

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

May 21 – Acts 14:1-28

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Day 141 – 224 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Paul and Barnabas continued their first missionary journey. They traveled to several cities in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor (called Galatia) and finally returned to their home church in Antioch. Along the way, they experienced great progress and persecution.

Paul and Barnabas made their way to several Roman cities — Iconium, Lystra, Lycaonia, and Antioch (Pisidian) — in which lived both Jews and Greeks. They always visited and taught in Jewish synagogues and then took those who believed in Jesus to form a local church. Before leaving that church, they helped the believers to appoint elders who would serve as shepherds of the congregation in their absence (v.23).

Paul also healed people when he had the opportunity (v.8-10), which always brought attention to the gospel message. However, while in Lystra, the people of the town confused Barnabas and Paul with Greek gods, like Zeus and Hermes (his messenger). The two did everything they could to convince the townspeople that they were just men who served the living God (v.11-18). However, divisive Jews stirred up the crowd which nearly killed Paul with rocks (v.19).

However, Paul was not deterred. Though everyone believed him to be dead, he got up and got back to work (v.20). When they had made it as far as Derbe, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps and revisited the churches they had planted. Their goal was to encourage the believers in their faith (v.21, 22).

When they had completed their mission, Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church in Antioch, where they shared the glorious news of the westward spread of the gospel (v.26-28). No doubt, they were excited to share all that God had done through them, and the Antioch Christians were excited to hear the stories.

Daily Reflection

Though Paul and Barnabas experienced great success on this trip, they also experienced tremendous pushback from the enemy. Persecution arose in various forms. For example, the enemy sowed **division** among the hearers and even **discredited** the messengers (v.1-3). He **discouraged** Paul and Barnabas with verbal and physical abuse (v.2, 19). Finally, he tried to **derail** Paul and Barnabas with pride, referring to them as Greek gods (v.11, 12).

When sharing the gospel, it's always two steps forward and one step back. Paul and Barnabas had success at first, then faced some sort of opposition. However, even with one step back, they did not get discouraged because the gospel was moving forward.

I wonder, how much opposition does it take to discourage us to the point of quitting? The disciples in Derbe thought Paul was dead (v.20). Most of us would've stayed on the ground after getting pummeled with stones. We would've said, "That's enough. I quit." But not Paul. Though others thought he was down and out, he got back up and kept going.

How well do you handle opposition? What is required of you to keep fighting the good fight even after you've gotten beaten up?

Like an army, it's okay to fall back every now and then. **But falling back doesn't mean that you are retreating. Ask God for strength. "Gather your forces" and continue to advance.**

Only One Gospel

May 22 – Galatians 1:1-24

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Day 142 – 223 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

We transitioned to the book of *Galatians*. We are not yet finished with *Acts*, but since we are reading the New Testament chronologically, this is where the book of *Galatians* falls on the timeline. Paul and Barnabas just finished their first missionary journey to Cyprus and a region in Asia Minor known as Galatia (*Acts 13, 14*). They must have received news that the churches they planted were being disturbed by false teachers, and the Christians there were abandoning the true gospel. Before Paul could return and encourage them, he did the next best thing — wrote a letter.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is full of rich Christian truths, of course, but he wrote it to refute the Jews (called Judaizers) who were perverting the gospel with Jewish rituals. For example, Judaizers tried to convince Christians that they still needed to be circumcised, follow dietary restrictions, continue the sabbath, and obey other Jewish laws and traditions (*Acts 13:44, 45; 14:1, 2*). Thus, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasized the freedom that Christians have in Christ and that to mix Jewish law or tradition with the gospel is to distort the gift of salvation (*Acts 14:3; Gal. 5:1*).

Having this context helps us understand Paul's astonishment in *Galatians 1*. He wrote, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you... for **a different gospel, which is really not another**; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (*v.6, 7*).

Evidently, the Judaizers had caused suspicion about Paul's credentials and the gospel itself. Thus, Paul spent much of *Galatians 1* defending his conversion and calling (*v.1, 10-24*). He wanted the Galatians to know that what they heard him preach was from God, not from him or any other man (*v.1, 11, 12*). Thus, if anyone should teach something contrary to the gospel, he should be cursed as a fraud (*v.8, 9*).

Daily Reflection

Imagine a daring military operation into a foreign country to release prisoners of war. What if, after having been liberated from the enemy, those POWs decided to return to captivity. We would be astonished. That was the point Paul was making. Why would anyone, who has experienced the freedom (grace) of Christ, return to the bondage of the Law? Christ has set us free! Therefore, live in that freedom (*5:1*).

Another important point Paul made was that when the true gospel of Christ is mixed with anything else, it doesn't become another gospel. It becomes a false gospel. **A distortion of the true gospel is no gospel at all** (*v.6, 7*). Salvation is only found in Christ alone. Even if an angel should preach a different gospel (as in Islam or Mormonism), we know it can't be true because it conflicts with the biblical gospel (*v.8*).

Satan hates the exclusivity of Christianity, that there is only one way to God. Therefore, he must confuse people by clouding the one way with "other ways." Since Satan knows that Christ is the only way to God, he disturbs the gospel by distorting it (*v.7*), twisting it into something that it is not so that people will miss the real meaning and message of the true gospel. He distorts the gospel often by adding something to it (in this case the Law of Moses), by taking something away from it, or by tweaking some aspect of it. However, by perverting true doctrine, Satan simply produces false doctrine, which draws people away from freedom and back into oppression.

No matter what credentials a person has, we should always practice discernment and guard against false doctrine. We must judge teachers by the gospel, rather than judge the gospel by the teachers. The person does not validate the message, but rather the message validates the person. We must be vigilant to protect the true gospel of Christ. **There is only one gospel, and any distortion of that gospel is no gospel at all.**

No Compromises

May 23 – Galatians 2:1-21

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Today in Your Reading

Paul continued to defend his ministry credentials to the Galatians. So far, he had offered four arguments to support the legitimacy of his apostleship and message. First, he pointed out that the gospel that he preached was not of man, but it was from God (1:10-12). Second, Paul was preaching in direct conflict with his training as a zealot (1:13, 14). Third, Paul made sure that the Galatians knew he did not “consult with flesh and blood” immediately after his conversion (1:16, 17). Fourth, Paul reminded his readers that the time he spent with the other Apostles was minimal, not enough for formal training in the gospel (1:18, 19).

In *Galatians 2*, Paul offered his fifth and sixth arguments by sharing two stories. First, he described his visit to Jerusalem to see the Apostles (v.1-10, Barnabas and Titus went too). The meeting, he said, was private (v.2). Out of respect for their leadership, Paul did not want to argue with them (in case it was necessary) in front of other believers. It is always wise and respectful to appeal to or confront influential leaders in private and not in public. The meeting was successful, as the Apostles affirmed Paul’s ministry and added nothing to his message (v.6-9). In short, Paul was on the right track.

The second story Paul shared (and the sixth argument to support his credentials), was the time Peter (or Cephas) visited Antioch, and Paul confronted and rebuked him for his hypocrisy. What happened exactly? Peter, whom God had already challenged regarding his view of the Gentiles (*Acts 10, 11*), reverted to his old ways. He (and all Jews) had once regarded Gentiles (non-Jews) as unclean, yet God convinced them that they were not unclean and that they needed the gospel too. Though it was difficult for Peter to accept, he abandoned the Jewish dietary laws to fellowship with Gentiles (v.12). However, once he was in Antioch, he slipped into his old self and only ate with the Jews, fearing what others might think (v.12).

Peter’s actions communicated to the Gentiles that they were second-class Christians. It was a terrible act of hypocrisy that led others astray, including Barnabas (v.13). Paul courageously called out Peter in front of everyone. He had already told the Galatians that he was not a people-pleaser (1:10). A people-pleaser would’ve said nothing to please Peter, protected his reputation, and kept the peace. **But a God-pleaser stands for truth (His Word and gospel) no matter who opposes him. There can be no compromise with the gospel.**

Daily Reflection

Is opposing someone or pointing out his or her faults in public a good idea? Should Paul have confronted Peter privately, as Jesus instructed (*Matt. 18*)? When Paul was in Jerusalem, he met with the Apostles privately. Why now was Paul confronting Peter publicly?

Paul was not ignoring Jesus’ command to confront someone in private. Rather he was protecting the gospel, which had been offended in public. Peter’s actions were not a personal offense to Paul. Rather they were an offense that impacted the local church in Antioch, even leading many astray. Thus, since Peter’s offense was public and had huge ramifications, Paul did the right thing and addressed it publicly. It is possible that, if Paul would have said nothing, the people who witnessed the infraction might never have been together again; and they may have left thinking that what Peter did was okay.

Paul said some hard things (v.14-21), all of which we will study in the days to come. For now, let’s consider his actions. Have you ever confronted a superior, or someone you greatly respect, for something that you knew to be wrong? What compelled you to do it? What was the result? **Like Paul, we must remember that our first allegiance is to God and His truth (gospel). We must not allow any aspect of the gospel to be compromised, no matter who it is that’s perpetrating the lie.**

The Gospel Before the Law

May 24 – Galatians 3:1-14

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Day 144 – 221 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

After spending two chapters of *Galatians* defending his apostleship and message, Paul transitioned to the purpose of the letter — to address their abandonment of Christ to return to the bondage of the Law (1:6, 7). The Galatians had been fooled by Judaizers into thinking that salvation came through the Law of Moses and not by faith in Christ alone.

Paul challenged the Galatians' decision by posing five rhetorical questions (3:1-5), one of which asked, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (v.3). In other words, the Jews received salvation and the indwelling Spirit through faith in Christ, not by adhering to the Law of Moses (v.2, 5). They could not perfect themselves any more than what Christ had already done for them.

But one of the excuses that the Judaizers used to defend their position was Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. For example, if Abraham was circumcised, and circumcision was prescribed in the Law of Moses, then all Jews (Christians or not) should be circumcised. Here we get to see the brilliance of the Apostle Paul and the reason why God chose him, a Jewish scholar, to be His instrument.

Paul took the Jews' greatest asset (Abraham) and used it against them. How so? First, Paul pointed out that even **Abraham was not reckoned as righteous because of the Law but because of faith in God** (v.6, 7). Second, **Abraham was declared righteous (by faith) a thousand years before the Law existed**. Therefore, Abraham is not a good support for the Law but for the gospel. He believed in the promised Savior, that "through Him all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (3:8).

Third, **Abraham was declared righteous before circumcision was expected of him**. Circumcision was a mark of his faith in God, not a cause for his righteousness (a work). Fourth, **when**

Abraham believed God, he was a Gentile, not a Jew. Ouch! This point offended his Jewish readers for sure. Technically, Abraham is our spiritual father (v.7, 14), just as much as he is the Jews' national father. When we sing the song about "Father Abraham, who had many sons. I am one of them and so are you," it is true. All men, Jews (nationally) and Gentiles (spiritually) are included in his family tree.

Finally, Paul reminded the Jews that with the Law came a curse for those who can't obey it (which is everyone). Therefore, **the Law could not (and did not) save anyone**. It is "Christ who redeemed us from the curse of the Law" (v.13).

Daily Reflection

This passage is the most important part of Paul's letter to the Galatians so far. In it, he answered a vital question — how were people in the Old Testament saved, before Christ's advent? **Simply, just like you and me — by faith**. Those before Jesus believed God by faith in the Messiah who was to come (seed in *Gen. 3:15*), while we who live after Jesus put our faith in what He has already done. **Both groups, Old and New Testament, are saved in the same way**. So then, what was the purpose of the Law? Paul will answer that question next.

While it is easy for us to be judgmental of the Galatians, we are often guilty of the same foolishness. Having been justified before God by faith in Christ, we regularly attempt to justify ourselves through the things we do. Somehow, we believe that carrying out our Christian duties or fulfilling our obligations earns good standing with the Lord. Christ died to set us free from that kind of thinking, that kind of living. **Why would we be so foolish as to rely upon our work and not His?**

Are you a foolish Galatian? Are you hoping the things you do will earn favor with God? Don't be fooled. You already have the favor of God through the work of Christ. Just rest in Him.

The Need for the Seed

May 25 – Galatians 3:15-29

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Day 145 – 220 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Paul continued to defend the gospel against the Judaizers who were confusing and disturbing the Galatian churches. In the previous passage (v.1-14), Paul argued that the gospel preceded the Law of Moses in the faith of Abraham who believed in the promised Savior. Next, he responded to those who believed that the Law somehow replaced or nullified the covenant God made with Abraham (v.15-18).

His point is that once human contracts, wills, or covenants are agreed upon, no one can dismiss them, break them, or add conditions to them. Human covenants are binding and must be carried out to completion. If human agreements are so significant, then how much more would a covenant with God be? Should it be broken or added to? Absolutely not!

Although many promises were made to Abraham, the one to which Paul referred was regarding the Seed (v.16). What or who is this seed that Paul mentioned? He was referring to the promise God made to Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3:15), that He would restore mankind through a special seed, a Chosen One. However, we are not told who that seed was, and thus the entire Old Testament is a long-awaited search for that seed (the Messiah). Several prophets are given vague descriptions of the Seed, but no one is given full disclosure until He came to the manger. That Seed, of course, was Jesus, and he was a descendant of Abraham. Paul's point in referring to the promise of the Seed was to affirm it, despite the coming of the Law 430 years later (Ex. 12:40).

So then, the question that Paul must address now is why the Law was given. If God never meant for the Law to make men right with Him, then why did He give it? Paul said that God gave us the Law "because of transgressions until the seed would come" (v.19). In other words, the Law was only temporary until something better could replace it — the Promised Seed.

Therefore, God provided the Law to express His expectations for His people, to give them a way to see the seriousness of their sin, and to demonstrate their inability to please Him continually because of their sin. Therefore, sinful men need a Savior to redeem them.

Simply put, the Law and the Promise of the Seed are not contradictory but complementary. They work together to achieve the same goal — to point all people to the Seed when He comes. **To believe that the Law could give life or impart salvation (right standing with God) would contradict the need for the Seed. The Messiah would be unnecessary if the Law could save men without Him (v.21).** However, Paul wrote that "everyone was shut up (imprisoned, enslaved) under the Law" until the promised Seed could come and release us from bondage. It would be faith in Christ that would set us free from the prison of the Law. **Thus, the Law was to be a tutor (school master) to guide us to the true source of salvation — the Promised Seed.**

Daily Reflection

Would you consider yourself to be a good person? Yeah, we all do. But when you view yourself in light of God's law (commandments), you quickly realize that you are not so good after all. The laws of God shed light on the fact that you are imperfect and that you cannot please God. The only way to be right with Him is through salvation in Christ. In other words, **the Law revealed your need for the Seed.**

Knowing this truth, it is important that when we share the good news of the gospel with others that we first start with the bad news. People will not see their need for the good news of salvation if they first aren't made aware of the bad news, that they are fallen and flawed. The gospel is not a promise for a better life or to solve our problems. The gospel is meant to redeem us from the curse of the fall, and to restore our relationship with God. **We all need the law to point us to the Seed!**

Divine Adoption

May 26 – Galatians 4:1-20

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Today in Your Reading

In the previous passage (3:26-29), Paul explained that if believers in Christ were “sons of God,” then they were also His heirs. Today, he shared more details as to what it means to be an heir. Since we were not born as children of God, Paul explained that we are adopted into His family. However, even though we are adopted, we have a wonderful inheritance.

Paul first used the analogy of a child (v.1) who was counting the days until he received his inheritance. Although he would one day own everything, he received nothing until the proper time. In fact, he was kept under “guardians and managers,” much like a slave (v.2). Then, Paul compared us to slaves, who were once “held in bondage under the elemental things of this world” (v.3). However, praise God that He freed us from this enslavement by sending Christ.

The Father sent His Son “when the fullness of time came” (v.4). Since God does all things with purpose and intentionality, then the timing of Christ’s coming was perfect. He entered the stage when all was providentially prepared.

Paul also noted that Jesus was “born of a woman” and “born under the Law” (v.4). Jesus was divine, the Son of God, yet He was also human, born of a woman. He had to represent both deity and humanity to be a suitable mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5, 6). If Christ were only divine, then He could not have related to us as humans. But, if Christ were only human, then He would have been just like us, a sinner unable to relate to God.

Just as important as being born of a woman, Jesus had to be “born under the Law” (v.4). It was the Law that cursed men. They could not keep it. The Law represents God’s expectations, His standards for righteousness, unto which no man can attain. Jesus had to be born into this system so that He could fulfill the Law Himself, then rescue man from the Law. Because of His

sinless life, He broke the curse of the Law and then extended to us the opportunity to be saved from that curse by believing in Him in faith.

Because God has purchased us, we are now His adopted children, and as children, we are His heirs (v.7). What exactly have we inherited? Much of what we have inherited we do not know or see yet (Rom. 8:23-25), but we know that we’ve inherited the Spirit of God in our hearts (8:14-17). **The Spirit confirms our adoption. Because of His Spirit in us, we now relate to God as our Father. We are one of His children.**

Daily Reflection

Because Christ has set us free from the Law and enabled our adoption as sons and heirs of God, Paul expressed bewilderment as to why anyone would want to abandon the gospel for the Law (v.8-20). Why would he exchange a relationship with the true God for belief in false gods or to return to burdensome regulations (v.8-10)? Paul hoped he had not labored in vain (v.19, 20).

Paul’s most sobering question is this — “Where is that sense of blessing you had?” (v.15). When Paul preached to the Galatians, God afforded them an incredible moment, when their eyes and hearts were opened to the truth, when they understood and believed who Jesus was, when they accepted Him by faith and received the Holy Spirit, and when they experienced the incredible freedom of complete forgiveness and inexplicable joy of being made right in the eyes of God. We, too, experience this same sense of blessing when we are adopted into the family of God, but we forget that moment so quickly.

My dad was adopted as a child. He says that it was the best day of his life. When he received his adoption certificate, he finally belonged to a family. **You, too, belong a great family, the family of God, through a divine adoption. May you never lose that sense of blessing that comes with knowing that you are a free, forgiven heir of the Father!**

Bond Woman or Free Woman?

May 27 – Galatians 4:21-31

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Today in Your Reading

Paul continued demonstrating the superiority of the gospel or Christianity over the Law of Moses or Judaism. He referred to the story of Abraham's two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, by two women, Hagar and Sarah (*Gen. 16, 17, 21*).

When Abraham was told by God that he would become the father of many nations and yet knew that his wife Sarah was barren, he arranged to have a son through Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden (slave), Hagar. Although the plan "worked" (Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, "according to the flesh"), it was not Abraham's best decision. Soon after, God miraculously enabled Sarah to give birth to Isaac, the promised son, in her old age (*v.22, 23*). Just as Abraham was the father of many nations, so Sarah became the mother of nations (*v.27*).

Although the situation was quite awkward, as it is anytime that we run ahead of the Lord, Paul used it as a picture of the gospel in the Old Testament. **These women represented two covenants** (*v.24*). Ishmael, who was born of the slave Hagar (bondwoman), represented the Old Covenant of the Law. Isaac, who was born of Sarah (a free woman), represented the New Covenant. Paul linked Hagar to Mount Sinai, where the Israelites received the Law (*v.25*), and to the current Jerusalem, which was still enslaved to the same law. Then, Paul linked the "Jerusalem above" — that is heaven — to Sarah's children, who are free (*v.26*). She is the "mother" of the New Covenant in Christ. His followers are free from the curse of the Law, the Old Covenant. Just as Sarah was made to be fruitful with children, so will heaven be full of God's children and heirs (*v.27*).

The Bible says that Ishmael was a wild, untamed character who snubbed and persecuted Isaac (*v.28, 29*). As a result, God commanded Abraham to cast him and his mother out of the camp (*v.30*), for they did not belong with the "People of the Promise."

Likewise, the Judaizers (pictured in Ishmael) persecuted the Christians (pictured in Isaac) in the early church. **Yet, the "children of the bondwoman" have no place with the "children of the promise."** Therefore, God will separate the two. In other words, those who are slaves of the Law (Judaizers) will have no place in heaven, for they have no place in Christ, who was (and is) the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. **Again, we recognize and appreciate the wonderful freedom we have in Christ.**

Daily Reflection

When we read illustrations like this from the Apostle Paul, we must be amazed at the insight he was given into the Old Testament. We know that he was a scholar of the Scriptures, the model student of the books of Moses, and perhaps the greatest Pharisee that ever lived. However, we must also believe that Paul did not understand the allegorical aspects of these stories until he was converted to Christianity.

How did Paul, who was steeped in the Law, suddenly see the shortcomings of the Old Covenant and recognize the superiority of the New Covenant? These insights did not come by his own study but by revelation from God. Perhaps He learned them from his time spent with Christ in the desert (*1:15-18*). We are not sure. But it is obvious that God had done a great work in Paul's life and used his knowledge of the Scriptures to argue for Christianity and persuade the "children of the bondwoman" (Jews) to see their need for Christ.

While we should strive to be expert students of the Bible (particularly of the New Testament), no amount of study "in the flesh" can reveal these truths to us. Only through God's Spirit can they be discovered. For if the Spirit of God inspired the words of the Bible, then the Spirit of God holds the keys to understanding them. May we ever seek to hear from the Spirit to discover and understand the manifold mysteries of our faith.