

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS
NO OTHER GOSPEL:
FREEDOM IN CHRIST

LESSON 6: "The Foolishness of Forsaking Faith" **Date:** Sept 28/Oct 12, 2014

TEXT: Galatians 3:1-14

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: On July 12, 2007, President George W. Bush prophesied about the foolishness of pulling our troops out of the Middle East too soon in our War on Terror.¹ He said,

To begin withdrawing before our commanders tell us we are ready would be dangerous for Iraq, for the region, and for the United States. It would mean surrendering the future of Iraq to Al Qaeda. It would mean that we'd be risking mass killings on a horrific scale. It would mean we allow the terrorists to establish a safe haven in Iraq to replace the one they lost in Afghanistan. It would mean we'd be increasing the probability that American troops would have to return at some later date to confront an enemy that is even more dangerous.

As we have witnessed in recent days, the former president's comments have come to pass on almost a point-for-point basis. Indeed, hindsight is 20/20, and with that crystal clear vision, we are discovering that forsaking the Middle East too soon was indeed a foolish decision.

In Galatians 3, Paul looks back on another decision, this one made by the believers throughout Galatia, and with a clear perspective, he also bemoans the foolishness of that choice. The Galatian Christians had forsaken the sufficiency of faith in justification, and the damage of their legalistic gospel was already being experienced. They were abandoning Christ (1:6; 5:2-4), being troubled by deceivers (1:7), putting themselves in danger of being accursed (1:8-9), becoming enslaved again (4:9; 5:1), turning against Paul (4:16), falling away from grace (5:4), disobeying the truth (5:7), and fighting among themselves (5:15). Yes, indeed, it was foolish for them to forsake faith!

Paul's tone is sharp, filled with concern, disappointment, perplexity, exasperation, and even indignation—a tone that pervades much of the epistle (1:6; 4:12-20). It matches the tone evident in his rebuke of Peter (cf. 2:11ff), for the same issues were at stake.

Paul's concern is directed at two different levels of error in this passage. He has already shown his disdain for the false teachers; now, he briefly addresses his consternation at two other parties responsible for this forsaking of faith's sufficiency in justification.

On the one hand, the Galatian believers themselves were being "foolish" (v. 1; cf. Luke 24:25)—that is, they were simply not using their mental faculties to think biblically in order to discern the error of the false teachers, the spiritual truth that was being jeopardized, and the convictions they needed to stand upon. Having let go of "truth" (Ephesians 4:15), they were like "children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Ephesians 4:14). They had "so quickly deserted" grace alone and faith alone and were adding works to Christ. In light of what Paul has already argued in chapters 1-2, this was mere foolishness.

On the other hand, something even more sinister was underlying the foolishness of these Christians. Paul asks, "Who has bewitched you?" His use of the masculine singular interrogative pronoun indicates that Paul has a particular individual in mind, and his use of the word "bewitch" indicates that it was demonic. Neither Acts nor this epistle records any use of black magic by false teachers in Galatia (like Simon in Acts 8), so it is most likely that Paul is referring here to Satan as the instigator of this spiritual foolishness. Paul knew that the battle for the true gospel was spiritual warfare, and while his opponents had human faces, they were being energized by the Devil himself.

In a similar passage in which Paul expresses great concern ("jealousy") for a church, he writes, "I am afraid that as the Serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3). A few verses later, he makes the connection between the "cunning" of the "Serpent" and the deception of the false teachers (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)—

Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

Earlier in that same epistle, Paul wrote about the potential of being “outwitted by Satan” and adds, “We are not ignorant of his designs” (2 Corinthians 2:11). 1 Peter 5:8 refers to Satan as “your adversary the Devil [who] prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” Yes, indeed, Satan was on the prowl and had bewitched these Galatian churches with his powerful and clever schemes through the teaching of the legalistic false teachers.

Illustration: In *The Pearl of Great Price*,² Joseph Smith records the beginning of his divine “revelations” which would eventually lead to the start of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (or the Mormons). While much of what he writes as personal historical testimony is admittedly questionable at best, his repeated accounts of shining personages that appeared to him bear a frightening similarity to Paul’s warning of Satan’s ability to “disguise himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). Interestingly, Muhammad, the founder of Islam, also testified to have received his divine revelations from an angelic being.³

Understandably, then, Paul’s concern for these Galatian believers is heightened. He had just recently been with them—perhaps just a matter of a few months ago—and now they were being bewitched by a powerful and clever adversary and were foolishly forsaking the sufficiency of faith for salvation. Such foolishness could have eternal ramifications!

So, in Galatians 2:15 Paul began to take the role of a critical thinker, a skilled theologian, a passionate apologist to defend the biblical rationality for faith’s sufficiency. He continues that purpose now in Galatians 3 and 4 and offers several arguments for the protection of the true gospel. In these chapters, Paul is driving home his point: **it is foolish to forsake the sufficiency of faith in justification**. From Galatians 3:1-14, let’s consider three of his arguments for the sufficiency of faith in justification.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE GALATIANS (vv. 1-5)

Paul had a shared spiritual experience with these Galatian believers, for he was the one who had led them to faith in Christ through his preaching. Their salvation experience is recorded throughout Acts 13:13-14:23, and Paul reminds them of it in his first argument for the sufficiency of faith. His referral to their past experience has two main parts.

1. **Their experience rooted: Paul publically declared the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (v. 1).**

Paul first roots their experience by reminding them that he had publically declared to them the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He doesn’t allude to their experience for experience’s sake. No, experience can save an individual no more than can works (cf. Colossians 2:16-23). Nonetheless, Paul is willing to use personal experience as an argument for the sufficiency of faith, but only insofar as that spiritual experience is tied to biblical theology. So, Paul first shows that whatever real spiritual experiences they had enjoyed—experiences which clearly demonstrated the sufficiency of faith in justification—were rooted in and the results of the biblical teaching they received from Paul.

Application: We should pause a moment here and recognize that while experience is a very important argument for many religious people today, supposedly verifying their religious inclinations, rarely it seems it is tied to the truth of God’s Word. For Paul, experience always had to be tied to and tested by the Scripture. When the Bible is our authority and starting point, experience can be a wonderful affirmation of God’s work and will.

Consider turning this into a question—“How does Paul’s practice of wedding experience to truth (and testing it by truth) contradict the practice of many experientialists today?”

What was this biblical theology that Paul had grounded them in on his first visit to them? Paul summarizes his teaching this way: “before your eyes...Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” When Paul traveled through Galatia on his first missionary journey, he continued his practice of “proclaiming...[only] Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). Being quite dramatic and picturesque in his delivery, Paul had “publicly portrayed” the crucifixion of Christ. That phrase translates a word that means “to placard” like a modern-day billboard. In his gospel preaching, Paul had powerfully provoked the “mind’s eye”⁴ of his listeners, and they responded in saving faith (cf. Acts 13:38, 48; 14:1, 21-23, 27).

Paul’s strategy never changed. In our letter, he affirms, “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14). And, as he tells the Corinthians that his biblical

gospel of Christ's death for our sins, burial, and resurrection was "of first importance," so he told the Galatians 1:6-9 that there was no other gospel and that those who proclaimed something else would be "accursed." While Paul declared many truths and taught many applications, there was always a most important truth—"the truth of the gospel."



Application: Drawing from Paul's example in verse 1b, John Stott affirms, "The gospel is Christ crucified, His finished work on the cross. And to preach the gospel is publicly to portray Christ as crucified. The gospel is not good news primarily of a baby in a manger, a young man at a carpenter's bench, a preacher in the fields of Galilee, or even an empty tomb. The gospel concerns Christ upon His cross. Only when Christ is 'openly displayed upon His cross' (neb) is the gospel preached."⁵ How does that practical consideration apply to my personal evangelism? *We must tell people about the crucifixion of Christ, not merely His character, His miracles, His love, etc. Stott continues, "In preaching the gospel [or personal witnessing] we are to refer to an event (Christ's death on a cross), to expound a doctrine..., and to do so publicly, boldly, vividly, so that people see it as if they witnessed it with their own eyes. This is what some writers have called the 'existential' element in preaching. We do more than describe the cross as a first-century event. We actually portray Christ crucified before the eyes of our contemporaries, so that they are confronted by Christ crucified today and realize that they may receive from the cross the salvation of God today."*⁶

Paul had given his life to the proclamation of Christ crucified and had faithfully proclaimed this gospel truth in Galatia (cf. Acts 13:16-41, 46-49). The Galatian believers had received this doctrine—they had seen the crucifixion of Christ as Paul painted that scene for them, and they had responded in saving faith in Jesus Christ. Now that Paul has reminded them of the truth that they received and were rooted in, he begins to rehearse the resulting spiritual experiences they had enjoyed.

2. ***Their experience rehearsed: Paul provokingly demonstrates the sufficiency of faith (vv. 2-5).***

Somewhat humorously, Paul writes (lit.), "This alone I want to learn from you," and then goes on to ask several questions. Four of them are particularly relevant to his purpose of reminding them of what they had experienced in Christ, so that he might provokingly demonstrate the sufficiency of faith for justification.

a. ***How did you receive the Spirit? (v. 2)***

Paul first asks, "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" While Acts 13:52 quietly records the receiving of the Holy Spirit by believers in one Galatian city, Acts 10:44-45 may picture what it was like—"While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God." Indeed, this is what was so compelling at the Jerusalem Council. There Peter declared, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us" (Acts 15:7-8). Clearly, then, the Gentile believers had come to enjoy the gift of God's Spirit just as the Jewish Christians had on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).


The gift of the Holy Spirit is an important and precious gift from God. According to God's Word, it is the in-"dwelling" of God's Spirit that proves we "belong to God" (Romans 8:9; cf. 1 John 3:24; 4:13) and are "children of God" (Romans 8:16; cf. Galatians 4:6). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit serves as a divine seal marking God's ownership and authority and security over our lives (Ephesians 1:13). In fact, the third Person of the Trinity living within us is nothing short of God's down payment, guaranteeing our entire spiritual inheritance (Ephesians 1:14).

This precious gift had been given to the Gentiles and there was no disputing that. Paul provokes the memory of the Gentile Christians and asks them *how* they had received the Spirit. Paul


could remember what they seem to have forgotten—they had received the Spirit by believing in Jesus, not by obeying the Mosaic Law. This was obvious! The Gentiles in the Galatian churches didn't even have the Law, and the Jews had to admit that centuries of adherence to the Law had failed to provide them with the promise of God's Spirit.

Contrariwise, just as the Jewish Christians had received the gift of God's Spirit "when [they] believed in the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 11:17), so did the Gentiles. Peter acknowledged in Acts 15:8-9, "God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith" (cf. Acts 19:1-6). Salvation and its gift of God's Spirit came to the Galatian believers only "by hearing with faith" and not "by works of the Law," and that is why when Paul left Galatia he was "encouraging them to continue in the faith" (Acts 14:22).

Application: While the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us was not as dramatic as it often was in the days of the early church when God visibly authenticated it (cf. Hebrews 2:4), it was nonetheless received in the same by—by grace through faith, and not as a result of any works we did. Paul wrote to the Ephesians believers and stated, "When you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in [Christ], [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13). The experience of the ministry of the Spirit within us (i.e., "the supply of the Spirit," v. 5) argues for the sufficiency of faith in our salvation.

 From your Bible, what are the various aspects of the Spirit's ministry that Christians are experiencing? *He regenerates our dead hearts (John 3:5; Titus 3:5), He convicts us of sin (John 16:8), He enlivens our relationship with God the Father (Galatians 4:6), He produces spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22-23; 6:8), He illuminates God's Word to us (1 Corinthians 2:14-16), He gifts and enables us for ministry (1 Corinthians 12; 2:4), He transforms us into the image of Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18), etc.*

Every time we enjoy one of these Spirit-provided experiences, we are reminded of the sufficiency of faith for receiving God's grace.

 How does the truth that God gives His Spirit fully to us upon our faith in His gospel (vv. 2, 5, 14; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13) contradict and undermine those movements today that teach two stages to salvation—such as a later "second blessing" or confirmation by speaking in tongues? *It is completely antithetical to what they teach. At the moment of our salvation, God's justification is accompanied by His gift of the Spirit. It is an entire package, in one part, that God fully gives to all who exercise faith in His Son.*

b. How should you continue in the Christian life? (v. 3)

Paul's second question is, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Paul's prefacing of this question with "Are you so foolish?" demonstrates that this is a "duh" question.

The logic is simple. They had "begun" their Christian life "by the Spirit"—that is, not only had they been given God's Spirit at the moment of their faith in Christ, but God's Spirit had actually been the One to regenerate and save them (cf. 4:6). Quite literally, the Holy Spirit had started their Christian life! "So," Paul asks, "are you now going to attempt to finish [a better translation than 'being perfected' in light of the contrast with 'begin'] by the flesh [i.e., by human obedience to the Law]?" With a question meant to stir their conscience, Paul demonstrates the foolishness of thinking "they could begin the Christian life in one way (by faith [in God's grace]) and move on to spiritual maturity in another (by works [through the flesh])."⁷ In Galatians 4:8-11, Paul reiterates this point that fleshly obedience to the Law is unable to continue what it couldn't even start in the first place—

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not god. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

The Judaizers were promoting this foolishness and sowing vanity, but Paul shows that the means of sanctification (i.e., finishing [or being perfected]) are the same as the means of justification (i.e., beginning)—they are works of the Spirit.⁸ MacArthur comments,

The Holy Spirit is not the goal of the Christian life but is its source. He is not the product of faithful living but is the power behind it. A higher level of living [i.e., by the flesh] does not bring the Holy Spirit; rather submission to the Holy Spirit, who already indwells the believer, includes a higher level of living.⁹

The implications of this truth for our daily Christian living will be fleshed out in Galatians 5.

Paul's logic here is not only simple, but it is also rooted in the character of God Himself. The only other place where this Greek word "begin" is used in the New Testament is in Philippians 1:6, where it is also used alongside this Greek word for "perfected" or "finish." In that passage, Paul writes, "I am sure of this, that He who *began* a good work in you will *bring it to completion* at the day of Jesus Christ." Just as God started the work of salvation in your life and will certainly complete it, so He started it by grace alone through faith alone and that is how He intends to finish it (cf. Colossians 2:6).

Application: Do you remember when you cried out in desperate and dependent faith for God to rescue your soul? Do you remember, when like a drowning man with a lifeguard, you began to cling to Christ alone as the only One who could save you from certain and eternal death? If your salvation experience started that way, it must continue that way. Nothing has changed with you—you are still weak and sinful. But the One you are clinging to will finish what He started, as you continue to respond to His grace in faith. Yes, your salvation experience testifies to the sufficiency of faith, not only in your justification, but also in your sanctification.

c. Was your spiritual experience in vain? (v. 4)

Paul's third question is in verse 4—"Did you suffer so many things in vain?" The Greek word for "suffer" is *pascho* and simply means "to experience something." Over time, however,

this word was frequently used to refer to unpleasant experiences and so simply became translatable as "to suffer."¹⁰ In our context without any reference to any hardship or difficulty, its original and fundamental meaning of "to experience" makes good sense. Nonetheless, even if we do go with the translation "to suffer," we have good reason given the persecution that Paul faced in Galatia on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:40; 14:5, 19, 22), and the meaning essentially stays the same.

Paul's point by asking this question is to help the Galatian believers recognize that if they return to a legalistic gospel of justification by obedience to the Mosaic Law, everything they have experienced (or suffered) as a result of their faith in Christ will have been totally worthless. One commentator explains,

If the Galatians slip back from the gospel into the twilight of a half-Jewish faith, it will mean not only the end of all such manifestations of the Spirit. It will also mean that they might as well never have had the experience at all, for all the good that it did them. Christ would have died to no purpose as far as they were concerned; the Spirit would have been given them to no purpose also.¹¹

In essence, then, this question summarizes the others. If faith in Christ was inadequate or unable to save them, then everything they had experienced exclusively in Christ was "in vain" (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:2).



Application: According to Ephesians 1:3-14, what have we experienced "in Christ" through faith that would be "in vain" if faith was discovered to be insufficient in comparison to human effort? "Every spiritual blessing"—election, adoption, redemption, forgiveness, revelation, an inheritance, sealing, a down payment, etc.

d. How is God powerfully working among you? (v. 5)

Finally, Paul asks in verse 5, "Does He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?" We have already seen that God had graciously given His Spirit to the Galatian Christians;¹² Paul now reminds the believers that accompanying the gift of the Spirit

were powerful miracles (Gk. *energon dunameis*). Some of those miracles are recorded in Acts 14:3, 8-11, 20, 27, the purpose of which was to validate the divine work occurring in their midst (cf. Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:4).

Paul's question, like his previous inquiry in verse 2, is on what basis God performed these incredible works among them—was it a result of their “works of the Law” or their “hearing with faith”? He is again appealing to their experience, which when rehearsed, would remind them that it was on the basis of faith alone. In his first recorded sermon in Galatia, Paul had demonstrated the insufficiency of the Law to forgive and free from sin, in contrast with faith—“Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this Man [Jesus Christ] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by Him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39; cf. Romans 8:1-4). After his sermon, when those who were convicted spoke with Paul about what he had preached, he “urged them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43). Clearly, then, the foundation that Paul had laid in his ministry throughout Galatia—the very foundation upon which God supplied the Spirit and worked miracles—was the foundation of grace alone and faith alone. Like the display of power that accompanied the giving of the Law (Exodus 19:16-20:21), God was once again mightily authenticating His divine revelation of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. It was that message and the response of faith to it that had provoked such supernatural displays in their midst.

Application: While the purpose of miracles has been fulfilled (cf. Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:4), God continues to confirm His work in the lives of His people with supernatural power, evidenced in transformed lives and godly fruit (cf. Galatians 1:13-24). Remember, Christian, such powerful change in your life is the proof of God's working not yours, and it is the result of God's grace through faith.

“Paul's argument is...powerful: If a person has received eternal salvation through trust in the crucified Christ, received the fullness of the Holy Spirit the same moment he believed, and has the Father's Spirit-

endowed power working within him, how could he hope to enhance that out of his own insignificant human resources by some meritorious effort?”¹³ He cannot! And so Paul has first simply rehearsed the Galatian believers' own spiritual experience to remind them of the sufficiency of faith. Because of what we have richly experienced (cf. Romans 8:31-34) through faith alone in Christ, it is foolish to forsake the sufficiency of faith in justification.

Application: Consider your spiritual experiences—either felt personally or revealed biblically. Are they grounded in the gospel and rooted in the biblical teaching of what Christ has done for you? Is their fountainhead a personal testimony of surrender to the crucified Christ? When connected to an initial experience of responding to the work of Christ (often called a conversion experience), spiritual experiences (i.e., the recognition of specific ways in which God is working in one's life) can be a wonderful encouragement and a reminder of God's grace and faith's sufficiency. But untethered from biblical doctrine, experience can be a deceptive and misleading source of understanding. Be careful!

Furthermore, if Christ is your personal Savior by faith, then allow every manifestation of His work in your life to humble you and cause you to worship God because of His grace. Answers to prayer, divine provision, life change (so evident in Paul's own testimony in 1:13-24), spiritual fruit, ministry opportunities, etc.—it is all a manifestation of God's grace to you, and it comes merely through faith! Your own experience, Christian, is a powerful argument for the sufficiency of faith and the generosity of grace.

Transition: It is foolish to forsake the sufficiency of faith in justification. Paul is in the meat of his book and has already offered one argument in defense of that thesis—the experience of the Galatian believers themselves. His second argument is discovered in Galatians 3:6-9, and it is the example of Abraham.

THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM (vv. 6-9)

Paul now turns his attention to the Old Testament and uses good Bible study to support his thesis that faith alone is sufficient for justification. The reason for going to the Old Testament is to demonstrate that even when God's people related to Him through the Law, salvation was always by faith. MacArthur explains:

Faith has always been the God-required response that brings salvation (Eph. 2:8-9). The saints of the Old Testament were saved by faith, just as the saints of the New. Abel had comparatively little revelation concerning God, but he believed in the truth of what he knew of God and was saved. Noah also had limited knowledge about God, and he, too, had faith in the truth He did know and was saved. Moses had considerably more revelation of God's nature and will, and by trusting in what he knew of God, he was saved. All three were justified, counted righteous and made acceptable to God, by their personal faith in Him. They "gained approval through their faith" (Heb. 11:4, 7, 23-29, 39).¹⁴

The Judaizers were doubtlessly quoting much Old Testament Scripture to support their legalistic gospel, for after all, they had long-standing traditional interpretations of the Law that they could appeal to. That is what makes Paul's particular Old Testament reference so powerful. In Galatians 1:6-9, Paul uses the example of Abraham to argue for faith's sufficiency. Because Abraham was the Father of Israel and lived before Moses and the Law, his salvation experience would either support or contradict those who were arguing for justification through the Law. Paul's argument from the example of Abraham hinges on two different Old Testament passages.

Consider asking, "What makes Abraham's example so powerful an argument against the Judaizers?" *He was the Father of Israel and lived before Moses and the Law.*

1. Abraham's belief (vv. 6-7; cf. Genesis 15:6)

Verses 6-7 allude back to Genesis 15:1-6—

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, You have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then He said

to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.

In this passage, God reiterated His promise to the childless Abraham that he would have innumerable descendants (cf. Genesis 12:2, 7; 13:15-16) and added that it would be through a biological son. The text then simply states what is quoted in Galatians 3:6, "Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" In other words, Abraham is here justified—declared righteous by God—by faith.

What is so important about this passage is that it occurs not only hundreds of years before the Law, but even several years¹⁵ before God instituted circumcision (cf. Genesis 17:10, 23-27). This was a direct assault against the false teachers who were using Abraham's circumcision as proof for their legalistic gospel. They had missed the point in their proof-texting Bible study! "The Judaizers, like most other Jews of that day, had completely reversed the relationship of circumcision and salvation."¹⁶ This is what Paul explains in Romans 4:9-12—

Is this blessing [of having one's sins forgiven, covered, and not taken into account—vv. 7-8] then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Paul previews that Romans passage (especially v. 11b) in Galatians 3:7 and writes, "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham." In other words, Abraham's real descendants—or we could say, real Jews—are those of his spiritual lineage, that is, those who are believing in God's promises and being justified by faith. Romans 2:28-29 says, "No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical [cf.

Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; Colossians 2:11]. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” So, “Jews with no faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are not true sons of Abraham [cf. John 8:31-33, 37, 39-40, 44], whereas Gentiles who believe in Him are.”¹⁷ Or, “the authentic descendants of Abraham are soul brothers rather than merely blood brothers.”¹⁸

Paul’s succinct summary of the relevance of Abraham’s example for today is recorded in Romans 4:5—“To the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith [like Abraham’s, v. 3] is counted as righteousness.”

2. **Abraham’s blessing (vv. 8-9; cf. Genesis 12:3; 18:18)**

Paul quotes a second Abrahamic passage in verse 8, this one from Genesis 12:1-3—

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

God promised Abraham that He would bless all nations in him. We have already discovered that this blessing—that is, justification or being declared righteous by God (v. 8), which is evident today through the gift of God’s Spirit (vv. 2, 5, 14)—is enjoyed through faith, and Abraham, in “believing God,” became the prototype of how this blessing would be enjoyed. Yes, “in him” or in the same way that he was (by faith), all nations—Jews and Gentiles—would be blessed and justified.¹⁹

So, Paul concludes that what Abraham was hearing in God’s promise to him was simply the gospel according to the Old Testament (v. 8). As is seen by God’s linking Abraham’s faith-filled example (i.e., “in you”) with divine blessing upon all nations, this gospel was the good news²⁰ “that God would justify the Gentiles by faith” (v. 8), just like He did with Abraham. “So then,” verse 9 concludes, “those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

Application: Paul has used two different segments from Abraham’s example to defend the sufficiency of faith in justification. The first one established that Abraham’s belief resulted in his justification (i.e., Abraham’s belief → Abraham’s justification); the second one affirms that God’s blessing would stem from faith like Abraham’s (i.e., Abrahamic [or Abraham-like] faith → Abrahamic blessing). Both references teach the same thing about the biblical gospel—justification is by faith alone.

*When Gentiles are saved, they are saved as Gentiles, just as Jews are saved as Jews. But no one from either group is saved or not saved due to racial or ethnic identity. Those who are saved are saved because of their faith, and those who are lost are lost because of their unbelief.*²¹



How does verse 8 support the inspiration of the Old Testament?²²



Although Abraham is a unique example, because he is a part of God’s redemptive plan, what does the impact of the faith of this one man (i.e., it resulted in God’s blessing of justification upon many, many people) teach us about our own faith? *It reminds us of the potential influence that our godly faith can have on those around us, especially upon our family. Let us then “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Colossians 1:23).*

Transition: Both the experience of the Galatian believers and the example of Moses underline the foolishness of forsaking the sufficiency of faith in justification. In Galatians 3:10-14, Paul offers his third block of evidence for faith’s sufficiency—the expiation of Jesus Christ.

THE EXPIATION OF JESUS CHRIST (vv. 10-14)

In these verses Paul looks to the expiation or atonement of Jesus Christ and establishes that faith and the Law are mutually exclusive in the conversation about justification. He does this by addressing the requirements of the Law, the contrast between faith and the Law in their offer of righteousness, and the satisfaction of the Law’s curse by Jesus Christ.

1. ***The Law brings a curse (v. 10).***

Verse 10 says, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” Paul reminds the Law-observer that what is required on that path, in order for spiritual safety to be known (i.e., avoiding the “curse”), is complete obedience (i.e., “abide by all things written”). He quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 (cf. Ezekiel 18:4, 20) to make his point, and interestingly that verse ends with the people of Israel declaring “Amen” or “so be it.” When God instituted the Law, He was clear that its standard was complete obedience and its demand was perfection. James put it simply in James 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (cf. Matthew 5:19).²³

With one short Old Testament reference, Paul has again laid the axe at the root of the Judaizers’ teaching. “The breaking of only one command even once brings a person under the curse; and since everybody fails at some point [cf. Psalm 14:1-3], all are under the curse. The proposition that a person can gain divine acceptance by human effort is therefore totally destroyed.”²⁴ The path of moral conformity to the Law leads only to a curse.

2. ***The Law is unable to justify (vv. 11-12).***

Verses 11-12 state, “Now [or, with verse 10 in mind] it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’” Here, Paul builds on what he has just proven from the Old Testament regarding Law’s curse and juxtaposes two other Old Testament passages to show a striking conflict (“but...rather” in v. 12) between the Law and faith (which two elements these false teachers were trying to mix) in their offer of righteousness. His first quotation about faith (v. 11) is from Habakkuk 2:4. His second reference about the Law (v. 12) is from Leviticus 18:5.

“The one who does them shall live by them.” — According to Leviticus 18:5, the Law offers righteousness (i.e., “shall live”) only to the individual who “lives by [or according to]” the Law’s requirements. That is what Paul indicates when he quotes this same Old Testament passage in Romans 10:5, “For Moses writes

about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.” And, as we’ve seen, only complete obedience to the Law will guarantee life (cf. Nehemiah 9:29; Ezekiel 20:11, 13, 21). Jesus Himself alludes to this Old Testament standard of Law in Matthew 19:17 and Luke 10:28 (cf. Matthew 5:48), even hinting as to its impossibility (i.e., “there is only One who is good”). Paul, realizing this impossible standard of Law, bemoans in Romans 7:10, “The very commandment [i.e., the Law] that promised life proved to be death to me [i.e., a curse]” (cf. Galatians 3:21).

“The righteous shall live by faith.” — In bold contrast to the Leviticus text is the offer of God in Habakkuk 2:4.²⁵ Carson notes that while this Hebrew passage is usually translated in the way written above, “Paul’s Greek [quotation]...can also be translated ‘the righteous-by-faith [or, the one who by faith is righteous] will live’.”²⁶ In other words, while “the righteous-by-Law” may live, no one is able to accomplish the Law’s standard of perfect obedience, and so people only experience “the curse-of-Law.” Alternatively, the righteousness of God Himself is offered to people through faith alone (cf. Romans 3:21ff), so that “the righteous-by-faith” may enjoy eternal life. “This [Habakkuk] passage is fundamental to Paul’s teaching. Indeed, that quotation serves as the very theme out of which the letter to the Romans is developed (Rom. 1:16-17)”²⁷ (cf. Hebrews 10:38).

Now Paul is not disdaining the Law, for he will soon show the necessary purpose of the Law. However, when it comes to justification, “the Law is not of faith” (v. 12)—that is, “the law has nothing to do with the notion of receiving ‘right standing’ as a gracious gift from God, as a result of trust in Him.”²⁸ When it comes to “obtaining God’s favour [sic] by winning ‘merit,’”²⁹ the Law cannot do what faith alone can. “Doing,” the concern of the Law, is in direct contrast to “believing,” God’s unchanging means of justification.

*The passage from Deuteronomy [v. 10] proves justification cannot be by the Law, and the passage from Habakkuk [v. 11] proves it must be by faith. The ways of law and faith are mutually exclusive. To live by law is to live by self-effort and leads inevitably to failure, condemnation, and death. To live by faith is to respond to God’s grace and leads to justification and eternal life.*³⁰

3. Faith in Jesus redeems us from the curse of the Law and justifies us (vv. 13-14).

Verses 13-14 read, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” Dealing with the problem of the curse of the Law, Paul again quotes the Old Testament and then points to its fulfillment in Jesus, to show how He has both dealt with the penalty of the Law and has provided the grounds for universal blessing.

Having already quoted Deuteronomy 27:26 to show the impossible standard of the Law—that is, complete obedience—and the resulting curse upon those who fail to reach it, Paul now shows how Christ “redeemed us from the curse of the Law” by substituting Himself in our place and “becoming a curse for us” (v. 13). He did that by dying in a particular way, that is, on a cross or “on a tree” (Acts 5:30; 1 Peter 2:24). Paul proves this by quoting Deuteronomy 21:23 where we learn that “a hanged man [‘on a tree,’ v. 22] is cursed by God.” Under the Law, a criminal was subjected to that particular kind of death to show that he was being cursed by God. So, we are being taught to recognize a “peculiar appropriateness”³¹ in Jesus’ death by crucifixion “on a tree,” for it symbolized that He had been cursed in our place and on our behalf. And, having become a curse for us, that payment of Himself “redeemed” or “bought us back” from the penalty of the Law that we had earned.³²

This substitutionary and redeeming sacrifice is a familiar New Testament theme. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake He [the Father] made Him [the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” 1 Peter 2:24 agrees, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” 1 Peter 3:18 adds, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh.”

“In Christ Jesus” the standard of the Law has been achieved (i.e., perfection) and the penalty of the Law has been paid (i.e., a curse); so now God’s prophecy to Abraham of spiritual blessing (i.e., justification) to the Gentiles (or better, ‘nations’ in light of his use of

‘we’—cf. v. 8)³³ and God’s promise of the Spirit [cf. Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Joel 2:28; John 7:39; Acts 2:33; Ephesians 1:13]³⁴ can actually be offered and enjoyed (v. 14). But, as has been clearly shown by now, it will only (i.e., “might”³⁵) “come” and be “received” “through faith” in that Redeemer (v. 14).

Application: The expiation of Jesus Christ is Paul’s trump card in showing the sufficiency of faith and the inability of the Law. Christ has done what we could not, and He now offers what the Law always withheld. Truly, then, justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We must have faith in Christ. We must cling to Him like a drowning man to a lifeguard, for apart from His rescue we will certainly perish. We must rely completely upon His work, rejecting our own effort as woefully insufficient to accomplish the standard of the Law or to redeem us from the curse of the Law. Apart from Jesus, we have no escape, no power, no resources; we are “under the Law” until it sentences us eternally.

But! “But we know that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:15). Is your faith in Jesus Christ?

*Faith is laying hold of Jesus Christ personally. There is no merit in it. It is not another ‘work’. Its value is not in itself, but entirely in its object, Jesus Christ. As Luther put it, ‘faith ... apprehendeth nothing else but that precious jewel Christ Jesus.’ Christ is the Bread of life; faith feeds upon Him. Christ was lifted up on the cross; faith gazes at Him there.*³⁶

It matters not what is the quantity of your faith, but only what is its focus. For when gazing on Jesus, Peter walked on water; and when looking to Jesus, he was plucked from the waves (cf. Matthew 14:28-33)—at the high points and low points in his life, faith in Christ was sufficient. Faith in Jesus Christ is where spiritual safety and everlasting freedom is found. Do not foolishly forsake it!

CONCLUSION

The experience of the Galatian believers, the example of Abraham, the expiation of Jesus Christ—powerful arguments to break the spell of the Satan and convince the Christian that it is foolish to forsake the sufficiency of faith in justification.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://fxn.ws/1ox8t7B>

² <http://bit.ly/1pfxk43>

³ <http://bit.ly/1to7JQo>

⁴ The word for “eyes” refers here to “mental and spiritual understanding” (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 744).

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Donald K. Campbell, “Galatians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 597.

⁸ In Galatians 4:8-11, Paul is again going to bring up this point, that the Law is unable to continue what it couldn’t even start in the first place—“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not god. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”

⁹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 67.

¹⁰ Arndt, 785.

¹¹ R. Alan Cole, *Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 9, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 134.

¹² The phrase “you received the Spirit” in verse 2 is in the aorist tense and looks toward the past when they received the specific blessing of the indwelling of the Spirit. The phrase “He who supplies the Spirit” in verse 5 is a present active participle, referencing the ongoing benefits of being filled with the Spirit (some of which are highlighted in chapter 5). We considered our experience of both the past and present ministry of the Spirit in the first point, and are focusing primarily on the phrase “He who... works miracles among you” in this point.

¹³ MacArthur, 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁵ At least 14 years (cf. Genesis 16:16; 17:1)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75. He then helpfully adds, “Lest Christians think that, because His chosen people have rejected Him, the Lord will reject them, Paul declares unequivocally, ‘I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be!’ Then he repeats the declaration, ‘God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew’ (Rom 11:1–2). God still has marvelous future plans for the Jews as a people. But at no time of history—before or after His special calling of the Jews—has any person been brought into saving relationship to God by any other means than faith.”

¹⁸ P. R. Jones, “Exegesis of Galatians 3 and 4,” *RevExp* 69 (1972), 476 quoted in Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994], 226.

¹⁹ Paul interpreted the Genesis quotation “All nations will be blessed through you” in a far richer sense than traditional Jewish exegesis allowed. Through the Jewish people the world had received many wonderful benefits, above all the sacred Scriptures and the religion of monotheism. However, Paul went much further when “he simply identifies the blessing with God’s ‘grace’ and his ‘justification by faith’” (George, 225).

²⁰ “Salvation by works would not be good but bad news” (MacArthur, 75.)

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

²² “It was not, however, the Scripture (which did not exist at the time) that, foreseeing God’s purposes of grace in the future, spoke these precious words to Abraham, but God himself in his own person.... It was not the not yet existent Scripture that made this announcement to Pharaoh, but God himself through the mouth of his prophet Moses. These acts could be attributed to ‘Scripture’ only as the result of such a habitual identification, in the mind of the writer, of the text of Scripture with God as speaking, that it became natural to use the term ‘Scripture says,’ when what was really intended was ‘God, as recorded in Scripture, said’” (B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 2nd ed. [Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948], pp. 299-300, quoted in James Montgomery Boice, “Galatians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976], 457).

²³ Cole makes an interesting point here, especially in light of the previous section’s argument for the inadequacy of being merely physically connected with Abraham through circumcision (140):

Now since it was manifestly impossible to keep all the commandments of the law, that meant that, willy-nilly, all those who tried to keep the law came under this curse. The rabbis realized this; Paul himself knew it from his own experience before conversion. But there seemed to the rabbis to be no way out except by clinging to the ‘merits of the Fathers’ and to the merits of Abraham in particular. That was why the Jews clung so insistently to the reassuring thought of physical descent from Abraham, and the bearing in their body of the physical mark of circumcision that assured them of God’s covenant with Abraham. The average Jew believed whole-heartedly that no circumcised son of Abraham would go to Gehenna. We cannot afford to smile at them when we remember how superstitiously some today can look on ‘membership’ of a church, or even the mere physical reception of water-baptism, or some other rite.

²⁴ Campbell, 598.

²⁵ “The question is often asked nowadays: is Paul being fair to the verse in Habakkuk by this exegesis, or is he ‘reading in’ a different meaning? ...

The brief answer to such a question is, first, that Paul does not even try to prove his doctrine of ‘justification by faith’ from this verse; he only illustrates it. He actually proves it from God’s ways of dealing with Abraham. This verse is nothing more than a handy peg upon which to hang a spiritual truth which is made abundantly clear elsewhere in Scripture. Secondly, it is by no means certain that Paul is doing violence to the verse in Habakkuk, especially if we translate his quotation, as in RSV, *He who through faith is righteous shall live*, or even ‘he shall gain life who is justified through faith’ with NEB (NIV follows the older translations with ‘The righteous will live by faith’). Even in the Old Testament, the line between ‘trusty’ and ‘trusting’ is a slender one, and we have already seen the ambiguity in the two meanings of the New Testament word *pistoi* as being either ‘faithful’ or ‘believing’” (Cole, 141).

²⁶ D. A. Carson et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1214.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cole, 142.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ MacArthur, 77.

³¹ Cole, 144.

³² “Christ was not ‘cursed’ simply because the manner of his death was the cross. Nevertheless, this death on the cross was to Paul yet another of those correspondences of Scripture with later events which are too numerous to be accidental. To him, this was a ‘fulfillment’ [sic], the giving of a fuller, richer meaning at deeper level. Yet, to his Jewish opponents, this very death of Jesus

on the cross, under God's curse, was the supreme proof that Jesus therefore could not be God's Messiah. Paul was meeting his enemies head on, as usual" (Ibid.).

³³ Considered in verses 6-9, our second main point

³⁴ Considered in verses 1-5, our first main point

³⁵ The verbs are in the subjunctive mood to show condition.

³⁶ Stott, 82.