

FAITH – THE ONLY WAY
Galatians 3:1-18

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A man died and appeared at the Pearly Gates for his entrance interview with St. Peter.

“You need 100 points to get into heaven,” Peter told the new arrival. “Tell me about your life.”

“I’ve been married to the same woman for over 50 years,” the man boasted.

St. Peter furrowed his brow and said, “OK. That’s worth one point.”

“One point!” the man stormed.

“What else have you done?” St. Peter inquired.

“I’ve gone to church all my life and rarely missed a Sunday service or a Wednesday prayer meeting,” the man replied.

“That’s worth one point,” St. Peter said.

Again the man protested, but Peter wouldn’t budge. “What else?” the apostle asked.

“I was on the church’s Benevolence Committee,” the man pled, now feeling a bit desperate. “I helped to feed a lot of hungry widows and provided shoes for a bunch of homeless kids.”

“I suppose that’s worth another point,” Peter said.

“One point!” the applicant fumed. “Man, on your grading system the only way anybody could get into heaven is by the grace of God!”

“That’s worth 97 points,” St. Peter smiled. “Come on in!”

In the first two chapters of Galatians, Paul addressed the problems of the Galatian churches by asserting his independence from Jerusalem. Both his call to be an apostle and the gospel he preached were given to him by the resurrected Christ, not by the pillars of the church in Jerusalem.

In chapter 3, Paul turned his attention away from himself and toward the Galatian Christians. Having spoken about his history, next he reminded the Galatians about their own history with the gospel of Christ Jesus. He wanted the churches to understand that salvation comes only through faith in Christ Jesus—not through the works of the law.

The Presence of the Spirit Declares that Faith is the Only Way (3:1-5)

Spiritual experience is too quickly discounted by many who call themselves Baptists. While our own experiences must be measured against the teachings of scripture, we should not be too quick to discount how we experience God. Scripture contains a collection of the testimonies of various people in various places who encountered God. The Old Testament depicts Moses' experience at the burning bush as the pivotal point in his life, and the fourth gospel shares the testimony of the man born blind who had been healed by Jesus.

Both Moses and the blind man were radically different people because of their encounter with God. As he was questioned by the religious authorities, the blind man, even in ignorance, gave his testimony, "All I can say is that one thing is sure: while I was once blind, now I see" (John 9:25, author's paraphrase). Perhaps it is the abuse of religious experience by some groups that has prompted Baptists to hesitate to share a word of testimony about how God is working in their lives and how they are working for God's kingdom.

Paul did not discount religious encounters. He pointed to the spiritual experience of the Galatian believers as a key point of defense for his gospel of salvation by faith alone. Paul challenged the Galatian believers to realize they had entered the new age, not by the works of the law, but, rather, by receiving the Spirit when they responded in faith to the preaching of the gospel.

Paul's use of the term "Spirit" occurs frequently in the latter chapters of Galatians (3:14; 4:6, 29; 5:5; 6:8). The Spirit is God's liberating presence in the life of His children. Paul taught many things about the Spirit, including:

1. When the Galatians received the gospel, they received the Spirit. Too often believers conclude that they must press forward or accomplish a particular level of spiritual maturity before they may experience the presence of God's Holy Spirit. In chapter 4, verse 6, Paul said it this way: "Because you are my sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts."
2. The Spirit came to the whole community and not to an elite few. Paul was not addressing the inner core of believers in the Galatian region. Rather, he was addressing the whole church. Paul makes clear elsewhere that receiving the Spirit and belonging to Christ are absolutely inseparable (Romans 8:9-17). We should not be intimidated by those who claim to have a special anointing or presence of the Spirit in their lives. All of God's children have been baptized by the one Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12:13).
3. Paul made it clear that walking by the Spirit and by the flesh are contradictory approaches to life. While he developed this idea in more detail in chapter 5, here Paul was perplexed by

Galatian Christians who would begin the journey of discipleship by walking in the Spirit and then revert midstream to the works of the law.

Paul opened chapter three by arguing that religious experience, the presence of the Spirit of God, serves to validate that faith is the only way. They received the Spirit by faith, and they must continue in faith.

The Experience of Abraham Declares that Faith is the Only Way (3:6-14)

Jesus, the Messiah, came as a Jew from the tribe of Judah. The early church faced the questions: Who are the real people of God? What is the identifying characteristic of those who are the true descendants of Abraham? Paul argued that God reckoned even Abraham, the forefather of Judaism, as righteous because of his faith (Genesis 15:6). Abraham's faith came long before the giving of Moses's law (cf. 3:17).

Paul was demonstrating that the Gentiles were part of Abraham's heritage, part of the lineage of the very father of the Israelite people (cf. Romans 4:1-25). Paul's argument was a difficult one for the Judaizers to discount. Paul knew that God had declared Abraham to be righteous when Abraham believed the Lord's promise to give him a son and to number his descendants as the stars of the sky (Genesis 15:16). Only later in the Genesis story, Genesis 17, was the account of Abraham's circumcision recorded (Roman 4:9-12). The circumcision, therefore, was simply a sign or a seal of the righteousness which he had obtained by having faith while he was still uncircumcised. Paul argued that Abraham is the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or not. Paul stated it clearly, "Therefore, be sure it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham" (3:7).

As we approach the task of interpreting the New Testament, we would do well to understand that the real Israel is composed of those who have believed, both Jew and Gentile. Many misunderstandings are clarified when we remember that the church is the real Israel, the real people of God.

Paul, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, declared that the Gentiles in the flesh, who were once excluded from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants and promises, are now in Christ Jesus no longer strangers to God. Both Jews and Gentiles are made into one, with the barrier or the dividing wall between the circumcised and the uncircumcised being torn down (Ephesians 2:11ff.).

In his letter to the church in the capital city, Rome, Paul could hardly have been more clear. He wrote, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:28-29).

As we read the New Testament, we must realize that Paul declared that the church is the new people of God, the new Israel, the full contingent of the descendants of Abraham. God's promises are fulfilled in those who profess the Lordship of Christ Jesus by faith. Abraham, the father of ancient Israel, is the personification of the very faith that Paul proclaimed. Having demonstrated

that Abraham is a believer (3:9), Paul then explained what happens to those who insist on being made righteous by law-keeping.

In verses 10-14, Paul used a very familiar passage of scripture, Deuteronomy 27:26, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the books of the law, to do them.” Twelve verses of Deuteronomy 27 begin with the word “cursed.” Paul was arguing that if any person is going to base his salvation upon the keeping of the law, then there can be no exception. That person must keep every single law, even the most insignificant commandment, or else endure the fatal curse. The result is inevitable. If we try to find our justification by keeping the law, then we will experience the curse of God. No one can keep all of the law.

Paul painted a very grim picture of the human dilemma. While the law requires perfect obedience in order to be right with God, no one has ever met such a standard. There is only one solution to our dilemma: Christ has born the punishment for our failure. Paul offered a summary statement of the gospel in verse 13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by himself receiving the curse” (Deuteronomy 21:23). Ancient Israelites found it difficult that the Messiah, the Anointed One, would be accursed by God. For us, Christ became cursed and shed his blood. He has taken our place, redeemed us, become our “stand-in.” Therefore (verse 14), even the Gentiles can now become part of the people of God, receiving the Spirit through their faith.

Actor Kevin Bacon recounted when his 6-year-old son saw Footloose for the first time:

He said, “Hey, Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you swing from the rafters of that building? That’s really cool, how did you do that?”

I said, “Well, I didn’t do that part...it was a stunt man.”

“What’s a stunt man?” he asked.

“That’s someone who dresses like me and does things I can’t do.”

“Oh,” he replied and walked out of the room looking a little confused.

A little later he said, “Hey, Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you spin around on that gym bar and land on your feet? How did you do that?”

I said, “Well, I didn’t do that. It was a gymnastics double.”

“What’s a gymnastics double?” he asked.

“That’s a guy who dresses in my clothes and does things I can’t do.”

There was silence from my son, then he asked in a concerned voice, “Dad, what did you do?”

That’s the grace of God in our lives. Jesus took our sin upon himself and did what we couldn’t do. We stand forgiven and bask sheepishly triumphant in Jesus’ glory.

It is very important to realize that salvation walks a single path. It does not run along with two possibilities, one for Jews and one for Gentiles. Everyone who wants to be part of the people of God, a real descendant of Abraham, must trust in Christ Jesus by faith.

The Irrevocability of the Covenant Demonstrates that Faith is the Only Way (3:15-18)

God's promise to Abraham was unconditional—no strings attached. Then, 430 years later, came Mount Sinai, Moses, and the law (verse 17).

In verse 16, Paul emphasized the idea of a single seed to stress our solidarity in Christ and the unity of the church. The original covenant with Abraham depicted one seed, representing a single family of faith. Perhaps this is why Paul was so upset over the issue of table fellowship at Antioch (see Lesson 2). To be the seed of Abraham is to belong to Christ. Paul summarized this section (verse 18) by asserting once again that Abraham's position is based on God's promise and not any merit.

In London, the great church architect Christopher Wren designed St. Paul's Cathedral with the highest and largest unsupported dome ever seriously conceived by an architect. The city fathers were convinced it could not be done. They insisted that such a dome would inevitably collapse without pillars to support it and insisted that Wren add columns to hold up his grand ceiling. Wren protested to no avail. Finally, after much wrangling over the matter, Wren reluctantly agreed to add the pillars. About a century later, a crew was hired to clean the inside of the dome. They built their scaffolding around Wren's great Corinthian columns, and when they reached the top, they made the most astonishing discovery. Wren and his workmen had rewarded the city father's distrust by leaving half an inch between the top of the pillars and the dome. The pillars supported nothing. The dome never collapsed.

In the same fashion, many Christians, like the early believers in Galatia, insist on working their way into God's kingdom by their good deeds. In reality, however, Paul said that our good deeds, the works of the law, and all Jewish tradition can contribute nothing to our salvation. They stand like tall pillars that never touch the dome, they never support our right standing before God. We think the great dome of God's kingdom depends on us. We think our right relationship with God or our worth as a person depends on us. We endeavor, with fear and trembling, to please our Lord, or we do so to appear spiritual to ourselves and others. Even as we strive so mightily to accomplish something for God's kingdom or leave our legacy for future generations, we realize that everything we do is useless unless it is based upon faith in Christ Jesus.

We would do well to remember, however, that for all of Paul's emphasis on salvation by faith and faith alone, he never discounted righteous living. As we move through Galatians, we will find Paul made clear that while we are saved by faith in Christ Jesus, we are saved to live a life that calls us to walk by the Spirit and not by the desires of the flesh.

We fill out applications for everything—credit cards, college admissions, and the purchase of insurance. Imagine yourself filling out an application to be accepted in heaven. First you give your name, address, and social security number. Next you come to a section entitled “List of Qualifications.” What would you write? What would qualify you to be a part of God’s kingdom?