

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A Study of Galatians: The Blessings of the Gospel - Galatians 3:1-29

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are considering Galatians 3. This is the third of a six talk series and in the previous two broadcasts we have learned that Paul was seeking to lead the Galatian Christians through the most difficult, and divisive, problem that the early church had to deal with. This was the acceptance of Gentile believers into what had previously been a community of Jews, who had accepted that Jesus was the promised Messiah. When Greeks and others, from a pagan background, who confessed that Jesus was the Son of God, and accepted that He was Lord were welcomed into the church by Peter, and the other apostles, there were some at Jerusalem who could not accept this. They were convinced that Gentile Christians had to adopt Jewish religious rites, such as circumcision and only eating certain foods. We also learned how Paul had to defend his apostleship by relating how he received the Gospel that he preached by direct revelation from God. In Galatians 2, Paul recited the details of a meeting in Jerusalem, with other apostles, where the difficulties over receiving Gentiles were talked through until a solution was agreed, where they, the Gentiles, were accepted into full fellowship, solely on the basis of the faith in the Lord Jesus.

Sadly, the Galatian letter shows that not all accepted the decision of the Jerusalem council for, as we shall see, Paul had to deal very firmly with the notion that the Christian Gospel was insufficient by itself to make Gentile believers acceptable to God. Galatians 3:1-5 illustrate that quite clearly: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been openly set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? Have ye suffered so many things in vain? If it be yet in vain. He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" That quotation is from the Authorised or King James Version of the Bible.

Paul's use of the word "Galatians" to address the Christians of Galatia, rather than the term "brothers", prepared the way for the rebuke that he delivered in the passage we read. From these verses, we also learn that the Apostle was unable to understand how they, (the believers of Galatia), had become so foolish that they were about to exchange the freedom that they had in Christ for the shackles of the Law. To Paul, it was inconceivable that the Galatians should be so deficient in judgment that they took a position where they, in effect, declared that the death of the Lord Jesus was insufficient. So incomprehensible was it, that to the Apostle, it seemed as if someone had cast a spell on them.

This departure was not caused by a faulty preaching of the Christian Gospel, when Paul evangelised the region, for he stated, in effect, that it could not have been clearer if his message had been posted on a public bill-board in large letters. At the heart of Paul's Gospel was the simple, yet essential, message of Christ crucified - a fact of history that carried within it continuing significance for the salvation of mankind, for without the shedding of blood there could be no forgiveness. (Hebrews 9:22) Nothing could be allowed to intervene, or dilute, the stark purity of the Gospel message. Wherever he travelled, the Apostle was determined to preach nothing except the cross of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

A further reason why Paul was so baffled that the Galatian Christians should move over to legalism was that it was contrary to their conversion to Christianity. He asks them directly whether, or not, they received the Spirit by works, or by faith. This point is not some academic issue debated by theologians in a lecture theatre. It is a matter of supreme importance to us this morning, as we discuss these matters on *Truth for Today*. Are we fully persuaded that there is absolutely nothing that we can do that will add anything to the perfection of Christ's redeeming suffering upon the cross? We must rest upon that finished work and not try foolishly, as the Galatians did, to increase, or even overlook, the eternal efficacy of the death of Christ. As Mrs. Alexander wrote:

*"He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by His precious blood.*

*There was no other good enough,
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in."*

They might only be verses from a children's hymn, but the message they proclaim never alters.

Galatians 3:5 both summarises the opening verses of the chapter and also provides a lead into the rest of the chapter. Paul asks the Galatians directly whether their present experience of the Spirit's power, working within them, was a result of faith, or the works of the law. As we shall see, this argument crops up another three times in the rest of the chapter. Galatians 3:6-9 reveal Paul's understanding of the history of salvation, which began with Abraham and reached its pinnacle in Christ. "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they who are of faith, the same are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then, they who are of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham."

Notice, in the portion of the Galatian letter that I have just read, that Paul mentions the "sons of Abraham". It can hardly be doubted, that the teachers of legalism, at Galatia, were seeking to persuade the believers that to become a true son of Abraham they must be circumcised. "No," shouts Paul, "a true son of Abraham is one who has like faith to the patriarch." So to emphasise the argument of Paul, thus far, I can do no better than quote a writer to whom I regularly refer: "Who are the ones who enter into spiritual blessing? The answer is: Those characterised by the approach of faith are blessed along with Abraham, who had faith. Besides, since the blessing of Abraham is declared to have been intended for the Gentiles also, how could the Gentiles be blessed except by faith?" (James Montgomery Boice, *Galatians [NIV Expositors Bible Commentaries]*)

I trust that makes clear the message that we are justified before God by faith alone.

Now we can examine Paul's rejection of the notion of justification by works of the Law, by reading Galatians 3:10-14: "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident; for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

We should notice that, in these verses, Paul quotes three times from the Old Testament to show to the Galatian believers that trying to live according to the Law will result in a curse on those who fail, even in the smallest way.

One of the Scriptures cited is part of Habakkuk 2:4, where it states that "the just shall live by faith". With this Scripture, Paul is introducing a general principle and, as FF Bruce remarked about Habakkuk 2:4: "If life is assured to those who are justified by faith, then it is not assured to those who seek justification by law keeping, whether they succeed in keeping the law or not." (*The Epistle to the Galatians*, FF Bruce)

We must, however, pay attention to the major point of this section and the One whose actions are the spring of that life. Paul returns us to the great unalterable fact of salvation history and of faith, which is, that Christ has redeemed us. Not the Law, nor angels, nor the philosophies of men, but the death and resurrection of Jesus the Son of God.

Having considered the negative aspect of the curse of the Law, the Apostle returns, in Galatians 3:15-18, to another positive aspect of faith, which is the permanence of the covenant formed with Abraham, "the father of the faithful". He is used, by Paul, to illustrate the centrality of faith in the things of God. "Brethren, I speak after the manner of men: Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man annulleth or addeth to it. Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before by God in Christ, the law, which was 430 years after, cannot annul, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise." (Galatians 3:15-18)

In Galatians 3:15-18, Paul is countering the argument that, even if Abraham was justified by faith in the first instance, then Law, which arrived over four centuries later, changed the basis of the relationship of Abraham's descendants with the living God. Paul rejected this thesis by turning their attention to the contemporary customs of confirming wills and covenants. Once a covenant had been made, nothing could alter or annul the promise. If man was reluctant to break a covenant, once made, how much more was God going to keep His promises, especially when they were centred in the coming Redeemer, who was, of course, the Lord Jesus. Another point I wish to make from this section is that the promises were not made to Abraham and his immediate family only, and so could be fulfilled even before the Law was

inaugurated. Rather, were they embodied in the One who was to come, meaning that the grace of God was the overriding principle, and not keeping the Law.

Having considered the abiding nature and precedence of the covenant, in Galatians 3:15-18, we now must move on to discuss the purpose of the law, but before we do so, can I remind anyone who has just joined us that they are listening to *Truth for Today*, where we are studying Galatians 3, and I am about to read Galatians 3:19-22: "Wherefore, then, serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one. Is the law, then, against the promises of God? God forbid; for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe."

We have learned this morning that seeking to keep the Law is of none effect when it comes to justifying a sinner. Why, then, was the Law given you might ask? In the passage we have just read, Paul answers that very question by revealing that the Law was given because of transgressions. Some might ask, and I would be one of them, "What exactly does that mean?" Perhaps the best amplification is to quote Romans: 3:20 "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

The first part of Romans 3:20 confirms what we have seen is the message of Galatians 3, which is, that observance of the Law can never bring justification for the sinner. The second part tells us that by the Law is the knowledge of sin. In other words, it outlines for us the standard that God requires from us. If we are honest, we must admit that we are incapable of reaching that standard.

When I was a teenager, I played cricket for the youth team of the firm I worked for. Initially, I thought I was quite skilful and competent. During the season, I played against two youngsters who went on, a few years later, to be regular members of the England side. Compared with them, my ability was poor, for they demonstrated, in no uncertain way, that they possessed the necessary ability and all round-skill, which revealed to the rest of us our lack of talent. It became obvious to me that something was lacking when compared with the standard needed to reach the top. In the same way, but to a far greater degree, the Law was given to show mankind the standard that God required. Only One, in the whole history of the world, reached that level of perfection and He was crucified for us. Some minutes ago I quoted the lines from a children's hymn that say:

*"There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin."*

I repeat, again, for though it might only be a children's hymn yet it states an unchangeable truth about the greatness and worth of the Lord Jesus.

Galatians 3:20 has had many interpretations, as many as 300 according to Lightfoot, the respected 19th century expositor. (Joseph B Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*) As a century has passed since that time, there are, no doubt, further additions to that sum! In the time allotted to me, all I can do is sum up what seems to me to be the emphasis of Galatians 3:20, in the context of our study this morning. Paul seems to be saying that the promises had a superlative character compared to the law which was mediated - an action that meant man was party to it, whereas the promises were unilateral. This further emphasises the point that the promises were unconditional.

As time is racing away, we must move on to Galatians 3:23-25, which discuss being liberated from the law: "But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster."

Here, Paul instructs us that the Law guarded and confined us until the age of faith in Christ arrived. I would judge that this has a meaning in the history of salvation, as well as referring to an individual's faith in the Lord Jesus, for once the Christian era commenced the need for the Law, which acted as a guardian rather than a teacher, was ended. FF Bruce translates Galatians 3:25 as: "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian." (*The Epistle to the Galatians*, FF Bruce) Thus, we understand that once the Lord Jesus had come the time of the Law was over. It should also be said the experience of passing from Law to promise is the experience of every true Christian.

As we are almost at the end of our allotted time, we must briefly consider Galatians 3:26-29, which makes the critically important point that we are all one in Christ: "For ye are all the sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

There are three points that I wish to make from Galatians 3:26-29.

1. All who have been justified by faith in the Lord Jesus have become sons of God. From being under the curse, they have been transferred into the realm of the Father's blessing.
2. Through that same faith, all believers are one with each other, which was a remarkable statement and difficult to accept by some believers in that day, or in any age. For the Jew to consider that the uncircumcised Gentile was a child of Abraham took the grace and power of God. So, whether the barriers are social, religious, or class, they simply should not exist in the church, because the work of Christ has broken every barrier down.
3. Christians of every age are one by virtue of being heirs to the promise.

The radical nature of these three concluding points takes on further lustre, when we remember the words of the morning prayer, when a male Jew would give thanks that he was not a Gentile, not a woman and not a slave. No doubt Paul, himself, had used that formula in his prayers in his pre-Christian days. Now the Spirit of God had taught him the implications of the death of the Lord Jesus. No doubt, he also needed the power and grace of God to put these doctrines into practice.

My closing prayer is that we all will be persuaded of the sole sufficiency of the death of the Lord Jesus, on the cross at Golgotha, that we never, for one moment, think that we can ever do anything that will add to the merit of that sacrifice. The grace and the love of God, in Christ, have redeemed us once for all, as the hymn that was often used by Billy Graham to close his evangelistic meetings, tells us. To end our time together this morning I will read one its verses:

*“Just as I am - Thou will receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve,
Because Thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God I come, I come!”*

Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871)

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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