

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON THIRTY-FIVE)

“ARE WE BEING FOOLISH?” (PART 2)

GALATIANS 3:1-5

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.

2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

4 Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

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—

In **Galatians 3:1–5**, Paul confronts the believers in Galatia with their folly and the inconsistency of their behaviour. They had allowed themselves to be “bewitched” by the false teaching of the Judaizers, and Paul shows them that their action contradicts the work of Christ on the Cross and contradicts the work of the Spirit in their lives.

In verse **1**, he describes them as being “*foolish*.” We explained in **Lesson 33**, that the Judaizers had infiltrated the Galatian church and were undermining the very core of Christianity, namely, justification by faith alone in Christ alone. They were teaching the Galatians that in

order to be true believers, they had to become Jewish proselytes and obey the Mosaic Law including circumcision. Paul was appalled that the Galatians would tolerate, much less embrace, such heresy. He called them “*foolish,*” or people without understanding, reason, and thought. They had abandoned the very truth of the glorious Gospel they had been taught by one of the greatest teachers in the history of the church. They were not stupid, they had simply failed to use their spiritual intelligence when faced by the unscriptural, Gospel-destroying, legalistic teaching of the Judaizers.

The Galatians were behaving as if they had been “*bewitched.*” But they were in not in reality the victims of a magical spell. Rather, they had been misled by teaching that they should have readily recognized as false, because Paul had thoroughly, vividly and graphically proclaimed the crucified Christ to them. The Lord Jesus Christ had been “*publicly portrayed as crucified*” before them. They had heard the plainest possible preaching and teaching from Paul and his companions concerning the substitutionary death of Christ. Jesus Christ had been so clearly set forth before them that they had, as it were, seen Him as He hung on the Cross of Calvary. Yet, under some “spell,” they had turned aside from the faith of Christ, to follow “*a different gospel,*” one which made the death of Christ of no efficacy whatsoever!

In the first five verses of this chapter Paul asks five questions of the Galatians. By asking these questions, Paul is appealing to their own experience. He desires for their own experience to convince them of their error in departing from the Gospel of the grace of God.

In verse 2, Paul writes, “*Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*” This question points to the manner in which the Galatian believers had been justified, or declared righteous, or saved. Paul asks them in effect, “Did you have to work for the Spirit of God to take up residence in you, or did He come in when you put your faith in Jesus Christ?” They would have answered, “We received the Holy Spirit when we put our faith in Jesus Christ.”

Paul is challenging them to remember how they were saved. The Galatians would have remembered that they were saved by **hearing** the Gospel that Paul had proclaimed, and accepting it by **faith**. And they would have remembered that they received the Holy Spirit the moment they placed their trust in Jesus Christ and His death, burial and resurrection on their behalf, independent of performing any works.

In verse **3**, Paul asks his readers two questions that are really one rhetorical question: “*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*” The question in verse **2** is about how one **becomes** a Christian, while the question in verse **3** is about how one **lives** as a Christian. Verse **2** deals with **justification** by faith while verse **3** deals with **sanctification** by faith.

Paul’s argument is a powerful one. If the believers in Galatia had received their initial salvation by trusting in the crucified Christ, and if they had received the Holy Spirit the moment they believed, and were experiencing His supernatural, transforming power working within them, why would they now endeavour to be sanctified by means of self-effort? Why would they seek to be brought to a state of spiritual maturity by works?

The point Paul is making of the verse is that we must continue in the Christian life the same way that we started it-by the grace of God. Faith is the only response to the Word of God which allows the Holy Spirit to work in and through us. The Flesh, on the other hand, responds to God’s Word, not with reliance on the Spirit but with reliance on self. It can produce a very rigorous morality, but it negates grace and makes the Cross of Christ of no effect. The essential mark of a Christian is not how far he or she appears to be progressing in sanctification, but on what he or she is relying to progress in sanctification. Are we striving for sanctification by works? Or are we relying on the Spirit to sanctify us?

Brothers and sisters, the means of justification and sanctification are the same! We are justified and sanctified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In verse 4, Paul asks his fourth question: “*Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?*” The Greek word translated “suffer” is **paschó**: (**pas’-kho**), which originally described essentially what a person experienced, whether good or bad, favourable or unfavourable. The “**United Bible Societies New Testament Handbook**,” explains that in **Galatians 3:4**, the word,

“is ambiguous, since it could be understood either negatively or positively. Negatively, it could be understood as ‘suffering’ and therefore could refer to the persecutions that the Galatian Christians had gone through...Positively, it could refer to the spiritual experiences of the Galatians as a result of their reception of the Holy Spirit...The Galatian Christians would probably have known the specific experience referred to in Paul’s words, but unfortunately we do not.”

Neither view makes a great deal of difference as it relates to interpreting the letter as a whole, but it is my opinion that to understand Paul’s use of the word **paschó** as a reference to the spiritual experiences of the Galatian believers, fits the immediate context better. Indeed, in verse 5, which we will consider shortly, there is a direct reference to their spiritual experiences. The **Christian Standard Bible** translates the verse as follows: “*Did you experience so much for nothing—if in fact it was for nothing?*” Paul is asking them in effect, “Have you experienced so many blessings of the Holy Spirit in vain?”

By turning to a message of works-righteousness, the Galatian believers were depreciating the saving and sanctifying work that the Holy Spirit had effected in their lives.

The phrase, “*If indeed it was in vain,*” leaves open the possibility that the justifying and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Galatian believers was not in vain. In adding these words, Paul implies that it is hard for him to believe that the Galatians would ultimately abandon the Gospel of grace and embrace the false teaching of the Judaizers. It seems that Paul had momentarily entertained the thought

that the Galatians would persist in linking their experience of the Spirit to their observance of the Law. If this were to happen, it would mean that they might as well have never had the experience of being saved by grace at all! Christ would have died to no purpose as far as they were concerned, and they would have received the Holy Spirit to no purpose also.

Harry Ironside comments that Paul,

"cannot believe that it is in vain, for he looks back and remembers the exercises they went through, the joy that came to them when they professed to receive Christ, and the love that seemed to be welling up in their hearts one for another, and for him as a servant of God and for the Saviour Himself...'I cannot believe you were not converted, that it was not real. You have been misled, you have gotten into a fog, and if I can, I want by the grace of God to deliver you.'"

Why does it seem inconceivable to Paul that the spiritual experiences of the Galatian believers would ultimately be in vain? It was certainly not because of a steadfast character on the part of the Galatians. It is God's faithfulness that provides the foundation of Paul's confidence. God Almighty is the steadfast One, and He does not commence his work of saving a soul in order to abandon it before it is completed. As he tells the Philippians in **Philippians 1:6**, "*And 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*" (**English Standard Version**).

In verse **5**, Paul brings to a close his appeal to the Galatians' own experience by one last reminder both of how rich their spiritual experiences have been, and of the way in which God had bestowed on them such wonderful blessings. He asks his fifth question: "*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?*"

In this verse, Paul continues the thought of verses **2** and **3**. As we noted last week and earlier in this Lesson, Paul, in verse **2** is speaking of the **initial** entrance of the Spirit into the hearts of the Galatians at the moment they placed their faith in the Lord Jesus. In verse **3**, he refers to the **sanctifying** work of the Spirit in the believer's life. In verse **5**, the subject of the **manifestations** of the Spirit is introduced. Paul speaks about the act of the Holy Spirit in enduing certain members of the Galatian church with gifts of the Spirit. Paul's point is that all of these manifestations clearly indicate that the grace way of salvation must be God's way since it is accompanied by the supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is trying to get the Galatian believers to understand that every spiritual benefit that they had enjoyed, and were enjoying-initial salvation, sanctification and the manifestation of spiritual gifts, were all graciously given to them by God through the operation of the Holy Spirit in their lives. In other words, grace had saved them, grace was conforming them to the image of Jesus Christ, and grace had allowed them to manifest the gifts of the Spirit. It was all of grace! It was the same Holy Spirit Who indwelt them when they were initially saved, and Who was performing His work of sanctification in their lives, Who was also bestowing His spiritual gifts to them.

John MacArthur notes that,

"Paul's argument is itself 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?"

The Greek words translated "*supplies*" and "*works*" are both in the **present tense** which indicates that the work of the Holy Spirit in both respects was continually going on in the Galatian churches, even though

they were in the process of defecting from the authentic Gospel! God was still working in and through the Galatian believers, although His work was being hindered by their forsaking of His ministrations and their dependence instead upon self-effort. The point however is that these Galatians still had the attesting power of the miracles among them, proving that grace and not works was the way of salvation.

Brothers and sisters, while Paul's reference to the working of miracles clearly speaks to specific instances of mighty works that were clearly supernatural, we need to remember that the greatest of all miracles is the saving of a soul! Our regeneration was a miracle wrought by the Spirit. And the changes that have occurred in our lives continue to be evidence of His miraculous, life-transforming work. As one commentator remarks,

"If the Holy Spirit comes in when we accept Christ by faith—and He does—then the obvious answer to our maturity in spiritual things is the in-living Christ who wants to be released to operate in our lives by the same faith...**works** can keep us from salvation in Christ, so even after we become a Christian **works** once again can keep us from spiritual growth. How subtle and easy it is for us as Christians to feel that any fruit that is going to come out of our lives in being changed is going to be something which we are going to do on our own efforts. And so we contribute greatly to hypocrisy and phoniness and real insincerity by feeling that Christian growth and development is dependent upon us. We need to recognize His analysis of things in **John 15:5**, and that is, without Him we can do nothing."

In His book, "**A Faith to Live By**," the Scottish theologian, **Donald Macleod**, wrote the following:

"We do not depend on the law for our experience of Spirit baptism or for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Again, this has become a serious issue. The Charismatic Movement proposes a view of our experience of the Holy Spirit which is essentially legalistic. Its preachers and teachers

tell us that the church is in a dreadful spiritual state and the answer to the problem is Holy Spirit baptism, which can be 'got' by going through various steps such as believing in Christ, renouncing all known sin, thirsting for God, praying expectantly and so on. There are variations on this theme but the core technology remains: there are things we have to do. Furthermore, if the poor believer comes back and says he has been through all these steps but nothing has happened, he is then asked, 'But have you really gone through all these steps? Have you really renounced all sin? Have you made a surrender of your will to God—an absolute surrender? Have you really, really thirsted?' Of course, the poor Christian says, 'Well, maybe not!' But this is pure legalism: the gift of the Spirit depending upon our personally attaining some kind of higher life. Paul deals with the problem directly and specifically in **Galatians 3**. 'Did you,' he asks, 'receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?' (verse 2). The gift of the Spirit is as much a matter of **sola fide** (by faith alone) as is justification. The New Testament preaches a glorious gospel. But when we tamper with it and add bits to it in the interests of moralism we create all kinds of problems. If our receiving the gift of the Spirit depended on our doing something, on the quality of our believing or on the strength of our religious desires, we would never have the Spirit."