

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON THIRTY-SIX)

“IS ABRAHAM OUR SPIRITUAL FATHER?”

GALATIANS 3:5-7

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

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—

6 just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

In previous Lessons, we have stated that in the first five verses of **Galatians** chapter 3, Paul asks five questions of the Galatian believers:

1 *“Who has bewitched you?” (Verse 1)*

2 *“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (Verse 2)*

3 *“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Verse 3)*

4 *“Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?” (Verse 4)*

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?” (Verse 5)*

By asking these questions of the believers in Galatia, Paul is appealing to their own spiritual experiences. He appeals to their spiritual own experiences in an effort to convince them of their error in departing from the Gospel of the grace of God.

The essence of Paul's argument in the first 5 verses of the chapter, is that their new position is a contradiction of their own spiritual experiences, as well a contradiction of the Gospel.

The Galatians had "foolishly" allowed themselves to be "bewitched" by the false teaching of the Judaizers who, by their unscriptural, Gospel-destroying, legalistic teaching, were undermining the very core of Christianity, namely, justification by faith alone in Christ alone. They were teaching the Galatians that in order for them to be true believers, they had to become Jewish proselytes and obey the Mosaic Law. By asking his questions, Paul is trying to the believers to recognize that their defection from the Gospel of grace contradicts the work of Christ on the Cross, and contradicts the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Brothers and sisters, there is a great gulf that separates authentic Christianity from every other religion in the world. It is the gulf of **works** versus **faith**.

Last week we said that in verse **5**, Paul brings his appeal to the Galatians' own spiritual experiences to a close by one last reminder of how rich their spiritual experiences have been, and of the way in which God had bestowed on them such wonderful blessings. His fifth question is, "*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 speaks about the act of the Holy Spirit in endowing the members of the Galatian church with gifts of the Spirit. Paul's point is that all of the manifestations of the gifts of the Spirit, 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.

In **1 Corinthians 4:7**, Paul asked the believers in Corinth three questions, which he might well have asked the believers in Galatia: *“For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”* (**English Standard Version**)

What did the Corinthian or the Galatian believers have that they did not receive? What do you or I have that we did not receive? The answer is **nothing**, neither in the physical realm nor in the spiritual realm. The gift of the Holy Spirit Himself and the gifts that He gives to us, are all just that...**gifts**. He and they are not **wages** that we have earned by our meritorious works or behaviour!

In verse **6**, Paul writes, *“Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’”* As we consider this verse, it is important for us to remember that by asking his 5 questions of the Galatian believers, Paul is appealing to their own spiritual experiences. They were aware, based on their own experiences, that God had justified them and given them the Holy Spirit when they heard and believed the Gospel of grace, and that their ongoing sanctification and their manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit were not the result of their works, but of their faith. In light of the role of faith in the conversion, sanctification and manifestation of spiritual gifts as it relates to the Galatians, Paul now cites the experience of the Patriarch Abraham, the *“man of faith”* (verse **9**), and the *“father of all who believe”* (**Romans 4:11**).

In his argument, Paul uses the very Scriptures which the false teachers were using to show the necessity of the Galatians’ being circumcised and keeping the Law! In effect Paul is asking the Galatians the question he asked the Romans in **Romans 4:3**, *“What does the Scripture say?”*

The first two words of verse **6**, *“Just as,”* call the attention of the believers in Galatia to the comparison that Paul is going to make between their experience and the experience of Abraham as it relates to the matter of justification.

The Judaizers claimed to have the Old Testament on their side and would have considered Moses to be their preeminent example of how a person attains righteousness. But Paul goes much further back than Moses, perhaps as much as five centuries, and says, “Let us consider Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. How was he justified?”

In answering that question, Paul appeals to the Old Testament as a witness, testifying that justification has **always** been by faith alone and not **ever** by works. He quotes from **Genesis 15:6**, “*Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”*” This quotation is one of the clearest statements in the entire Bible about how a person can be justified before God. Abraham “**believed**” God, and his belief or faith, rather than his works, was the basis upon which he was declared righteous before God.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, stated,

“Let us begin with Abraham and learn how this friend of God was justified and saved. **Not** because he left his country, his relatives, his father’s house; not because he was circumcised; not because he stood ready to sacrifice his own son, Isaac in whom he had the promise of posterity. **Abraham was justified because he believed.**”

Why does Paul cite the experience of Abraham, an **Old Testament** patriarch in a discussion regarding **New Testament** believers? He does so because Abraham is the “Father of the faithful.” He is, so to speak, salvation’s prototype. **Romans 4:9-12**, and **Galatians 3:28-29**, clearly indicate that this is indeed the case. We shall read both passages from the **English Standard Version**:

Romans 4:9-12

9 Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

10 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.

*11 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,*

*12 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.***

Galatians 3:27-29

27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

*29 And if you are Christ's, then you are **Abraham's offspring**, heirs according to promise.*

Brothers and sisters, contrary to what we may have been taught, the baptism of which Paul is speaking in this passage is not water baptism. We are saved by faith apart from any works including the work of baptism. Baptism in this verse refers to the “immersion” of the believer into the body of Christ. This is a supernatural transaction which is accomplished by the Holy Spirit at the time of our conversion. Paul refers to this in **1 Corinthians 12:13**: “*For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit*” (**English Standard Version**).

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that there is, and has always been, only one plan of salvation-only one way for persons to be saved! Every person who has been ever been justified, or declared righteous, or saved, either in the Old Testament era or in the New Testament era, has been justified, or declared righteous, or saved, in the same manner-by placing

their faith in Jesus Christ! They believed God, and their belief, or faith, was the basis upon which they were justified, or declared righteous before God, or saved!

Those who lived in the Old Testament era were saved by believing, or placing their faith in a Christ who was to come. Those who live in the New Testament era are saved by believing, or placing their faith in a Christ who has come!

Abraham was justified, or declared righteous, or saved, in **Genesis** chapter **15**, more than a decade before he was circumcised, and more than 400 years before the Law was given to Moses. It is incandescently clear therefore, that neither circumcision nor the Law played any role in his salvation.

As Paul repeatedly stresses in his letters, the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, which includes the imputation of the perfect righteousness of Christ, is not merely a divine afterthought following the failure of Israel under the law. It was the very means by which Abraham, the father of all who believe, was saved!

In his commentary on **Galatians**, **John Phillips** writes,

"The point Paul thus makes with the *Galatians* is clear. The Judaizers were proud of being 'Abraham's seed'...Very well! How was Abraham saved? Simply by believing the Lord! No more, no less! That, itself, cut the ground from beneath the feet of the Judaizers. But Paul had only just begun. If that was how Abraham was saved, how are all other men saved? **On the same principle exactly.**"

Kenneth Wuest makes the following remarks relative to **Galatians 3:6**:

"Thus Abraham believed God, and his act of faith was placed to his account in value as righteousness...this does **not** mean, however, that Abraham's act of faith was looked upon as a meritorious action deserving of reward. It was **not** viewed as a good work by God and

rewarded by the bestowal of righteousness. That would be salvation by works. But the fact that Abraham cast off all dependence upon good works as a means of finding acceptance with God, and accepted God's way of bestowing salvation, was answered by God in giving him that salvation. Abraham simply put himself in the place where a righteous God could offer him salvation upon the basis of justice satisfied, and in pure grace. God therefore put righteousness to his account. He evaluated Abraham's act of faith as that which made it possible for Him to give him salvation."

Justification is an **act of God** whereby He removes from the believing sinner his or her guilt, and the penalty incurred by that guilt. God also bestows a positive righteousness to the believing sinner. That positive righteousness is Jesus Christ Himself, in whom the believer stands, not only innocent and un-condemned, but actually righteous in point of law for all of time and eternity. This is what God did for Abraham when he believed Him. And this is what He does for every sinner who places his or her faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. The Judaizers were attempting to merit this salvation for themselves by their own good works, and were inveigling the believers in Galatia to do the same.

Paul had been brought up with a rabbinic perspective which held that Abraham was judged righteous because he had been faithful in the time of testing and was consequently rewarded. But when he became a Christian that perspective changed. He became persuaded by Scripture that Abraham did not **merit** the covenant. Instead, the covenant was a **promise** from God that Abraham accepted **by faith**.

John MacArthur points out that,

"It was **not** the greatness of Abraham's faith that saved him but the greatness of the gracious Lord in Whom he placed his faith. Faith is never the **basis** or the **reason** for justification, but only the channel through which God works His redeeming grace."

Brothers and sisters, Paul is drawing a conclusion between Abraham's justification and the justification of the Galatians. This, as we pointed out earlier, is obvious from the phrase, "*Just so*" at the beginning of the verse. Abraham's life is an illustration of the manner in which every human being, in every age is saved, whether Old or New Testament whether Jew or Gentile. This is the conclusion that Paul has arrived at. It is this conclusion that he declares in verse 7: "*Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.*"

Based on what he has just quoted from **Genesis 15:6** (that Abraham was justified by faith), Paul's conclusion is that all who believe as Abraham believed are the spiritual children of Abraham. His use of the word "*know*" in contexts such as this, always points to a truth that his readers should have understood and appreciated, but somehow have failed to grasp. Paul is explaining to them that it is evident from the **Genesis** account that only those who come by faith can be the children of Abraham. The failure of the Galatian believers to understand this obvious truth is very disheartening to him.

Paul is persuaded **by Scripture** that since Abraham, the "*father of all who believe,*" was justified by faith alone, it follows that every one of his "*offspring*" must be justified in the same way! In other words, it is those who exercise the same faith that Abraham exercised who are his true followers.

The expression "*those of faith,*" refers to those who have exercised faith for salvation, and whose standing and character are consequently determined by that faith. The phrase "*sons of Abraham,*" is, of course, not to be understood in a genealogical sense but rather in the ethical sense of the term. Abraham our "father" was accepted by God on the basis of faith, and God deals with all Abraham's sons on the same moral basis. God is no respecter of persons. Thus the faith exercised by Abraham is declared to be the fundamental condition of acceptance with God for all human beings! Abraham's true children are not those who

are his natural offspring, or those who diligently observe the Law, or some other system of rule-keeping, but are those who simply believe!

The **New Living Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God.”*

Brothers and sisters, we sometimes sing,

*“Father Abraham has many sons
Many sons has Father Abraham
I am one of them and so are you
So let’s all praise the Lord.
Right hand!”*

Are we really the sons of Abraham? Is he really our spiritual father? According to **Galatians 3:7**, *“The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God.”*