

A Three-Fold Rebuttal

Galatians 3:4-9

If we reached the climax of the book last week, as I suggested, then where do we go this afternoon? If the focal point of the message of Paul to the Galatians was our focus last week, what should be our emphasis today? To answer those questions as an introduction this afternoon, let me first emphasize that the most important theological point of the book was established in,

Gal. 2:16 "...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

That theological point was then made personal with that climactic focal point from last week, which really can be reduced to the simple question of verse 3, "Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?"

That's the point the Apostle stresses with these churches. That's the crucial issue upon which they have been deceived, bewitched, by false teachers. It was the danger of depending upon their own strength, even as Christians, to be made mature. It was the danger of thinking that their own effort, their own works of righteousness, would be sufficient to attain to the goal of their Christian faith and life. Perhaps by their own self-denial or self-discipline they could attain that goal. Perhaps by their own standards, by their own good works, they could do enough.

The answer, so clearly, is no. None of that is sufficient. The answer so clearly implied by verse three is "no." They are not made perfect by the flesh. That's Paul's point. And in our text today, he proves it. He gives a three-fold rebuttal of that whole

idea that you could be perfected by the flesh, by their own effort. Three illustrations, almost. Three things that point out how foolish it really was to be so deceived as to think that their own works of the law. And the first rebuttal, the first proof of his point that we live by faith is the subject of suffering. The idea is what I would describe as,

I. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GOOD DOCTRINE.

There is a simple explanation, and also one that is a little deeper. The simple answer is that the Galatians had evidently suffered at the hands of their fellow Jews because of their conversion, their faith in Jesus. Jewish people who believe in Jesus continue to suffer that persecution, in a very personal and painful way. In the strictest of Jewish families, such a person would be considered dead. Shunned, excommunicated from the family, just for the name of Jesus.

Thus Paul's point is that they have already enduring the suffering that came with believing in Jesus. Because they were freed from Jewish obligations, because they rightly believed that they were no longer bound to the ceremonial regulations, they were rejected as outcasts by their own people. Now, if they went back to the slavery of those Jewish regulations such as circumcision, all of their suffering would have been meaningless. Worthless. They would have suffered in vain. The animosity they stirred up among their fellow Jews would have been unnecessary, if they would now return to the previous obligations of their Jewishness.

But I believe there is also something of a deeper answer to this question of verse 4, "Have you suffered so many things in vain?" You see, suffering, in the context of salvation by the works of the law, really has no hopeful purpose. It is a failure. Suffering just means you have to try harder to accomplish what you are

trying to achieve. That is a description of...

A. Suffering as related to salvation by the works of the law.

Just try harder. Just keep working at it. When you are limited in what you can accomplish, when you don't achieve your goal, and still suffer, it's all for nothing. If you can't earn what you are trying to purchase, then suffering has no value.

In other words, suffering has no value when related to salvation by the works of the law. Suffering just keeps you from doing some more of those works that you seem to think are so necessary. But,

B. Suffering as related to salvation by the hearing of faith...

...is a whole other matter.

Because suffering is the context in which faith thrives. Suffering is the experience by which you are united to Christ, by faith. You who live by faith, you have communion with Jesus when you suffer. When you are constrained, when you are weakened by your own mortal corruption, when sickness or disease or infirmity or injury lays you low, that is when you learn most effectively what it means to trust God. Suffering may not be an opportunity to do the good works of the law, but it is a great opportunity to walk by faith.

1 Peter 2:19 "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."

In fact, if you are perfected by the exercise of your faith, then suffering not only becomes an appropriate means for your growth, it is perhaps the best! So, as James puts it,

James 1:2 "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

And to make that point about the profit and benefit of suffering even more clearly, consider Jesus himself.

Heb. 5:7 "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him."

So suffering is a means of grace, by which even Jesus learned obedience, through which even Jesus was made perfect and complete. But, to go back to the subject of Galatians 3, all of that suffering has no purpose if your advancement and growth in Christ is a matter of circumcision or any other attempted work of righteousness that you have to perform. That's the first rebuttal, the first illustration of why the bewitching problem of the Galatians was so dangerous and destructive to their Christian faith.

The second rebuttal to the Galatians false doctrine of being "perfected by the flesh" relates to,

II. THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

v.5

The idea here is simple. The argument is easy to understand. It begins with,

A. Understanding the way in which you receive the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So, a question. Simple question. God supplies the Holy Spirit to you. That is, of course, the third person of the trinity. The person of the Holy Spirit. God poured out his Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost, and this first generation of the church would still have access to eyewitnesses to that great event. God did it. God sent his Holy Spirit. God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church. God is in control, not the church. So the simple and obvious question is, “Did God send his Holy Spirit to you because you did something to earn it?” “Did God send his Holy Spirit in response to your performance of some works of the law?”

The Apostle seems to think that everyone will clearly and obviously know the answer to that question. NO! God didn't send his Holy Spirit to you because you did something good to deserve it. God didn't pour out his Holy Spirit at Pentecost because of the works of the law performed by those disciples.

In fact, do you remember what they were told to do? Nothing! They were told simply to wait.

Acts 1:4 “And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Perhaps it was best described by Jesus,

John 3:8 “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

You have the Spirit because God caused it to blow upon you. “By the works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” That's

obvious. By hearing of faith. Likewise, the power of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by miracles. So, not only is the way in which you receive the Holy Spirit important, but also,

B. Understanding the way in which you can experience the power of the Holy Spirit.

Same question, same obvious question.

v.5

Same obvious answer. The hearing of faith. God didn't perform miracles because the people had adequately performed their own works of righteousness in obedience to the law. No, God performed miracles to demonstrate his own power, and to validate his own identity as God, to make obvious his divine nature.

The miracles which God performed among the Galatians were not a reward for their law-keeping! And everyone would have understood that point clearly. So on that basis, Paul says, you should always realize that your growth in godliness and maturity in the Christian faith is not a matter of your own effort or self-help. It is not a matter of external predetermined standard that you try to achieve. Sanctification is a work of God's grace, and it is God who enables you more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.

God enables you, as you trust him. God enables you, as you live by faith. Then the third rebuttal, the third example used to correct the error of the Galatians.

III. THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM.

If those other two illustration were a little hard to follow, now let's use a person. If the other two rebuttals were theoretical or doctrinal, now we can use the simple example of a well-know

man. Let's consider Abraham.

v.6

This is such a huge point, because Abraham is so hugely important. If you want to understand the Christian faith today, you need to understand Abraham's faith. If you want to understand the doctrine of salvation, you need to understand Abraham. If you want to understand grace, and the covenant of grace, you need to understand Abraham.

So what do we know about him? Let's start with,

A. The faith of Abraham.

Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. His faith was counted to him, or imputed to him, put into his account, as righteousness. So how was it that Abraham was considered as being accepted by God as righteousness? How was it that Abraham was justified? How was it that Abraham was acceptable to God, approved by God, received by God? Use any of those words you want. The answer is the same. By faith. He believed God.

Let's look at the specific illustration. Genesis 15. God made two chief promises to Abraham, descendants and land. God promised him many descendants, as many as the stars in the sky. Abraham had a problem, though, didn't he. He had no children. Sarah was barren, and they were now past the time for having children.

The second promise didn't seem any more likely, land. Lots of land. God would make Abraham into a great nation. God said to him, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." But, of course, there was a problem there, too. Abraham was a stranger and alien in the land. He had no home. No land at all. God had

told him to leave the only home he knew, Ur of the Chaldeans.

Gen. 12:5 "And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan."

But God had made a promise.

Gen. 15:5 "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. 6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

Abraham believed God's promise. God credited him with perfect righteousness. God imputed to Abraham a perfect righteousness. So how was Abraham made righteous? By works of the law or by hearing with faith? Well, any Jew that read Paul's letter would know the answer to that question. And so do you. Of course, it was by faith.

This is such an important point for Paul in,

Rom. 4: 1 "What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."

His faith is counted as righteousness. Not his works of obedience to the law.

Heb. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to

live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

Look then back in Galatians 3 and how Paul describes and defines,

B. The children of Abraham.

And this is what makes all of this so practical for you and for me. Because we are the children of Abraham. Just look at the words,
v.7

We are the descendants of Abraham. We are the fulfillment of that promise God made to him. We are the heirs of God’s covenant promises to Abraham, we the church. We Gentiles. We, the uncircumcised. We who continue to believe God’s promise.

Look also at,
v.9

God didn’t have one plan for Abraham and another plan for the church of this age. God didn’t save the people of Israel because of their works and then change his plan in order to save the church by faith. It was the same.

That’s why we study the Old Testament. That’s why we study Abraham. That’s why we study the covenant God established with Abraham. Because it is the same relationship that we have with God today.

We are the children of Abraham, not nationalized Israel. We,

therefore, are the people of God, not the nation of Israel. We are the heirs to the covenant promises God made to Abraham, not the Jews. We are not plan B in God’s plan of salvation, since plan A in the Old Testament didn’t seem to work. We are not a parenthesis in God’s prophetic plan and purpose for his people, as the fulfillment of those promises would await some sort of future millennium on earth. No, we the church, we today, fulfill all of those promises because we are the children of Abraham.

Rom. 2:28 “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 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.”

Finally, with regard to Abraham, notice how Paul refers to,

C. The gospel of Abraham.

v.8

I just love that description. God preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand.

That’s why circumcision is no longer valid, as a requirement for acceptance before God. That’s why the legalism of the Galatians was so bewitching, so dangerously foolish. Because those requirements now amount to a denial of the gospel, the gospel preached to Abraham.

This is that gospel. “Believe in the promise of God, by faith trust God to do and to give what he promises, and you will be saved.” You will be accepted as righteous in his sight, you who believe. You will be saved, by faith, not by your imperfect and incomplete attempt at your own law-keeping.

The Scripture actually predicts that God would justify the

Gentiles by faith, for that gospel-promise is made to Abraham. And Abraham believed God. So the question of the day is simple. Do you believe God?

Let me make that promise explicit. Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe that God raised him from the dead? Do you believe that he died for your sins? Do you believe that God will forgive you your sins if, confessing your sins, you would trust in Jesus? Do you believe that God will save you, that he will give you eternal life, on the basis of your faith in him?

Please, I urge, believe those things, because in that way you will have eternal life. Believe in Jesus, and you will have eternal life.

Now, to build on that, the whole purpose of this text, you who do believe that, listen to this question again. And answer it with the only possible, obvious answer that you know to be true. And don't forget that answer as you seek to live out your Christian life. The question is this, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?"

No, beloved. The answer, a thousand times over, the answer is no.