



Part 6 – Perfected by the Flesh?

Galatians 3:1-9

Having established from the logic of the gospel that sinners can only be justified before God by grace through faith alone, Paul now turns his attention to the Scriptures to further his argument against the Judaizers. No doubt these “false brothers” would have sought to advance their message by frequent use of references to the laws and ceremonies established under the covenant with Moses. Paul, however, grounds his argument not in the types and shadows of the ceremonial law but in the prior and everlasting promise made to Abraham (and all those who would believe after him). As R. Alan Cole writes:

Hitherto, Paul has argued from this own spiritual experience, and the facts of Christian history. Now he will show that such experience is not subjective and illusory, but grounded upon the eternal purposes of God as revealed in his Word.¹

1. The Galatian’s foolish forgetfulness

- Vv. 1-5
- So far this letter has lacked the typical warmth of Paul’s other epistles. It has also included strong words concerning the Judaizers and the fate of anyone who declares a false gospel. Now, however, the Apostle’s words become even more painful: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” He is incredulous that the churches he planted and nurtured would be turning to a false gospel.
- The verb translated “publicly portrayed” (προεγραφή) is likely to be understood here as “publicly proclaimed.” The same verb is used elsewhere to refer to that which has been written in advance (cf. **Rom 15:14; Eph 3:3**). It is also used to refer to written proclamations and public notices.² Paul’s incredulity is the result of the fact that the Galatian Christians had been established in the true gospel by the means of its proclamation. Their current dalliance with meritorious religion is a contradiction to the message of the cross which had been proclaimed to them. When it comes to the power of the gospel, hearing is seeing.

Vs. 2 – “...Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”

- Paul’s rhetorical question is meant to get them thinking about their conversion and their early days as new believers. The presence of the Holy Spirit was powerfully evident through the ministry of the Apostle (vs. 5). Did such blessings accrue to them by faith (πίστις) or works of the law (εργων νομου)? Is the Holy Spirit granted by human merit or divine grace at work through faith alone?

Vs. 3 – “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

- The reference to having “begun by the Spirit” applies to the believer’s justification, God’s once for all act of declaring believer’s righteous on the basis of the finished work of Christ. Paul is assuming throughout that these Galatians are truly believers; that by faith alone they have gained entry into the company of God’s people. Both the grace to believe and union with Christ are works of the Holy Spirit in no way earned by human merit. Paul is confident that they have indeed begun “by the Spirit.”
- In the final clause Paul makes an indirect but important reference to the doctrine of sanctification: “...are you now being perfected by the flesh?” The term “perfected” is not an uncommon way to refer to the Spirit’s work of progressively conforming believers to Christ. This is the doctrine of sanctification. Like effectual calling and justification, sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit who unites the believer to Christ. And while the believer’s sanctification is characterized by growing in good works and conformity to Christ it is no less a work of grace alone working through faith alone as is justification.

¹ R. Alan Cole, *Galatians* (TNTC) (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989) p. 128

² Thomas Schreiner, *Galatians* (ECNT) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) p. 181

2. The power of promise

Vs. 6 – "...just as Abraham 'believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness'?"

- The promise of the doctrine of justification by faith alone is "believe and be saved." Justification by faith alone promises sinners that if they believe upon the Lord Jesus and his finished work, they will be counted as righteous before God. This is the promise that we find throughout Jesus' teaching: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life" (**John 3:16**). "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already..." (**John 3:18**). "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life..." (**John 3:36**). "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (**John 5:24**). "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (**John 6:40**). "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life" (**John 6:47**).
- And as Paul is zealous to point out, this promise of justification by faith alone is the very promise made by God to Abraham. Paul is pressing upon his hearers to recall how Abraham, the father of the Jews, was saved. The Judaizers had come to emphasize the importance of Abraham's deeds. And yet the idea that Abraham functions as a virtuous example to follow in order to accrue merit before God is utterly undone by the actual record of his life. The record in Genesis portrays Abraham as a man struggling with his own sin. At times he fails grievously. And yet he is justified before God not because his good works outweighed his failures but because he believed (**Genesis 15:6**).
- God justifies not by demanding from us, but by giving to us. Justification is all promise, never demand lest our salvation be the fruit of our own merit and the cross be emptied of its power.

3. God's one gracious plan

- Vv. 7-9
- Whether one is a Jew or a Gentile makes no difference in terms of the promise of justification. Thus, Paul's bold statement that it is not heredity that makes one an heir of Abraham, but faith alone (vs. 7). This was a direct rebuke from Paul to the Judaizers who insisted that membership in the household of Abraham was secured by observing Jewish ceremonial law.

Vs. 8 – "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.'"

- 2,000 years before the birth of Jesus, Abraham believed the gospel! The promise made to Abraham was all about the work that would be fully accomplished by the Messiah. Paul quotes God's promise recorded in Genesis 12:3 that Abraham would inherit land and that his descendants would form a great nation, and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. This is the foundational text of the Covenant of Grace (the Abrahamic Covenant). The direction of redemptive history as it is unfolded in Scripture demonstrates that Abraham was expecting an eternal, spiritual fulfillment to that promise: "He was looking for the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (**Hebrews 11:10**). Speaking to some of the religious authorities of the day Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (**John 8:56**). In other words, Abraham understood that the promise that all the nations would be blessed through him pertained to the work of the coming Messiah. Long before the birth of Jesus, Abraham believed in him "and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Vs. 9 – "So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

- Paul's "so then," is the language of logical connections. Abraham heard the promise of the gospel and believed. On the basis of faith alone Abraham was counted righteous by God. And the same holds true for all who believe in the Christ. This has always been God's plan. It is rooted in the history God himself established by his own divine providence. It has always been the plan of God to justify his people by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Rather than understanding their past and their Scriptures, the Judaizers were actually denying their true history. Justification by faith alone did not originate with Paul. It did not even originate with the advent of Jesus. Abraham was justified by faith alone. Those justified by God neither begin nor are they perfected by the flesh. From beginning to end the life of salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.