

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FORTY-ONE)

“THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM”

GALATIANS 3:13-14

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—

14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

We will commence our study this evening with the comments of **Warren Wiersbe**, relative to verse **13**:

“The word ‘redeemed’ in **Galatians 3:13** means to purchase a slave for the purpose of setting him free. It is possible to purchase a slave and keep him as a slave, but this is not what Christ did. By shedding His blood on the cross, He purchased us that we might be set free. The Judaizers wanted to lead the Christians into slavery, but Christ died to set them free. Salvation is not exchanging one form of bondage for another. Salvation is being set free from the bondage of sin and the Law into the liberty of God’s grace through Christ.

This raises an interesting question: how could these Judaizers ever convince the Galatian Christians that the way of Law was better than the way of grace? Why would any believer deliberately want to choose bondage instead of liberty? Perhaps part of the answer is found in the

word 'bewitched' that Paul uses in **Galatians 3:1**. The word means 'to cast a spell, to fascinate.' What is there about legalism that can so fascinate the Christian that he will turn from grace to Law?

For one thing, **legalism appeals to the flesh**. The flesh loves to be 'religious'-to obey laws, to observe holy occasions, even to fast... Certainly there is nothing wrong with obedience, fasting, or solemn times of spiritual worship, **provided that the Holy Spirit does the motivating and the empowering**. The flesh loves to boast about its religious achievements-how many prayers were offered, or how many gifts were given...

Another characteristic of religious legalism that fascinates people is **the appeal to the senses**. Instead of worshipping God 'in spirit and in truth' (**John 4:24**), the legalist invents his own system that satisfies his senses. He cannot walk by faith; he has to walk by sight and hearing and tasting and smelling and feeling. To be sure, true Spirit-led worship does not deny the five senses...But these external things are but windows through which faith perceives the eternal. They are not ends in themselves.

The person who depends on religion can measure himself and compare himself with others. This is another fascination to legalism. But the true believer measures himself with Christ, not other Christians...There is no room for pride in the spiritual walk of the Christian who lives by grace; but the legalist constantly boasts about his achievements and his converts (**Galatians 6:13-14**).

Yes, there is a fascination to the Law, but it is only bait that leads to a trap; and once the believer takes the bait he finds himself in bondage. Far better to take God at His Word and rest on His grace. We were saved 'by grace, through faith' and we must live 'by grace, through faith.' This is the way to blessing. The other way is the way to bondage."

In verse **13** of our text, Paul quotes from **Deuteronomy 21:22-23**:

22 “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree,

23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

(English Standard Version)

By dying on “*a tree*”- the Cross, Jesus Christ bore the curse of the Law for us. He became a curse for us so that now we are no longer under the Law and its dreadful curse. The Law satisfied its demands upon the Lord Jesus. It therefore removed Him from the confines of its legal dominion and control. Since believers are identified with Him in His death in which He paid their penalty, they are removed with Him from the confines of the Law’s dominion and control, and are therefore no longer under its curse.

Christ voluntarily took our place and was made a curse for us, so that the blessing spoken of in verse **14** might be ours. He fulfilled the Law’s demands by His perfect obedience, and He suffered the Law’s full penalty by His death on the Cross. Now all those who believe in Him are forever justified because of what He did for them.

Brothers and sisters, as **Spurgeon** argues in the following quote, the substitutionary death of Christ is the central doctrine of the Gospel:

“We have heard some preach a gospel something after this order: that, though God is angry with sinners, yet, out of His great mercy, for the sake of something that Christ has done, He does not punish them, but remits the penalty. This is not God’s gospel, for it is neither just to God nor safe for man. We believe that God never remitted the penalty. He did not forgive the sin without punishing it, but He exacted the full penalty without the abatement of a solitary jot or tittle. Jesus Christ, our Savior, drank the veritable cup of our redemption to its very dregs.

He suffered beneath the crushing wheels of divine vengeance the same pains and sufferings that we ought to have endured. He bore our sins that He might bear them away by the fact of bearing them Himself. This is the central doctrine of the Gospel."

Brothers and sisters, the only way to escape the curse is not by our work, but by His.

In verse **14** Paul writes, "*So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*"

There are two clauses of purpose in this verse, each introduced by the words "*so that.*" Both clauses relate to the first clause of verse **13**: "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.*" Paul is informing his readers of the purpose for Christ becoming a curse for us. He became a curse for us, "*so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,*" and "*so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*"

While he does not specifically say what the "*blessing of Abraham*" is, it is obvious that he is referring to justification by faith, apart from works. In verses **8** and **9**, he had already clearly alluded to this:

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

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

(English Standard Version)

The last clause of verse **14** makes it clear that the blessing of Abraham is also related to the promise of the Holy Spirit, for unless one is justified by faith he or she cannot receive "*the promised Spirit.*"

It is important for us to note that in the context of **Galatians 3:8**, this blessing of Abraham is clearly a **spiritual** blessing, and Paul says it is related to justification by faith. In other words, the blessing of Abraham in Paul's contextual argument does not make any reference to the promise of land. In fact, in God's original promise to Abraham in **Genesis 12:1-3**, nothing is said to him about inheriting land. What God said to him was, "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*" (**Genesis 12:1 English Standard Version**). It is not until **Genesis 12:7** that God makes a specific land promise.

According to **Galatians 3:14**, it is "*in Christ Jesus*" that the blessing of Abraham comes. The blessing of Abraham comes to those, both Jew and Gentile who are identified with Christ, and therefore are in the New Covenant with Him by grace through faith. It was "*in Christ*" that God acted for our salvation, and so we must be "*in Christ*" in order to receive it. The redeeming, curse-bearing effect of the crucifixion is implemented through people coming into a relationship with Christ that could be described as an incorporation. And we become incorporated in Him "*through faith.*"

Brothers and sisters, faith is personally laying hold of Jesus Christ. There is no merit in our exercise of faith. It is not a "work." According to **Ephesians 2:8-9**, "*it is the gift of God, not a result of works.*" The value of faith is not in itself, but entirely in its object, Jesus Christ.

The "*blessing of Abraham*" in **Galatians 3:14**, refers to God's promise to Abraham recorded in **Genesis 12:3**: "*I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (**English Standard Version**).

How are all the families of the earth blessed in Abraham? He lived, died and was buried thousands of years ago. And the nations that came from his loins are not the promised blessing to the families of the earth either. The blessing of Abraham is the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ, **the** descendant or seed (**singular**), of Abraham. The **New**

English Translation renders **Galatians 3:16** as follows: “*Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his descendant. Scripture does not say, ‘and to the descendants,’ referring to many, but ‘and to your descendant,’ referring to one, who is Christ.*”

The blessing of Abraham, the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ, includes the gift of the promised Holy Spirit, Who is received, “*through faith.*”

Brothers and sisters, we receive the Holy Spirit not by keeping the Law but by believing in the One Who kept the Law perfectly. All who believe in Jesus receive the Spirit the moment they are justified, or declared righteous or saved.

The Greek word translated “*promised*” is **epaggelia**:(**ep-ang-el-ee’-ah**), which literally means to “tell at or upon.” **Epaggelia** originally referred to an announcement or declaration. Eventually, it came to mean a declaration to do something or give something. This, in time, came to be associated with the implication of obligation to carry out that which was declared to be done or given. Thus we come to the meaning of a promise. In Scripture, **epaggelia** refers primarily to God’s pronouncements that provide assurance of what He intends to do. The English theologian and bishop, **J.B. Lightfoot**, says that **epaggelia** was used only of the promises of God, and described a gift graciously bestowed, not a pledge obtained by negotiation.

There is no Old Testament record of any promise to Abraham of the gift of the Spirit for Himself. In the message to Abraham in **Genesis**, the comprehensive word “*blessing*” is used. It is only later, in **Isaiah 32:15**, **Ezekiel 36:27** and **Joel 2:28** for example, that the gift of the Holy Spirit is specified as being included in the blessing of Abraham. In these and other passages, we are informed of God’s pronouncement that the Holy Spirit would be an integral aspect of the blessing of Abraham.

John the Baptist prophesied concerning the promised Holy Spirit. In **Matthew 3:11**, he says, “*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he*

who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”
(English Standard Version).

In **John 1:32-33**, we read the following:

32 And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’

(English Standard Version)

Jesus Himself spoke of the promise of the Spirit to His disciples (**Luke 24:49, John 7:37-39, John 14:15-17, John 14:26, John 15:26, John 16:7-14**).

In **Acts 1:4-8**, we read the following:

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.”

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

7 He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

(English Standard Version)

Paul's concern in **Galatians 3** is to make it clear that the promise was conditional upon faith and not upon the fulfilment of the Law. The Law was later than the promise, and inferior to the promise, and did not annul it.

Commenting on verse **14**, **James Montgomery Boice**, wrote the following:

"These last two clauses, stating the purpose for which Christ redeemed men from the curse, are coordinate. That is, they express the same reality from two perspectives. Both return to the point from which Paul's argument started—namely, that the blessing of Abraham, seen today in the reception of the Holy Spirit, is received through faith and through faith only."

Brothers and sisters, we cannot accumulate merit before God because we cannot gain enough quality or quantity of righteousness to match the standard of God's righteousness. Only God's grace can give us that. This is true with receiving the Holy Spirit as well. The moment a person believes in Christ, he or she receives the Holy Spirit. This event is simultaneous with salvation. Paul sees the blessing of Abraham summed up in the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is received through faith.

It is important for us to understand that the primary audience of Paul's letter to the Galatians, were Gentile believers who were adding the works of the Law to the Gospel of grace, and in so doing, were compromising the sufficiency of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. They chose to embrace a system of religion that did not base itself exclusively on Jesus Christ. In so choosing, they added the Mosaic Law on top of Christ as the means of acceptance with God. Unfortunately, many persons, some of them very sincere, are still doing so. These persons, whether they are aware of it or not, add conditions to the covenant God has established and thus are modern-day disciples of the Judaizers. There are **no** conditions for acceptance with God apart from

surrender to Christ and life in the Spirit. Any addition attracts God's curse.

Brothers and sisters, the surest way of discovering if we are operating as modern-day Judaizers is to examine how pure our systems of thought are in comparison to the authentic Gospel, and how consistently we allow them to operate in our assembly. It is very possible for us to preach and teach an unadulterated message of salvation by grace alone, while our operations in our local setting are anything but gracious. It is possible for us to distort the clear message of the Gospel that we espouse with all kinds of legalistic systems and practices.

A church's health is defined by whether or not it worships God in His holiness, responds to Him warmly in His love, and lives according to His will in loving holiness. We should inspect our own systems to see if acceptance with God is based solely on Christ, and if we encourage a total reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit for Christian living. If any of these two principles are missing, it may be because some form of "law-works" virus is affecting our internal system.

In his commentary on **Galatians**, **Scot McKnight** writes the following:

"It is fundamentally important for churches to maintain a unity of the Spirit when people of diverse viewpoints are worshiping and living together. **We do not really need the Spirit if we are identical.** But we do need his Spirit to enable various people to live in unity. God wants people of variety to worship and live together because he takes delight in seeing the Spirit of God create one new people as a witness to the world of his grace."