

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON THIRTY-FOUR)

“ARE WE BEING FOOLISH?”

GALATIANS 3:1-3

(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?

Last week, we stated that in chapters 3 and 4, we have the **doctrinal portion** of Paul’s letter to the believers in Galatia. In this section, Paul gives a Scriptural defense of the Gospel. He does so by addressing the Galatian believers themselves, using their example of inconsistent conduct to launch into an exposition of justification by faith. Paul desires to show the Galatians that their present position as it relates to the Gospel, is a contradiction of their own spiritual history.

The essence of Paul’s argument is that their new position is a contradiction of the Gospel. The reason for his astonishment at their folly is that Jesus Christ had been “*publicly portrayed as crucified*” before their very eyes, through his preaching and teaching.

In verse 1, Paul writes, “*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.*”

Paul describes them as being “*foolish.*” The word “foolish” is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, “not having a mind,” The word does not refer to a lack of intelligence as much as it refers to mental laziness and carelessness. It describes one who demonstrates an unwillingness to use his or her mental faculties to understand. The Anglican archbishop **Richard Trench**, explains that the Greek word implies that there is always a moral failure lying behind the intellectual failure. The Galatians were lacking, not in intelligence, but in obedience to the truth of the Gospel!

The word “*bewitched*” is the translation of a Greek word which in the New Testament, has the meaning of subjecting a person to the influence of the occult. The idea is of misleading or seducing persons by flattery, false promises, or the occult. The word clearly suggests the use of feeling over fact, emotion over clear understanding of truth.

The Galatians were not 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 the Galatians. The Lord Jesus Christ had been “*publicly portrayed as crucified*” before them. And yet their eyes had been diverted from the Cross to the Law. They were therefore without excuse.

The phrase “*publicly portrayed*” is a translation of the Greek word **prographó: (prog-raf’-o)**, which literally means, “to write for public reading, announced on a poster.” The word was used to describe all public notices or proclamations and indicates a public announcement in which the validity of a particular fact or condition is proclaimed. This is what Paul had done in his proclamation of the Gospel in Galatia. He had laid out the truths of our Lord’s atoning work on the Cross so clearly,

that the Galatians had a very clear understanding of its significance. They could “see” it.

The Galatians 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. As one writer observes, Paul,

“Pours out question upon question. He wants no answer for himself, he needs none; the Galatians need them for themselves. It is high time they did a little plain Christian thinking.”

By asking these questions, Paul is appealing to the Galatians’ own experience. He desires for their own witness to convince them of their error in departing from the Gospel of the grace of God.

In verse **2**, Paul poses the following question to the believers in Galatia: “*Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*” This question, the second of the five, should have been sufficient to convict them of their folly of drifting from the truth of the Gospel that had initially saved them!

The question points to the manner in which the Galatian believers had been justified, or declared righteous, or saved. Obviously they had been justified, or declared righteous, or saved through the miracle of the new birth and the reception of the Holy Spirit. If, then, they had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and, as a result, had believed on Jesus Christ for their salvation, how could there possibly be any place for works, either alone or in addition to faith, so far as the obtaining of their salvation was concerned?

Paul clearly assumes that all the Galatian believers have received the Holy Spirit. His question is not whether they have received Him or not, but whether they received Him by **works** or by **faith**. What he is asking them is **how** they received the Holy Spirit. What part did **they** play in the process? By the receiving of the Spirit, Paul means the **initial** entrance of the Holy Spirit into their hearts when they put their trust in the Lord Jesus.

Paul asks the Galatians 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.

Brothers and sisters, is this not a question that we should ask ourselves and endeavour to answer honestly? How did our Christian life begin? “Did we receive the Spirit by works or by faith?”

The Message translates the verse as follows: “*Let me put this question to you: How did your new life begin? Was it by working your heads off to please God? Or was it by responding to God’s Message to you?*”

The “*works of the Law*” and “*hearing with faith*” are two diametrically opposed ways of salvation, and only one, “*hearing with faith*,” leads to true salvation. Faith and works are polar opposites which cannot be mixed. They do not tolerate each other. It must be one or the other, and not a combination of both. The Law says, “**You must do this.**” The Gospel says, “**Christ has done it all!**”

Commenting on **Galatians 3:2-5**, **John Stott**, writes the following:

"The law requires **works** of **human** achievement; the gospel requires **faith** in **Christ's** achievement. The law makes **demands** and bids us **obey**; the gospel brings **promises** and bids us **believe**. So the law and the gospel are contrary to one another. They are not two aspects of the same thing, or interpretations of the same Christianity. At least in the sphere of justification, as Luther says, 'the establishing of the law is the abolishing of the Gospel.'"

The experience of the Galatians was that the Spirit had come by "*hearing with faith.*" That is, in reality, **always** the way that the Spirit comes, because that is the **only** way that the Spirit can come! The Holy Spirit is **never** "**worked up.**" It is **always** "**sent down.**" No one can believe God unless God enables him or her to believe. And He enables us to believe by His Word. In **Romans 10:17** we read, "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (**English Standard Version**). Faith is not an achievement we earn for ourselves; Faith is gift that is bestowed on us by God.

John MacArthur states that,

"The gift of the Holy Spirit is the believer's most unmistakable evidence of God's favor, his greatest proof of salvation and the guarantee of eternal glory...The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is inseparable from the new birth. At no time before salvation can a person have the indwelling Spirit, and at no time after salvation can he not have Him."

In verse **3**, Paul asks his readers in Galatia 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?*" In verse **2**, Paul speaks of the **initial** entrance of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of the Galatian Christians when they put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. In verse **3**, he is speaking of the **sanctifying** work of the Spirit in the lives of these saints. 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 or justification 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 Message provides a very effective translation of Paul's word to the Galatians: *"Are you going to continue this craziness? For only crazy people would think they could complete by their own efforts what was begun by God. If you weren't smart enough or strong enough to begin it, how do you suppose you could perfect it?"*

In **Philippians 1:6**, Paul writes, *"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**). Who was it that began the "good work" of salvation in us? "Was it God or was it ourselves and/or others? If it was God who started the work, then it is He Who will bring it to perfection or complete it!

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.

Kenneth Wuest has an excellent note in respect of the matter:

The judaizers in preaching a message of law obedience to the Galatian Christians, caused these latter to abandon the position of grace and put themselves in the sphere of law...Because there was no provision in the Mosaic economy for an indwelling Spirit who would sanctify the believer as that believer trusted Him for that work, the Galatians were turning away from the teaching and the reality of the ministry of the

Spirit in the life of the believer in this dispensation of grace, and were starting to depend upon self effort in an attempt to obey an outward legalistic system of works. Thus these Christians who had begun their Christian lives in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, now were depending upon self effort to continue in them the work of sanctification which the Holy Spirit had begun. The present tense of the verb here indicates that the Galatians had already begun this attempt. Paul says in effect, 'How foolish to think that you can bring yourselves to a state of spiritual maturity in your Christian lives. That is the work of the Spirit. Only He can do that for you.'

The Galatians were, so to speak, "short-circuiting" the work of the Holy Spirit by their fleshly works. They were attempting to live the supernatural Christian life by adhering strictly to a set of moral/ethical rules and guidelines.

Brothers and sisters, if the devil cannot prevent us from being saved by faith, then he will attempt to hinder our growth and maturity by faith. The truth is that every one of us has a tendency to fall into the legalistic snare of trusting in our own works rather than the work of the Spirit. We need to always be aware of this tendency and ask the Holy Spirit to keep us in a state of brokenness and total dependence upon Him, trusting in His supernatural strength to enable us to live the Christian life.

Brothers and sisters, it is God Who takes the initiative in starting His work in us and He is the only One who can bring it to completion. God not only initiates the good work of salvation, but continues it and guarantees its consummation. The way in which the Christian life begins is the way in which it is to be sustained. Christianity from beginning to end is a supernatural work of God. It is the only religion in the world that is so constituted.

In **Colossians 2:6**, Paul writes, "*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him*" (**English Standard Version**). We received

Christ Jesus by faith and it is by faith that we must walk in Him. We cannot perfect in the flesh what was begun in the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, without the supernatural power of the indwelling Holy Spirit the Christian life is not merely a difficult life to live. It is an impossible live to live! And His supernatural power is only possible “in Christ!” We cannot walk as Christ walked in our own strength. We must, moment by moment, maintain an attitude of humility and by a complete dependence upon the Spirit of Christ, Who alone can enable us to walk as more than conquerors in the face of the struggles, temptations and tests that God allows in our lives.