

The Book of Galatians

Lesson 5: Faith or Law? The Galatians' Folly -- Galatians 3:1-14

You have probably watched someone you love make a baffling choice. They had something good, something that was working, and then, for reasons no one could quite follow, they walked away from it toward something worse. You wanted to grab them by the shoulders and say, what are you doing? That is exactly the tone Paul takes here. He has been building careful arguments for two chapters, and now the dam breaks. "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

It is the language of a man watching people he loves fall under a spell. The Galatians had seen Jesus Christ crucified, vividly portrayed before their eyes in the preaching of the gospel. They had believed, and the Holy Spirit had come to them, powerfully and unmistakably. They had begun the Christian life in the freedom of grace. And now, somehow, they were being talked into finishing it by the law, trading the Spirit for self-effort, grace for performance.

So Paul asks them a question that cuts straight to the bone. When the Spirit came to you, how did that happen? Was it because you kept the law of Moses, or because you heard the gospel and believed? They knew the answer. The Spirit had come by faith, not by works. And if their life with God began by faith, why on earth would they think it should continue any other way?

Then Paul lifts their eyes to two great realities. He points back to Abraham, who simply believed God and was counted righteous, the father of all who live by faith. And he points to the cross, where Christ took the curse we earned by breaking the law, becoming a curse for us so that the blessing promised to Abraham could reach the whole world. As we read, let the question land on us too: are we trying to live by faith, or have we quietly slipped back into the flesh?

Group Discussion: Paul marvels that people who "began by the Spirit" would try to be "perfected by the flesh" (3:3). Why is it so easy for a church or a Christian to start in grace and then drift into performance, and what are some signs that the drift is happening?

Personal Reflection: Paul reminds the Galatians of the day the crucified Christ was "publicly portrayed" before their eyes (3:1). How vivid is the cross to you today, and what tends to crowd it out of your daily view?

Read Galatians 3:1-14

Study Questions

1. Paul asks, "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (3:2). Why does Paul send the Galatians back to how they first received the Spirit, and what does their answer prove about how a person comes into right relationship with God?

2. Paul presses, “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (3:3). Where in your own walk have you begun something by grace but slipped into trying to grow or earn God’s favor by your own effort and performance?
3. Paul reaches back to Abraham, who “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (3:6). What does Abraham’s example teach about the relationship between faith and righteousness, and why does Paul anchor his argument in Abraham rather than in the law of Moses?
4. Paul says “it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham” (3:7). What does it mean for your identity that, through faith in Christ, you belong to the family of Abraham, and how should belonging to the family of faith shape the way you live?
5. Paul warns that “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse,” because the law requires that a person “abide by all things written in the Book of the Law” (3:10). Why does relying on law-keeping bring a curse rather than a blessing, and what does this reveal about every attempt to be saved by our own performance?
6. Paul asks whether they “suffered so many things in vain” (3:4). Have you ever been tempted to abandon something you once suffered or sacrificed for in your walk with Christ? What helps you persevere rather than give up what you have begun?
7. Paul contrasts two ways: “The righteous shall live by faith,” yet “the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them’” (3:11–12). What is the fundamental difference between the way of faith and the way of law, and why can the two never be combined as the ground of our standing with God?
8. Paul calls believers to live by faith, not by the flesh. Where is God calling you, in some specific and ongoing area, to trust him rather than rely on your own strength, planning, or control?
9. Paul declares, “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’” (3:13), so that the blessing of Abraham and the promised Spirit might come through faith. What does it mean that Christ bore the curse we earned, and how do we receive this blessing through a faith that truly trusts and obeys him, rather than through law-keeping or a bare faith only?
10. Look back across the whole passage. The Galatians had taken their eyes off the crucified Christ and put them back on their own performance. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to keep the cross central and to live by faith in him rather than by the flesh.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 15:1–6, Abraham believing God and being counted righteous; Romans 4:1–12, Abraham as the father of all who are justified by faith; Habakkuk 2:4, the righteous living by faith; 2 Corinthians 5:21, Christ made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God; Deuteronomy 21:22–23, the one hanged on a tree bearing a curse.