3-16-25

Galatians 3:1-14

As we continue studying this impassioned letter Paul has written to his beloved Galatian church, we see him methodically covering all the points necessary; along with a few emotional outbursts. The church has been infiltrated, and come under the influence of, Judaizers; Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah but also think that the law of Moses must still be followed. As Paul unequivocally points out, the Gospel plus anything is no longer the Gospel. It becomes a false Gospel and does not lead to salvation.

The Judaizers had a two-pronged attack: first, they attacked Paul personally saying that he was not qualified to be teaching as he was; second, they attacked the Gospel he presented saying that it was not sufficient. Apparently, they were pretty convincing since the Galatian church as a whole believed them. Paul spent most of the first two chapters of this letter defending himself. While it’s not always a good idea to defend yourself, in this case, he had to. He had to demonstrate to the churches that he had the same assignment to be an apostle as any of the others.

Starting with our chapter 3, Paul spends the rest of the letter defending the Gospel as he presented it, and explaining what the law can and cannot do. We looked through the first 5 verses last Sunday. Paul had asked them a series of questions. If they answered these questions honestly, they would have realized that they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, not by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. Their fledgling church had witnessed and participated in many miracles. Not a single one of them came by works, or by following the law. Many of the Gentiles wouldn’t have even known what the Law of Moses was.

Now Paul uses the Scriptures of what we call the Old Testament to refute the teachings of the Judaizers. And if you think about what’s going on in the background, it’s hilarious. Paul had been a Pharisee, part of a sect that held to the law in its strictest form. Not only that, but Paul was top of his class. He knew the Scripture inside and out. On top of that, he now had had encounters with Jesus, and he had the Holy Spirit: Paul now knew the law and the Scriptures, and he understood them. And here come the Judaizers who think they are going to use the law to out-argue Paul.

Paul now uses the very Old Testament Scriptures undoubtedly used by the Judaizers to make his case that no one is justified by the law; justification only comes by faith. He uses Scripture quotations from Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and the prophet Habakkuk. He begins with the most foundational Scripture for understanding the necessity of faith, Genesis 15:6; *Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*

The context of that verse is God promising Abraham that he would have many, many descendants. Abraham was old, and so was his wife, Sarah. So it was no small thing that he believed God. Furthermore, there was no visual evidence that this would take place. But Abraham believed God anyway: that’s called faith. And the Scripture tells us that his faith had a consequence that wasn’t part of what God said: Because Abraham believed what God promised by faith, it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

There are some things to notice here and Paul develops these a little more in his letter to the Romans. This promise and this declaration of righteousness came before the law. Moses didn’t show up for several more centuries. So not only did Scripture show that righteousness came through faith, it showed that it came before the law. The law had nothing to do with it.

Additionally, this promise and the righteousness came before God instituted the covenant sealed with circumcision. The Judaizers would have been very adamant that all the Christian men be circumcised in order to comply with the law and to receive salvation in Christ. It should have been very important to the Gentile Galatians that Abraham was actually a Gentile, and uncircumcised, when he received salvation. And that he received it through faith.

The Judaizers would have been convincing the people that they had to become an Israelite, or a Jew. This was called becoming a proselyte. The idea was to physically come as close as possible to being a descendant of Abraham. But Paul shows that we become a descendant of Abraham by faith. We are spiritual children of Abraham.

I think there is a connection here with something John the Baptist said: *for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.* And then consider the new covenant promises through the prophet Ezekiel: *Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.* Each of us, before we knew Christ, had a heart of stone; we were cold toward God. Yet through Jesus, each of us has received a new heart that is warm toward God and we gain a living spirit; we have become spiritual children of Abraham. God has indeed raised up children to Abraham from stones.

In verse 8, Paul mentions “Scripture foreseeing”. This shows us that Scripture is the word of God. In Scripture, we see that God already had a plan to justify the Gentiles by faith. That is how Abraham was justified while he was still a Gentile. And among the promises God made to Abraham was this: *“All the nations will be blessed in you.”* Paul makes this amazing observation: This was the Gospel.

How was this the Gospel; all the nations will be blessed in you? It was the promise of the good news that through the offspring of Abraham would come One who would make salvation possible for all the nations of the earth. Moses did not fulfill that promise. His law did not offer salvation, nor was it ever meant to. Later in this chapter Paul goes into the purpose of the law; but its purpose was not salvation. Jesus was the One who brought the offer of salvation to anyone who would accept Him. And that acceptance comes through faith; believing in God’s promise through His Son.

*So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.* Or “the man of faith”. And we can’t miss the context here. It is specific; Abraham believed God, he believed what God said, he believed God’s word. Our faith must also be very specific. It is not faith in general or even faith in faith; it is faith in Jesus Christ alone: The Word of God manifest; faith in His person and in His work on the cross. That is the faith that brings about justification before God; that is the belief that brings about righteousness. Without these things we cannot hope for eternal life.

In verse 10 is a quote form Deuteronomy: *“Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.”* There is a good chance that the Judaizers were using this quote to get the Galatians to follow the law. It says that they are cursed if they don’t follow the law. But Paul turns it around. He tells them that everybody who tries to live by the works of the law are already under a curse. Why? As it says, if you don’t abide by everything written in the law you are cursed. Everything written means over 600 laws.

The Jews have proven over millennia that no sinful human-being can possibly follow all the laws of Moses. We are sinners by nature and we will sin. And as Paul points out in his letter to the Romans, with the law came transgression; to break the law is to transgress. So now we are sinners and transgressors. It becomes more and more obvious that we cannot work ourselves into God’s favor. He had to make a way for us, which He did; and that way is Jesus.

Paul states that no one is justified before God by the law and as a proof text he quotes from the prophet Habakkuk: *“The righteous man shall live by faith.”* Justification and righteousness go hand in hand. You can’t have one without the other. To be justified before God means to be declared “not guilty” by Him. That can only happen by accepting the sacrifice Jesus made by taking our punishment in our place. To be righteous before God means “living rightly”. We are sinners by nature so we can’t have our own righteousness; we have to get it somewhere else. Of course we get it from Jesus. He took our sins and gave us His righteousness. And this all happens only by faith.

*live by faith.* As people righteous in Christ, we do our best to live that way during this life. But more deeply, we will live eternally by faith in Jesus.

Paul concludes with one more quote regarding the law verses faith: *“He who practices them shall live by them.”* If a person chooses to establish their own righteousness by the law, then they have to live by those laws; in other words, keep them entirely. By now, it has been made clear that establishing one’s own righteousness is not going to happen. And there is certainly no benefit to adding it to faith already established in Jesus.

Now, in all this, Paul never says that the law is wrong or incorrect. The entire Old Testament is the word of God: the Law, the Prophets, the history, the Psalms; it is all the holy word of God. We must never disregard it or consider it obsolete. And Paul uses this truth in his final quote from the Law: *“Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”.* This little verse from Deuteronomy 21 turns out to be very important when applied to Jesus.

Throughout the Old Testament, God is very concerned about keeping things free from defilement. Defilement is a very serious matter and it unfortunately doesn’t tend to remain in one spot or with one person. For example, when Israel first entered the Promised Land and conquered Jericho, everything in the city was to be utterly destroyed; nothing was to be kept by any of the people as booty. But one man, Achan, took some things for himself. As a result, the army of Israel was defeated in their next battle and thirty-six families of Israel lost their men. One man defiled the whole nation of Israel.

In Deuteronomy 21, the LORD explains how to cleanse the land when a murder victim has been found and the guilty party can’t be determined. The murder itself has defiled the land so cleansing must take place by means of oaths and sacrifice.

Verses 22 and 23 of that chapter read: *“If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.”* So the person guilty of capital offence is brought to justice, but the act of hanging him on a tree shows that he is accursed of God. However, the accursed person is defiling the land so he must be taken down and buried, out of sight. The defilement is removed from the land.

Jesus was hung on a wooden cross; a tree. While He was perfectly innocent and just, He took our sins and our curse upon Himself. He became a curse for us; by hanging on a tree He was accursed of God. Now, the Romans liked to leave crucified people hang for a few days. Normally it took a few days to actually die from crucifixion; also it served as a deterrent to see someone hang there.

But things didn’t work out that way with Jesus. First off, He died quickly. In fact in Mark 15:44 it is recorded that Pilate was somewhat surprised that He died so soon. The thing is, Jesus finished His work on the cross and then gave up His spirit. He was not killed; He died at the moment of his own choosing. Secondly, He was taken down from the cross and buried that same day; just as the LORD commanded back in Deuteronomy 21:22. The accursed One took the just punishment and was buried out of sight; thus the defilement could be removed from the land.

Certainly, as we look around, we see that this world is defiled and filled with sin and decay. But the Kingdom of Heaven is not; it is perfect and pure and holy. And we who have accepted Christ and the work He has done for us are, and will be, citizens of that Kingdom. All the defilement that clings to us is removed by faith in Him.

Paul reminds the Galatians, and us, that it is because of what Jesus did that we can receive the promise made to Abraham that we will be blessed with salvation. We also receive the promised Holy Spirit who will indwell us to be our comfort and our guide. Still, we can’t pass over those very important words that show up again in this last verse: *through faith*. And keeping that in the context of the whole Bible, that means faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Prayer

Blessed Lord God, how marvelous it is that You have made a way for us to have eternal life when there was no way. As Jesus told us, with man salvation is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Then Lord Jesus, You went on to do the impossible. Such a loving sacrifice has never been made in the history of creation; Your love is beyond knowledge.

Lord, how easy it is for us to be misled. And the more we think that we will not stray from Your path, the more likely we are to do so. Holy Spirit, keep us focused on our Lord Jesus. Keep pride from rising up making us think that we don’t need help. Please do not put us to the test. And when we do face temptation, quickly show us the way of escape and lead us there.

Gracious Jesus, our salvation is as simple as believing on You. You have done all the work, so we can rest in You. The work we have now is our joy. It is done to please You and increase Your Kingdom and bring You glory. May we be obedient and productive servants of Yours.

Lord Jesus, it is in Your name we pray,

Amen