

The Book of Galatians (Part 1) - Justification by Faith

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Justification by Faith

“He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” (2 Peter 3:16, insertion mine)

The King James Version of the Old Testament only mentions the word “faith” twice while the New Testament uses it 245 times. Given this striking imbalance, some people might conclude that prior to the cross, salvation came through obedience. (This lack of discussion on faith in the Old Testament is sometimes used by advocates of dispensationalism; the idea that salvation is offered to people in different ways at different times.)

I believe that faith is only mentioned twice in the Old Testament because God wanted to demonstrate the properties of salvific faith before revealing the intricate details of how He uses grace, law, faith, and works to determine our eternal destiny. The Bible says faith without works is meaningless. (James 2:17) So, the Old Testament is full of examples of obedience exercised due to faith. For example, there is Abel and his sacrifice, Noah and his ark, Abraham leaving home and later offering Isaac on the altar, and Rahab protecting the spies. When writing Hebrews 11, Paul used these Old Testament examples to show the works that faith will produce, and to demonstrate that God’s salvation has been faith-based since sin began. I am sure one of Paul’s favorite Bible verses was, “. . . but the just shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4) and he knew that Abraham, “. . . believed in the Lord; and He [the Lord] counted it to him for righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6, insertion mine)

Jews and Gentiles in the Early Church

The early Christian church was energized by a series of miracles such as Jesus’ resurrection and ascension and many marvelous manifestations of the Holy Spirit. However, miracles were not the main attraction of early Christianity; it was its message. Christians had a new gospel that taught salvation comes to anyone who believes and obeys! A Christian believes that Jesus came to Earth as “the Lamb of God” and ascended to Heaven where He sits on God’s throne. A born-again Christian is willing to obey Jesus’ commandments. (Matthew 28:19,20) For Gentiles in the first century A.D., Jesus’ gospel meant there was no need to become a Jew. For Jews, Jesus’ gospel ended the anxiety of not knowing if good works were enough to atone for sins.

During the first century A.D., the Pharisees controlled religious thought within Judaism. The Sadducees differed in some respects with Pharisees, but both groups united in the belief that God required rigorous obedience to the law for salvation. If a Jew died with enough “good works” to outweigh his sins, God would save him because he was a son of Abraham and could

participate in the promises God gave Abraham. (Luke 3:8) The Pharisees understood that salvation could not be attained through works alone, this was very important to be a descendant of Abraham. The righteousness of Abraham (Genesis 15:6) was also needed for salvation. Therefore, a man could only inherit the righteousness of Abraham if he was a descendant of Abraham and all descendants had to be circumcised per the everlasting covenant. (Genesis 17:13)

Of course, the realities that faced the early Christian church cannot be expressed in one or two paragraphs. I have oversimplified the issues so you can better appreciate the “can of worms” Paul opened when he began confronting Gentile and Jewish converts with their distortions of faith. Their religious baggage was about to derail the early church, so God empowered a former Pharisee to keep it from imploding.

Paul's Combined Message to the Early Church

It did not take long before Christians observed that Paul’s letters and logic were easy to abuse because he spoke simultaneously to two opposing schools of thought. Jewish converts came into the church heavily influenced by legalism. (Acts 15:5) Gentile converts came into the church with deep-seated feelings of anti-Semitism and a disdain for obeying religious rules. (Galatians 5:15-21) Jewish converts wanted to continue circumcision, the laws of Moses, and Jewish traditions. The Gentiles wanted a salvation that had nothing to do with sanctification. The church was a mess. Ironically, these two extremes still exist today within the body of Christ and each continues to use Paul’s writings to defend their position.

Justification Before God

As you read Paul’s letter, remember both sides of the conflict. The primary issue of Galatians is whether justification before God comes through faith, obedience, or a combination of the two. The nature of justification was a crucial topic in the early church because the outcome determines behavior. Does God actually want His children to do anything specific? I have added commentary within brackets [].

Galatians 1:1-5 “Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Galatians 1:6-9 “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting [my gospel. I am] the one who called you by the grace of Christ and [now you] are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from Heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned [because the gospel I presented to you came straight from Jesus Himself]! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than

what you accepted [from me], let him be eternally condemned!”

Galatians 1:10-17 [My words are harsh and I know some of you will become angry.] **Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men [as I did when I lived as a Pharisee], I would not be a servant of Christ. I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I [hated Christians and I] persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in [the rigors and leadership of] Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into [the wilderness of] Arabia and later returned to Damascus.”**

Galatians 1:18-24 **“Then after three years [in the wilderness, carefully aligning Scripture with the revelations that were given me], I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord’s brother [the overseer of the church in Jerusalem]. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And [after they heard my gospel] they praised God because of me.”**

Galatians 2:1-3 [After my conversion, I lived and worked among the Gentiles for a long time.] **Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation [that was given to me] and [I] set before them [the leaders of the church] the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running [contrary to the teachings of the other apostles] or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled [by the apostles] to be circumcised, even though he was a [an uncircumcised] Greek.”**

Galatians 2:4-8 **“This matter [of circumcision] arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves [to the law of Moses where circumcision was thought to be a means for justification]. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. As for those [others who were present] who seemed to be important – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance – those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw [that my ordination and gospel had come from Jesus Himself] that I had been [chosen and] entrusted with the task of preaching the [same] gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.”**

Galatians 2:9-11 “**James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars** [in the church], **gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the [divine] grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.** [But the problem started] **When Peter came to Antioch, I [Paul] opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.** [Even though Peter, one of the closest companions of Jesus while He was on Earth, was highly respected as a Christian leader, but he needed to be rebuked in public for the cause of Christ.]”

Galatians 2:12 “**Before certain men came from James** [the overseer of the church in Jerusalem], **he [Peter] used to eat [and freely socialize] with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he [Peter] began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.**”

The so-called “circumcision group” was a group of Jewish converts who insisted that all Gentile converts must enter into the covenant of circumcision. (Genesis 17:13) The group believed that only Abraham’s heirs could be saved. Therefore, if any man wanted to be an heir of the promises made to Abraham, he had to be circumcised.

Galatians 2:13-16 “**The other Jews** [belonging to the church] **joined him [Peter] in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was [confused and] led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel** [of Christ which treats Jew and Gentile alike], **I said to Peter in front of them all, ‘You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew** [because here in Galatia you have ignored numerous Jewish laws and traditions such as eating with the Gentiles and foods offered to idols]. **How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?’**”

“**We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified** [made perfect in God’s sight] **by observing the law, but** [we know that justification comes] **by faith [alone] in Jesus Christ. So we, too [as Jews], have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be [or can be] justified.** [It is impossible for a sinner to perfectly obey God’s law. Given enough time, every man will fail. Therefore, it is impossible for a sinner to stand before God as though he never sinned – fully justified by his works.]”

Galatians 2:17-19 “**If, while we seek to be justified** [through faith] **in Christ, [and] it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners** [because faith does not abolish the law of God that defines sin], **does that mean that Christ promotes sin?** [Does trusting in Christ for justification permit us to freely violate God’s laws?] **Absolutely not!** [Consider my reaction to Peter.] **If I rebuild what I [have recently] destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker.** [In other words, if I return to my Jewish religion and I set out to obey its laws to be perfect before God, I will clearly prove that I am a lawbreaker and I cannot possibly justify myself in God’s sight because I cannot perfectly obey all those laws all consistently!] **For through the** [condemnation of the] **law I died to the law** [I admitted that I could not save myself, therefore] **so that I might live for God.**”

Galatians 2:20-21 **“I have been crucified with Christ [He died for my sins] and I no longer live [to glorify in a manmade righteousness], but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body [is directed at glorifying Christ through obedience to His commands, but I cannot justify myself according to my works, therefore], I live by faith in the Son of God, [trusting in Him for my justification, doing all that He has commanded – not to be declared righteous through works, but I do obey His laws and commands out of love for Him] who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God [by trying to establish my own righteousness through works], for if righteousness could be gained through [obeying] the law, Christ died for nothing!”**

To be continued.

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