

Galatians



“He Who Through Faith is Righteous Shall Live”

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

In our previous lesson, we were able to read St. Paul’s description of his participation in the Council of Jerusalem. The approval he received there for his preaching was an important factor in the confidence he felt to write forcefully to the Galatians, admonishing them not to turn to a “different gospel.” He was even willing to admonish St. Peter when he behaved in a way that was not in keeping with the intent of the Council’s ruling. By the end of Galatians 2, St. Paul was addressing what he considered to be the grave threat presented by a desire to return to the Law of Moses (all the moral and ceremonial law given to Moses at Mt. Sinai) in order to be pleasing in God’s sight. He began a discussion of “justification,” the theological term that refers to being in a state of grace—forgiven of all sin and filled with the Holy Spirit, Who floods the soul with faith, hope, and love. In that state, we are ready and able to do God’s will. We are righteous in His sight.

In chapter 3, St. Paul begins a densely packed argument to prove to the Galatians that justification cannot possibly come through “works of the law” (see how chapter 2 ends in 2:21). The next two chapters of Galatians are devoted to this argument. As you will see, this is not a dispassionate theological discussion for St. Paul. He understands fully the high stakes if he fails to teach the Galatians to discern the deep error they are being tempted to embrace. Nothing is more contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ than believing that one needs to once again return to the Mosaic code for justification, to become a Jew in order to be blessed by God. St. Paul is in such a heightened state of urgency in this part of his letter that he wants to be as convincing as he can in the relative brevity of a letter. Sometimes he dispenses with carefully crafted transitions as he darts from one idea to the next, which can leave his 21st century reader dazed and confused! It might be helpful for you to see an outline of the entire chapter before you begin answering specific questions. Because this chapter makes several references to Old Testament passages, which we will take time to read and consider, we will devote two sessions to it.

- I. Evidences that justification comes through faith and not works of the law **(3:1-12)**
 - A. The Holy Spirit **(3:2-5)**
 - B. Abraham **(3:6-9)**
 - C. Old Testament Scriptures **(3:10-12)**
- II. Christ solves the problem of the Law of Moses and makes the blessing of Abraham available to all **(3:13-14)**
- III. The priority of the promise given to Abraham over the Law given to Moses **(3:15-18)**
- IV. What is the purpose of the Law? **(3:19-24)**
- V. What faith accomplishes for us **(3:25-end)**

Read through this entire passage, all at once. Then answer the questions on the text that follow.





GALATIANS 3:1-12

1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes 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 with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you experience so many things in vain?— if it really is in vain. 5 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? 6 Thus Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 7 So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 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 men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith. 10 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.” 11 Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for “He who through faith is righteous shall live”; 12 but the law does not rest on faith, for “He who does them shall live by them.”

Questions on the Text



THE SPIRIT'S TESTIMONY READ GAL. 3:1-5

1. **What kind of language does Paul use to express his deep concern about the problem the Galatians are facing (vs. 1)?**
2. **Notice the curious phrase Paul uses in vs. 1, which says that before the eyes of the Galatians, Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. What do you think this means?**
3. **How does Paul use the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Galatians' lives (vss. 2-3) as the first bit of evidence that justification comes through faith and not by works of the law?**
4. **What specific kinds of experiences with the Holy Spirit do you think Paul is referring to in vss. 4-5?**
5. **There was no doubt about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people to whom Paul wrote. How would the Galatians have to answer the question Paul puts to them in vs. 5?**
6. **Notice that Paul is appealing to the personal experience of his friends. The questions he asked are rooted in common sense, not in Scripture or theology (there will be time for that). What does this tactic suggest to us about the best place to begin when we want to persuade people of spiritual truths? The texts of these passages are not included in this lesson. Read them in your own Bible.**

As Paul begins to answer his own question from vs. 5, he turns to Abraham, the Father of the Jews. Quite possibly the people suggesting to the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised and observe all the Jewish law used Abraham as an example of one who loved God and obeyed Him. Perhaps they taught that circumcision was the real mark of belonging to God, as it had been for all the Jews since Abraham. It is important here for Paul to defuse this idea. In order to understand Paul's reference to Abraham, it is necessary to be familiar with some of the history of his life. We will examine two passages from Genesis.

THE PROMISE OF BLESSING READ GEN. 12:1-9

7. **At the end of Gen. 11, we are introduced to Abram, the son of Terah. Terah was a descendant of Shem, the righteous firstborn son of Noah. It appears that Terah set out from Ur of the Chaldees to go to**





Questions on the Text (cont.)

the land of Canaan, perhaps to stake a tribal claim on the land that rightfully belonged to the descendants of Shem but was occupied then by the Canaanites, the descendants of Ham (Noah's son who sinned against him—see Gen. 9:20-29). Terah made it as far as Haran, but settled there instead. In Gen. 12:1-3, God speaks to Abram (his name will later be changed) and makes an amazing promise. What is it?

8. *It is worth thinking about this promise with some care. Does Abram have to do anything to earn it?*
9. *How will Abram actually receive it?*
10. *What kind of man does Abram appear to be?*

ABRAM BELIEVES GOD **READ GEN. 15:1-6**

11. *By this time, about ten years have passed. What is Abram struggling with?*
12. *How does God respond to that struggle?*
13. *God counted (“reckoned”) Abram’s belief in His promise as righteousness—the trust that Abram placed in God made him pleasing in God’s sight. Was Abram circumcised at this time in his life (hint: Read Gen. 17:9-27)?*
14. *So what can we conclude about the relationship between righteousness (being pleasing to God) and circumcision?*

SONS OF ABRAHAM BY FAITH **READ GAL. 3:6-9**

15. *Whom does Paul say are the true “sons of Abraham” (vs. 7)?*
16. *Paul says that when God promised Abram to bless all nations through him, he was preaching the gospel to him. That is because Paul understood the word “bless” to mean “to justify” (see vs. 8). How was this “blessing” obtained by Abram? How would the Gentiles (“all nations”) obtain it?*
17. *If an act of faith resulted in justification for Abram, was he justified only once, on the occasion mentioned in Gen. 15, or was he justified several times (think carefully about this and read Heb. 11:8-19 before you answer)?*
18. *Was Abram justified by faith alone (think carefully about this and read James 2:18-26 before you answer)?*
19. *Putting this reference to Abraham in its proper perspective according to Paul’s purposes, what was his primary reason for using Abraham as an example in these verses?*
20. *Paul thinks of Abraham as a man of faith. What characteristics of Abraham’s faith do you think Paul found so appealing and exemplary?*

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Now Paul turns from using the example of Abraham to using the Old Testament Scriptures in order to





Questions on the Text (cont.)

demonstrate that justification is by faith and not works. Recall that Paul was trained as a rabbi. His faith in Christ enabled him to see clearly what was hidden in the Old Testament teachings about righteousness and faith; now he wants to use these to powerfully refute the error and misunderstanding of the Judaizers.

THE LAW BRINGS A CURSE

READ GAL. 3:10-12

21. *In vs. 10, Paul quotes Deut. 27:26 (read). What is the big problem facing anyone who expects to be justified by keeping the law?*
 22. *In vs. 11, Paul quotes from the minor prophet, Habbakuk. In order to understand the quote, you need to know that Habbakuk wrote at a time when the fierce, deplorably wicked Chaldeans (Babylonians) were used by God to chastise Israel. The prophet wonders how a holy God could allow the Chaldeans to appear to escape judgment for their violent arrogance. God assures Habbakuk that, in His own time, He will visit justice on them. Read Hab. 2:1-4. For Israel to silently and patiently endure the Chaldeans will be a test for them. How is this test like the test Abraham faced? How will one please God in this test?*
 23. *Paul finally gets to the root of the problem of “the law” in vs. 12. You need to read Lev. 18:1-5 in order to understand Paul’s use of his quote. Why does he say “the law does not rest on faith”? According to the Leviticus passage, what does the law rest on?*
 24. *If no one can actually keep all the law, and if those who please God are those who live by faith in Him, not depending on “works of law,” what is the natural question that arises at this point in the discussion of justification?*
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Questions for Reflection

One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is to take it deeply into your life through memorization. The suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the text in the lesson. Or you may choose one of your own. For further reflection, consider these:

1. *The promise God made to Abram in Genesis 12 was extravagant in its intention to bless him. It was in the nature of what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him” (I Cor. 2:9). God’s promise of blessing to you is of the same magnitude. Take time now to reflect on the lavish promises God has made to those who keep faith with Him: forgiveness of sins, freedom from the bondage of sin, renewal of the soul, power to live in a way that pleases Him, eternal life. They are staggering in their intention to love you inside out. Luxuriate in them.*
2. *In your life of faith today, how can you be helped by the example of Abraham’s faith? Be specific.*
3. *What difference does it make to you that God does not ask you to be good enough for Him to bless you, but because He blesses you, He asks you to be good?*





Opportunities for Additional Study

For the student who wishes to reflect more deeply on the passage in the lesson, consider these:

Points to Ponder

When God promises to bless Abram, in Genesis 12, this is not the first time we see God blessing men. It began in the Garden of Eden, when God blessed the living creatures He had made (**Gen. 1:22,28**). What does it mean to be blessed by God? In the Garden, it meant that the creatures there were in a state of happiness because they were good. Over and over in the Genesis narrative, we are told that God saw His creation as “good.” When He had made everything, He saw that it was “very good” (**Gen. 1:31**). The essence of blessedness before God is to be completely and delightfully pleasing to Him. The whole created order perfectly fulfilled the desires God had for it. Being full of His goodness, it was *pleasing* to Him.

Adam and Eve, in the beautiful garden God had planted for them, were entirely pleasing to Him. They were also entirely pleasing to each other. This state of blessedness, of being pleasing to God, was not something they worked hard to get. In fact, it was a completely free gift from their Creator. They did need to do something to preserve it, however. They needed to obey God’s command not to eat of a certain tree in the garden. As long as they lived in compliance with that one command, their blessed happiness was assured.

We know the outcome of the story. By disobeying God, Adam and Eve lost the blessing of being pleasing in God’s sight. The “blessing” of God does not appear again in Genesis until Noah. After Noah and his family left the ark to re-create civilization, he built an altar to the Lord, offering animals in burnt sacrifice. The Lord was pleased with the odor (**Gen. 8:20-22**) of that sacrifice and blessed Noah and his sons. Unfortunately, it wasn’t too long before Noah was passing along not only his patriarchal blessing but a patriarchal curse as well. His middle son, Ham, was guilty of incest with his mother, Noah’s wife. Noah pronounced a curse on the son who would be the fruit of that union—Canaan. In relatively short order, men had once again lost God’s blessing by living in a way not in keeping with the very few “rules” God had given. From the time of Adam and Eve, men have known that sexual union is for husband and wife (**Gen. 2:24**), not mother and son.

So, when God calls Abram in Genesis 12 and makes an amazing promise to bless, bless, bless—what should our reaction be? If we have followed the story from its beginning, we should be positively *breathless* with the thrill of it. What kind of love is this, that God would relentlessly pursue man in order to bless him? How can weak and fallen human beings matter so much to Him that He would unfold His plan to bless them *through* the flesh-and-blood descendants of Abraham? Is it really true that somehow, someday, God will once again bless men so that they are pleasing to Him? Mark carefully the words of God when Jesus rose up out of the waters of the Jordan, at His baptism: “This is My Beloved Son, with Whom I am *well pleased*” (**Matt. 3:17**). Is it any wonder that St. Paul was consumed by his determination to rescue his Galatian friends from any possible misunderstanding of this?

Catechism Connection

Excerpted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Gal. 3:2 – “Since the Word became flesh in assuming a true humanity, Christ’s body was finite. Therefore the human face of Jesus can be portrayed; at the seventh ecumenical council (Nicaea II in 787) the Church recognized its representation in holy images to be legitimate.” (476)

Gal. 3:10 – “The perfect fulfillment of the Law could be the work of none but the divine legislator, born subject to the Law in the person of the Son. In Jesus, the law no longer appears engraved on tables of stone but ‘upon the heart’ of the Servant who becomes ‘a covenant to the people,’ because he will ‘faithfully bring forth justice.’ Jesus fulfills the Law to the point of taking upon himself ‘the curse of the Law’ incurred by those who do not ‘abide by the things written in the book of the Law, and do them,’ for his death took place to redeem them ‘from the transgressions under the first covenant.’” (580)



Summary

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In this lesson, we observed that:

1. St. Paul put a question to the Galatians. How did you enter into life in the Holy Spirit in the first place, because you were circumcised or because you had faith? Since they were uncircumcised pagans when he preached the gospel to them, there is really only one possible answer to that question. They entered into life with God by their faith.
2. St. Paul begins working with that answer and builds on it. Not only were the Galatians made acceptable (pleasing) to God by their faith, but even Abraham, the Father of the Jews, was counted as righteous by God when he put his faith in God's trustworthiness. That happened *before* he was circumcised, so it couldn't have happened *because* of the circumcision.
3. In all of this, St. Paul is not narrowly focused on *how* justification takes place. His intention is to show that it is not connected to keeping the Law of Moses. He equates justification with what Abraham received when he decided to trust God during a difficult time of testing. In that episode, Abraham's faith made him righteous in God's sight. Paul says the very same thing is true for Gentiles who put their faith in God. They become pleasing to Him.
4. St. Paul aims to show that no one in the Old Covenant could ever be righteous before God on the basis of keeping all the Law of Moses. The law had a curse attached to it, as well as a blessing. One tiny infraction brings down the curse. Faithful Jews always knew that ultimately, if they expected blessing from God, they would have to rely on His *promise* to bless them someday, somehow. The blessing would not come as a result of their keeping the law, because no one could keep it perfectly. Jews from the time of Abraham would have to trust in the goodness and mercy of God if they ever hoped to be pleasing in His sight.

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

