

## **“Beginning with the Spirit”**

### **Galatians 3:1-5**

#### *Introduction:*

1. If you’ve ever experienced the joys of hiking, you know that it makes sense to survey the ground you’ve covered once in a while. To this point in the letter to the Galatians, we have seen the following:

- Introduction (1:1-5)
- Problem of false teaching (1:6-10)
- Presentation of Paul’s authority to speak for Christ (1:11-2:10)
- Presentation of the good news of justification through faith in Christ (2:11-21)

2. Now Paul begins a biblical and theological proof of the good news he preached. While he does this, he also presents the relationship of the old and the new covenants. When he finishes, it will be clear that the Holy Writings teach one way of salvation: by grace alone through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

3. In the section before us today, the apostle Paul appeals to what the Galatian believers know from their own spiritual experience. What agrees with what they know that God has done among them? Is it the teaching of justification by faith, or is it the false teaching of the works of the law being promoted by the false teachers?

#### *Exposition:*

I. An incredible turn of events (3:1)

A. Paul had laid a solid Biblical foundation in his ministry to them (cf. 1 Cor 3:10).

1. His content was Christ-focused. He had preached Jesus Christ crucified. It should be clear that authentic Christianity involves the preaching of the cross of Christ. If you are not telling the story of God’s glory in Jesus, you are not telling God’s message. If you can tell your story, without reference to Jesus Christ, you have lost connection with him. If your story of Jesus does not highlight Christ crucified, you are not telling God’s message. The verbal form “crucified” is in the perfect tense. Christ’s saving work was accomplished on the cross, and its benefits are always “fresh, valid and available” (Stott, p. 70). Certainly, the cross is central and essential to the subject of justification. How can any person be right with God? You must trust in Christ crucified.

2. His manner was vivid and expressive. He had portrayed Christ to them—like putting the message of the cross on a poster board so that they could see it before them. Listen to this message again. See Christ on the cross, horribly wounded and bleeding. A crown of thorns is smashed into his forehead. Nailed to a wooden cross with splinters, he struggles in agony for each breath. Most in the watching crowd are mocking him. But wait! One hanging next to him begs for mercy, and Jesus promises him life in glory. Suddenly, the sky becomes dark, and Jesus cries out that God has forsaken him. What is happening? Next, listen as the victor’s cry resounds in your ears, “It is finished!” He dies, and

the earth shakes beneath you. The Roman commander cries out, "Surely, this man was the Son of God!" And three days later Jesus rises from the dead in testimony that God has accepted his perfect sacrifice for sinners! So don't be faithless but believing!

*Apply:* This is true not only of Paul's preaching to the Galatians, but it holds true wherever the good news of Jesus Christ is preached. The twenty-first century hearer lacks nothing compared to those who heard the good news in the first century. Therefore, right now is an excellent time to turn from your empty way of life and to trust Christ crucified and risen as your Lord and Savior.

B. Yet the Galatians experienced a sad decline.

1. They were acting contrary to God's wisdom written in the Bible. Therefore, Paul addresses them as "foolish" or "mindless", just as Jesus had to the two men on the Emmaus Road (Lk 24:25). We are responsible to bring our minds under Christ's lordship (cf. 2 Cor 10:5). Living for Christ, following Christ, just doesn't happen. Everyday we must rely on him for spiritual strength. Each day we must follow his authority communicated in the Word.

2. They were acting like someone had put a magic spell on them. Paul wonders, "What else can account for such a dramatic reversal?" Have you ever gone sledding or tobogganing or cross country skiing? One thing I have learned from all those is that it is a lot faster to go down than to go up. The Galatians had quickly gone downhill. False teaching had drawn them away from the Lord.

*Apply:* Teaching does matter. Be very careful what you listen to!

II. An inquiry into their spiritual experience (3:2, 5) – An honest answer to this question will solve the controversy. "The apostle refers his readers to this, because the receiving of the gift of the Spirit is surely the most unmistakable evidence of God's favor and the plainest guarantee of eternal redemption" (Ridderbos, p. 112).

A. Paul views their spiritual experience from two angles.

1. The first view is from the perspective of their reception. They were Gentiles who were separate from the law covenant. So then, they obviously had not received the Holy Spirit through the law. Instead, they received the Spirit when they believed the gospel that Paul preached.

2. The second view is from the perspective of God's work. How did God work in them when he gave them the Spirit and did miracles in or among them? It was not by the law, but by hearing and believing what was preached.

*Apply:* Notice very clearly that the reception of the Spirit is linked with justification by faith. Both are received from God at the same time and in the same way. If you are justified by faith, you have also received the Holy Spirit.

B. The point is clear. Was the Spirit given and received by the grace of God in the gospel or by the works of the flesh?

1. Think of the difference between the two ways. "The law says 'Do this'; the gospel says, 'Christ has done it all'. 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" (Stott, p. 71).

2. "It is implied that there could be no higher privilege for mortal men and women than the gift of the Spirit. Since this gift was received through believing the gospel and not through obedience to the law, the superiority and sufficiency of the gospel called for no further demonstration" (Bruce, p. 149). Their reception of the Spirit proved Paul's point. But to many in Christian circles, Paul's words seem strange and inconclusive, because they live as if the Spirit had not been given.

*Apply:* Can the gospel be preached and believed on without the necessity of the Spirit's help? Many years ago, the southern evangelist Rolfe Barnard said he attended a Christian conference in which they had a workshop on everything except the Holy Spirit. Yet that was the workshop they needed most. The story could be repeated endlessly in our time. Everyone has a program, a method, a system, or some other idea. I would suggest another way. It is the way of preaching the good news of Jesus Christ in reliance on the power of the Spirit of God.

### III. An inquiry into the nature of the Christian life (3:3-4)

#### A. Is the Christian life a turning backwards to the flesh?

1. Paul drives home the point that the beginning of the new life was with the Spirit. All that belongs to the new order begins with him. There is no Christian way of life apart from the leadership of the Spirit of God (cf. Rm 7:6; 8:14).

2. To return to legal works would be a return to the flesh ("human effort"), meaning human nature in its weakness and separated from the power of God. As Paul will make clear, the law itself belonged to the realm of the flesh.

*Apply:* So then, as a Christian—a follower and learner of Jesus Christ—how can you please God? Is it by relying on yourself? Or do you honor God by being filled with the presence of Christ by the Holy Spirit?

#### B. Is the Christian life pointless?

1. There is a difference of opinion about the correct translation for the Greek word *epathete*. Should it be translated as "suffered" or as "experienced"? If we choose "suffered", Paul reminds them of what the persecution they had already endured for Christ? Was that for no reason? If we choose "experienced", Paul reminds them of how Christ had remade their lives. Was that real? In either case, he wants them to answer if everything connected with Christ was for nothing. Notice that to walk back to the law and the flesh was in Paul's view "nothing" (cf. Ph 3:7-8).

2. He presses this point on them: How do they explain what happened to them before they were misled by the false teachers? Yet Paul expects that they will respond positively to what he was saying by adding "if it really was for nothing." He is offering them a way back.

*Apply:* Where is your confidence for acceptance with God? Are you relying on your own good works or religious performance? Are you hoping to convince God to like you by something you do or by being spiritual? The good news is that God accepts whoever trusts in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. God gives

every believer in Jesus the gift of the Holy Spirit. God is at work in every true Christian by the Holy Spirit.  
Have you received the Holy Spirit?