

Christians don't have exactly the same issues that Abraham had when dealing with God, but Paul was insistent that faith was still faith. Just as God could count Abraham as 'righteous' because of his faith, our faith enables us to be put right with God; that is, we are justified.

Verse 8&9 – The faithfulness of God

Paul considered this to be God's gracious revelation of the Gospel to Abraham centuries before it was to be found through Jesus Christ (3:8). Indeed, God had even given Abraham the great promise that through him 'all the world would be blessed' (Gen 12:3). Paul asserts this understanding of Genesis very boldly here in his letter to the Galatians, but the argument is put very briefly. His letter to the Romans says much more about Abraham and his place in God's plan of salvation (chapter 4).

However, as far as the Galatians were concerned, the highlight of Paul's argument was the conclusion that all those who believed were 'blessed together with Abraham' (3:9). The same God who raised up a nation from Abraham was now raising up a new people based upon faith in the one man Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Clearly everything had changed and some might have felt that the new church of Jesus Christ seemed radically different from the old people of God, the Jews; but Paul's argument was that the one thing which held all God's work together was faith; not circumcision, and not the Law.

Application

The flesh or the Spirit? That is the choice put before Christians. In some passages of Scripture, Paul develops this contrast in order to raise a question about Christian lifestyle and he asks, do you live by the flesh or do you live by the Spirit? Indeed, this question is found towards the end of Galatians in chapter 5. However, here in this passage, the question is not one of lifestyle, but about how we relate to God. It is a question about the inner motives which drive our relationship with God. It is important that we check out from time to time whether we really do have faith and trust in God through Jesus, because it is very easy to lose track of our faith. We can easily become consumed by doing the things Christians do, particularly in church, but when something happens to us which is unexpected, our trust in God evaporates. We find that despite our worship and expressions of faith when with others, we are not at all sure that we trust God. You may say 'that can't happen to me', but I strongly suggest you refrain and accept that it could. We are all human and Satan will do everything in His power to pull us down this slippery slope. As a pastor and minister, I have come across many upstanding Christians who have found themselves very uncomfortably placed when life has not gone as planned. The wisest approach in my opinion is to accept that all of us are susceptible to fall and miss the mark of our high spiritual calling. We do all in our power to retain our spiritual integrity, but when we do fall, the first course of action must be to recognise this, and go straight back to our Lord in prayer and repentance. The Lord will always help us when we fall, but we need to have faith; and that is the point.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what you think Paul means by 'the flesh'. In what ways is it different from 'the Spirit'?
2. What are the founding principles of your church which have disappeared over the years? Should they have been retained?
3. Is Paul's argument that faith (Genesis 15) came before circumcision (Gen 17) the only way of proving that faith is more important than the law?

Discipleship

There are many challenges within this passage of Scripture, because this is where Paul begins to get going with his thoughts about what was happening to the Galatians. One of the problems we all face with Paul's letters is the problem of familiarity. This means that we can sometimes read what he says without taking in the true depth of meaning which is there. For this reason, take the opportunity to read over this passage several times, and allow God to speak to you through this process.

Final Prayer

Dear Lord; thank You and Alleluia! You are the source of all the joy, the love, the blessing, the wonder, the happiness and the glory which we find on the pathway of our life's journey! In Your Name, we reject all the evil, the sin, the worry, the unhappiness and the despair which comes from the Evil One, and we revel in Your love! Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN!

Prayer

You, Lord Jesus, have done for me what is impossible for my mind to grasp, my heart to comprehend or my feelings to appreciate; yet somewhere within my spirit lies the unspoken yet powerful bond by which You draw me heavenward and I do not let go. All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for Your amazing Love for one such as me! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Troubles

Life is full of situations which we find difficult to assess; something we are asked to do may lead to a good result or it may lead to unmitigated disaster. Ask the Lord to help you discern the difference between what is potentially good and potentially evil, so that you do not do things in ignorance. Then you can do your best to avoid unnecessary troubles.

Meditation

(a meditation arising from Psalm 68:5,6)

The Father of orphans and a protector of widows;
This is our God in His holiness.

The liberator of prisoners and a home to the desolate;
This is our God in His justice.

The head of His army and a conqueror of His enemies;
This is our God in His might.

The healer of sicknesses and a guide to the blind;
This is our God in His mercy.

The leader of His people and an everlasting presence;
This is our God in His majesty.

The Saviour of the world and a lover of His people;
This is our God in His glory.

Bible Study - Galatians 3:1-9

¹ You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? You who have already seen Jesus Christ put on public display as one who has been crucified! ² The only thing I want to find out from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? ⁴ Have you endured so much for nothing? (if it really was for nothing) ⁵ Well then, does the One who supplies you with the Spirit and works miracles among you do this because of your doing the law, or because of your belief in what you heard? ⁶ Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness,' ⁷ know then that it is people who believe who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, announced the gospel in advance to Abraham; 'All the Gentiles will be blessed in you.' ⁹ So then, those who believe are blessed together with Abraham, the man of faith.

Review

Paul was deeply distressed that the churches he had helped found in Galatia had been infiltrated by people who wanted Gentile Christians to show allegiance to Jewish heritage by becoming circumcised and following all the revelation of the Law as given to Moses. He had fought such people throughout his ministry (see 2:11-21) and preached in a manner which warned his hearers about the dangers of allowing anyone to divert their faith away from Christ, and Christ alone (see 1:6-9). Still, Jewish opponents of his, who we call 'Judaisers', seemed to follow Paul around; and when he had founded a church and then gone on his way, they then began to work away at changing people's minds about the merits of obedience to the ancient laws of Moses. Paul was furious that this had happened at some of the most important of the churches he founded in Galatia on his first missionary journey (Acts 13,14); 'You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?' (3:1).

Previously, when Paul had dealt with a similar situation by confronting Peter at Antioch, the passions roused led him to speak about the Christian faith in a new and vibrant manner (see 2:11-

21). Now, in his letter, Paul addressed the Galatians directly about the fatal problem of accepting the teaching of Judaisers, and with his passions aroused yet again, he wrote in defence of the true Christian faith in powerful new ways which had a very important impact on the life of the early church and Paul's own future ministry. Although you will not necessarily find in this passage today some of the 'purple passages' of faith which marked yesterday's passage, you will find that Paul's arguments have become essential pillars of Christian theology.

Particularly important in Paul's argument was the contrast he drew between 'the Spirit' (3:2,3,5) and either 'the law' (3:2,5) or 'the flesh' (3:3). This is the first time that Paul has introduced the subject of the Holy Spirit into the letter, and it is very important because as he continues in the letter, the Spirit becomes an important theme. It is generally well known that the famous 'Fruit of the Spirit' are found in Galatians (5:22f.). However, the inspiration of this passage is that Paul contrasts the Spirit with either the law or the flesh, and this contrast is something which we find in nearly all of Paul's later letters, and in particular, the letter to the Romans (e.g. Romans 8:4f.). Paul appears to use 'law' and 'flesh' as meaning the same thing, and it is possible that by doing so he was being somewhat caustic. After all, the 'law' required Jewish males to bear a mark in their 'flesh' (circumcision), and this was what the fuss was all about in the first place, because it is what the Judaisers taught!

The other great feature of this passage is Paul's teaching about the faith of Abraham. He identified from Scripture the fact that faith was essential to Abraham's relationship with God (3:6f. see Genesis 15:6) before circumcision was required (Genesis 17f.) and long before the Law (Exodus 20f.); this makes 'faith' inherently more important than either circumcision or the law! This argument also proves that God has been faithful over thousands of years of life. He always responds to faith, and this does not change.

Almost everything before this point in Paul's letter to the Galatians has been introduction, and largely about Paul justifying his attack on Judaisers. However, in rebutting their teaching which had become like a perennial weed within the church, Paul develops some of the most important foundations of Christian theology. In the passage we read yesterday, he gives a detailed description of salvation by faith in Christ alone (2:19,20), and in today's passage, he describes the work of the Spirit and contrasts it with the works of the law and of 'flesh', he proves that faith is more important than law, and he proves the faithfulness of God across the centuries. All this is fundamental to Christian theology.

Going Deeper

Although it is possible to read this passage and understand roughly what Paul was trying to say, there are many details we have not yet addressed, such as what it means when Paul says Jesus was on 'public display' (3:1), or indeed, what he means by contrasting the Spirit and the flesh. In order to cover all these features, we will look at this verse by verse.

Verse 1 – 'foolish Galatians'

Paul was not only very upset to hear that the Galatian churches had succumbed to Judaisers, he was furious, and he called them 'foolish' (also meaning 'stupid' or 'ignorant'). Paul doubtless felt the pain of finding out that these preachers had overturned the good things he had taught, by promoting Judaism. The main argument he employed against these people was that the truth about God was to be found only through Jesus Christ His Son, which required faith. However, the Judaisers appealed to law, which by definition required human effort to do what it required.

Paul was at a loss as to why people would not accept this essential point. True religion was bound up with God and what He had done, not the human effort required to achieve a set of pre-existent rules, however good they were. Paul displayed his frustration by chastising the Galatian churches with the astonishing words; 'You who have already seen Jesus Christ put on public display as one who has been crucified!' Paul seems to be saying, 'Surely the crucifixion of Christ, which people have seen and you confess, is the proof that faith is based on what God does and not what people do! Why don't you see that the law has nothing to do with it?'

Verse 2 – how did you receive the Spirit?

Now in the Early Church, it was generally accepted and taught by Paul (see Acts 19:1-7) that the evidence of the risen Christ in the life of the believer was provided by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it was expected that special gifts and signs accompanied the coming of the Spirit (as in 1 Cor 12), such as 'speaking in tongues'. This would undoubtedly have been part of Paul's teaching when the churches of Galatia had been founded. His question to them was therefore straightforward; 'Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law or by believing what you heard?' It was a rhetorical question of course, because the church knew that the answer was 'by believing'.

By asking this, however, Paul contrasted the law and faith, both of which are human responses to God. However, keeping the law consists of human effort to control life according to what God has commanded; something which required a great deal of effort. However, believing in Jesus Christ, or having faith was not a matter of effort, but of placing ones hopes in God alone. The faith which Paul speaks of here is rather like the faith of those people who came to Jesus believing that touching Him would heal them (such as the woman with a haemorrhage – Matt 9:20f.). For Paul, such faith was integrally linked with the work of the Spirit.

Verses 3&4 – the contrast of Spirit and flesh

Paul went on to say 'Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?' and in this, he contrasts the Spirit not with the law, as in the last verse, but with the 'flesh'. We are used to reading phrases like this in Paul's letters (see above), but this is the first place (chronologically) where Paul uses the word, so why does Paul use the word 'flesh' and what does it mean? It is possible that Paul used it because it was a caustic way of referring to circumcision, otherwise described by the people of the day as a 'mark of the flesh'. It seemed ludicrous to Paul that after the Jewish people had followed the ways of the flesh (that is, circumcision and obedience to the law) for two thousand years and failed to find salvation through it, that Gentiles should now accept it! They had received the Spirit of God through their faith in Jesus, so why did they think they needed anything more?

When Paul adds the question 'Have you endured so much for nothing?' it is not immediately clear what he means. But if you read Acts 13 and 14, you will find that the Galatian churches were founded in the midst of great controversy, and Paul and Barnabas had to work very hard to stave off physical attacks on the young church from local Jews who were jealous of Paul's preaching. These young churches had probably suffered a great deal from persecution by Jews in their infancy, so it was somewhat paradoxical that they were now beginning to accept Jewish beliefs! Paul's question was designed to remind the Galatians of the sacrifices they had made for their right to be free in Christ and receive the Spirit.

Verse 5 – the manifestations of the Spirit

In verse 5, Paul begins by speaking about God. It was essential for his argument that everything he said was rooted in God and in Scripture, so that it could not be said that his teaching was merely his own construction. Before looking at the question Paul asked in verse 5, it is worth noting that the beginning of the verse is in fact a description of God, as 'the One who supplies you with the Spirit and works miracles among you.' What a wonderful way of talking about God! Some translations of the Bible emphasise this by adding God's name to the text (it is not there in the Greek), to say 'the God who supplies you with the Spirit ...' The Spirit of course, is God's own Spirit, not just one aspect of God (associated with 'gifts' or 'fruit!'), or as John put it in his Gospel 'God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in Spirit.' (John 4:24). Here, though, Paul appealed to the Galatians to recall the wondrous work of the Spirit and the miracles which accompanied it. This was what the life of the church should be about, not theological arguments about the law and circumcision!

The question Paul asked the Galatians was whether God gave them the Spirit because of 'belief in what you have heard' or because of their 'doing the law'. This is the same as the question Paul asked in verse 2, and is repeated for emphasis. The Galatians knew that they had the blessings of the Spirit because of their faith in Jesus. Nothing else needed to be said; they had a choice, the Spirit or the flesh? Christian faith could not co-exist with both.

Verse 6&7 – 'people who believe are sons of Abraham'

Paul goes on to give a simple Biblical explanation for his stance that faith is more important than the law in our relationship with God, using the life of Abraham. Any study of Genesis will easily show that when God gradually revealed Himself to Abraham. He firstly made promises to Abraham and required nothing of him except that he be obedient and go to Canaan (Gen 12:1-3), and this is what Abraham did. What is interesting is what comes next. When Abraham questioned God about His commitment to His side of the promise (to enable Abraham and Sarah to have children), God reiterated His promise that Abraham would have children, and Abraham let go of his doubts and accepted God's promises (Gen 15:6). God accepted Abraham's faith and 'counted it to him as 'righteousness'. Being a story from the very earliest chapters of Genesis, this comes before any mention of circumcision (Genesis 17) or the Law (Exodus 20).

The remarkable step which Paul takes in verse 7 is to generalise Abraham's experience and say that the faith God required of Abraham is no different from the faith He requires of us now. It is 'people who believe who are sons of Abraham', and these people who are the true Israel!