

## **Paul's Good News about God as Seen in Galatians**

By Dallas Willard

The Apostle Paul concerns himself with three major arguments in his epistle to the Galatians: 1) a defense of his authority and independence as an apostle, 2) a defense of the truth of his message of justification by faith, and 3) a defense of the liberty found in justification by faith.

The whole of Paul's influence and teaching to the peoples of Galatia had been endangered by Judaizers who had sought to throw disrepute upon his teachings by seeking to discredit his authority as an apostle. Hence Paul includes in his greeting to the churches a terse declaration of his apostleship. He claims to derive his right to be heard directly from Jesus Christ and not from men. He denounces their turning to a gospel of a different kind and mocks its inferior quality (v. 7). He argues that his gospel, unlike theirs, was not the result of men's teaching but of God's. One evidence of this was that Paul did not seek to please men but God (v. 10).

To further demonstrate that his gospel was not a result of the teaching of men, Paul gives a brief history of his past life. His life under Judaism was diametrically opposed to his teaching. His actions and emotional make-up were in opposition to his present life. His past could in no way account for the present. Upon his direct confrontation with the living Christ and subsequent conversion, Paul did not go to Jerusalem to be taught by the Apostles but spent three years in Arabia. Since the trip to Arabia replaces the teaching of the Apostles, Paul thereby implies that these three years were spent being taught by Christ. After this period of training Paul made a hurried visit to Jerusalem and saw only Peter and James, not to confer with them on doctrinal matters again for fourteen years.

In chapter two, a slight shift in Paul's argument is noted. He continues to show how little he is indebted to the Apostles for his gospel, indeed, when conferring with them it is found that the Apostles agree with him and if any were found inconsistent it was not Paul but Peter. Thus Paul not only shows his lack of indebtedness to the Apostles but his equality with them. In addition it is significant to note the carefully chosen examples Paul uses to prove his point. Paul brought Titus with him to Jerusalem but absolutely refused to give in to the Judaizers who wanted Titus to be circumcised. Next, Paul cites the results of the Jerusalem council which placed no burden upon the Gentile believers in regard to the Jewish ritual. Finally, Paul cites the inconsistency of Peter at Antioch where, through pressure by Judaizers from

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James, he leaves the Gentile fellowship – an act which in essence declares that faith in Christ is imperfect without the righteousness of the law. *Paul opposes Peter not as vacillating under pressure but as sinning against the light.* Each example is cited to emphasize what Paul is next to argue – namely, that justification is by faith alone (*sola fide*) and that all attempts to require cultural trappings as “necessary” destroy the good news of the gospel. To mistake the “vessel” for the “treasure” spells doom. Paul argues for a gospel without cultural presuppositions of any kind because he saw that God loves all men/women equally and requires only that people do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God *plus nothing*.

Paul concludes the rebuke given to Peter and at the same time introduces the second major concern of epistle. Emphatically he states that submission to the righteousness of the law produces death; for no man can keep the law. This is contrasted to submission to be crucified with Christ which produces life. In essence the law brings death; redemption by the cross, life.

However, it was not sufficient for Paul to show his authority as an Apostle. The Judaizers claimed to have the Old Testament Scriptures on their side and thus, after a brief appeal to their personal experience, he calls the Scriptures to his defense.

Paul appeals directly to Abraham as the proof for his case. Abraham “believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” (v. 3:6) Thus, argues Paul, only men of faith can be called of Abraham. Foreseeing this, the prophecy was that through Abraham the Gentile nations shall be blessed. “So then those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith.” (v. 3:9)

The blessing of faith is then contrasted with the curse of the law. The law is a curse simply because its way of salvation, perfect obedience, is impossible.

Further Paul argues that the matter of prime importance is not the law but the promise given to Abraham. A simple example is given: when a will is made and ratified it is not later cancelled. So it is with the promise given to Abraham of which Christ is the fulfillment. The law which came four hundred thirty years after the promise was not given to annul the promise. The law is

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inferior to the promise in both time and origin. (Ordained by angels through Moses: 3:19, 20.)

Then, what is the purpose of the law? The law is not opposed to the promise of God but is rather our custodian to bring us to Christ. But now that we have faith, we are no longer under a custodian's care.

Another analogy is presented. The child though destined to be an heir remains under tutors as long as he is a child, and thus Paul describes the era of the law as the era of tutelage. But Christ has done away with the need of a tutor and hence Paul rebukes them for going back to the tutor when they could have Christ.

At this point (4:11-20), Paul leaves his carefully thought out logic to make a tender appeal to their treatment of him when among them. His language is softened as he speaks of them as "brethren" and "my little children." He reminds them of their affection for him when he was among them even during his "trial in the flesh." The anxiety he holds for them is as one experiencing birth pains. They were not his enemies then, why are they now?

Returning to his original argument, Paul illustrates from Hagar and Sarah. One was born according to the flesh, the other according to the promise. Thus Hagar represents the covenant of Sinai and Sarah, the heavenly Jerusalem. Just as the one born according to the flesh persecuted the true Israel which is born according to Spirit, so now the Judaizers persecute the true Israel which is born according to the Spirit. (Note that "flesh" here refers simply to the natural human energies—Abraham needed no divine assistance to beget Ishmael upon Hagar, but the beget Isaac upon Sarah was totally beyond him. To operate in the flesh means to depend upon human energy and ability.)

In chapter five and six, the third major argument is presented – namely that this liberty from the law results in a holy life.

Again Paul emphasizes the essential dichotomy between seeking salvation by means of the law and by means of the faith in the finished work of Christ. To make the keeping of the law essential for salvation, the work of Christ is annulled. Therefore neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any matter.

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For Paul, the fulfillment of the law in practice is not found in circumcision or other ritual but in love. This is what is meant by living and working in the Spirit. Christian freedom from the law cannot lead to immorality because this would lead to a walk in the flesh which is diametrically opposed to the Spirit. Those who belong to Christ cannot walk in the flesh because the flesh has been crucified.

After destroying the basis for a Christian to live under the Jewish law, Paul calls the Christian to holiness by submission to the "law of Christ" (6:2), that is, to evidence concern for one another.

Several practical suggestions are given to show what it means to walk in the Spirit after which Paul warns them that God is not mocked but that He knows the kind of life each one lives.

Final warning is given against the Judaizers. Paul points out that their motive is to glory in gaining another convert (evangelical brownie points) while his glory stands only with the cross of Christ.

Significantly, Paul draws the epistle to a close by pronouncing a prayer of blessing upon those who live by the rule of the Spirit whom he calls "the Israel of God" (6:16). A final appeal is given to do what he asks because of all he has suffered. In keeping with the entire thrust of the epistle, the formal benediction emphasizes the blessing upon their "spirit" rather than the more traditional "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with *you all*."

In summary, Paul opposed the Judaizers in the same way Jesus opposed the culture religion of the Pharisees. Compare these words of Paul and Jesus: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." Paul (Gal. 5:1). "You compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves." Jesus (Matt. 23:15).