

SOLELY BY FAITH --- THE TESTIMONY OF EXPERIENCE

Galatians 3:1-5

To stop walking by faith and to begin walking by works is foolish! The wise course of action is always to depend upon the provisions and promises of the God of grace. It is so foolish that those doing it are acting as if they are under some kind of evil spell, as if they are bewitched. At least this was the reaction of the Apostle Paul to the actions of his friend in Galatia. Even though they had received salvation by faith in Christ, they were now attempting to perfect their Christian life through their own misguided efforts. Before us we have the response of Paul!

With this paragraph the Apostle opens the doctrinal section of this letter. As we have noticed already, the first two chapters are personal, and the last two are practical, with the middle two setting forth doctrine. This is not to suggest that the doctrinal section is not personal or practical. The continued use of the personal pronouns make it clear that we are still dealing with some very personal things. And nothing could be more practical than a right view of Christian truth.

In this paragraph the Apostle appeals to the experience of the Galatians. While you cannot base doctrine on experience alone, neither can you ignore experience. In the next paragraph he will appeal to Scripture. Whenever you have experience and Scripture in agreement, you are moving on solid doctrinal grounds. The problem with the false teachings of the Judaizers was that they did not even measure up to the common experience of the people of God. The experience of the people of God and the doctrines taught by these false teachers contradicted each other. Their experience said that the Christian life is solely by faith from beginning to end. Paul demonstrates this with a series of probing questions concerning their experience. Let's examine our experience in light of these questions.

I. OUR EXPERIENCE SAYS THAT SALVATION IS SOLELY BY FAITH.

Salvation has come to the Galatians when they responded to the preaching of Paul. Here he reminds them of the basic substance of His preaching to them. "Before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you." When Paul had been in their midst, he has placarded the Crucified Christ among them. He had been faithful to declare to them that God had provided for the remission of their sins through the death of His Son upon the Roman tree. He had told the story so vividly that it was like he had drawn a picture of that historic event. When they read this message, they responded in faith.

"This only would I learn of you, received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" How they received the gift of the Holy Spirit is important. The presence of the Holy Spirit as a gift in their lives is the supreme

evidence of the divine favor. When a man commits his life to Christ in trust and faith, God commits Himself to this man by giving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul wants them to tell him when God granted this gift to them?

Did the gift of the Spirit come on the basis of their observing and doing the works of the law? Did these Gentile believers receive the Holy Spirit when they submitted to law circumcision and began to observe the sabbaths and Jewish dietary laws? When did these Jewish Christians receive the Holy Spirit? Was it when they were faithfully observing the laws of Moses, or was it when they turned their faces away from Moses toward the Lord Jesus Christ, the crucified One. Paul presents the only two possibilities in this statement. It must have been either on the basis of their diligent observance of the law, or on the basis of their responding to the Gospel message in faith. Even Paul does not give their answer, the implied answer is obvious. Each of them was exactly like the Gentile, Cornelius. The Holy Spirit came into their lives when they placed their faith in the Lord Jesus and in His work on their behalf on the Cross. In no way could they claim to have merited this precious gift by their works, even though they might have been works performed in obedience to some law of God.

This passage reflects a truth stated many times in the New Testament letters. The Holy Spirit dwelling in a life is supreme evidence that the life is in the favor of God, that the person has been saved. The Holy Spirit bears witness with the spirit of man, that man might be sure of his relationship to God. But this gift is given to men by God only when man comes to the place that he readily acknowledges that he has no claim upon God, that he can do nothing to deserve the goodness of God, and that he clings to the Crucified One as his only hope of eternal life. The only people in this world who have any assurance of salvation are those who know that salvation is solely by faith. If salvation is given on the basis of works to any degree, there can never be any real assurance of salvation. My testimony agrees with that of the experience of the Galatians. The Holy Spirit came into my heart when I placed my faith in Jesus Christ, and in Him alone for salvation. Does yours agree with this?

II. OUR EXPERIENCE SAYS THAT SANCTIFICATION IS SOLELY BY FAITH.

By "salvation" I was basically referring to "justification". Obviously salvation is a broader word, and actually includes "sanctification". Paul comes to this in the next verse. "Are ye so foolish?" That is rather bold speaking, but it was reflection of how deeply Paul felt about the action his friends had taken. What they were doing did not make sense. "Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" "Having begun" takes them back to the inception of their Christian lives. Already he has reminded them that their whole Christian life found its beginning in the day in which they placed their faith in Christ, and God graciously bestowed upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit. But what about now?

"Perfect" or "made perfect" means to complete, to bring to maturity. It means more than just to bring to an end; it means to consummate. How will that which has begun in their Christian life be brought to its logical end? Will it be by the inspiration and enablement of the indwelling Holy Spirit, or will it be by the dedicated efforts of the flesh. "Flesh" in this verse is a reference to human nature apart from divine enablement and influence. It means "self", The Galatians were being taught by the false teachers that it was up to them to finish what God had begun in them., They could make of themselves mature full-grown Christians by careful observance of the Jewish rules. Circumcision would be a first step toward maturity, then keeping the Jewish feast days would help, being careful about what you ate would be also helpful. But it all depended upon you. You must do it for yourself, or it would not be done.

Suppose I raise the question with you. How does a man become a mature Christian? Would you point to Bible Study, memorization of Scripture, prayer, witnessing, separation from the world, and service? While you have pointed me to some good things, let me warn you that careful observance of all those things might not produce anything more than a good repulsive Pharisee of the first order. In fact the Pharisees that Jesus condemned so often did most of these things with real discipline and consistency. The truth is that you and I cannot of our own effort produce in ourselves Christian maturity. The sooner you realize that you cannot make of yourself a good Christian, the quicker you will become a mature Christian. Such maturity, such perfecting of the Christian life, comes as we depend upon the finished work of the Risen Christ, and allow His Holy Spirit to work in our lives. It is solely by faith. The Holy Spirit works in us as we trust in Christ --- not on the basis of our meriting His work in us by the works of the flesh.

This truth may seem confusing to some of you, but maybe you need to be confused. Your prayers, Bible Study, and religious works do not have any merit before God. The Holy Spirit does not work in your life only as you merit His work in your life. He works in your life only as you trust in the merits of the Lord Jesus. It is solely by faith in the Crucified One.

III. OUR EXPERIENCE SAYS THAT OUR SERVICE IS SOLELY BY FAITH.

After a reminder of their sufferings, Paul comes to the question of the Holy Spirit's power being expressed through their service. "He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" God is the one who "ministereth" the Spirit. "Ministereth" is a beautiful word in this context. The word underlines the generosity of God. The idea in the word is that of giving, to supply generously. The point of the question is "on what basis does God supply the Holy

Spirit to empower us in His service?" "Worketh miracles" is a reference to those supernatural enablements that always mark the service of the people of God. Some of these enablements may be more spectacular than others, but enablement to perform any service for God is supernatural, it is a special work of the Holy Spirit. But who knows the power of the Holy Spirit in His service?

Paul presents two possibilities. Was it on the basis of their obedience to the law or the works of the law? Actually the Jewish members of the Christian community had been keeping the law a long time, and attempting to do religious things, before they became Christians, but not once during that time had they ever known the power of the Holy Spirit as special endowment for service.

Likewise in the experience of the Gentile Christians. They had been experiencing the power of God in their Christian service long before these new teachers ever told them they should submit themselves to these legal regulations. Indeed, the power had come upon them as they had heard the Gospel of Christ dying for their sins, and had responded to that work of His in faith. The power had come solely by faith. At the time they had not had any earthly idea that they might earn the power by observing rules and regulations.

This has not changed. God is still generous with the power of His Holy Spirit, but He is particular about those upon whom He pours out this power. He does it only upon those who are trusting in Christ, and in Him alone. But does not the power usually come upon those who are faithful in Bible Study and prayer? Does it not come upon those who are practicing certain spiritual disciplines? Yes! This is true! But this is not true because these have merited the power through their spiritual discipline. It is rather that through the study of the Word and earnest prayer faith has a way of growing. Those who practice these disciplines are those most likely to be leaning upon the Lord Jesus in faith. It is to those leaning upon the Lord Jesus, and not on themselves, that the power is given. So even our service for the Lord, or better, the power for our service comes by faith alone.

CONCLUSION:

This testimony of the first century Christians is exactly like mine. Everything God has done for me has been when I came to the end of myself, when I acknowledged my own inability and unworthiness, and trusted in Christ alone. It is solely by faith.

So wherever you are in the Christian journey, your need is to trust in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.