

“O Foolish Galatians”

January 30, 2011

Text: Galatians 3:1-5

A few years ago I had a minor driving accident in Flagstaff.

It was a cold winter day, & the streets were covered w/ snow/ice.

I was coming out of Home Depot’s parking lot, moving only 2-3 miles per hour, when I noticed a car approaching on the street that runs in front of that store.

There was ice on the driveway exit ramp, and as I started into its downward slope, my car began to slide.

I tried to avoid the car coming up the street, by pressing on the brake, but even my ABS brakes wouldn’t hold the road.

And no matter how I turned the steering wheel, my car just kept moving straight ahead, right into the lane of the oncoming car, which I ultimately sideswiped.

The thing I remember most about this slow motion collision, was my feeling of utter helplessness.

The forces of physics had been set in motion, they were slowly being played out in front of my eyes, & I could do nothing to alter the inevitable outcome.

This was an event over which I had no control at all, the results of which I would certainly feel.

Our human nature likes to feel it’s in control of our lives.

So when Scripture teaches us that our soul’s salvation is outside of our control and completely in God’s hands—dependent on His grace, not our own moral efforts—it’s very difficult for us to accept.

But there it is, the only option God has given us.

We must learn to completely entrust our souls to Him/His-grace.

It’s not unusual for Xns who know they have been saved by God’s grace through faith in the atoning death of X, to stop relying on God’s grace, even after their conversion.

In essence, we say to God, “Thank You for saving me. Now I’ll take over, keep myself saved, and mature myself through disciplined obedience to Your Law, all on my own.”

That’s exactly what the Xns of Galatia had done, which is why Paul responds to them in his letter, w/ love but w/ frustration, saying “*O foolish Galatians!*”

When you/I start thinking (even subconsciously) that our spiritual wellbeing and growth in the faith, depends on us and the religious things we do, we need to sit down, take a deep breath, and say to ourselves, “God’s

grace alone has brought me this far, and it alone will ultimately take me home to heaven.”

At that point, we are fighting the battle of self-righteous legalism within ourselves.

Paul is going to teach the Galatians about their continuing dependence on God’s grace, but he’s going to do it by using the Socratic method of asking them questions.

In our text (Gal 3:1-5), Paul asks 5 questions...

*** Question #1—Have you forgotten Jesus’ death?**

We find this question in=>

[Galatians 3:1]=> “*You foolish Galatians [more accurately: “O foolish Galatians”], who has **bewitched** you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?”*

The Galatian Xns had acted foolishly—not stupidly, foolishly.

Their problem wasn’t a lack of intelligence, but a negligence of the pure doctrine of salvation through the atoning death of X.

Acts 13:38-39 says Paul had taught them=> “*Through Him [X] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, / and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.*”

They had believed this, had become saved, and then had let the Judaizers convince them, that they also needed to obey Moses’ Law for their salvation.

That was foolishness! Paul had taught them better than that.

Paul asks, “Who has bewitched you?”

This is a very interesting word that refers to a witch’s casting an evil eye on someone, and thus gaining/exerting control over him.

Paul knows that can’t really happen, but it was a popular myth back then, based on ignorance/superstition.

But “*bewitched*” was an especially appropriate word to use here, because it was thought that the solution to the curse of the evil eye, was to stop looking at the witch’s face.

The Judaizers had captured the attention of Galatian Xns, as if they’d cast an evil eye on them;

The Galatians should have stopped looking/listening to them, but they’d kept listening, transfixed.

The word “*who*” is singular, prob. pointing to Satan, the real power behind the spell of the Judaizers’ false teaching.

The Galatians hadn't lost their salvation, just the joy/freedom of salvation, by trading their reliance on God's grace, for the uncertainty/bondage of faith in the Law.

Satan always tries to persuade men to trust themselves, not God.

It started with his asking Eve, "*Indeed, has God said...*" (Gen 3:1).

And Satan has been tempting men/women ever since then to trust their own judgment over God's wisdom.

The Galatians had started trusting their own fleshly wisdom and their "achievement of righteousness" through obedience to the Law.

This was disappointing to Paul, because he had taught them to trust God's grace, based on the atoning death of Jesus.

He had publicly (or graphically) portrayed to them the crucified X=> the whole doctrine of salvation thru X's sufferings/death.

Paul had painted a word-picture of X's crucifixion, that was so vivid, they could almost hear the ringing of the nails being hammered into Jesus' hands/feet.

They could prob. have said, "We see Jesus hanging there on that cross, in our place!"

I wish I could describe X's death for you as powerfully as Paul must have, for the Galatians.

I wish I could make you feel as if you were standing right there at the foot of the cross, seeing Him look down at you, hearing Him say your name & tell you, "I'm giving Myself for you personally, because of My love for you."

I wish I could cause you to place yourself in that scene, kneeling at His feet in reverent gratitude and adoration.

X's death is just as efficacious for your sin right now, as it was the Galatians, and it was just as efficacious for them as it was for John, who had actually stood there at the cross w/ X's mother, Mary.

If you want to feel the assurance of your salvation, take your eyes off your own good deeds, & place them on X.

Take your hands off the steering wheel of your salvation, and let Him drive it.

It might be a little unnerving to have to deal with the fact that you're not in control like that, but it's the only way to become justified before God.

Say with Paul (II Tim 1:12)=> "*I know whom I have believed [not I know about Him, but I know Him personally] and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.*"

Set aside the Law, & all other religious rituals/systems, & look to Jesus Himself, & the power, of the fellowship, of his sufferings on that cross.

Focus on the fact that He died as the Sacrifice chosen by God, to atone for your sin, satisfying the justice of God, for which you would otherwise have had to die, yourself.

Your sins were laid on Him, and God's righteousness was imputed to you, all as acts of His grace.

Whenever you are tempted to do something to make yourself more spiritually secure, remind yourself that you're saved—& that you remained saved—by God's grace.

Remind yourself that Jesus took your place on that cross, that He graciously died for you—out of love for you—and that alone is enough to save your soul.

*** Question #2—How did you receive the Spirit?**

Obviously, these are rhetorical questions.

Paul knows the answers, but he wants to make the Galatians think about them so they too will reach the correct conclusions.

The H.S. is the greatest of all God's gifts to a man.

- * He is the seal of God's favor, on a believer's heart.
- * He is the believer's resident truth-Teacher.
- * He intercedes for us in prayer, w/ unutterable groanings.
- * When He reigns in our hearts, we manifest His nature.
- * The Spirit washes away our sins, and renews our spirits.

So the indwelling of the Spirit is synonymous with salvation from sin/guilt/condemnation.

- * He assures our hearts that God has adopted us, making us His own children.

Rom 8:16=> *“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”*

Paul's question is how the Galatians had received the H.S., which is the same as asking them how they were saved.

[Verse 2]=> *“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”*

Again, Paul is using questions to make the Galatians think thru the implications of their own experience, and to draw the right conclusions from it.

He assumes that they've all been indwelt by the H.S.

He asks them to think about the cause of the Spirit's indwelling—was it their obedience to the Law, or was it their listening to the gospel and believing in it?

If they gave it any thought, they'd have to answer that the H.S. came into their lives when they believed.

They hadn't "earned" the gift of the Spirit, by becoming circumcised or adhering to Mosaic Law.

In fact, because they were Gentiles, they prob. hadn't even learned about such things yet, when they'd believed.

That would come later, when the Judaizers entered the picture.

Q: How would they have known for sure when the H.S. had entered their lives?

Because miraculous sign-gifts were still operating in the Church at that time.

Some of the Galatian believers had prob. exercised such supernatural gifts as healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, and the ability to understand/speak languages they had never learned.

They had suddenly discovered that they had received these supernatural abilities from the H.S.

Moreover, they undoubtedly saw major changes in one another's lives, as the fruit of the Spirit began to manifest itself=>
love/joy/peace/patience/kindness
goodness/faithfulness/gentleness/self-control.

Suppose Paul were to ask you, when you first noticed evidence of the H.S. in your life=>

* Was it while you were still working so hard to save yourself with your own goodness?

No, it was when you simply heard & believed in Jesus, for the washing of regeneration, & the renewing of the Spirit.

* Did you gain assurance of your salvation while you still trusted in your obedience of the Law to save you?

No, Rom 8:16 says the Spirit assures us by bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and He wasn't even in your life yet until you believed in X.

* Were you able to truly commune with God when the best you had to offer Him was your own human goodness?

No, only when you heard/believed the gospel, did the Spirit transform/indwell you, begin to intercede for you with the Father.

* Were you spiritually empowered for fruitful ministry by the works of the Law;

Or by hearing with faith?

Ans: Before you heard/believed-in X, you had no spiritual `power because you had no spiritual gift, & that was because you were neither saved/indwelt by the Spirit.

The H.S. is received by a person's "hearing with faith."

That means hearing the gospel in a personal way, not just philosophically— hearing about salvation from sin/guilt, & knowing it's important to you, because of *your* sin/guilt.

It's hearing with your mind as the H.S. drives the message home to your heart, convincing you that it comes from God Himself & requires your careful/reverent attention.

It's hearing that leads to such strong persuasion of its truthfulness that you know intuitively, Jesus is the answer to your sin problem, & you must have Him in your life, to solve it.

That He is able to pardon your sins, being God, and yet He, being a man like you, He has the right to do so, because He loved you enough to die for your sins, in your stead.

*** Question #3—How are you being perfected?**

This is Paul's next question to the Galatians, and it's found in=>

[Verse 3]=> "*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being **perfected** [spiritually completed] by the flesh?"*

As we just saw, we are saved by hearing that Jesus saves sinners, & then placing our faith in Him to save us.

So what sense would it make, once we're saved, to start trusting our own weak, fleshly nature to sanctify us, mature/perfect us, or even just to keep us saved? None.

The Spirit's presence in our lives has produced spiritual rebirth, forgiveness of sin, spiritual freedom, joy, assurance, power against Satan, and answered prayer.

Why would we now switch to faith in ourselves & our powerless flesh, to complete what the H.S. has begun?

To go back to that fruitless old strategy (as the Galatians had) would be utterly foolish.

But to avoid getting ahead of ourselves, let's make sure we know what it means to have "*begun by the Spirit.*"

First, it means that only the Spirit can save us, by His transforming power.

* No man can do so, by baptizing us while we're infants.

* Nor can we save ourselves—we have neither the ability to do so, nor the will to leave behind the sins we love, & which have become so much a part of us.

Only God's sovereign Spirit can save a person, which is why Jesus said in John 3:8=>

*"The wind [pneuma] blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is **born of the Spirit** [pneuma]."*

The H.S. is like the wind in that they are both unpredictable and they are both uncontrollable.

How does the H.S. save a person?

He begins by regenerating that person's soul.

Someone: Don't you mean He begins by convicting him of sin?

No, what would be the point of that, if the man is so dead in his sin, that he couldn't/wouldn't even sense the Spirit's conviction?

Before man can become aware of his sin's deep wickedness & his need for a Savior, his dead spirit must be enlivened.

Because the Spirit is as sovereignly unpredictable as the wind, no one can tell how/when He may bring a soul to life, enabling it to sense the grave spiritual realities of its own condition.

It may be in the middle of a sermon, a Xn book/tape, or a prayer.

It may be in the middle of a conversation, or, as in my case, in the middle of a hymn.

Suddenly, that person is no longer dead to his sin.

Before, he might have known about sin on an intellectual level, or even that he was a sinner.

Now he feels it & even mourns/grieves over it, as the Spirit convicts his heart of sin/righteousness/judgment.

For the first time he has a capacity for spiritual understanding.

He begins to think new thoughts, and to feel desires he's never had before, because the Spirit of God has now breathed life into him, making him a spiritual man.

The central thought preoccupying his mind at this point is "I am a sinner," & he feels the crushing weight of his sin.

It has been there all along.

But his conscience has never sensed it like this before.

Next, the Spirit teaches him that he cannot save himself.

The old notion that he could do so, by his own innate goodness falls to the ground & dies before his eyes.

With it, goes the assumption that he could repent/believe whenever he was ready to do so.

Now he says, "I can do nothing on my own," as his arrogant old self-assurance breathes its last too.

That's what Paul was talking about in Gal 2:19=> "*Through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God.*"

This newly-repentant sinner cries out to God, "Lord, I am dead & helpless; if You don't save me, I will be damned/hopeless."

Now the Spirit witnesses to the person's heart that Jesus is the One who can save him, & he cries out for X to do so.

The Spirit gives him the faith to believe in X, and applies Jesus' cleansing blood to his soul.

The person lays hold of X by the faith God has given him, casting his eternal fate wholly on the righteousness of Jesus X.

And now he begins to experience the joyous newness of his eternal life, in X.

One would think that no one would ever want to leave this newfound security of soul that is found only in the grace of God.

But Paul's question to the Galatians ("*Having begun by the Spirit, are you being perfected by the flesh?*") confirms what we know from experience ourselves=> We do stop relying on God's grace, from time to time.

In fact, it's a constant fight for us, to stop thinking/acting foolishly, to set aside our foolish/fleshly self-confidence, and to re-embrace again/again/again our total dependence on God's grace, & X's death. Every Xn has, at certain times, had to groan over his own foolishness, & remind himself afresh that fleshly weakness makes all his good moral resolves useless/meaningless, apart from the Spirit's power.

So how are we being perfected?

By the Spirit of God, and certainly not by our flesh!

*** Question #4—Did you suffer in vain?**

Again remember that, although Paul has gotten tough by calling the Galatians "foolish," his general method is to gently lead them to the right conclusions, by asking them poignant questions.

[Verse 4]=> "*Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?*" (Paul is hoping it really wasn't).

NT scholars debate whether the word "*suffer*" actually means to suffer persecution, or merely "to experience" something.

It can be translated either way.

* Those who argue that it means "to experience," point out that there's no direct NT evidence of a Galatian persecution.

They believe that Paul is just summing up what he has just said=>

I.e., “You know that it’s because of Jesus’ atoning death that you were saved, indwelt by the Spirit, and are being perfected by the power of the Spirit;

“So why haven’t these experiences taught you that Jewish legalism is the opposite of the truth of the gospel?”

* On the other hand, those who translate the word “*to suffer*,” answer that, although the NT doesn’t specifically document a persecution of Galatia’s Xns, there’s good reason to believe there actually was one=>

* Paul had prepared them for it.

In Acts 14:22, we read that he warned the Galatian churches that=> “*Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*”

* Paul himself had suffered fierce persecution, from the Jews of Galatia, even being left for dead at 1 point.

* Xn converts both to the east, & to the west of Galatia suffered persecution, so the Galatians may well have too.

If the Galatian Xns were indeed persecuted, Paul is asking=> “To what purpose did you suffer so much at the hands of the Jews, winning such wonderful victories as you stood true to the gospel, if now you are capitulating to the heresy of their theological cousins—the Judaizers?”

This just illustrates how easy it is for our flesh to stop trusting the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, and to agree w/ our enemies, that it makes good sense to trust ourselves instead;

Even if we have suffered persecution, for the truth in the past.

* **Question #5--Does God save through the Law or thru faith?**

This is essentially the same question Paul asked in verse 2, but with some notable differences?

* The question in verse 2 was stated in the past tense and focused on the Galatians’ own experience=> “*Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?*”

* The question in verse 5 is stated in the present tense, as an axiomatic truth, and it focuses on the works of God.

[Verse 5]=> “*Does He then [ouv—therefore], who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?*”

Having led the Galatians through this series of questions, engaging their minds by appealing to their own experiences, Paul now asks them to draw a conclusion.

In essence, the apostle is placing in their laps the whole question of whether God saves by grace through faith;

Or by the works of the Law (as the Judaizers had claimed).

Just to tip the scales toward a correct conclusion, he reminds them of the miracles they had witnessed.

* This may refer to the miracles performed by some of the Galatians themselves, who had the miraculous sign-gifts.

* On the other hand, it may refer to miracles God had worked through Paul, since 2 Cor 12:12 says the badge of a true apostle was signs/wonders/miracles.

In other words, Paul was saying, “Has God worked any miracles through the Judaizers lately, such as you have seen Him do through me, and possibly even some of yourselves, since you’ve been saved by faith in X?”

“*Provides*” means to provide in super-abundance, so the Galatians must have seen many such miracles.

The purpose of NT miracles was always to attest to God’s messengers and their message.

Paul worked miracles, the Judaizers didn’t, and that alone should have settled the issue of who to believe, & whose message was from God.

What is the most important application we find in this text?

That man is saved by the power of the H.S., as he trusts God’s grace alone to save him, based upon his faith in X’s atoning death.

The moment he starts adding anything of his own, instead of simply hearing with faith in the crucified X, & asking for His forgiveness, he trusts in himself, sets God’s grace aside, & preempts God’s saving work in his life.

I hope that, if you have never entrusted your soul to Jesus X, you’ll stand at the foot of His cross, inviting Him to take control of your life as your Savior/Lord, seeking His forgiveness, & surrender yourself to the work of His Spirit in your soul.