

EXEGESIS AND APPLICATION OF GALATIANS 3:1-5

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BY
JASON MORRISON
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EXEGESIS AND APPLICATION OF GALATIANS 3:1-6

Translation

¹ Oh, foolish Galatians! Who bewitched you? ^a Before whose eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed ^b as crucified. ² This is the only thing I desire to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit through works of the law or through hearing of faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, do you now finish in the flesh? ⁴ Have you suffered so many things for nothing—if indeed it really was for nothing? ⁵ So then, does He [God] supply you the Spirit and work miracles among you through works of the law or through hearing of faith?

Translation Notes

^a τῆ ἀληθείᾳ μὴ πείθεσθαι- (not to obey the truth) is added after ἐβάσκανεν (bewitched, or fascinated) by C D^c K L P Ψ Byz vg^{mss} syr^h goth eth ζ ND Dio.

^b ἐν ὑμῖν (among you) is added after προεγράφη (vividly portrayed, written) by D E F G K L Byz it^d it^g syr^h goth ζ ND Dio.

Historical Background: Author, Recipients, Date, Occasion and Purpose

The Apostle Paul is the undisputed author of this epistle. The opening in 1:1 introduces the author as Paul in his typical fashion. In addition it contains many features characteristic to Paul; and therefore together with Philipians and Corinthians it forms the

core of the most indisputable core of Pauline literature.¹

The recipients of the epistle are identified as Galatians; however there is debate as to whether they were Galatians in the political or ethnic sense. The term *Galatians* can refer either to ethnic Gauls, who lived primarily in the northern region of Asia Minor in Galatia proper, or it could refer to the entire Roman province of Galatia, which included cities located further to the south.² Though the arguments concerning each theory extend beyond the scope of this paper, I will give a quick outline of the main points for each.

The North Galatian theory would require a later date for the epistle. According to this theory, Paul could not have written the epistle until his second missionary journey after the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. The strongest arguments for the North Galatian theory include the original restriction for the term Galatia to the northern territory. A second argument concerns the similarity of subject matter between Galatians and Romans, which Paul wrote at a later date.³

The South Galatian theory calls for an earlier date of the epistle, just after Paul's first missionary journey, but before the Jerusalem council since he makes no mention of the council's decision in the letter. Arguments in favor of the South Galatian theory include the lack of any mention of the church council's decision in Acts 15. Paul would have likely used this information. Also the mention of Peter's vacillation (v.2:11) would likely not have occurred after the council meeting. Finally, some debate whether

¹ Alan R. Cole, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Galatians* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 29.

² William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 5.

³ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 345.

or not Paul actually visited any towns in the region of North Galatia during his second journey.⁴

The evidence point to the South Galatian theory as the most likely. Scholars holding to this theory place the time of writing as early as AD 48.⁵ Those holding to the Northern Galatian theory propose that Paul wrote the epistle between AD 54 to 57 from either Ephesus or Macedonia.⁶ Gundry also suggests a hybrid view that says the recipients were the churches in South Galatia, but that the date could be later near the time of writing of Romans. Though he does not suggest any dates.⁷ For the purpose of this paper, the southern theory is favored along with an early date.

The purpose, whether the epistle came before or after the council, remains the same. Galatians was written to combat the activities of the Judaizers,⁸ which was threatening to the message of the Gospel among gentiles.⁹ If the occasion were before the Jerusalem council, Paul was on the forefront in confronting the most divisive issues that the church had encountered to that point. It was a serious issue, which Paul addresses with great emotion.¹⁰

⁴ Robert H. Gundry, 346.

⁵ Ronald Y. K. Fung, "The Epistle to the Galatians," in *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 28.

⁶ Raymond Edward Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 468.

⁷ Robert H. Gundry, 347.

⁸ Some theorize that Paul may have been addressing three groups, true believers, Judaizers and Gnostic Jewish believers; however, I believe that this passage most likely addresses the Judaizing issue.

⁹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 465.

¹⁰ "When the thanksgiving prayer is missing (Galatians...) this is evidence of the extremely

Form, Context and Structure

Galatians best fits into the category of public epistle. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* refers to it as an apologetic letter, which includes epistolary and rhetorical features.¹¹ It was most likely intended to be circulated among the Galatian churches, presumably those, which Paul had visited on his first missionary journey. Since the nature of the problem was teaching, from other individual(s) who were preaching another message other than the true Gospel, which Paul had preached, the letter has an apologetic tone as the true Gospel is defended.

Galatians 3:1-5 is part of a larger letter, in which Paul utilizes rhetorical devices as well as personal appeal to influence his readers. Galatians 1:11-2:1 presents an autobiographical argument for the Gospel of the Spirit. Galatians 2:1-21 further presents a support of justification by faith as evidenced by the acknowledgement given by the leaders in Jerusalem and of Peter. Then Paul presents the primary argument starting at chapter three, there initiating the next argument of the letter, which runs through at least 4:11, where he again begins a personal appeal. Whereas in chapters 1 and 2 Paul references his own experience, in 3 now he initiates his next argument with an appeal to his readers' experience. Therefore 3:1-5 is the introduction to the main argument that follows.

This passage can best be understood as part of a rhetorical form. Paul uses a series of questions to engage his audience and cause them to examine their own

serious nature of the problems addressed." As cited in: Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 7131, Kindle e-book.

¹¹ David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 873.

experience with God to look for truth. The readers are challenged to acknowledge the reality of their experience with the Spirit in order to realize the folly of the teaching of the Judaizers. Paul uses a series of six questions that build on each other to lead the reader to the logical conclusion: God provides the Spirit and does miraculous things through faith.

Exegesis

1a. Paul addresses the Galatians strongly, using the word *ανοητοι* (ignorant, foolish). Though some note that Hellenistic literature often referred to ethnic Galatians as ignorant or stupid, this is not likely Paul's intent to insult his converts.¹² Rather the emphasis is on getting them to logically examine the teaching of the Judaizers, which has deceived them. They have not taken the time to test the teaching against that, which they have already heard.

The first of six rhetorical questions that Paul uses asks "who has bewitched you?" The word *εβασκανεν* (bewitched, enchanted, fascinated), just as in English, does not always refer to witchcraft. The Galatians have most likely been fascinated by clever teaching of an authoritative figure. However, Paul may have more in mind than just an exaggerated metaphor. While demonic activity may be an overstatement, a "power of falsehood" may be seen in the enchanting charismatic power of the *τις* (Singular leader of the Judaizers or the leader's fellow cohorts).¹³

1b. While the word *προεγραφη* (portrayed) can also mean "written beforehand", the context here clearly refers to the vivid portrayal of Christ through apostolic preaching.

¹² Alan R. Cole, 87.

¹³ Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 961.

The presentation of Christ was so vivid, that they could form a mental picture of his death on behalf of sinners who would accept him by faith. The implication is that Jesus' work on the cross was far superior to any work of the law.

2. Verse two begins with a rhetorical question, which sets up the entire argument. How did their spiritual life begin? Did they receive the Spirit by works or by faith? Paul structures the question as an antithetical argument with a purposeful contrast between two options: faith or law. The contrast is emphasized by the repeating structure of the sentence "through works of the law or through hearing of faith."

The phrase *ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως* (through/by way of hearing of faith) can be understood in two ways. If *ἀκοῆς* is translated as either "hearing, listening" in the active sense, then *πίστεως* (of faith) can be understood as either a qualifying genitive (hearing characterized by faith) or as a subjective genitive (hearing that comes of faith).¹⁴ In either case, the contrast between law and faith is the thrust of the argument.

Some have taken the phrase "received the Spirit" as a reference to baptism in the Spirit. However, the context of the verse and the situation being addressed (justification by faith verses law) merits that this phrase be interpreted as receiving the Spirit at the time of salvation¹⁵

3. The next question, "Are you so foolish?" is another rhetorical device to highlight the seriousness of the situation. Paul is also using structural repetition here to reinforce his point. This question sets up another antithetical question similar to the question in

¹⁴ William Hendriksen, 112.

¹⁵ Paul A. Pomerville, *Galatským a Řimanům* (Brussels, Belgium: ICI, 1999), 111.

verse 2, this time equating the law with flesh.

The structure of the fourth question, “Having begun in the Spirit, do you now finish in the flesh” sets up a double comparison between Spirit and flesh and between beginning and finishing. While *επιτελεισθε* may be interpreted as perfected (e.g. NIV, NKJV, NAS), here the better translation is finished as it fits the comparison structure. Hendricksen notes the chiasmic structure of the sentence in the original Greek. Paul frames the sentence with the verbs and locates Spirit and flesh beside each other in the center of the sentence, thereby emphasizing the contrast between them.¹⁶

In a way Paul is showing how they are taking a step backwards. The Galatians were reborn of the Spirit at the beginning, but now they want to go back to the flesh and “complete” themselves. The entire life of the believer is supernatural from beginning to the end, but the way of the law is thoroughly fleshly to its end. Finishing in the flesh can be interpreted as the other side of their spiritual reality. Their trust in the flesh has become their spiritual “finish” or end.¹⁷

4. Paul’s fifth question calls on the Galatians to reflect on their experiences. The meaning of *επαθετε* is somewhat ambiguous and can be translated as either “suffered” or “experienced.” Most translations, including the NASB, KJV and ESV render it as “suffered”, whereas the NIV favors “experienced.”

In all of Paul’s other writings, the word is translated as suffering (I. Cor. 12:26; II Cor. 1:6; Phil. 1:29; I Thess. 2:14; II Thess 1:5 and II Tim. 1:12). If the South Galatian

¹⁶ William Hendriksen, 114.

¹⁷ Horst Robert. Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., vol. 1-3, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

view is adopted, then suffering could be a reference to the persecution that is mentioned in Acts (13:50; 14:2, 5, 19). Though in those cases it was Paul himself who bore the brunt of the persecution, one can reasonably assume that the persecution was not limited only to him.

If *suffering* is the intended meaning, then the emphasis is on the ruin that comes through the Galatians' current trajectory. All of their suffering would have been in vain. In addition it could also be a contrast between the suffering they have experienced because of their faith and the suffering they would experience in their bodies by accepting circumcision.¹⁸ The second suffering would negate the first.

On the other hand, Cole points out that the translation "experienced" fits the immediate context better.¹⁹ In the preceding verse, Paul has just asked them to remember the wonderful experience of the Spirit at the beginning of their faith, and in the following verse, he mentions the miracles, which come by faith. Additionally, Hendricksen makes the point that the original meaning of the word was neutral, and that Paul's usage in other places was specific to those contexts. In each of those other cases, the context demands "suffering" as a translation, but this context makes no such demand.²⁰

If *experienced* is the intended meaning, then the emphasis is on all of the wonderful benefits of the life of faith. In that case Paul is asking if they had experienced so many blessing and miracles for no purpose. The Galatians had simply chosen to forget

¹⁸ If Paul is addressing multiple parties, including both Judaizers and early Gnostics, then "suffering" may make more sense when one considers, that Gnostics would have argued that the flesh must suffer to free the spirit. Paul then would be making the case that they have already suffered in their bodies and will suffer (Acts 14:22), so there is no need to add the suffering of circumcision.

¹⁹ Alan R. Cole, 90.

²⁰ William Hendriksen, 115.

all of the blessing in favor of their new path.

Either translation has the same overall message. Paul wants the Galatians to look back and evaluate their present choices in light of past experiences with the Spirit. He expresses hope that indeed they will make the correct choice and return back to the way of faith when he writes, “If indeed it has been in vain.” There is still hope for them to leave their foolishness.

5. The apostle once again returns to the original question in verse 2; having challenged the Galatians to examine the past, he now asks them to extend the application to the present. It is not that God has become inactive and therefore they need to turn to the law. He is still supplying the Spirit and working miracles among them, but it is a gift through faith not something earned through law.

The word ἐπιχορηγῶν (supply, give, grant freely), indicates that neither the Spirit nor the δυνάμεις (literally “mighty works” e.g. miracles) are in any way earned through works. In contrast, the Galatians current path of works would lack both Spirit and power as they attempt to add to the Gospel.

Theology and Application

The issue at hand in Galatians 3 is summarized by the central question of the passage, “Having begun in the Spirit, do you now finish in the flesh?” There is a stark contrast between two opposing principles: spirit vs. flesh, which in turn represents a conflict between nomism/ legalism vs. faith. Paul later goes so far as to say that those who are seeking to be justified by law have been severed from Christ (Gal. 5:4) for it is through Spirit and faith that they have righteousness, not through Law.

Paul adamantly upheld the doctrine that the Gospel contained transformational

power (Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 1:18-24; II Tim. 1:8-9, 12). A charismatic teacher or group of teachers were adding to the Gospel message, deceiving them and robbing the Galatians of what they should have known. The Gospel had given their dead ears life through the hearing of faith, which should have equipped them to resist the allure of nomism/legalism (Acts 28:27, Rom. 10:8, 17; 11:8).

Finally, the conflict of flesh and Spirit is key to New Testament pneumatology (Rom 8; Gal 4:28-30; 5:16-17; 6:8). Human effort and the flesh stand in opposition to the activity of the Spirit. There is a danger of great loss, both temporal and eternal, when one tries to walk in the flesh, rejecting the free gift of the Spirit that comes by faith.

Other New Testament authors also affirm the role of faith and the Spirit in salvation and eternal blessing (I Pet. 1:2-9). Peter specifically reminds believers that the Spirit sanctifies them. It is not the law that brings sanctification. Hebrews also encourages believers to imitate the faith of those in the Old Testament and not to follow legal teachings about ceremonies and foods (Heb. 13:7).

The message of Galatians 3:1-5 continues to be important for believers today. Though circumcision and ceremonial law may not be a temptation to most today, other forms of legalism and false religion abound. Human religion is always empty no matter its form, nomism, legalism or any other natural efforts to improve upon the Gospel. Both pneumatology and soteriology are important in this text. Pentecostals especially should take note of the role of the Spirit and that miracles operate as a free gift on the basis of faith and not as a confirmation of one's adherence to a legal standard. The temptation to rely on our own efforts, wisdom and systematic formulas of spiritual impartation can lead us in the path of the Galatians and result in the absence of the Holy Spirit.

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