

SONS OF ABRAHAM
PART 1

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:6-14

January 31, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

Paul has been seeking to establish the Galatians in the truth of the gospel, namely that a man is justified through faith alone apart from the works of the law.

In 3:1-5, we saw how Paul appealed to three experiences of the Galatians in order to expose their foolishness in turning back to the law for their right standing with God and to remind them of how their experiences confirmed that justification is not by the law but by grace.

Paul reminded the Galatians how he (and Barnabas) had come to them and preached the gospel of Christ crucified to them (v. 1). His preaching of the gospel to the Galatians was so unmistakably clear it was as if they had been eyewitnesses of the crucifixion!

When the Galatians heard the gospel and believed they received the gift of the Holy Spirit (v. 2) and God the Father abundantly poured out the Holy Spirit and His power upon them (v. 5). The gift of the Spirit (over against circumcision) served as the “identity marker” that the Galatians (Gentiles) were indeed the people of God.

Paul’s gospel message was clear and the evidence of the Spirit among the Galatians was unmistakable. The Galatians experienced the Holy Spirit’s work at the beginning of their Christian lives as well as the ongoing, day-by-day work of the Spirit not based on anything they had done (i.e., works of the law, circumcision) but rather by hearing with faith. The phrase at the end of v. 2, “by hearing with faith,” highlights not only the way we start the Christian life but also the way we continue in it day by day. So, the experiences of the Galatians uphold the thesis Paul set forth in 2:16 (i.e., justification is through faith alone apart from the works of the law).

Now, in 3:6ff, Paul continues to develop his thesis of whether a person is justified by keeping the law or by believing what is heard. However, his argument shifts in v. 6. It was not just the Galatians’ experiences that demonstrated they were justified by faith alone apart from works of the Law. Paul now appeals to the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures to prove his case.

Before moving on, Paul’s appeal to Scripture raises an important point we should note. While Paul’s appeal to the Galatians’ experiences were valid, it was not totally sufficient to establish them in the truth of the gospel. The reason is because there is always the danger of a genuine work of the Holy Spirit being distorted by a counterfeit work. And, so experience alone is not sufficient to establish authoritative doctrine in the church.

Thus, along with his appeal to the Galatians' experiences, Paul appeals to the teaching of Scripture in order to verify their experiences of the Holy Spirit (i.e., that their initial reception and ongoing experience of the Spirit is evidence of justification by faith alone apart from works of the law).

Timothy George writes,

“While this argument from experience was necessary, and certainly valid, it was not sufficient to reanchor the Galatians in the truth of the gospel. Why not? Because in New Testament times, just as in ours, the genuine work of the Holy Spirit is often confused with spiritual experiences of dubious origin... Thus to his preliminary appeal to experience Paul added a lengthy and substantial argument from Scripture. While the two arguments complement each other, they were not of equal weight in Paul's mind. From this point on to the end of chap. 4 the doctrine of justification will be presented in the context of a battle for the Bible. For Paul the verdict of Holy Writ is the court of final appeal in all matters related to God and the revelation of His will to human beings,” (Timothy George, *Galatians*, p. 215).

Paul thus appeals to the OT Scriptures and uses Abraham as a “test case” to strengthen his argument that justification comes through faith alone apart from works of the law. Verses 6-14 begin with Abraham (v. 6) and end with Abraham (v. 14).

In vv. 6-9, Paul expresses faith alone positively. He takes his readers back to the very beginning of Israel's history when God made His promise to Abraham. Based on God's promise, Paul argues that faith not works is the way that leads to God's blessing (i.e., justification) and thus makes one a son of Abraham.

In vv. 10-14, Paul expresses this same truth negatively by arguing that the law only leads to cursing. The good news, however, is that guilty, unrighteous sinners do not have to despair because Jesus assumed this curse for them on the Cross so that they might truly receive the blessing promised to Abraham (i.e., the promised Spirit/justification; vv. 13-14).

So, to begin with, in 3:6-9, Paul will set forth 3 arguments to show that the genuine sons of Abraham are those who live by faith in God's promises and not by the Law and one's performances. Faith is the way that leads to God's blessing (i.e., justification) and makes one a son of Abraham, whereas the law only leads to cursing (vv. 10-13). With this context in place, this brings us to Paul's first argument.

LESSON:

I. ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED AS AN UNCIRCUMCISED GENTILE. V. 6

Genesis 12 and 15 serve as the backdrop and foundation for Paul's teaching here in Galatians 3. He bases his arguments upon Genesis 15:6 (v. 6) and 12:3 (v. 8). Note how

Paul begins v. 6, “just as Abraham believed God...” V. 6 is connected to v. 5 by the phrase, “just as” (καθὼς).

In Paul’s mind, the parallel between Abraham and the Galatians was clear. Paul’s flow of thought is that just as the Galatians heard the gospel and were justified by faith apart from works of the law, even so Abraham believed God’s promises and was counted as righteous apart from anything he had done.

Just as God the Father abundantly supplied the Holy Spirit and worked miracles among the Galatians “by hearing with faith” in the same way Abraham was justified “by hearing with faith” and not by works of the law.

It is impossible to overstate the importance the account of Abraham (Genesis 12, 15) plays in the overall structure and teaching of the Bible.

Graeme Goldsworthy writes, “All of world history is related to the promises that God makes to Abraham. The final meaning of history will be found in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a descendant of Abraham,” (*According to Plan*, p. 121).

Paul’s appeal to Abraham raises the question, “Why?” Why does Paul appeal to Abraham?

Paul appeals to Abraham precisely because the Judaizers did so. As we have learned, the Judaizers boasted that they were the true sons of Abraham (cf., John 8:33, 39). They based their distorted “gospel” on a misunderstanding of the Old Testament scriptures.

The Judaizers held to the “rabbinic exegesis” of Abraham, which taught that Abraham was blessed by God because of his faithful obedience (i.e., his obedience was the ground of his justification before God, see George, *Galatians*, p. 217).

Much like a lot of children’s curriculum and teaching we find in Evangelicalism today, Abraham was praised as one of the great heroes of Israel’s past. Rabbinic Judaism set forth Abraham as a “hero of the faith” whose faithfulness and obedience merited God’s favor and brought divine blessing on him and his offspring (see George, *Galatians*, p. 217).

One of the Judaizer’s favorite “proof texts” upon which they built their argument was Genesis 17 where God first institutes circumcision (see 17:4-14). Concerning the significance the Judaizers placed on circumcision, James Boice writes,

“Most significant, however, is the probability that the obligation to become “sons” of Abraham through circumcision formed the central argument of the legalizers’ teaching. This argument would have focused on Genesis 12 and 17 and would have advanced the position that no one could be blessed by God who was not part of the company to whom God’s promises were made. It would have added that one entered this company solely through circumcision. These arguments Paul encounters head on, for he shows that even Abraham was blessed through faith, not circumcision,” (*Galatians*, p. 456).

A second incident in Abraham's life the Judaizers appealed to was Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22 (see Gen. 22:16-18). Therefore, by virtue of Abraham's acceptance of circumcision and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, he was said to have merited the reward of righteousness because of his obedience and faithfulness under trial and testing (George, *Galatians*, p. 219). Contrary to the Judaizers, Paul (and James) makes it clear that Abraham's obedience was not the ground of his justification before God, which would contradict Genesis 15:6. Rather, Abraham's obedience was a subsequent vindication of his faith (cf. James 2:21-24).

Following the "example" of Abraham, the Judaizers claimed to be the true sons of Abraham because of their circumcision (i.e., works of the law). As far as the Judaizers were concerned the teaching of Scripture was clear. If the Galatians wanted to become true sons of Abraham they also had to be circumcised or else they could not be counted as true sons of Abraham, receive the full blessing of the people of God and possess the right to call God their Father.

Paul has already raised the issue of circumcision back in 2:3 where he stated that the leadership of the Jerusalem church (James, Peter and John) did not force Titus to be circumcised even though he was an uncircumcised Gentile. The implication of this is that Gentiles (as well as Jews) do not have to undergo circumcision in order to be counted as the true people of God.

Paul argued in 3:2-5 that the genuine mark of the believer is not circumcision but rather the reception and experience of the Holy Spirit (3:2-5), which comes by hearing with faith apart from the works of the law (i.e., circumcision).

The Judaizers' false teaching created confusion (3:1) in the Galatians' minds and troubled their souls (1:7). Therefore, in order to refute the Judaizer's distorted "gospel," (i.e., faith in Christ plus works of the Law) Paul directs the Galatians back to the Old Testament Scriptures. However, unlike the Judaizers, Paul begins in Genesis 12 and 15 rather than 17 or 22 and shows that from the beginning the Bible has taught justification by grace through faith alone.

With this background in place, let's look at how Paul, in distinction to the Judaizers, viewed Abraham. From this, we will see how Paul understood the way in which the Scriptures unfold for us the truth of justification by faith alone.

What we will find in Genesis is that Abraham was not a "hero" who merited righteousness but rather a "zero" who deserved judgment and yet received grace from God who keeps His promises.

ABRAHAM: A TEST CASE

The Biblical record of Abraham begins in Genesis 11:26-32 in the early second millennium B.C. We don't know much about Abraham other than he was a Chaldean who lived among pagan people served other gods (Gen. 11:31; Josh. 24:1-3).

The Scriptures provide no insight into his faith or knowledge of God before God called him out of Haran to Canaan. There is not even a hint in the Biblical record that God called Abraham because of his goodness. Rather, the Biblical account provides a “No Spin Zone,” uncensored account of Abraham’s life.

Beginning in 12:1-3, when Abraham was 75 years old, the Scriptures tell us that God appeared to him and called him out of Haran to Canaan. The Bible doesn’t tell us why God chose Abraham as opposed to someone else.

Thus, God’s dealing with Abraham from the very beginning highlights sovereign grace. God’s promise and grace, not Abraham’s performance and merit, are the central, prominent themes within the historical account of Abraham.

So, when God appeared to Abraham, He made a promise to him. He promised to give the land of Canaan to his descendants and to bless them as His people who would in turn be the source of blessing to the entire world (12:1-3). We know from later revelation that the promised “offspring” is Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ/Messiah, cf. Gen. 3:15; 24:60; Gal. 3:16). This explains why Isaac is clearly set apart from Ishmael as Abraham’s heir. The Genesis account is interested in tracing a single unique line of offspring that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ (cf., Acts 3:25–26; Gal. 3:16).

Again, we see that the central theme that runs throughout the story of Abraham is the covenant promise and the way it was given. In Genesis 15, in an amazing act, God undertakes an oath to ensure His promise to Abraham.

Instead of both parties walking together between the severed halves, God walks alone and undertakes an oath to perform all the conditions and to suffer all the curses of the covenant (Gen. 15:7-11).

There is no mistaking the fact from Genesis 15 that God’s promises will be fulfilled by His grace and power rather than Abraham’s performance and goodness.

Far from being upright and good, the Biblical account reveals that on two separate occasions, Abraham lied about his wife to save his own life (Gen. 12:11-20; 20:1-8).

Rather than trusting God to fulfill His promise of a son, Abraham and Sarah, 10 years after receiving God’s promise, sought to resolve their infertility problem by their own personal performance (i.e., having Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar, bear a child on her behalf Gen. 16).

At times, we see Abraham’s faith waver and border on disbelief (Gen. 15:2-3). These accounts reveal why Paul, in Romans 4:5 refers to Abraham as ungodly rather than righteous!

Again and again, the promises God makes to Abraham are set against a backdrop of events that seem to threaten them and make their fulfillment seemingly impossible.

For example, a great enemy, the Canaanites, possessed the Promised Land.

Twice, as just mentioned through Abraham's sin, Sarah is almost taken as a wife for other men (Pharaoh and King Abimelech).

25 years after God first made his promise to Abraham, Abraham and Sarah remained childless and at last at the age of 100 God made him a father (Gen. 21)! Humanly speaking, Abraham and Sarah were too old to bear a son. This is why Paul, in Romans 4:19, says he considered his own body as good as dead!

After God fulfilled His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son, He then called Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, thus appearing to contradict all that He had promised (Gen. 22).

The importance of all these threats and apparent roadblocks to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham is this:

The fulfillment of God's promises can (and will) only be achieved by the sovereign power and grace of God (see Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, p. 121).

No human merit or work will be able to bring God's promises to fulfillment. Only God, who walks alone among the severed halves and assumes the responsibility to perform all the duties of His oath and to bear all of the curses for its violation, will fulfill His promises.

This is where faith comes in, as Paul says in Galatians 3:6. In response to God's promise (Gen. 15:5), the Scriptures say, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Again, the important point to note about Abraham's faith is not its strength or perfection (clearly Abraham's faith wasn't perfect!) but rather the strength and perfection of the promising God he trusts (Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, p. 123).

It is clear from the Biblical record that Abraham is a "zero" and deserves nothing of what God promises to him. He is hardly a "hero of faith" whose uprightness and obedience merited God's favor. Thus, the fulfillment of God's promises must be seen as an unmerited gift of grace.

Justification is all by grace through faith from the beginning middle and end alone. This is why the Biblical account says that Abraham was counted/reckoned as righteous before God through faith (Gen. 15:6, Gal. 3:6; see also Rom. 4:3; Jam. 2:23).

When Abraham believed (not worked/performed) God counted him as righteous. Through faith alone, God declared Abraham righteous, though as we have seen Abraham was hardly righteous in Himself. Abraham, like all subsequent believers, was both righteous and a sinner at the same time (*simul iustus et peccator*).

Because his faith was weak and imperfect, God imputed His righteousness to him. The phrase, "it was counted to him as righteousness" is what Bible teachers refer to as

imputation. Imputation is simply an accounting term. Phil Ryken writes, “Trusting God was like opening a bank account. Immediately, God transferred righteousness into Abraham’s account,” (*Galatians*, p. 97).

It is important to note that the fact that believers are simultaneously justified and sinful does not mean that they are unchanged. True saving faith only resides in a regenerate person who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 3:2-5).

Though the believer never reaches a state of perfection in this life, nonetheless, all who are justified are also in the process of being sanctified and begin to manifest the fruit of their justification (e.g., Gen. 22, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac). The Heidelberg Catechism writes, “It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness,” (Q. 64). But, the crucial point Paul is making in 3:6 is that the *ground* of Abraham’s (and ours) justification was *imputed* righteousness rather than *inherent* righteousness.

Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. God justified Abraham before he was circumcised (Gen. 17) and before he obeyed God’s command to sacrifice Isaac (Gal. 22). Clearly, Abraham wasn’t inherently just when he was justified. Rather, the moment he trusted God he was counted as righteous. Paul is arguing that the Galatians were in the same state as Abraham. Abraham didn’t have to be sanctified until he was declared just. The point Paul is making is that Abraham was counted to be something that he was not. God “imputed” (reckoned) righteousness to Abraham before Abraham did anything!

Further, lest someone conclude that Abraham’s faith merited God’s favor/righteousness or was itself counted as his righteousness, Paul, in Romans 4:2-5 dispels any such notion of merit in relation to faith. Further, Paul had just twice stated in 3:2, 5 that justification comes about “by hearing with faith” and not by “works of the law.” By quoting Genesis 15:6 in confirmation of this truth, it is clear that Paul did not believe God “counted” Abraham’s inherent goodness or his act of faith as if it were righteousness.

So, we conclude from the Genesis account that Abraham was justified not as a “hero” but as a “zero,” not as a “performer” but as a “believer,” not as someone who was “godly” but rather “ungodly.”

Martin Luther, commenting on the significance and blessing of the phrase, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness,” writes,

“...these two things make Christian righteousness perfect: The first is faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift and which formally believers in Christ; the second is that God reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness for the sake of Christ, His Son, who suffered for the sins of the world and in whom I begin to believe. On account of this faith in Christ God does not see the sin that still remains in me. For so long as I go on living in the flesh, there is certainly sin in me. But meanwhile Christ protects me under the shadow of His wings and spreads over me the wide heaven of the forgiveness of sins, under which I live in safety. This prevents God from seeing the sins that still cling to my flesh. My

flesh distrusts God, is angry with Him, does not rejoice in Him, etc... But God overlooks these sins, and in His sight they are as though they were not sins. This is accomplished by imputation on account of the faith by which I begin to take hold of Christ; and on His account God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin, even though it really is sin," (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, pp. 231-232).

This is the joy and glory of imputation. The sin that still remains in you is not counted (imputed) against you but rather is forgiven for Christ's sake in whom you believe, who is perfectly righteous. By faith alone, Christ's righteousness is yours and your sin is His. This is the true definition of justification and of Christian righteousness, namely the divine imputation of righteousness through faith alone for the sake of Christ.

CONCLUSION:

As we consider Paul's appeal to Abraham, the Biblical account is clear that Abraham did not receive circumcision in order to be justified. The command of circumcision in Genesis 17 was not a condition for inheriting God's promises/blessings. Rather, circumcision was a sign and seal of the inheritance for those who were already entitled to it (a sign and seal of the righteousness that was imputed to Abraham through faith, cf. Gen. 17:11; Rom. 4:9-12)!

Abraham didn't deserve God's goodness. The historical account of Abraham paints a picture of God's free and sovereign grace from first to last. Paul refutes the Judaizers and says to the Galatians (and us) that God reckoned Abraham righteous before he was even aware of circumcision. The great father of the Jewish people was justified when he was an uncircumcised Chaldean!

Thus, the Bible (i.e., the Abrahamic Covenant) from the beginning teaches that we are made right with God in only one way: by grace through faith in Christ alone. Moreover, this grace and faith are not only the way we start the Christian life but are also the way we continue in it day by day (Gal. 3:3).

The Holy Spirit, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, also sustains and strengthens our faith in the same way throughout our lives.

During critical points in Abraham's life (see Gen. 13:14-18; 15:4-6, 13-21; 17:1-21; 18:16-19) God graciously reminded Abraham of his promises in order to sustain him in the face of impossible circumstances, which seemed to threaten their fulfillment.

In the same way, God, through His gospel (the ultimate fulfillment of His promises to Abraham) sustains us and drives us forward in the Christian life.

Our hope in the midst of our ongoing struggle with sin (which some times appears to be an impossible obstacle) is not the perfection of our faith but rather the grace and faithfulness of our Promising God!

Michael Horton writes,

“The Christian life is often like this. We glide out of our harbor under full sail, thrilled with delight in knowing our sins are forgiven and that we are right with God. A new love for our Redeemer fills us with gratitude, and we are eager to follow the course he has set for us in His Word. Yet as we pass into the open seas, we encounter spiritual stress. God’s law, we find, provides the direction but not the power, and a panoply of spiritual technologies are available to substitute. We think that by reading this book or going to that conference or following this plan for spiritual victory or these steps for overcoming sin in our life, we can get the boat going in the right direction again.

These guides are usually neither law (i.e., God’s directives) nor gospel (i.e., God’s promises and acts in Christ), but helpful advice from fellow sailors. In a sense, the advice they offer is more law than gospel, since it imposes expectations and demands as conditions for success. Yet the more advice you get, the deeper your sense that you are simply dead in the water spiritually. Exhausted, you either give up and promise to never sail again or you realize that what you really need is a fresh gust of wind in your sails. That wind is always Christ in His saving office. What you really need is to be told all over again about who God is and what He has done to save you, and about the new world that awaits you because of His faithfulness to unfaithful sailors. This alone will fill your sails so that you can get safely back to the harbor when the gales blow hard.

Our whole life as Christians is a process of sailing confidently into the open seas, dying down in exhaustion, and having our sails filled again with God’s precious promises...

No less than when we first believed, we must always attribute to the gospel the power that fills our sails with gratitude, and to the law the proper course that such gratitude takes. At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, the gospel ‘is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes’ (Rom. 1:16),” (*God of Promise*, pp. 193-194).

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