

WHEN THE CHURCH TAKES A WRONG TURN

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
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Let's Begin

Early in the 16th century, a Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther sent shockwaves around the Christian world when he posted what came to be known as the “95 theses” on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Among many things, he dared question the papal authority of the established church. This simple act led to what we know today as the “Protestant Reformation.” The church at large had taken a wrong turn somewhere in the third or fourth century.

Consequently, while there were “pockets” of the true people of God throughout the Medieval period, the vast majority of Christendom had followed the wrong path. They had lost the simple Gospel message of faith in Jesus Christ alone. God used Martin Luther, along with many other “lesser lights” to call the church back to her Biblical roots and the simple preaching of the Gospel.

The church at Galatia broke Paul's heart. How soon they had taken a wrong turn. Chapter three is Paul's blade cutting both ways. He cuts quickly and deeply into the Galatians' betrayal of their vows to follow Christ and Christ alone. At the same time, his own heart is sliced wide open because he loved the Galatians so much. He spent many hours teaching them, discipling them, and tutoring them in the faith once for all given to the saints. Now, at the blinking of his eyes, so to speak, the Galatians have foolishly taken a road which leads away from God not toward Him.

As we consider this tragic story of the early church taking a wrong turn, let's follow the outline below:

- I. There is Corruption of the Gospel (vv. 1-5)**
- II. There is Correction from the Gospel (vv. 6-14)**
- III. There is Commitment to the Gospel (vv. 15-29)**

I. There is Corruption of the Gospel (vv. 1-5)

No fooling around exists for the Apostle. He gets to his point immediately, “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you” (v. 1). To turn away from God's way of salvation is a cosmic crime. To turn away after one has been given the truth, with truth clearly, thoroughly explained, is a detour on a dead-end street. And the dead-end street is one-way! Hence, Paul uses the strongest terms in speaking with the Galatians. For him, they are, “O foolish Galatians.”

Paul is not accusing them of stupidity, though stupid they were for thinking about going back to the bondage of the law. The Galatians had no idea of the boundary they were about to cross. And, tragically, many times we do not either. God places obstacles in our way to caution us, steer us, and keep us safely through life's journey. However, we have moments when we feel we must test the boundaries, all the while ignoring the danger we are in. That perfectly describes the Galatians as well.

Another term Paul uses to drive the severity of their condition home is “bewitched.” While their foolishness displayed their insensitivity to danger, Paul's description of them as “bewitched” showed them as being under a “spell” of some sort. Evidently, the Judaizers were very eloquent in their presentations, casting a hypnotic frame of mind over the Galatians. It is said that Adolph Hitler was so persuasive in his speeches as tens of thousands of Germans gathered to hear him that they stood for hours in the cold or rain, spellbound by his powerful presentations.



Reflection Connection

Think for a moment about the millions of people who have been deceived by certain TV preachers who promise them wealth if they will only send them money. Why do you think people are so gullible?

The Holy Spirit anoints God's men as they stand in the pulpit to preach God's Word. He makes their message effective and drives home the truth of the Gospel to the listeners' heart. Not surprisingly, Satan has his "copy cat" anointing as he blinds the minds of those who do not believe (cp. 2 Cor. 4:4). Consequently, the false teachers' words are filled with manipulation, giving an impression that the words are true. The Galatians were in grave danger under the spell of the devil's hucksters.

The special message of the Gospel had been corrupted. Had the Galatians received the Spirit by faith or by works? That was the only relevant question (v. 2). If so, how could they begin in the Spirit but end up in fleshly works? (v. 3). It was really very simple to cut through the fog the Judaizers had cast over the Galatians' mind. If believers will stay in Scripture, and stick with Scripture, virtually every false teacher will be easily exposed.

Not only was the Gospel *simple*, it was also *stirring*. Paul had painted a picture of the Gospel so plain, so clear, it was almost impossible to confuse it.

Second, the spiritual maturity in the Gospel had been corrupted (vv. 2-3). The Galatians were saved by faith. Nothing else qualified. Paul pushed them to think deeply about their faith; not what they did but what Jesus did for them. The Christian life begins here--faith. And, the Holy Spirit testifies to the believer's heart that faith in Jesus is their hope (cp. Rom. 8:9; Eph. 1:13; John 7:39). Therefore, the Galatians were both *justified* (v. 2) and *sanctified* (v. 3) by faith alone. Beginning in the Spirit, we continue by the Spirit. He *regenerates* us, *resides* in us, and He continually *renews* us. Our entire Christian life is boxed in by the Spirit of God not the works of the flesh.

In addition, Paul insisted the *supernatural manifestation of the Gospel* had been corrupted (vv. 4-5). The ministry of the Spirit working miracles, changing hearts, renovating lives, and reconciling relationships were tests of the true Gospel of grace. The foolish Galatians were about to trade such heavenly wonders for phony babble from false teachers about circumcision being the test of one's relationship to God. The Apostle was white hot! To so much as breathe that the "law saves" makes the Gospel null and void.

II. There is Correction from the Gospel (vv. 6-14)

Paul raised his cannon and pounded the Galatians' spiritual wall to powder. They were allowing the Gospel to be corrupted. Now, he appeals to the Biblical evidence to solidify his case. Going back beyond the Judaizers' wrong-headed exposition of Moses' law of circumcision, he cites Abraham. Paul's simple but profound conclusion is we are saved the very same way Abraham was saved--by *faith*. His masterful appeal to the father of faith was a direct hit against the Judaizers. Case closed!

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Reflection Connection

Do you find yourself unconsciously depending on your "good works" to please God in your every day walk with Him? Explain. Do you think a lot of Christians appear to depend on their own activities--good works, prayer, worship, witnessing, etc--to gain God's favor?

First, we share the same justification with Abraham (vv. 6-9). Paul writes, "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (vv. 6-7). How was Abraham saved? What constituted Abraham's relationship with God, being accepted in God's sight? Abraham "believed" God. He took God at His word. The result? His faith was, "accounted to him as righteousness." What could be any clearer? Simple faith saved Abraham.

Furthermore, every believer is a spiritual descendent of Abraham (vv. 8-9). Works of righteousness--including circumcision--do not make us children of Abraham; faith does.

Second, we share the same redemption (vv. 10-14). Paul affirms the law's curse but the Gospel's redemption. He writes, "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.

And the law is not of faith: but, the man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (vv. 11-13).

Hence, the Gospel is *indispensible* (vv. 10-12) as well as *incredible* (v. 13). Even more significantly for us, the Gospel is *available*, "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (v. 14). The curse has been lifted off us and placed on Jesus. He bore it on Calvary. Now the same salvation Abraham experienced we experience. And, we experience it the very same way as did Abraham--*through faith*.

**Abraham
"believed"
God. He took
God at His
word.**

III. There is Commitment to the Gospel (vv. 15-29)

Paul's message could not stand unheard by both the Galatians themselves as well as the Judaizers who were spreading their false doctrines. While the Gospel had been corrupted by them, the same Gospel offered correction to them. Now, there must be a rock-hard commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A faith welded to the Gospel is the only hope for the Galatians to get back on the road with God.

Before the final capstone is placed on Paul's argument, however, he deals with an obvious question which, by answering it, will push the Galatians back to the Gospel road. The question Paul now addresses is this: If keeping the law cannot save, why did God give the law in the first place? The Apostle offers a three-fold answer.

First, the law was related to the promise of God (vv. 15-18). In this section, Paul mentions the "promise" of God a staggering 7 times! The promise referred to God's promise to Abraham. The Apostle offered a *human illustration*, "Brethren,



I speak after the manner of men; Though *it be* but a man's covenant, yet *if it be* confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto" (v. 15). The "covenant" is a simple contract between at least two parties. The covenant can neither be cancelled nor changed. With the human illustration, Paul makes *spiritual application* (vv. 16-18). What is true of human covenants is also true of a covenant with God. God's salvation covenant is no different.

With this in place, the law of Moses, coming 430 years after God's salvation agreement with Abraham could not cancel out the agreement, the agreement based on faith. If the law added to faith, Paul argues, the law destroys faith. Hence, the covenant would be broken with Abraham. In addition, the law is completely conditional--do this and live. However, the promise--given to Abraham based on his faith--is completely unconditional. Jesus Christ did it all for us. Faith is merely the empty hand which receives His finished work as a promised gift.

Second, the law was related to the purpose of God (vv. 19-20). Paul just showed how faith was and remains the instrument through which people are saved. Elsewhere, the Apostle would say it like this, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). Hence, the law cannot accomplish the purpose of God to save.

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The question arises, if the law does not serve the purpose of God to save, what purpose does the law serve? Paul answers, first, the law makes us aware of our natural inclination to sin. It was added "because of transgressions" (v. 19). Once the law was intact, sin became a violation of the law (cp. Rom. 4:15). The law does not make us sinners; rather the law reveals us as sinners. But while the law shows us our sin, it possesses no power to save. It possesses only the power to condemn. The law creates in our heart an urging, a need to be saved. As a result, it drives us to Christ's cross, seeing in Him hope for salvation.

Third, the law was related to the power of God (vv. 21-25). Paul queries, "Is the law against the promises of God?" (v. 21a). His answer is, "God forbid!" Or, another way to say it is, "Most certainly not!" Indeed if the law had the power to save, Jesus would have died in vain. The aim of the law is to lead a desperate law-breaker--a sinner--to Christ.

The law is like a *custodian* who watches the jail (vv. 22-23). Prisoners are shut up, locked away with no hope of escape. The prisoner is bound in chains, fixed to the dungeon wall. When the law of God is preached, listeners feel imprisoned by the walls of sin. Christ sets us free. He paid our fines. He took our prison sentence upon himself. We are free, saved by Jesus Christ!

The law is also like a *child guardian* (v. 24-25). In the Greco-Roman world, servants were hired to care for children from ages 6 to 16. They tutored them when possible and cared for them. The guardians made sure the children were schooled properly. The law "tutored" us; that is, it made sure sin would be exposed so we would run to Jesus for salvation.

Reflection Connection

How does the law affect our life each day? Should Christians focus on the details of books like Leviticus or Deuteronomy? Why or why not?



Paul is now in a position to push the Galatians toward a commitment to the Gospel. They had been corrupted from the Gospel and Paul had corrected them with the Gospel. Now they must make allegiance to the Gospel. Paul writes, “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (vv. 26-29). The Gospel identifies us with Christ. We are “baptized into Him” and now we must “put on” Him. Our garment is Jesus Christ.

Additionally, the Gospel unites us with other believers. Just as we are all children of Abraham through faith, we are brothers and sisters in God’s family of faith. We are all, “one in Christ Jesus.” If the Galatian church turned around, getting on the right road to God, it would be as a family, the family of God.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul asserted the law was our “schoolmaster” to bring us to Christ (v.24). The English term translated “schoolmaster” is the Greek word *paidagōgos*, which literally means “a trainer of boys.” The term originally referred to slaves who cared for young boys, serving as escorts from home to school. Later, the term began to be used of a teacher or an educator. In fact, ancient Greeks regarded philosophers as teachers. For Paul, like the slave escorted boys to school, the law was designed to escort the sinner from condemnation in the law to salvation in the cross.

Wrap Up

Churches can miss God. They can make a wrong turn and end up in a spiritual wilderness. That is precisely what happened to the Galatians. Instead of following the Gospel, they allowed false teachers to corrupt the Gospel. Paul corrected their error and empowered them with the truth in Jesus Christ.

