

EXPOSITORY NOTES

GALATIANS

Gordon Lyons

Expository Notes

Galatians

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New Testament Expository Notes

Galatians

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Introduction and Background

The Galatians were descended from a branch of the Celtic tribes who, in the early 3rd century BC, had migrated to this part of the (then) land of Anatolia. These Celtic tribes overcame the previous inhabitants, and settled down in the land. Subsequently, this Celtic group became known as 'Galatae' (hence, Galatians).

Around 85 BC, the Galatians fought against the Romans, but were defeated and found themselves in subjection to the Romans. The ethnic name, Galatia, remained, but it became a Roman protectorate or province. Over the years, the land boundaries of Galatia were modified by the Romans.

Located in the former central Anatolia (now Turkey), Galatia in the north was bounded by Bythinia and Paphlagonia; in the east by Pontus; in the south by Lycaonia and Cappadocia, and in the west by parts of Phrygia. The modern capital of Turkey (Ankara) lies within the bounds of ancient Galatia.

There has been some dispute as to whether Paul was writing to the Galatians in the north, or to those in the south. Formerly, the northern theory prevailed; but now, in the light of more recent evidence and research, it seems more likely that the churches of Galatia to which Paul was writing lay in the south of that region. These would be the churches of Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, etc.

It is believed by many biblical scholars that Paul wrote Galatians around 49 AD or perhaps during the early 50s AD.

In this epistle, Paul asserts his apostolic authority, and insists that he had received that authority directly from the risen Lord Jesus. Similarly, Paul insists that he did not learn the gospel from those who were apostles before him, or from any other human source. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus committed the gospel directly to the apostle Paul by revelation.

It was essential that Paul could establish his apostolic authority as being directly from the Lord. Paul would be required to take issue with the false teachers who had arisen in the Galatian churches, and who claimed to be presenting the true message from God—a message which ensured that the Mosaic Law was observed by Christians. This, of course, was false teaching at its worse, for it contradicted the very essence of salvation by the grace of God through faith. Thus, those who espoused this pernicious error were rejecting the grace of God and proving unfaithful to God and to his Son.

It was for this reason that the apostle penned this letter to the churches of Galatia. To a greater or lesser extent, those fellowships had been deceived and misled by Judaizers and their doctrines, especially in relation to circumcision. The Judaizers insisted that circumcision was essential to salvation. Paul insisted categorically that salvation was based on the grace of God alone; was received through faith in Christ, and was not dependent on works of the law. Thus, speaking by inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, Paul repudiates the necessity for circumcision to accompany or follow faith in Christ. At the same time, Paul calls the Galatian believers back to the pure message of the gospel that he had taught to them originally.

Galatians Chapter 1

No Other Gospel

Galatians 1:1-10

In this letter to the churches of Galatia, the apostle Paul defends the gospel of grace against the legalistic Judaizers. Paul also defends and asserts his apostolic authority over the churches—including those of Galatia.

The Judaizing teachers were asserting that Paul's gospel was not the same as the gospel preached by Peter, James or John—the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Furthermore, they claimed that—as an apostle—Paul was inferior to and subject to the apostles at Jerusalem. Paul, however, repudiates both claims, asserting vigorously that both he and the Jerusalem apostles stood on exactly the same level as appointed ambassadors of the Lord Jesus, and that both he and they preached exactly the same gospel message.

The tone of Paul's letter to the Galatian churches is somewhat severe. Perhaps this reflects the apostle's amazement that these believers could so soon, and so suddenly, turn away from the teaching that they had received from Paul. As the Lord's faithful servant, however, Paul would not permit these or any other churches to wander from the truth. Therefore, in an effort to bring them to their senses and to show them the pernicious nature of their error, the apostle sends this terse, but loving, letter to the Galatian churches.

The apostle Paul begins by declaring in verses 1 and 2:

Galatians 1:1-2

Right at the very outset of his letter, Paul asserts his apostleship. He is an ambassador of Christ. He was not sent to preach the gospel by any man, or by any group of men, but by the Lord Jesus. Paul received his commission to proclaim the gospel of Christ directly from the Son of God himself. This was how Paul received his authority as an apostle. This was his credentials to those who would examine him. (Acts 9:4-6,15; 26:13-20; Rom. 1:1; Col. 1:25)

Unlike the Judaizing teachers who opposed him and his message, Paul was the Lord's divinely appointed servant. As such, the message that he proclaimed was the word of the Lord. Everything that the apostle taught, both in his preaching ministry and in his epistles, was taught under the direct guidance and inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

Although Paul was responsible for writing this letter to the Galatian churches, he wrote it with the full support and encouragement of the brothers who were present with him, and whom he mentions in verse 2.

Assuming that Paul was writing to Christians in south Galatia, the churches in that area would include those at Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and others.

In verses 3 to 5, the apostle continues with his opening greetings:

Galatians 1:3-5

The undeserved and superabounding grace and mercy of God—together with that peace that passes all understanding—be to you from the Father and from the Son. He it was who yielded up his life to the agonies of the cross, to atone for our sin, and to reconcile us

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to God: we, who formerly, had been God's enemies through our sinful and rebellious ways. (Titus 2:14)

(4a) Who gave himself for our sins... (NIV)

What was the greatest gift that a holy, righteous and merciful God could give for the world of sinful mankind? It was the gift of his one and only Son. (John. 3:16) What, however, was the greatest gift that God's Son could give for us? It was to give himself up to the cross for our sins, as a perfect sacrifice and substitute (v.4). The Lord Jesus loved us so much that he gave up his own life to redeem us to God, and to grant us eternal life.

Not only did Christ deliver us from our sins, but also he delivers us from this present evil age. He has achieved the victory over the evil one, and over his dominion in our lives. Also, the Lord Jesus has destroyed Satan's power in this world; and he delivers us from those who emulate the evil one and who are the children of the evil one. (John 12:31; Eph. 2:2)

All this happened according to the will of God, our Father in heaven. Let us, then, glorify his name and offer him praises, throughout the ages of the ages—or forever and ever. Amen.

In his opening remarks to the Galatian churches, Paul does not mention anything of a praiseworthy nature. This is contrary to the apostle's usual practice in his letters to churches elsewhere, and is an indication of how far spiritually those Galatian believers must have fallen.

Following these introductory remarks, the apostle immediately states his reason for writing this letter. Thus, in verses 6 to 7a, Paul says to the Galatian churches:

Galatians 1:6-7a

(6) I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—(7a) which is really no gospel at all... (NIV)

Paul expressed utter amazement that these Galatian believers could actually think of forsaking the truths of the gospel, which they had heard clearly and repeatedly from him. He is astonished that they could willingly substitute false teaching for the only true gospel of Christ. The apostle accuses the Galatians of deserting the one who had called them in his grace: i.e., God—thus proving unfaithful to God.

In verse 6, the word 'called' is a word that—in this context—means effectively or effectually called. It does not refer to the outward call of the gospel (merely), but to the inward call. This inward call of the Holy Spirit is always associated with regeneration or the new birth. Paul, therefore, accepts that these Galatians were no mere professors of faith, but genuinely born again children of God. Thus, their departure from sound teaching into false doctrine is all the more reprehensible. It was indeed an inexcusable example of spiritual adultery or unfaithfulness to the God who had called them to himself, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Paul adds in verse 7a, however, the 'different gospel' to which they were now turning, was in reality no gospel at all. They had forsaken the gospel of God's grace. The message they were heeding now—and accepting—was a message that proclaimed salvation by works. It was the old Jewish message dressed up in new clothes: the message that required obedience to the law and to the covenant.

This, however, was not the gospel of God's grace. Indeed, this was not the gospel at all—for there was no good news associated with its teaching. It did not—and could not—promise freedom from the law. Rather, it produced only bondage to the law: for it was a message that could not deliver anyone from sin or from sin's slavery and penalty. (Cf. Rom. 10:1-4)

Concerning those who peddled such false teaching from church to church, the apostle says in verse 7b:

Galatians 1:7b

(7b) ...Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. (NIV)

Paul states quite categorically that those false teachers were trying to confuse the believers of the Galatian churches. They were trying to 'mesmerise' the believers into accepting their own brand of teaching. Unfortunately, the Galatians had been so bewitched by those false teachers that they had begun to believe the persuasive but pernicious arguments in favour of observing the Mosaic laws. (Rom. 16:17-18)

It was not enough (claimed the false teachers) to believe on Christ. In order to receive God's salvation, one had to observe the works of the law—including the covenant of circumcision. (Cf. Acts 15:1-31)

This was Judaizing at its worst—for it twisted the Word of God and made a mockery of the cross and of the gospel. Thus, Paul concludes verse 7 by saying of those false teachers: ...[they] *are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

But what is Paul's response to such teaching? In verse 8, the apostle provides an unequivocal answer:

Galatians 1:8

(8) But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! (NIV)

Paul makes absolutely no concession to those who hold a different viewpoint from him or from the other apostles. He yields not even an inch of ground to anyone who distorts or varies the gospel message. Indeed, he declares that if he, or anyone else—human or angelic—should preach a gospel other than that already proclaimed by the apostles, then that person or angel will be eternally condemned. He will remain forever under the wrath and curse of God. (2 Cor. 11:13-15; cf. 1 Cor. 16:22)

The word used in verse 8 for 'condemned' is a word that means literally, 'accursed'. (Gk., *anathema*. The word, 'anathema' means, 'devoted to God' i.e., for utter destruction.) Paul, however, is not using the word 'accursed' or 'anathema' as an expression of anger (although the apostle must have been justifiably angry with the false teachers). Rather, he is asserting that such false teachers—whether men or angels—fall under the immediate and singular wrath and curse of God.

(Ultimately, every such false teacher of God's Word faces eternal destruction in the lake of fire. However, we should note that 'destruction' does not imply 'annihilation' or cessation of existence. Punishment and torment in the lake of fire endures for eternity.)

In the light of Paul's severe warning in verse 8, it is evident that God absolutely forbids his people from tolerating or encouraging those who proclaim a false gospel. Accepting, condoning or tolerating false teaching involves us in outright unfaithfulness to God. (Titus 3:9-

11) This is the message the apostle Paul is attempting to convey to these Galatian believers. However, in case they thought that the apostle was being unduly harsh or critical in his assessment of the situation, the apostle reiterates what he has just said:

Galatians 1:9

(9) As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (NIV)

Paul's words are uncompromising. However, we must bear in mind that what Paul was saying or writing here, he was saying or writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His words, therefore, are not the expressions of his own personal thoughts, ideas or opinions. They are the words of God himself. (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:20-21) Since, however, the Spirit of God directed Paul to write in such uncompromising language, it must be obvious to everyone just how seriously God judges those who alter, distort or pervert the truths of his Word.

False teaching must not be tolerated. God's Word makes this abundantly clear. If anyone proclaims a gospel (so-called) different from that set forth in the Word of God by the Lord Jesus and his apostles, then that person places himself under God's wrath and curse. (Rev. 22:18-19)

In verse 10, Paul asks of the Galatians:

Galatians 1:10

Some people maliciously accused the apostle Paul of seeking to win the favour of men, rather than remain faithful to God and to his Word. This, of course, was an absolute falsehood. Paul himself says that he became all things to all men in order that, by all means possible, he might win some. However, at no time, did the apostle sacrifice the truth in order to please anyone. (1 Cor. 9:19-22; 10:33)

As he had just clearly demonstrated, the apostle was absolutely determined to uphold and defend the truth—even if this should cause offence, as often it did. However, Paul could not be a servant of Christ apart from the offence of the cross. He could not be the Lord's ambassador if he were not to remain uncompromisingly faithful in word and deed to the One who had appointed him to preach the gospel.

Paul, therefore, sought the approval of Christ—not the approval of any man. But faithfulness to Christ, and to the gospel, required that the apostle proclaim the truth as it is in Jesus. Faithfulness to Christ required also that the apostle of the Lord Jesus expose error and false teaching for what it was, and to show—without fear or favour—that God utterly condemned it.

Ultimately, this disciplinary action was for the good of the churches. It was Paul's earnest desire that the churches of Galatia (and elsewhere) should thrive and prosper in the faith, and in love for one another and for the world. However, to do this, they must root out of their minds all ideas of achieving salvation by observance of the Mosaic Law, by good deeds, or by any other method whatsoever, excepting the grace of God.

So it is today. Every form of false teaching and error must be eliminated from the church. Only then, will God's people experience his blessing and power in their midst.

Paul Received Gospel from the Lord

Galatians 1:11-17

Paul was the servant of the Lord. He was not the servant of any man, and the gospel that he preached had not been taught him by man, but revealed to him by the Lord. Thus, in verse 11, the apostle writes:

Galatians 1:11

Paul begins this verse by saying, *I want you to know...* I want to certify to you... I want you to be utterly sure of this...

The apostle was reinforcing what he was about to say concerning the source of his gospel. It was not man-made. It was not the product or invention of any human mind, including his own. The gospel had not derived its origin in man. Indeed, no human teacher of religion could ever have conceived a gospel that proclaimed each of the following essential conditions:

- the necessity of a perfect sacrifice of atonement, involving;
- the death of the Redeemer;
- the Lord Jesus' resurrection for the sinner's justification;
- the Lord Jesus' exaltation to God's right hand, and
- the Lord Jesus' coming again.

This message is unique to the Christian gospel, imparted by God through his Son. No human mind could ever have conceived such a method of redemption and reconciliation with God. Although perfectly logical, therefore, the gospel of Christ stands entirely apart from human reason as its source, and from mere human teaching—however profound. (Cf. 1 Cor. 2:9-10)

Thus, in verse 12, Paul continues:

Galatians 1:12

(12) I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. (NIV)

The Jews made much of the teachings and traditions that they had received from their elders, and from their forefathers; and they held diligently to those teachings and traditions that had been passed on to them through many generations.

Paul, however, declares that he had not received the gospel in this manner: i.e., it had not been passed on to him from other men who had heard and received it before him. The apostle declares also that he had not become acquainted with the gospel through formal instruction. No one had taught him the gospel message.

In what manner, then, had Paul discovered the truth about this glorious message of eternal salvation?

In the latter part of verse 12, the apostle says,

(12b) ...I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Some people claimed that Paul had received the gospel message from the other apostles or from those who had heard them. From this, they asserted that Paul's teaching did not carry the same authority as the other apostles—for they had been with Jesus in person, and had received his teaching first hand.

Paul refutes this argument by insisting that the Lord Jesus Christ himself had called and appointed him to preach the gospel among the Gentiles. Furthermore, Paul had not received the gospel message through any human being, or by means of human teaching. Rather, the apostle asserts categorically that he had received it by direct revelation from Jesus Christ. The Lord himself had revealed or unveiled the truths of the gospel message to this former persecutor of the church.

We are not told exactly when this took place. It may have been during the period spent by Paul in Arabia (v. 17; see also Acts 22:6-10; 26:13-18). One thing is certain, however, the Lord Jesus revealed the gospel to Paul long before this apostle had established any contact with the Jerusalem church, or with the other apostles and leaders there (vv. 15-17).

In verse 13, Paul refers back to his former manner of life—to the time before his conversion experience on the Damascus road. Thus, he writes:

Galatians 1:13

Paul reminds the Galatian believers of something that they had heard previously—either from him personally during his missionary journey, or from others. This concerned Paul's former manner of life: how—as the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus—he had persecuted the church of God. Paul says, in fact, that he had persecuted God's people with extreme ardour. He adds that it was his aim and purpose to destroy the entire church. To this end, Saul of Tarsus hounded the followers of Jesus to prison and to death. (Acts 8:1-3; 22:4-5)

In this respect, Saul the Pharisee far excelled many of his fellows. Thus, in verse 14, the apostle writes:

Galatians 1:14

Paul had been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel—the much-respected teacher of rabbinical law. However, it is most unlikely that Gamaliel himself would ever have sanctioned or approved of Paul's extreme zeal for Judaism. (Acts 22:3)

In his knowledge and application of the Jewish law, Paul was considerably in advance of many of his contemporaries. He was a zealot—or 'fanatic'—in the cause of his religion, and in maintaining the tradition of the Jewish elders and forefathers. (Phil. 3:4-6) Because of Paul's intense zeal, however, he bitterly persecuted the Christians—believing them to be guilty of blasphemy against God. (Acts 26:9-11) As Paul himself conceded later, however, he had been greatly mistaken in his beliefs. Elsewhere, he admitted candidly and humbly that he had acted in a state of ignorance and unbelief. (1 Tim. 1:13)

In dramatic fashion, God had halted Paul's reign of terror against the church. By the intervention of the Lord Jesus on the Damascus road, Paul's thinking and way of life was transformed completely. (Acts 9:3-22)

To this end, the apostle writes in verses 15 and 16:

Galatians 1:15-16

As a Pharisee, Paul knew the Law and the Prophets. He had been versed thoroughly in all of the OT Scriptures. He knew, therefore, of the sovereign power and activities of God over nations and over individuals. Paul knew also that—as with the prophet Jeremiah—God had set him apart from his mother's womb. Even before he had been born, God had set Paul apart for his own purpose and glory. (Jer. 1:5)

This, however, was not as a Pharisee ('separated one')—although even this too was part of God's plan. Rather, God had set Paul apart to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Now, looking back on these momentous events,

the apostle Paul recognised that it was by God's grace that he had been called and appointed to this supreme work. (Cf. Acts 13:2)

In verse 16, the apostle continues by saying that God was pleased to reveal his Son in him.

According to God's own good pleasure, the truths concerning the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ were made known to Paul by direct revelation (cf. v.12). Thus, once more, the apostle declares his personal knowledge of the Son of God and of his gospel as being completely independent of any human sources.

God revealed his Son to Paul, and in Paul, in order that he might preach Him among the Gentiles. This Paul did—without consulting anyone, or comparing the content of his gospel message with that of the other apostles: i.e., those attached to the church at Jerusalem.

In verse 17, Paul continues:

Galatians 1:17

Paul emphasises the fact that he did not attempt to contact or consult with the other apostles, or with the Jerusalem church. Nor did he do so for some considerable time after his conversion. On the contrary, instead of conferring with the other apostles, Paul travelled immediately into the desert of Arabia. After spending some time in the seclusion of Arabia, the apostle then returned to Damascus in Syria.

Paul Meets Peter and James

Galatians 1:18-24

In verse 18, the apostle continues:

Galatians 1:18

In line with Jewish reckoning, the 'three years' mentioned here could be either three complete years, or one year and parts of two other years.

Only after this extended period, did Paul travel up to Jerusalem. Paul had decided to acquaint himself with Peter—the apostle to the Jews, and one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Clearly, this was Paul's first meeting with Peter or with any other apostle. During the fifteen days spent in Peter's presence, the apostle Paul must have learned a great deal about Peter's personal experiences and about his work. Peter, too, must have learned much about Paul, and about the work among the Gentiles to which the Lord had called him.

In verse 19, Paul continues:

Galatians 1:19

Peter was the only one of the twelve apostles present in Jerusalem when Paul made his visit. The other apostles were not present at this meeting—and Peter himself would shortly be leaving Jerusalem to visit other areas.

Paul tells us that the only other person present on this occasion was James, the Lord's brother. James, of course, was not one of the original twelve apostles, although, probably, he would be considered an apostle in the more general sense of the word.

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This James had not been converted until after he had encountered the Lord Jesus raised from the dead. Then, James had believed. Now, however, James the Lord's brother was one of the leaders or 'pillars' of the church at Jerusalem. (Gal. 2:9; see also 1 Cor. 9:5; 15:7)

Among the leadership, apparently, the apostle Paul met only Peter and James on this particular visit to Jerusalem. Thus, in verse 20, the apostle writes:

Galatians 1:20

Paul is adamant. The situation was exactly as he had described it—and God is his witness to this fact.

(We must remember what the apostle is doing here: He is providing precise details of how he received the gospel directly by a revelation from the Lord Jesus Christ himself. In addition, he is asserting his complete independence of the other apostles as far as his apostolic authority and commission to preach Christ is concerned. By doing this, Paul is preparing to refute utterly the false accusations of the Judaizing teachers who were causing so much trouble throughout the churches of Galatia.)

Returning to Paul's itinerary, the apostle writes in verse 21:

Galatians 1:21

Following his two-week visit to Jerusalem, the apostle Paul then went to Syria (which includes both Damascus and Antioch), and Cilicia (which includes Tarsus—Paul's hometown). Both Syria and Cilicia lay outside the borders of Israel. Syria was situated to the north of Israel, and Cilicia lay even further afield, in what is now eastern Turkey. Cilicia was the Roman province next to Galatia.

Paul may have been well known by the churches in those areas, but he was not known personally at all by the churches of Judea. Thus, in verses 22 and 23, the apostle writes:

Galatians 1:22-23

None of the believers in the Judean churches had met Paul personally; at least, since his conversion. If they had met him at all, it was as their bitter enemy and persecutor. Now, however, they had heard that this same persecutor of God's church had been converted to faith in Christ. In addition, they had heard that this man Paul was now preaching the faith that formerly he had despised and belittled, and which he had tried so desperately to destroy. (Acts 9:20-22)

And how do the Judean Christians respond to this news concerning their former violent persecutor? Paul tells us in verse 24:

Galatians 1:24

Initially, some of the Jewish disciples (as opposed to the believers in Galatia and elsewhere) had been extremely suspicious and apprehensive when they heard that Saul of Tarsus had been converted. Perhaps he was only using this profession as a devious method for gaining access to the church. It required the intervention of Barnabas to calm their fears and to ensure that Paul was accepted as a fellow-believer. (Acts 9:26)

Ultimately, the believers had accepted that Paul had indeed been truly converted, and that this former violent persecutor of the church was now the Lord's obedient servant.

Realising that the Lord had dealt mercifully and graciously with Paul, and with the persecuted church, the believers then praised and magnified the name of the Lord when they heard this most welcome news. Now, God was using their former bitter enemy to bring the gospel of eternal salvation to multitudes of men and women everywhere.

Such is the power of God to transform the lives of even those who are most vehemently opposed to him and to his church. Glory be to God and to his Son, who possesses such power and who exercises it in accordance with his infinite wisdom, love, mercy, grace, and compassion—and yet in perfect justice and righteousness.

Galatians Chapter 2

Paul's Formal Visit to Jerusalem

Galatians 2:1-10

As far as his divine commission to preach Christ was concerned, the apostle Paul had asserted his complete independence from the Jerusalem apostles. Paul also had asserted total independence from those other apostles concerning how, when and where he had received the gospel message.

Now, in chapter 2, Paul reveals that fourteen years had passed before he had discussed his gospel with the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Thus, in verse 1 of chapter 2, the apostle writes:

Galatians 2:1

On an earlier occasion, Paul had made his way to Jerusalem to acquaint himself with Peter. However, on that brief two-week visit, the two apostles had not formally discussed at length the gospel message that Paul was then preaching to the Gentiles. On that occasion, such a discussion would have been irregular, since—apart from Peter and James—no other apostles or elders were then present (Gal. 1:18-19).

Fourteen years passed, therefore, before Paul returned to Jerusalem for a formal discussion with the apostles and elders about his teaching. (It is uncertain whether we should reckon the fourteen years from the time of Paul's conversion, or from his previous short—two-week—visit to Jerusalem.) In any event, a lapse of fourteen years means that Paul must have been preaching the gospel for well over 10 years—independently of James, Peter, John and the other apostles in Jerusalem. Now, however, Paul has decided to return to Jerusalem to confer with the church leaders there. On this occasion, Paul brings with him some of his companions, including Barnabas and Titus.

But why did the apostle decide to consult the Jerusalem church leaders after fourteen years of preaching independently of those leaders? Paul answers this in verse 2:

Galatians 2:2

At this time, Paul was operating from the church at Antioch in Syria. However, some brothers had come to Antioch from Judea. These individuals had been telling the church at Antioch that circumcision and observance of the Mosaic Law were essential to salvation. This teaching caused much trouble and distress among the believers at Antioch. (Acts 15:1,5)

To resolve this issue, Paul and Barnabas decided to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the apostles and elders there. In Galatians 2:2, Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem in response to a revelation. This statement is not inconsistent with the history given in Acts chapter 15. It is perfectly possible that God revealed his will on this matter to Paul, either personally or to the church leaders at Antioch (or both) in response to their earnest prayers. (Acts 15:1-2)

This is the first occasion on which Paul set forth the full details of his gospel message to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. In the first instance, Paul did this in private—to the

principal leaders of the Jerusalem church¹. Paul needed to ensure that the apostles at Jerusalem were in full agreement with his gospel, and with his stand against the Judaizing brothers. If not, then Paul concedes that it might appear that he had been running his race in vain.

Of course, the risen Lord Jesus had commissioned Paul directly and had revealed to him the message of the gospel. Thus, if this apostle had been running in vain, it was not in respect of his apostolic authority or of the gospel that he preached. Rather, it could only be in respect of how his ministry might have appeared to the Jerusalem apostles. Paul had to ensure, in private session with them, that their version of the gospel did not differ in any way from that preached by himself. Paul would be concerned particularly about the relationship of the law to the gospel, as understood and taught by the Jerusalem church leaders. He would be concerned also about the position of the Jerusalem leadership concerning the circumcision party who were now perverting the gospel of Christ.

These false brothers of the circumcision party who had come to Antioch from Judea had told the church there that circumcision and the observance of the Mosaic Law was an integral part of the gospel message and an essential element of salvation. This, of course, had caused considerable distress to the believers at Antioch. These believers had accepted Paul's message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

However, when Paul recounted this situation to the apostles at Jerusalem, he tells us in verse 3:

Galatians 2:3

The circumcision party at Antioch had inferred that the leaders of the Jerusalem church supported their brand of teaching. They told the church at Antioch that James, Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem advocated circumcision, and therefore it ought to be observed by this and all other local churches.

Paul makes it abundantly plain, however, that neither James nor Peter—or any other of the apostles at Jerusalem—had given these Judaizing teachers their official support or authorisation. If the Jerusalem leadership had supported circumcision, they would have required Titus—a Greek—to be circumcised in conformity with their alleged instructions and practice. The fact that they laid no such requirement on Titus demonstrated that James, Peter and the other apostles did not support the circumcision party.

In verse 4, Paul reminds his readers of the reason why this Jerusalem church visit and conference had become necessary:

Galatians 2:4

The visit to Jerusalem was necessary because the Judaizing teachers at Antioch were disturbing the believers there with their false teaching. They were jealous of the freedom in Christ enjoyed by the believers at Antioch (and elsewhere). This freedom was not licence, or freedom from all restraint. Rather, it was freedom from the requirements of the Jewish ceremonial law, and from all its ritual demands and obligations—such as circumcision.

The false brothers could not accept that a person could be saved by God's grace, through faith alone—as Paul and the other apostles were proclaiming. Rather, these false teachers insisted on the necessity of adding the works of the law to the message of faith in Christ. Paul, therefore, had gone to Jerusalem to resolve this matter once-and-for-all. The apostle did not intend to yield for one moment to the demands of the legalistic teachers.

¹ James (the brother of the Lord), Peter, John and possibly others. GL.

Thus, in verse 5, Paul writes:

Galatians 2:5

At no time, did the apostle Paul yield to the insidious demands for circumcision—even although the apostle was placed under immense pressure to do so. Paul was determined that the truth of the gospel would not be compromised by false and legalistic teaching. The message proclaimed by Paul and the other apostles magnified the grace and mercy of God—not the efforts or works of men.

Paul had resolved that God's message of salvation by grace would prevail—and nothing else. This way, the apostle held out hope of eternal salvation to all who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and trusted in him alone for their salvation.

The Judaizing teachers made much of the church at Jerusalem, and of the apostles there. This perhaps is because a party of converted Pharisees belonged to that church, and may have been lending support to the circumcision party at Antioch. Indeed, these Judaizers themselves may have come from the Jerusalem church originally. If so, it is certain that the apostles or elders of that church did not send them out.

The false teachers even implied that the apostles and leaders of the Jerusalem church were superior to Paul, and—if necessary—could overrule Paul in matters of doctrine or practice. These false brothers thus inferred that Paul was wrong not to support or practice circumcision, since this had been sanctioned by the Jerusalem church.

This, of course, was false. Although individual members of the Jerusalem church (such as the former Pharisees) may have supported circumcision, the apostles or elders there had given no such sanction or approval. Nor did James, Peter or any other apostle at Jerusalem have the authority to overrule Paul in doctrinal or any other matters. Paul was responsible to the Lord alone for the message he proclaimed. (Acts 15:5-6) He was not in any way subject to the apostles at Jerusalem. Rather, as an apostle whom the Lord Jesus had called and commissioned directly, Paul stood on exactly the same ground, invested with precisely the same authority in preaching and teaching, as did Peter or any other of the apostles who had been with Jesus from the beginning.

Thus, concerning the true position taken by the Jerusalem church leaders toward Paul and his message, the apostle writes in verse 6:

Galatians 2:6

The Judaizing teachers had attempted to elevate the apostles at Jerusalem above Paul, and every other servant of God—despite what the Lord Jesus himself had taught about such matters. (Matt. 20:25-28) Paul, however, rightly refuses to recognise any such distinctions among the Lord's servants. As far as Paul is concerned, James, Peter, John and the other apostles stood on exactly the same level as himself. Indeed, the apostle Paul reminds the false teachers that God does not judge by external appearances. Nor does God judge a man's position by the estimation or esteem of men.

Thus, Paul concluded that—although the false brothers claimed superiority for James, Peter and the other apostles at Jerusalem—these same leaders at Jerusalem added nothing to Paul's message.

Although they had the opportunity to do so, the apostles and other leaders at Jerusalem did not advise, or even request, Paul to augment the message of the cross with the teaching about circumcision. If they had, the message of the cross would no longer have been a message of grace, but a message of works (ch. 3:1-3).

Paul continues in verse 7:

Galatians 2:7

Far from being at variance with the teaching of the Jerusalem apostles, both they and Paul realised that they had been proclaiming exactly the same gospel message. They realised and accepted unreservedly that the Lord had appointed Paul to proclaim his name among the Gentiles, just as the same Lord had appointed Peter to proclaim his name among the Jews.

Thus, in verse 8, Paul writes:

Galatians 2:8

The false brothers at Antioch were doing all in their power to drive a wedge between the teaching of Paul and the teaching of the apostles at Jerusalem. Clearly, this was a devilish attempt to split the church—under the guise of upholding the teaching of the OT Scriptures. These OT Scriptures, however, were being abused and distorted by the false teachers to suit their own beliefs and practices.

Despite the claims made by the false teachers, the gospel preached by both Peter and Paul was exactly the same gospel. Moreover, it was the same because it originated from the same source, and sought to glorify the same Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, although Paul had been preaching this gospel for well over 10 years before this meeting in Jerusalem, it was found—unsurprisingly—that both he and the apostles at Jerusalem were united in their message.

Thus, in verse 9, Paul mentions the leaders of the Jerusalem church by name:

Galatians 2:9

James, Peter and John were renowned as ‘pillars’ of the Jerusalem church. The ‘pillars’ are those who provide stability, support and leadership to the fellowship. (Cf. Eph. 2:20; Rev. 3:12)

At this point, we should note that the James mentioned was James the Lord’s brother—not the apostle James. The apostle James had been associated with this church in earlier years. However, at the time of this conference, the apostle James had been put to death by Herod. After this, the only remaining James was James the Lord’s brother. (Acts 12:1-2)

According to some historians, James the Lord’s brother came to occupy a prominent position in the Jerusalem church, perhaps as its bishop. He was much favoured by the Jews, possibly because they believed he was more in sympathy with their cultural viewpoint. James, however, did not give his support to the Pharisaical element within the church, or to the Judaizing teachers.

James, Peter and John agreed wholeheartedly with the work being carried on by Paul and Barnabas, and they gave to the latter their fullest support and approval. They agreed that they were united together in the Lord’s work, and they fully accepted that Paul and Barnabas should continue their work principally among the Gentiles, while the Jerusalem church continued its work principally among the Jews. At no time, however, did the apostles at Jerusalem request Paul to adapt his gospel message to suit the beliefs of the Judaizing teachers. (Acts 15:23-31)

In verse 10, the apostle Paul continues:

Galatians 2:10

The only formal request made by the apostles at Jerusalem was that Paul and his companions should continue to remember the poor in a practical manner—as they had done in the past. Paul, of course, was more than willing to accede to this request. He was as deeply concerned as they were, not only for the spiritual wellbeing, but also for the material and physical wellbeing of the poorer believers at Jerusalem and its environs. (Cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-3)

Paul Rebukes Peter**Galatians 2:11-21**

Earlier in this letter, Paul had firmly established his complete apostolic independence from Peter and the other apostles and elders at Jerusalem. Paul had shown that he had received a direct commission from the Lord himself to preach the gospel among the Gentiles. As an apostle, therefore, Paul stood on exactly the same level, invested with exactly the same authority, as was James, Peter or any other apostolic church leader.

Therefore, in verse 11, we read concerning Paul:

Galatians 2:11

Here we see Paul acting in defence of the truths of the gospel. Furthermore, because Peter had acted the hypocrite in a public manner, the apostle Paul challenged Peter in a public manner. Thus, it is evident that Peter could stand corrected by Paul—or by any other apostle. It is evident, too, that Paul was invested with full authority to administer such correction to another apostle. This is all the more noteworthy since Peter, the apostle in question, was considered to be one of the principal leaders of the Jerusalem church.

However, what offence had Peter committed to necessitate such a sharp rebuke from Paul?

The apostle Paul tells us in verse 12:

Galatians 2:12

The apostle Peter had travelled to Syrian Antioch from Jerusalem together with some other Jewish believers. While at Antioch, it had been Peter's practice to share meals with the Gentile believers. This, of course, would have been strictly forbidden to Peter as a Jew. As a Christian, however, the Jewish dietary and ceremonial laws did not need to be observed—and Peter realised this. However, many converted Jews—especially those of the Pharisaic party—still believed it was utterly wrong to share meals with Gentile believers.

While, Peter was still at Antioch, some of these strict Jewish Christians arrived there from Jerusalem. We are told that they came from James—one of the principal leaders of the Jerusalem church. However, although James may have understood their legalistic viewpoint, it is extremely unlikely that he gave them any official sanction or encouragement to propagate those views or to teach them at Antioch. This would have been completely opposed to the letter that the Jerusalem church leaders sent to the church at Antioch. (Acts 15:22-31)

Nevertheless, the arrival of these legalistic individuals at Antioch clearly alarmed and frightened the apostle Peter. In spite of the fact that Peter had been doing nothing worthy of censure—but rather of commendation—the apostle was greatly concerned about what

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the circumcision group might think of him. In Peter's case—as so often in our own case—the Scripture is true: *Fear of man will prove to be a snare...* (Prov. 29:25a)

Peter greatly feared the criticism of these Jewish Christians—if indeed they were Christians, and not just unregenerate false teachers. Thus, the apostle began to withdraw himself—slowly but surely—from eating with the Gentile Christians. He began to eat only with other Jewish Christians—at separate tables. This, of course, was sheer and inexcusable hypocrisy on Peter's part. This is why Paul found it necessary to rebuke Peter sharply and publicly.

Peter had set the worst possible example to other believers:

- Firstly, he had shown that all believers are equal in Christ, and that God recognises no distinction between Jew and Gentile.
- Secondly, however—whenever the circumcision party had arrived from Jerusalem—Peter had promptly shown that some believers are more equal than others, and that, by implication, God does in fact recognise a racial, moral or spiritual superiority among the Jews.

Peter's refusal to eat with Gentile believers also meant, of course, that he could not share with them in the breaking of bread. This, too, required separate tables!

Clearly, this situation was intolerable and completely unacceptable. If the church was to remain united in Christ, then such a dichotomy between its members could not be permitted. Therefore, acting out of love for the body of Christ and for the benefit of the church as a whole, the apostle Paul takes immediate steps to resolve this issue. Only by so doing, can he demonstrate the essential unity of the church.

That this matter was indeed very serious, and demanded Paul's immediate intervention, is demonstrated in verse 13. There, concerning Peter, it is written:

Galatians 2:13

When Peter began separating himself from the Gentile Christians, other Jewish believers did the same. Thus, two distinct groups of Christians began forming within the church at Antioch.

Once more, Peter was in the wrong for encouraging a split among the people of God, and for implying by his example that the Gentile Christians were inferior to the Jewish Christians. Indeed, there should have been no distinction at all between Jewish and Gentile Christians, since—in Christ—all such distinctions had ended. (Eph. 2:14-22; 3:6)

However, the situation at Antioch had become so serious that even Paul's faithful companion, Barnabas, was enticed into the same error. Because he was Jewish by race, Barnabas had aligned himself with Peter and the other Jewish Christians. This, however, may very well have left the Gentile believers at Antioch without effective leadership.

It seems apparent from these events that the apostle Paul may have been absent while this situation was developing. It seems inconceivable that—if present—Paul would have allowed the situation to reach this sorry state without intervening much earlier.

However, as soon as Paul became aware of the matter, he dealt with it in the strongest possible terms. Paul was not prepared to let anyone compromise the truths of the gospel to suit the views or opinions of men. This was true of the apostle—no matter how influential or powerful those men might be, and no matter how strong or sincere the beliefs that they held. If allowed to continue unchallenged, those views or opinions would simply split the church in two.

Thus, in verse 14, Paul declares:

Galatians 2:14

As soon as Paul observed the hypocrisy of Peter and the other Jewish Christians, he acted. He noted that they were not walking a straight course as far as gospel truths were concerned. Therefore, Paul challenges Peter in front of the entire church at Antioch. (Lev. 19:17; 1 Tim. 5:19-20)

Peter was a Jew by race—as was Paul. Yet, when he became a Christian, God showed Peter that he did not recognise racial distinctions, or distinctions between the ‘clean’ and the ‘unclean’. (Acts 11:3-18) Peter had accepted this revelation from the Lord, and it had transformed his attitude toward the Gentiles. No longer did he consider Gentiles as unclean—but as those from among whom God would call his elect, even as from among the Jews. Thus, Peter was happy to associate with Gentiles, although his particular calling was to labour principally among the Jews. (Acts 10:9-16,28)

Probably, while ministering to the Jews from the church in Jerusalem, Peter would be associating mainly with other Jews. Therefore, there would be little opportunity for him to eat with Gentile believers, and thus incur the criticism of the strict Jewish Christians (or pseudo-Christians) at Jerusalem. Now that he had come to Antioch, however, Peter took the opportunity to exercise his freedom in Christ and to share fellowship with the Gentile believers there. Peter began living like these Gentile Christians, accepting their more liberal customs concerning food.

However, as soon as the strict Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem—purportedly from James—Peter began to dissociate himself from the Gentile believers. Instead, he began living again like an unconverted Jew, accepting their strict customs concerning food and drink. Peter did this because he feared the criticism of the Jewish brothers from Jerusalem. But by so doing, Peter was clearly implying that Gentile believers ought to live like Jewish believers: i.e., they should be prepared to adopt the Jewish dietary and ceremonial laws, to avoid giving offence to converted Jews. (Acts 11:1-4)

This, of course, was a complete denial of Christ’s teaching and example on this very matter. It touched on Jewish food laws—laws that were not applicable to anyone converted to Christ. (Mark 7:18-20) Furthermore, had not the Lord Jesus himself eaten with tax collectors and sinners? (Mark 2:16) And if the Son of God could eat with tax collectors and sinners, how much more ought the Lord’s people to share meals with their own brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of racial or religious origin?

However, Peter’s observance of Jewish dietary and ceremonial laws also touched on the very heart of the gospel message. For, if certain Jewish ceremonial laws were still valid, then all Jewish ceremonial laws and rituals must still be valid. (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-5; Heb. 9:9-10)

Clearly, this presented an intolerable situation: one that threatened to undermine the entire gospel message of justification by faith. Thus, in verses 15 and 16, Paul writes:

Galatians 2:15-16

As a Jew—and especially as a former Pharisee—Paul was thoroughly acquainted with the OT Scriptures. He knew the Law and the Prophets in detail; and he knew that the law of ceremonies and ordinances could not save anyone. (Rom. 3:19-20)

Yet, until he came to know Christ, Paul had not realised that a person could be justified only through faith in *God’s Son*, and not by keeping *God’s law*. However, once Paul—and every other Jew—had come to know and accept this glorious truth, they had placed their faith unreservedly in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the finished work that the Lord Jesus

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had accomplished on their behalf. Through faith—and by the sovereign grace of God—they had been justified or pronounced righteous in God's sight.

However, if God justifies a person through faith, then clearly justification is a gift of God's grace. Moreover, if a gift of God's grace, works of the law cannot be a contributing factor. Otherwise, grace would no longer be grace. (Rom. 4:16; 11:5-6)

Nevertheless, lest this truth should be misunderstood or misapplied, Paul is careful to add in verse 17:

Galatians 2:17

Like very many other people, a Jew seeks to earn his righteousness and find justification in God's sight by works of the law, or by doing his very best to please God. Paul, and other genuinely converted people, had come to realise that they could never have been justified by works of the law, or by 'righteous' acts. Rather, they had learned that God justified them—or declared them righteous—by his grace, through faith in Christ alone.

The Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the entire law of God on the believing sinner's behalf. Christ also paid the penalty demanded by the law against sin, acting on the believing sinner's behalf. Those, however, who seek justification before God, must freely acknowledge their own sinfulness and their own total inability to achieve righteousness by their own personal efforts.

However, does the fact that, by his grace, Christ accepts and justifies sinners mean that Christ promotes or encourages a person's sin or sinful way of life? Does it mean that such a person should disregard totally the requirements of God's moral law? Most certainly not! The law has its place—to condemn sin, and to lead us to Christ.

(However, there can be no excuse for living without regard to the precepts or principles of God's moral law (Rom. 3:5-8); although, of course, this has no bearing on a person's salvation.)

Christ redeems and delivers a believing sinner *from* his sin and *from* his sinful way of life. However, having accepted that salvation is by God's sovereign grace, through faith in Christ, a person cannot then revert to observing the works of the law *in order to* retain his salvation. From beginning to end, salvation is a gift of God's grace.

A genuine believer, of course, will produce the fruit of the Spirit. He will engage in many good works or deeds. However, he will never do so as a means of contributing toward, or retaining, his salvation: For he realises that God granted him that salvation as a gift—through faith in Christ. However, even this saving faith, too, is a gift of God. (Rom. 3:22-24; Eph. 2:8-10)

In verse 18, the apostle Paul writes:

Galatians 2:18

Before his conversion, the apostle Paul (then, Saul of Tarsus) believed fervently in salvation by works. He had built up an entire system of legal righteousness based on this principle. In consequence, Saul opposed most vigorously all those who taught otherwise—especially those who taught salvation through faith in Christ.

However, when Saul of Tarsus encountered the living Christ on the Damascus road, this shattered all his pre-conceived notions regarding righteousness with God. For the first time in his life, Paul came to realise the truth: God imparts righteousness to a person through faith—not through works. This righteousness comes because of God's undeserved grace and mercy toward the sinner—not because of the sinner's desire or effort.

This meant that observance of the moral law, or of the ceremonial laws, could never win the righteousness that comes from God. This righteousness is imputed to the believing sinner purely as a gift of God's grace. It meant also that physical descent from Abraham could not win this righteousness from God. It was purely a gift of God's free and sovereign grace.

When Paul accepted this way of righteousness through faith, he had to set aside forever the attempt to achieve righteousness through keeping the law of ceremonies, statutes and ordinances. He also had to set aside permanently the idea that a person could merit God's righteousness through such things as good or charitable works. Even although those acts were highly commendable, and approved of by God, they could not lead to a person's salvation.

This also meant that other things in the Jewish law, such as circumcision, were no longer valid. It meant, too, that God no longer recognised any distinction between the clean and the unclean—whether concerning foods, or concerning the Jewish and Gentile nations.

That which applied to Paul, applied equally to Peter and to every other truly converted Jew. If, however, Paul or Peter were to seek to restore the old legal methods, they would be insulting God. They would be despising God's grace, and inferring that Christ's work on earth and death on the cross was somehow insufficient to atone for sin. But this precisely was what the apostle Peter had done by turning back to Jewish teaching, and by separating himself from the Gentile believers. By rebuilding that which he had once destroyed—i.e., the observance of the ceremonial laws, and the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile—Peter had made himself a law-breaker in the eyes of God. (Eph. 2:13-22)

However, for the believer in Christ, the Jewish laws of ceremonies, statutes and ordinances can have no place. This was the message that the apostle Paul was attempting to convey to Peter.

No one can be justified by observing these laws, or even by keeping the moral law itself. This is because no fallen human being is capable of keeping every commandment perfectly throughout his entire lifetime—as the law requires. Therefore—although God's law itself is holy, righteous and good—justification cannot be achieved through the law, but can be received only as a gift of God's grace. (Rom. 7:12,14)

Continuing this thought, Paul writes in verse 19:

Galatians 2:19

The law of God, as summarised in the Ten Commandments, is still relevant and applicable to the lives of every human being today—regardless of race, colour or creed. As a principle of civil and legal justice and moral righteousness, this law has not been annulled. God will still judge fallen mankind according to this law. However, concerning spiritual matters, this law is incapable of providing salvation, of justifying a person, or of effecting a sinner's reconciliation with God. This was never its intention.

The law of God is intended as a temporary judicial or forensic instrument. Additionally, when applied to a person's heart by the Holy Spirit, this holy law is intended to achieve the following results (among others):

- to expose a person's sins, and convict him of his guilt.
- to demonstrate that person's innate sinfulness, and his complete moral and spiritual bankruptcy and helplessness.
- to show to that person why a holy and righteous God must justly condemn him as a sinner.

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However, while doing this, it is also intended to magnify the grace of God toward lost and sinful humanity.

The law, therefore, has its place—to demonstrate a person's bondage to sin, and to show him the penalty due to his sin. If, however, a sinner is to be justified, he must be released from the demands of the law. The only way to be released from the demands of the law is through death.

To use an everyday example: According to the God's law—and leaving any exceptions aside for the moment—the only way that a wife can be released from the law concerning marriage, is through the death of her husband. Death annuls the moral, spiritual and legal bond existing between herself and her former husband. However, until he dies, she remains bound to him permanently by the law of marriage.

So it is with the law's demands over the sinner. The only way that a sinner can be released from the law that exposes his sin, convicts him of his guilt, and results in his condemnation, is through death. Then, the law ceases to have any claim over him, and therefore can no longer condemn him. (Rom. 7:1-2)

But how can a sinner die to the law?

He 'dies' to the demands of the law when, through faith, he becomes united to Christ—as Paul is about to explain. Thereafter, declares Paul, he lives a new life for God, and for God's glory.

In verse 20, Paul explains further what he means by dying to the law:

Galatians 2:20

We die to all the claims of the law against us when we believe on Christ. Because, when a sinner believes on Christ, he is united to him in his crucifixion: i.e., his old sinful nature or person is put to death with Christ on the cross. Therefore, that old sinful nature, or that old person, no longer lives. Rather, God has created a new nature within that person; he has formed him anew. By his Holy Spirit, Christ himself indwells the believing and redeemed sinner—who now has become a child of God. (Rom. 6:4-11; Gal. 5:24; 6:14-15)

Thus, Paul and every other redeemed child of God, now lives their bodily lives through faith in God's Son. In gratitude and devotion, they now yield their entire life to him and to his service, for they recognise just how deeply Christ must have loved them—and still loves them. (Eph. 2:4-7)

In addition, they appreciate with all their heart the fact that Christ gave himself up to the agonies and punishment of the cross, enduring the just wrath of God against sin. For they realise that he did so—not for his own sins (of which he had none)—but for their sins, and for their redemption. Glory be to God!

In verse 21, Paul concludes chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians by saying:

Galatians 2:21

(21) I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"² (NIV)

The Jewish Christians from Jerusalem had insisted on adding law works to God's grace, thereby nullifying grace as an outright gift of God. (Cf. Rom. 3:31- 4:5)

² Some interpreters end the quotation after verse 14. [NIV footnote to Gal. 2:21]

Paul, however, will have none of this. If these legalistic Christians—if indeed they are Christians, and not just unregenerate false teachers—if these legalists are prepared to set aside God's grace, then Paul most certainly will not do so. For Paul—and for the entire Christian gospel—grace remains paramount.

Paul has already shown—and will continue to show—that it is impossible to attain to righteousness through keeping the law, simply because no one can keep the law perfectly (apart from the Lord Jesus, who was true God and true and perfect Man).

However, had it been possible for a person to achieve righteousness through observing the law, then Christ died in vain. But, in fact, Christ died to make atonement for sin. Christ died and rose again to effect the believing sinner's justification.

Those believing sinners, however, receive righteousness as a gift of God's grace, through faith in the Son of God. They do not receive it as a reward for their own efforts, or strivings after righteousness. This was precisely the mistake being made by the Jews of Paul's day in their attempts to win acceptance with God. It is precisely the same error made by many sincere people today. (Rom. 9:30 - 10:4)

Galatians Chapter 3

Faith, not Works, Justifies

Galatians 3:1-14

The apostle Paul now turns his attention once more to the Galatian churches as a whole. What had happened at Antioch in Syria with the circumcision group had been repeated in other places—including Galatia. However, instead of recognising this insidious error for what it was and rejecting it, the Galatian churches had accepted it.

Amazed at their simplicity in this regard, Paul declares to the Galatian believers in verse 1 of chapter 3:

Galatians 3:1

Paul sounds almost exasperated by the naiveté and conduct of the Galatian believers. The apostle refers to these believers as ‘foolish’. The word Paul uses here is not the usual scriptural word for ‘foolish’—meaning morally or spiritually deficient. Rather, it is a word that implies sufficient knowledge, but a complete lack of understanding and discretion. It implies inexcusable gullibility on the part of the Galatians. Thus, Paul asks ...*Who has bewitched you? Who has cast a spell over your minds? Who has hypnotised you with their lies, and blinded your minds to the truth?*

Paul, of course, is not speaking of literal witchcraft or hypnotism in this place. Rather, the apostle is speaking of the power of persuasion—the kind of pernicious persuasion employed by the beguiling false teachers in an effort to convince their hearers that they are presenting the truths of God’s Word (Gal. 1:6-7; 5:7-8). This is a perfect example of Satan or his servants disguising themselves as angels of light—i.e., in imitation of the holy angels, or messengers of God. (2 Cor. 11:13-15)

These false messengers, of course, had deceived or beguiled the Galatians. They had accepted the false doctrines of the legalising teachers—believing that the acceptance of those doctrines was necessary to complete their salvation.

Clearly, however, the Galatian believers had lost sight of Paul’s message of faith. In that message, the apostle had set before them clearly Christ as crucified for their sins, Christ as raised for their justification, and the Holy Spirit as indwelling them for their sanctification and ultimately their glorification. Paul had presented Christ to them as the All in All. The Galatians, however, had forgotten the very fundamentals of their faith. More accurately, they had been deceived by the fine-sounding arguments of those who purported to know the Scriptures—but who were in fact distorting the Scriptures to suit their own viewpoint.

Thus, in verse 2, Paul asks:

Galatians 3:2

Paul challenges the Galatians to think of how they came to know Christ. Did they come to faith in Christ, and did they receive the Spirit of God, through obeying the law, or through believing the message that Paul had proclaimed to them? —i.e., the message of Christ crucified.

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Of course, no answer was needed. They received the Spirit of grace and of sanctification through believing and obeying, or responding to, the gospel—not through obeying the law. (Acts 2:38-39; Rom. 10:17)

Thus, in verse 3, Paul continues:

Galatians 3:3

Accepting, then, that God had justified them by his grace, through their faith in Christ, then the Galatian believers had accepted that their salvation was a gift from God. It was not a reward for works performed. Clearly, then, they began with the Spirit—and they received the Spirit as a gift from God. How, then, could these believers expect to continue their new Christian life by means of mere human effort, and not by means of the Spirit of God? How, after receiving God's salvation as a gift, could they think of returning to the old Jewish principle of earning their salvation by obeying the regulations, rituals and ceremonies of the law?

Thus, in verse 4, Paul continues:

Galatians 3:4

The word translated 'suffered' may be understood to relate to the sufferings or persecution endured by the Galatian believers in Christ's name. However, it may simply be referring to their experiences as Christians; and thus Paul would be saying, "Have you *experienced* so much for nothing?"

Paul is pointing out that all their sufferings—or all their experiences as believers—are to no avail, if they are not justified through faith in Christ. Indeed, as Paul will assert later in this letter, if they return to the practice of circumcision and to the observance of the Jewish law, they are repudiating justification by faith. In this case, the offence of the cross is removed. Then, all their sufferings or persecution would have been pointless. (Gal. 5:11)

Paul, however, is careful to throw some doubt on this conclusion by adding at the end of verse 4: *...if it really was for nothing*. Paul is trying to show the Galatians the folly of their error, and yet at the same time encourage them to repent and re-commit their lives to the Lord in faith and obedience to him and to his Word alone. However, to emphasise the distinction between law and grace further, the apostle adds in verse 5:

Galatians 3:5

The working of miracles among these believers was a demonstration of the Holy Spirit's presence and power. It proved to the early church that God was indeed present and at work in their midst.

In addition, God granted to every one of his blood-bought children the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit had called and regenerated them. The Spirit had granted them the ability, the desire and the willingness to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit had set them apart and was sanctifying them. The Spirit had marked or sealed them as God's permanent possession and he guaranteed to keep them secure and to bring them to eternal glory.

From first to last, the indwelling gift and work of the Spirit—and the miraculous gifts of the Spirit—were granted by God. When they were still dead in trespasses and sins, the believers of Galatia had received the Spirit as a gift of God's grace. By that grace, they had placed their trust entirely, freely and willingly in the Lord Jesus Christ.

However, since all this had come by grace through faith, then—of necessity—this had excluded works of the law. For the gift of grace cannot co-exist with the works of the law. If full salvation is an outright gift of God’s sovereign grace—which it is—then this salvation cannot also be merited or earned by any individual: not even in part.

Paul now demonstrates this very important principle by citing the example of Abraham. Abraham’s history was well known among the Jews and among Jewish Christians. However, it was also sufficiently well known among the many Gentile Christians of the Galatian area.

These Galatian believers would have learned of Abraham from their Jewish neighbours or brothers in Christ. In addition, however, they would have learned of the patriarch from the apostle Paul. The apostle would certainly have cited the example of Abraham when he was preaching, or contending against those who were using Abraham as an example of justification by works. Of course, as Paul is about to demonstrate, Abraham was not justified by works (e.g., by submitting to the ordinance of circumcision, or to any other commands of God). Rather, Abraham was justified in God’s sight through his faith in God’s promises.

Thus, in verse 6, the apostle writes:

Galatians 3:6

{Cf. Gen. 15:6}

God made a promise of great blessing to Abraham—and Abraham believed God. Therefore, Abraham’s faith in God was reckoned to him as righteousness.

To summarise briefly the incident in Genesis to which Paul is referring in this verse: In Genesis chapter 15, the Scripture tells us that God appeared to Abraham (then known as Abram) in a vision. At this time, Abraham was an old man, and childless. He had no natural born heir to inherit his estate. God, however, promised Abraham that even yet he would have his own son. The LORD took Abraham outside, and told him to count the stars in the sky. Then the LORD added,

“So shall your offspring be.” (Gen. 15:1-5)

In Genesis chapter 15 verse 6, the Scripture adds:

(6) Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Thus, God credited or imputed righteousness to Abraham through his complete faith in the apparently impossible: Abraham believed God’s word, and accepted that God would most certainly fulfil that word. Abraham, therefore, was not justified in God’s sight because of any works he had done, but because of his faith in God’s promise. Justification, therefore, comes through faith—not through works.

Of course, this represents only a single incident in Abraham’s life of faith, confidence in, and obedience to God. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul cites other examples of Abraham’s faith, and of the fact that faith rather than works justified him. (See, for example, Romans 4:1-25)

Justification: Paul v James

Sometimes, it is suggested that James and Paul differed regarding Abraham’s justification—but this is not so. James speaks of a different period in Abraham’s life—long after God had justified him by faith. There, Abraham proved the reality of his faith when he was

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prepared to offer up his son Isaac in obedience to God's command. (Jas. 2:20-24; Gen. 22:9-12; 16-18)

James says that God justified Abraham by his works—i.e., by this act of obedience to God's command. However, the justification of which James speaks is not the same as that of which Paul speaks, for it happened 30 to 40 years afterward.

We may demonstrate the distinctions as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;">The ACT of Justification <i>Justified by Faith (Paul)</i> (Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:6)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">The EVIDENCE of Justification <i>Justified by Works (James)</i> (Gen. 22:9-12; 16-18; James 2:20-24)</p>
<p>Referring to the occasion when the LORD promised to make of the childless Abraham a great nation, <i>Paul</i> speaks of Abraham being justified by faith: i.e., God reckoned Abraham righteous by his <i>faith</i> (in God's promise).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This speaks of Abraham's initial and complete justification before God, which the patriarch received as a gift of God's grace. <p>Believers are justified solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ. However, once justified, the indwelling Holy Spirit causes them to bring forth fruit (or evidence) of their new life in Christ.</p>	<p>Referring to the occasion many years later when God commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac in sacrifice, <i>James</i> speaks of Abraham being justified or considered righteous by <i>works</i> (of obedience to God).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This speaks of Abraham's subsequent practical demonstration of his renewed life, and corresponds to the fruits of the Spirit in a believer's life. <p>Believers are not justified <i>unto salvation</i> by producing the fruits of the Spirit. Rather, they produce the fruits of the Spirit because previously God has saved and justified them by his grace, and through their faith in the promises of the gospel.</p>

Thus, James insists (rightly) that a real faith must be a living, acting, obedient faith—otherwise, it is a dead faith; it is a false profession of faith. (Jas. 2:20,24)

It is, of course, true that those whom God justifies by faith, must endeavour—by God's grace and by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit—to live a life that honours, pleases and glorifies God. In other words, he or she must live a righteous and holy life.

However, Paul's point remains valid: concerning his initial justification before God (and in respect of his salvation), Abraham was justified through his faith in God's promise—not through any works of obedience. Thus, in verse 7, the apostle continues:

Galatians 3:7

The Jews made much of their physical descent from Abraham. They claimed that they were Abraham's children because of their biological descent from the patriarch. Thus, the Jews inferred that—as the children of Abraham—they were the chosen people of God: For, out of all nations on earth, God had chosen Abraham (or Abram), and had promised to bless him and his descendants. Thus, according to Jewish teaching, all who were circumcised were united to God in the Abrahamic covenant, and stood to share in the Abrahamic blessings. However, those who were uncircumcised had no part in God's covenant, or in the blessings promised to Abraham.

Influenced by this subtle—but faulty—form of doctrine, the false teachers had persuaded the Galatians that circumcision was essential to their salvation.

Predominantly, of course, the Galatians were Gentiles, and therefore uncircumcised. However, according to this false teaching, unless they submitted to the rite of circumcision, they could not be included in God's covenant with Abraham. Consequently, they must consider themselves excluded from the promised blessings.

Believing this to be true, the Galatians began submitting to the demands of the false teachers. They began supplementing the message of grace with a message of grace plus works. However, this amounted to a distortion of the true gospel—a perversion of the gospel of grace.

Paul, therefore, immediately seeks to repudiate this evil doctrine. The circumcision group taught that God justified Abraham because he had obeyed the LORD's command regarding circumcision. However, the false teachers conveniently overlooked two very important facts:

1. God had already justified Abraham by faith—*before* he was circumcised.
2. At the time God justified Abraham, he had as yet no son to circumcise.

Although circumcision was the *outward sign* of God's covenant with Abraham, it *could not therefore have been the grounds* of Abraham's justification. This is because Abraham had been justified by God before he ordained circumcision and made it a sign of his covenant.

This is the very point that the apostle Paul makes—both here and in Romans chapter 4. Moreover, by this argument, the apostle overthrows the arguments of the circumcision party. Paul has shown plainly that God justified Abraham through his faith in the promise: the promise that God would make of him a great nation, even when he had no child.

From this it follows, (reasons Paul), that the children of Abraham are not those who are physically circumcised (merely), but only those who have the same faith as Abraham had before he was circumcised. Moreover, this applies to everyone, whether they are circumcised or not (vv.26-29; Rom. 4:11-17; 9:7-8; cf. John 8:39). God never intended his blessing of justification and salvation to remain with the Jews alone. Thus, God declared to Abraham that—through his offspring—he would bless every nation on earth.

To this end, Paul writes in verse 8:

Galatians 3:8

{Cf. Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18}

The Scriptures, of course, are the Word of God; and what the Scriptures say is what God says.

From eternity past, God intended to include all nations in his plan of salvation (foreseeing, of course, the fall of Adam, and the necessity of redemption). To this end, the LORD God planned to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. Initially, this gospel would come to them through the Jews—for to them God would commit his Holy Word. (John 4:22; Rom. 3:2)

Again, the Gentiles would be taught that God justified a person through faith alone. Abraham, the man of faith, would become an example—not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. Thus, Abraham was the means through whom God would bless with salvation the entire believing world of all generations. This is what the apostle Paul means when he quotes or alludes to those Old Testament Scriptures that say concerning Abraham:

“All nations will be blessed through you.” (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18)

Thus, in verse 9, Paul continues:

Galatians 3:9

Those who receive the blessings of salvation (including justification) along with Abraham are those who have the same kind of faith as had Abraham. This applies to anyone of any nation, colour or creed who embraces and obeys the gospel message through faith—and through faith alone.

Paul has established that God justified Abraham by faith—not by works. In addition, the apostle has shown that all those who believe—as did Abraham—are the children of Abraham and heirs of the promise made to Abraham. However, regarding those who insisted that works had a part to play in attaining right standing with God, Paul declares in verse 10:

Galatians 3:10

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” {Deut. 27:26} (NIV)

This is a very solemn and sobering statement, and it demonstrates the utter futility of trying to gain righteousness (or justification) before God through observing the law. Everyone who relies on keeping the law as a means of attaining righteousness in God’s sight is under a curse. Why? It is because the law itself places a curse³ upon every individual *who fails to keep it in its entirety*.

No one, however, can keep the law in its entirety. For the Scripture says,

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23 NIV)

Therefore, the law cannot justify anyone—for by the law everyone stands condemned. By their own failure to keep God’s law perfectly, everyone stands under the abiding wrath and curse of God. (Jas. 2:10)

Thus, the Scripture is true which says,

“Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” (Deut. 27:26; 27:1; Gal. 3:10b NIV)

Thus, the law is seen to serve its intended purpose. That purpose is not to be the means of providing righteousness in God’s sight, but to show to all mankind their total inability to observe God’s standards, or to be saved by any amount of human effort.

The law itself rules out salvation by works: for the same instrument that pronounces a person ‘*guilty*’ cannot also acquit that person or pronounce him ‘*not guilty*’. And since that person is a sinner, then the law must justly find him ‘*guilty*’ and condemn him accordingly. Thus, by the law, everyone stands condemned. (Rom. 3:19-20)

To this end, the apostle Paul writes in verse 11:

³ *curse*: Gk., *katara*, imprecation—not *anathema* (GL)

Galatians 3:11-12

(11) Clearly no-one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." {Hab. 2:4} (12) The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." {Lev. 18:5} (NIV)

It should now be evident to everyone that the law cannot justify anyone—and this was never its intention. Nevertheless, although the law condemns a person and shows him his utter helplessness as far as achieving righteousness by self-effort is concerned, the law does fulfil another role: It proves convincingly to mankind that he cannot save himself. It forces all those who are willing to acknowledge their powerlessness in this regard to look beyond themselves for an Almighty Deliverer. In other words, the true purpose of the law is to act as an instructor and guide in order to lead a condemned sinner to Christ. In addition, the law's true purpose is to show a sinner Christ's power to deliver even the vilest offender—through faith (vv. 24-26).

Thus, the Scripture says, *"The righteous will live by faith."* (Hab. 2:4) The object of faith is, of course, Jesus the Son of God. (Rom. 1:16-17)

However, as Paul reiterates in verse 12, the law is not based on faith, but on unflinching obedience to all its commands and precepts. (Lev. 18:4-5; Rom. 10:5) The law brings a sinner under the curse of God. Grace delivers the sinner into the love and blessings of God. Thus, in verse 13, Paul writes:

Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (NIV; cf. Deut. 21:23)

Because of sin, therefore, every member of the fallen human race lies under the wrath and curse of God—and this justly, for sin is utterly reprehensible in God's sight. God's law condemns the sinner, but (apart from life-long perfect obedience) the law offers him no way of deliverance from sin or from its just penalty, namely, death.

Yet, God so loved fallen mankind that he was prepared to intervene. God did not set aside his just and holy law, but he sent his own Son to pay the penalty that the law demanded for our sin, and to secure our deliverance. Thus, in verse 13, Paul says that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. By his substitutionary and atoning sacrifice, Christ paid in full the penalty due to us. He redeemed us from the curse of the law by taking that curse upon himself. He endured the wrath of God against sin and against the sinner on our behalf. (Rom. 3:24-26; 8:3-4)

Paul says that it is written,

"Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Deut. 21:23 NIV).

As a rule, only criminals and other offenders were hung on a tree. Among the Jews in earlier times, those offenders were first executed, and only later were their dead bodies suspended on a tree or pole. This differed from the Roman form of execution where criminals were nailed to a cross or crucified while still alive.

Christ, then, was treated as though he were a criminal—although, of course, he was not guilty of any crime or misdemeanour. On the contrary, the Son of God remained absolutely pure and sinless. Yet, for our sakes, Christ became the accursed of God—that we might be ransomed, forgiven and reconciled to God.

Thus, in verse 14, Paul writes:

Galatians 3:14

Abraham was justified by faith, and he continued to live by faith. He trusted God and his Word implicitly, and he obeyed the Lord wholeheartedly in his journey through life. This does not mean that Abraham had no faults, or that he did not at times fall into sin. However, it means that he endeavoured—by God's grace—to live a life of faith: a life that honoured God. Because of his faith in God and his Word, the Lord blessed Abraham abundantly. He also assured Abraham that—through his seed—all nations would inherit the (spiritual) blessings bestowed on Abraham.

For the Gentiles or anyone else, however, to inherit these blessings, they must first be forgiven, declared righteous in God's sight, and thus be reconciled to God. To this end, Christ died as their Redeemer, and rose again to effect their justification in the sight of God. Christ achieved for them forgiveness of sins, justification in the sight of God, and reconciliation with God. Now that they had been reconciled—through faith in God's Son—the believing Gentiles inherited the blessings of Abraham (vv. 6-9,29). This included the salvation of the Lord, together with the promised gift of the Holy Spirit as a sign and seal of the Lord's ownership and of full and final redemption—including the redemption of their bodies. (Isa. 32:15-18; Eph. 1:13-14; Rom. 8:23-25)

The Purpose of the Law

Galatians 3:15-29

Galatians 3:15

At the beginning of this chapter, Paul had addressed these believers as 'foolish' Galatians. Now, in verse 15, the apostle returns to his more usual form of address by calling them 'brothers'. Paul had no desire to censure or rebuke his brothers and sisters in Christ, except insofar as this proved necessary to show them their very grave error in respect of the Mosaic Law. Paul's only aim is to correct their error, and to turn them again to the right way—the way of faith in God's Word and God's promises.

To illustrate further the difference between law and grace, the apostle makes use of an everyday example—a last will or testament. No one can add to, or subtract from, the terms of a last will and testament once it has been legally ratified. It remains unchangeable.

So it was with the covenant that God made with Abraham. Once the terms of that covenant had been ratified, it remained unchangeable. However, the covenant that God made *with* Abraham was based on the promise that God made *to* Abraham—and on Abraham's faith in that promise. Therefore, being in the nature of an unchangeable covenant, the promise was unalterable. Not even the entrance of God's law of Commandments 430 years later could change or modify the covenant or its terms in any way, since that covenant had been previously ratified to Abraham.

But to whom specifically was the promise addressed?

In verse 16, Paul answers this:

Galatians 3:16

{See Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7}

God's promise, and God's covenant with Abraham, was not addressed only to Abraham personally. Primarily and specifically, this promise was addressed to Abraham's Seed.

In this instance, Paul wants to emphasise that the promise was not referring to Abraham's seed or descendants in general (although these were included), but to one specific Seed or Descendant; namely, Christ. The promise is made in Abraham to him. Therefore, when Paul notes that the Scripture does not say, "*and to seeds*", but "*and to your seed*", the apostle was not unaware of the fact that "seed" is a collective noun. (As such, it would use the same form for singular and plural.)

Probably, Paul was referring to, and emphasising, the fact that this particular "seed" (or "Seed") was the fulfilment of the protoevangel. There, the Scripture says that the seed of the woman—referring primarily to one person, Christ—would bruise the serpent's head. (Gen. 3:15; Gal. 4:4-5; Heb. 2:14-16)

Abraham's promised Seed *par excellence* was to be the promised Redeemer, through whom God would bless all nations on earth.

In verse 17, Paul adds:

Galatians 3:17

(This verse connects with verse 15; verse 16 being an amplification of verse 15).

God had established an unchangeable covenant with Abraham. This covenant had been based on God's solemn and irrevocable promise to Abraham. Because Abraham had believed God's promise to make of him a great nation, God had justified him or reckoned him righteous in his sight.

God's promise to make of Abraham a mighty nation included within it the promise to bless every nation on earth. The means through whom this blessing would come to the Gentiles was through the promised Seed of Abraham—namely, the Messiah or Christ of God. This arrangement, then, constituted an unchangeable covenant. This covenant had to remain in effect until every detail had been fulfilled—i.e., until the Seed (Christ) should come. Only then, would God establish a *New Covenant*—fulfilling the promises of the *Old Covenant*. (Cf. Luke 1:67-79)

This means that the Abrahamic covenant could not be set aside, modified or otherwise altered by the coming of the Law of Moses, or by anything else. For God had bound himself by an unalterable oath to fulfil the covenant, which he had made to Abraham based on his own sovereign promise. (Heb. 6:13-18) The law, therefore—that God gave to Moses 430 years later—could not annul or alter the covenant previously established with Abraham. Abraham had been justified by faith in God's promise. Therefore, since the covenant remained in effect, the means of acceptance with God—*justification by faith*—also remained in effect.

God introduced the law (The 'Ten Words' or Ten Commandments) to set forth his holy and righteous standards in clear-cut terms. God's law was also intended to demonstrate to the people their total inability to attain to the level of righteousness that God required by keeping the law: For, clearly, they could not keep it. No fallen, sinful human being could attain to God's standard of righteousness by the exercise of human effort.

God's law, therefore, emphasises sin by exposing its culpability and condemning it. However, since the law cannot deliver from sin or from its penalty, it also emphasises the need for salvation—not by law, or by any works of obedience—but by grace. Thus, although the giving of the law demonstrated God's perfect justice and righteousness, it also pointed to God's sovereign grace and mercy. (Rom. 4:13-18)

In verse 18, the apostle Paul continues:

Galatians 3:18

God's promise to Abraham was not confined to the guarantee of earthly blessings alone, but also—and more importantly—of heavenly and eternal blessings. Abraham looked forward to a city whose architect and builder was God. (Heb. 11:8-10,13-16)

Abraham was granted this inheritance because he believed God's promise—not because he kept the Mosaic Law, or because of any human achievements. Abraham received the promised inheritance—earthly and heavenly—as a gift of God's sovereign grace. In any event, the observance of the law could not have contributed toward Abraham's inheritance; for, at the time, the law had not been given—and it would not be given for another 430 years.

Thus, what Paul was saying to the Galatian believers was that they had been justified by God's grace, through faith in the promises of the gospel. They had received their inheritance of eternal salvation and future glory based on these gospel promises. These promises reflected God's unchangeable Word, and could not therefore be revoked or nullified. However, if saved by grace through faith, the works of the law did not—and could not—contribute toward achieving or retaining their salvation. From beginning to end, their salvation was all of grace. Glory be to God who shows such grace and mercy to fallen, but redeemed, mankind!

What place, then, did the law occupy? God gave his law to Moses over 400 years after he had given his promise to Abraham, and hence after God had justified Abraham through faith. But why did God give his law 430 years later, since he had already enacted an irrevocable covenant of grace with Abraham?

Paul answers this question in verse 19a:

Galatians 3:19a

God gave the Law of Commandments to perform a very definite function. God had given an irrevocable promise to Abraham through faith, but he gave the law to Moses as an interim or temporary measure, to highlight, condemn and restrain sin, until the promised Seed should come.

God gave his Ten Commandments to set forth his standard of perfect righteousness for all mankind. These Commandments identified sin, and demonstrated to the children of Israel (and to all mankind) their inherently sinful nature and their utterly sinful character. Failure to observe the Commandments in full resulted in a person being declared 'guilty' of breaking God's law. Consequently, the law became the means of showing a person his total inability to attain to God's righteous standards by his own efforts. (Rom. 3:19-20; 7:7-13)

In other words, the law justly condemned a person's sin. Furthermore, the Commandments showed people that they could not possibly hope to attain salvation by keeping the law, since they found themselves totally unable (without moral or spiritual strength) to keep God's law perfectly.

Unlike the promise, however—which was permanent—the law was temporary. It was given until the promised Seed—i.e., Christ—should come. When Christ came, he fulfilled every detail of God's law on the sinner's behalf. He also paid in full the penalty due to the sinner for his transgression or falling short of the law.

The Law of Commandments is still an instrument to point out a person's sin, to condemn that sin, and to drive the sinner to Christ for salvation. Salvation, however, is of God's grace. The law cannot acquit anyone from the guilt of sin, because that same law has already condemned everyone for committing sin. The same instrument (the Law of God)

cannot both justify and condemn the same person. Nor can the sentence of condemnation or the penalty of death be remitted. That penalty must be paid in full—if not by the sinner, then by the sinner's perfect, sinless Substitute.

However, because the sinner himself cannot pay the penalty, except by death, he therefore can never escape the condemnation of the law. Therefore, the law of God can never be the means through which he is justified in God's sight. Thus, for sinners, the law is an instrument of death only and never a means of justification, life, or freedom from sin or its penalty.

In verses 19b and 20, the apostle Paul adds:

Galatians 3:19b-20

When God made his promise to, and covenant with, Abraham, he did so without the aid of an intermediary. God spoke to Abraham directly. The promise, therefore, is superior to—and takes priority over—the law. This is because the law was given to the people through an intermediary (Moses), and was put into effect by angels. (Cf. Deut. 33:2; Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2)

God, therefore, did not make a direct *personal* covenant with the people of Israel, as he did with Abraham. Rather, in the case of Israel, God delivered his law indirectly, *through the mediation of Moses*. (Exodus 20:18-21; Acts 7:38) From this, Paul asserts the priority of the promise over the law.

The idea that the law was only a temporary instrument to expose and condemn sin—and not to impart righteousness—was virtually impossible for the proud and legalistic Jews and Judaizing teachers to accept. They could not see why God would not accept a person's best efforts at keeping the law—even if they failed in some points. They concluded (wrongly) that the law must be opposed to the promises of God.

In anticipation of such an objection, Paul writes in verse 21:

Galatians 3:21

(21) Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. (NIV)

The apostle will not be accused of teaching antinomian doctrine. Paul makes it abundantly clear that the Law of God is not in any way opposed to the promises of God. Each has its rightful place within the divine plan. (Rom. 3:20-24,31)

Indeed, says Paul, had a law been given through which a person could find life, righteousness and salvation would have come by this means. However, no such law exists. Moreover, as the matter stands, righteousness and salvation could only be achieved by keeping God's law perfectly for an entire lifetime.

Yet, even this would not satisfy the law's demands. For—even supposing a person could do this—the Law of God would still condemn him. Why? Because, although (theoretically) that person may never have committed any sin throughout his entire lifetime—the law could do nothing about the sinful nature with which he was born. It must still condemn him for that inherently sinful nature.

Thus, by the law, the sinner stands condemned. Thus, too, it is proved conclusively that the law cannot impart eternal life. It can bring only condemnation, judgment and death upon the sinner. In addition, this sentence of condemnation applies to the whole of unregenerate humanity.

That sin is universal, Paul proves in verse 22:

Galatians 3:22

The entire world lies under the power of sin. All mankind stands condemned, not only for his sinful nature, but also for the results of that sinful nature: i.e., his sinful thoughts, attitudes, inclinations, and deeds. All of these proceed from his fallen, corrupt nature. (Rom. 5:12; cf. 1 John 5:19)

However, if all mankind stands condemned by the law, the law cannot be the means of providing their justification. Justification must come by some other means. Nor can this other means be mixed with some elements of the law (or righteous deeds)—such as grace plus righteous acts or grace plus good deeds. If a sinner is to be justified—when he has been rightly condemned—then he must be justified by grace alone. To introduce works of the law in any sense is to invalidate grace.

However, what does the apostle Paul say in verse 22?

The whole world is a prisoner of sin: i.e., to a greater or lesser extent, mankind is enslaved by their sinful attitudes, thoughts, words and deeds. People are thus enslaved by the law, however, that they may be released from slavery—not through law-works or good deeds—but through faith in God's promise. This promise of salvation, or release from the penalty of and slavery to sin, comes by God's grace and through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—the promised Seed. All who believe in this method of justification—justification by God's grace through faith in Christ—receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a gift of that grace.

Nevertheless, as has been said previously, the law had its rightful place in God's divine plan (and in our lives). Thus, in verse 23, Paul declares:

Galatians 3:23

Before we came to realise that salvation could be found only through faith in Christ, we were held prisoners by the law. The law condemned our sin and rightly bound us for the offences we had committed. On all sides, God's holy law was our accuser, our righteous judge, and our prison guard. We could not circumvent the law or escape its pronouncements. For the law made no provision for appeal or acquittal, since, by our own transgressions, we had been condemned—rightly and justly.

This, of course, was one of the main purposes of the law: To show us the reality, seriousness, and power of sin—and its detestable nature in the sight of an all-holy God. Again, the law's purpose was to demonstrate to us that we were helplessly and hopelessly lost; we remained completely alienated from God by our sin, and we stood in great need of redemption. However, this redemption could not come by the law, but—as was to be revealed by God's Spirit in his Word—only through faith, and only by the sovereign grace of God.

Thus, in verse 24, Paul summarises this aspect of the law:

Galatians 3:24

(24) So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ⁴ that we might be justified by faith. (NIV)

⁴ Or *charge until Christ came* [NIV footnote to Gal. 3:24]

God gave his law for a gracious purpose: It was intended not merely to expose, magnify the heinous nature of, and condemn sin, but principally to drive the condemned sinner to seek a deliverer outside of himself. Thus, the holy law of God became our instructor or tutor to lead us to Christ.

This tutelage effect of the law forced the sinner to acknowledge freely his sin and guilt. It forced him to acknowledge that God's law justly condemned him of all charges against him. It forced him to acknowledge his utter helplessness before God, and his offensiveness to God. Yet, at the same time, it caused the truly concerned sinner to seek the mercy and compassion of the Lord—for the Lord God had revealed his everlasting love for sinful men and women. He had made available a way of redemption and reconciliation for all who called upon his name.

Thus, it is proved that God's law is holy, just and good (Rom. 7:12): For it leads to the one and only way of redemption for fallen individuals—whoever and wherever they may be.

God's law applies equally to all, without respect or persons. In God's sight, and as far as the need of redemption is concerned, it places everyone on the same level. No matter who or what a person is, he or she may experience salvation by God's grace, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. No one can receive the salvation that God offers to mankind in any other way. (Acts 4:12; 13:38-39; Rom. 10:4-13)

From the foregoing, we might observe that, for a person to understand fully how much he or she needs to seek the salvation of the Lord, that person must be made fully aware of the heinous nature of their sin. This is done through the application to their hearts or minds of God's holy law.

Thus, in realising their very great danger, spiritually and eternally, they are prepared by the Word of God (in this case, the law) to respond to the convicting and convincing power and influence of God's Holy Spirit, and to the love of God in offering them full redemption through faith in his Son. Consequently, for all who are so convicted and convinced by the Spirit of God, they are then converted by the Spirit unto newness of life through genuine godly repentance and faith in Christ. And, in Christ, they experience complete and final deliverance from the condemnation of the law, and the full measure of God's abundant and everlasting love for him or her as his redeemed and adopted child. God imparts all this, and much more, to every redeemed sinner by his sovereign grace.

Galatians 3:25

Now, however, that we have received Christ by faith, we continue to live by faith. The law can no longer hold us or condemn us, and it is no longer employed as our tutor. Christ has redeemed and released us from its bondage, power and tutelage. He has fulfilled every demand of the law on our behalf. The law therefore has no further claim on us. It has fulfilled its purpose. (Matt. 5:17)

As Paul writes to the believers at Rome:

- (1) Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,⁵
(2) because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Rom. 8:1-2 NIV)*

Who, therefore, are the true children of Abraham? Who are the true children of God? Is it—as the Judaizers claim—those only who adhere to God's law; or is it those who have faith in God's promise?

⁵ {Some later manuscripts Jesus, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit, [NIV footnote to Rom. 8:1]}

Paul answers this in verses 26-27:

Galatians 3:26-27

The true children of God are the children of the promise: i.e., those who have faith in God, as did Abraham. The object of their faith is the Seed promised to Abraham—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Everyone who has been baptised⁶ into Christ has been clothed with Christ. Everyone whom the Spirit of God has regenerated, and who has been crucified, buried and raised with Christ, has been united with Christ. (Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Cor. 12:13)

Through faith, God has imputed his Son's perfect righteousness to the believing sinner's account. Now, God has justified the sinner. God has declared him righteous (or 'not guilty') and has clothed him with, or credited to his account, Christ's perfect righteousness.

Once again, the apostle Paul emphasises that justification by faith removes all distinctions among mankind. Since this righteousness comes to fallen men and women by God's free and unmerited grace, no one can claim that righteousness as of right, or of merit, or of justice, or of reward. It is a sovereignly bestowed gift. It is owed to no one, but God gives it to everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in true repentance and genuine faith.

Thus, to show the impartial nature of this great salvation, the apostle Paul writes in verse 28:

Galatians 3:28

When a person becomes a Christian, God does not remove his or her individuality or any other distinctive characteristic—unless it is incompatible with faith in Christ. However, in relation to the gift of salvation, everyone stands on the same level. Regardless of nationality, race, colour, creed, position in society, sex, or any other distinguishing factor, that person is a sinner. He or she is under the wrath and condemnation of God, and of God's holy law.

If, therefore, that person is to be saved, he or she will be saved by God's *grace*—irrespective of who or what they are in this world. In addition, if they are to be saved, they will receive that salvation according to the will and purposes of God.

Again, by God's sovereign grace, they will be enabled—by the working of the Holy Spirit—to do what an unregenerate person is unable to do by himself: namely, to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Until, by his grace, God operates through his Holy Spirit in effectual calling and regeneration, a sinner remains spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. He is, therefore, completely powerless or unable to exercise saving faith until the Spirit of God empowers him to do so. Of course, the sinner exercises repentance and faith freely and willingly. However, he does so only because—by this time—the Holy Spirit has regenerated his soul and given him the ability.

The Judaizing teachers, who were causing so much trouble among the Galatian churches, asserted vigorously that only those who had been circumcised were the true children of Abraham. Paul had just refuted this pernicious and untrue argument by show-

⁶ baptised: Probably, Paul is referring to spiritual baptism (at regeneration or the new birth), where one is said to be 'baptized in or by the Spirit'. (GL)

ing that God's covenant with Abraham was based on a promise—a promise in which Abraham believed and thereby was reckoned righteous in God's sight.

The blessings of God's covenant—and of salvation—therefore, had nothing to do with circumcision. Circumcision was introduced later as an outward sign and seal of the covenant that God had already entered into with Abraham. Therefore, we see that the children of Abraham are those who believe in God's promise—as Abraham did. Moreover, since, ultimately, the promise concerned a Seed descended from Abraham, those who have faith in the promised Seed are Abraham's true children.

Thus, in verse 29, the apostle writes:

Galatians 3:29

Ultimately and principally, Christ is the Seed whom God promised to Abraham. Therefore, all who belong to Christ belong also to Abraham: i.e., they are his true (spiritual) children. Thus, all the blessings promised to Abraham include also Abraham's true children. When, for example, God says that he will take Abraham and his children to himself as his own chosen people, then God calls all believers as his own chosen people. When the Lord promises to be with Abraham's descendants and to bless them on this earth, and in the heavenly realms, then this promise of blessing applies to all believers in Christ; for they are the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

We who believe the promises of the gospel are Abraham's heirs. But our inheritance does not lie only or principally in this world, but—as with Abraham who anticipated a heavenly dwelling—our real inheritance is laid up for us in the world yet to come. How great indeed are the promises of God! (Heb. 11:8-10)

Galatians Chapter 4

God's Sons and Heirs

Galatians 4:1-7

In chapter 4, the apostle Paul again illustrates the divine purpose of the law in conducting a sinner to Christ (ch. 3:23-25). Thus, in verse 1 of chapter 4, the apostle writes:

Galatians 4:1

At the end of the previous chapter, Paul had said that all believers were the sons (lit., *children*) of God, Abraham's true seed, and heirs of God's promise (Gal. 3:26-29). In our present verse, however, Paul points out that—so long as the heir is a child (or a minor)—he has no advantages over a slave. Even although the child may be the potential owner of the entire estate, he does not benefit from that estate so long as he remains a minor.

In verse 2, Paul continues:

Galatians 4:2

As a child, the heir remains under the supervision of guardians and trustees. On behalf of the parents, these administrators carry out all the day-to-day management of the estate on the child's behalf. They also oversee the child's welfare and education.

This arrangement continues until the time set by the father in his disposition: in this case, the father's last will and testament. When his child attains to the age set, or when he reaches the age of majority, then the child inherits the part or whole of the estate that his father has bequeathed to him.

Now, says Paul in verse 3, this principle applies to the heirs of God's inheritance:

Galatians 4:3

So too with those who are to become the children of God, during the years of their 'minority': i.e., prior to their redemption and adoption into God's family. They are no better off than slaves. They are not among God's redeemed and adopted family; therefore, they have no inheritance or other privileges in God's household. On the contrary, they are enslaved to sin and to the basic principles of this world. (Col. 2:8,20-23) At this time, they are unconverted men and women, abiding under God's righteous wrath and curse. (John 3:36) They live according to their natural desires and inclinations.

This was the situation with the Galatian believers, prior to their conversion to Christ.

Concerning their knowledge of God, they may have learned only the first principles. For Jews, this would be what they had learned through the Mosaic Law and their religion more generally. For the Gentile majority among the Galatians, however, it would be what they had leaned or assumed from their pagan religions. The Gentiles may have known only that which God had revealed to all mankind about himself in his natural creation, together with that which God had written on their minds and consciences about himself. However, the revelation of God in nature, and in their human constitution, was sufficient in itself to leave them inexcusable concerning God's existence, divine nature, power and glory.

Therefore, even with this limited knowledge, all mankind remained fully accountable to God. (Rom. 1:20; 2:15)

Perhaps, then the Gentiles had received no more than an elementary schooling in 'religious' matters, which probably was of a distinctly pagan nature. Undoubtedly, some at least would have been involved in the worship of earth, wind, fire or water (elements sometimes representing the ancient pagan deities). To a greater or lesser extent, they may also have been involved in occult practises such as astrology, spiritism (or spiritualism), and other forms of demonic practises. This would be the most that could be expected of the majority of Gentiles at that time, excepting only those who had become proselytes to the Jewish religion.

Perhaps—as in the case of the Jews—the basic knowledge of God in nature, and in their conscience, had been augmented by formal religious instruction, including the teaching of the Mosaic Law. (Historically, Abraham, Isaac and their descendants were the chosen people of God, and all those who had faith in God's promise to Abraham belonged to God.)

For unconverted Gentiles, however, the knowledge of God as revealed in nature and conscience remained intellectual knowledge only. In very many cases, however, the Gentile peoples grossly distorted God's revelation of his existence, divine nature, power and glory in the natural creation by their pagan attitudes and practises. Even so, the revealed and innate knowledge of a Divine Being was sufficient to grant to all mankind a satisfactory awareness of the one true God, and to render them fully accountable to God for their actions. Nevertheless, this knowledge by itself was insufficient and incapable of making them God's children, even had they been inclined (which they were not) to seek God's ways. At this time, therefore, the unconverted Galatian Gentiles had no claims on—and no rights to—the inheritance of God. In fact, they stood alienated from God's family and household, and condemned by God's just and holy law.

Nevertheless, in his great love, grace and mercy, God had determined to redeem from lost mankind—including those to whom Paul is writing—a vast multitude from every nation on earth. Those, he made—and continues to make—his own children and heirs by redemption and by adoption. (John 1:12; 3:16)

Thus, in verses 4-5, the apostle Paul writes:

Galatians 4:4-5

At the specific time that he had set from eternity, God sent his own Son into the world. The Son had always been with his Father, and possessed all the attributes of his Father—including his eternity, power and glory. (Mal. 3:1; John 1:1-3) Now, however, the Son of God humbled himself—without divesting himself of his divinity—and took upon himself the form of a servant. The Son ever remained truly God, yet he also became truly man. (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; John 1:14; Phil. 2:6-8)

Jesus, the Son of God, was born of a woman. By the divine working of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was miraculously conceived, without paternal aid, in the womb of the virgin Mary. He was born and remained without sin, but his birth into this world placed him under the constraints of God's law. (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:10-12)

In accordance with God's eternal plan for the redemption of lost sinners, the Lord of glory fulfilled every detail of God's law on the sinner's behalf. He also bore the full penalty of the law against sin—bearing the wrath and judgment of God—again, on the sinner's behalf. (Matt. 5:17) Thus, by his perfect life and atoning sacrifice, Jesus redeemed them from the penalty and curse of the law by becoming a curse (or accursed) for them (Gal. 3:13; Col. 2:14; 1 John 4:9-10).

He did this, says Paul to the Galatians in verse 5, that they might receive the full rights as sons. Thus, God adopted them as his own children, and made them heirs in the fullest sense possible or imaginable.

This plan of redemption, then, infers the apostle, is entirely of God's grace. It is not of obedience to the law of ceremonies or ordinances—as the Judaizing teachers would have you believe.

That believers are in fact the children and heirs of God, Paul proves from verse 6:

Galatians 4:6

The proof that the Galatian Christians (and any other regenerated believers) were now children and heirs of God was the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and lives. Through the Lord Jesus' perfect atoning sacrifice, they had been reconciled to God and had received the indwelling Holy Spirit, who was to remain with them forever. However, if any person did not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, he did not belong to Christ. That person, therefore, had no part or place in God's inheritance. (John 14:16-18; Rom. 8:9)

Those, however, who had been regenerated and who were being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, were the true children and heirs of God. The Spirit was the seal and guarantee of their adoption by God. Again, the Holy Spirit's presence in their (or any other believer's) life is the absolute assurance that they would inherit everything that God had prepared for him or her—both in this age and in the age to come. (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14)

Thus, says Paul to the Galatians, because we are God's sons and daughters, we cry out to God as our very own and personal Father in heaven; and we do so using the diminutive, 'Abba.' (*Abba* was an Aramaic term of endearment for 'Father', but it has no exact equivalent in English. (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15))

To return to Paul's remarks in verse 6, and to the necessary consequences that flow from them: We know that our heavenly Father loves his own children with an everlasting love. We know too that he will never remove his love from us. Yet, when necessary, our Father in heaven will discipline us in love. He does this to prepare us for all that awaits us in glory, and which he has promised to us in Christ Jesus. (Heb. 12:3-13)

Thus concludes Paul in verse 7:

Galatians 4:7

Now, says Paul to the Galatian believers, you are no longer slaves. You are no longer without an inheritance. You are no longer under the law, nor are you in bondage to the law with its rites, ceremonies and ordinances.

You are no longer controlled by the basic principles of this world. You are no longer restricted by the limited revelation of God in nature and conscience alone; and, in the case of Jews, to the knowledge of God imparted by oral tradition or by the Mosaic Law. On the contrary, through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, and through your faith in the person and redemptive work of Christ, God has made you his sons and daughters. Moreover, since you are God's children by adoption, God has made you full heirs of his inheritance, and joint-heirs with his own Son⁷, Jesus Christ. (Rom. 8:16-18)

Nevertheless, surely you must see (infers Paul to the Galatians), that you received your sonship or adoption by the sovereign grace and mercy of God toward you—even while you were still sinners, and powerless to help yourselves. (Rom. 5:6) Out of his abundant

⁷ Son: Jesus is God's Son *by nature*. Believers are God's sons and daughters *by adoption*. (GL)

grace and mercy, God's Spirit regenerated your souls, enabling you—freely and willingly—to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, by his grace, God regenerated you and adopted you as his own children and heirs.

However, if it is by grace, then adherence to the law of statutes, ceremonies or rites such as circumcision cannot contribute toward your salvation. Nor are they required to retain your salvation, or to advance you in it. From beginning to end, God's salvation is of grace. You are saved by God's grace, and you continue to live by faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you. (Col. 2:6; Gal. 2:20)

Paul's Concern for his Spiritual Children

Galatians 4:8-16

Paul could have closed this subject at this point in his letter. However, the apostle is still greatly concerned about the influence the Judaizing teachers had been exerting over the minds of the Galatian believers. Thus, he finds it necessary to expand further on the true purpose of the law, and of the law in relation to grace.

To this end, the apostle writes in verse 8:

Galatians 4:8

Before their conversion to Christ, many of the Galatians followed pagan gods and occult practices. Being ignorant of the true God, they worshipped false gods or idols, and devoted themselves to pagan rituals and ceremonies in an attempt to appease those false gods, or to win their favour. However, the very nature of their pagan worship and ritual actually enslaved the worshippers and made them prisoners. They became prisoners, not only to the demands of a false and useless religion, but also to the many unclean and vile practices connected with pagan worship. (Rom. 1:20-31; 1 Pet. 4:3-4)

Pagan gods, of course, had no real existence. Nor could the true God ever permit his holy name to be represented by such non-entities. Nor, again, could he permit anyone to approach or worship his majestic presence by means of those false gods. (Cf. Acts 17:29-30) In fact, as Paul says to the believers at Corinth, that which the Galatians were devoting themselves to was, in reality, the worship of demons. Those demons assumed the guise of 'gods' (so-called). They hid behind a mask of (false) spirituality, and they were capable of exercising evil spiritual powers over those who became involved with them. (1 Cor. 10:19-20)

(It is by the exercise of very similar evil spiritual powers that fallen and sinful mankind is blinded by the '*god of this world*' (Satan) from seeing—i.e., from comprehending in order to believe—the truths of the gospel. (2 Cor. 4:4) This is why regeneration by the Holy Spirit is an essential prerequisite to repentance and faith in Christ: For only the Holy Spirit cannot revive those who are dead spiritually in trespasses and sins; and he alone can remove the satanic veil that blinds their minds to the truth, morally and spiritually.)

Such, too, represented the situation of the Galatians, before God called them to a saving knowledge of his Son. In their case, however, they would have been more deeply involved in pagan beliefs and practices than many unconverted people today.

Concerning the Galatians, Paul writes in verse 9:

Galatians 4:9

Paul cannot understand the direction these Galatian believers have been taking. The apostle points out to them that they are fully aware of the one true God and of the one and

only true way of salvation and worship through faith in Christ Jesus. He infers that they have committed themselves wholeheartedly to following this way—the way of the cross.

Indeed, Paul declares that—of themselves—the Galatians had not sought and found the true and living God. In their sinful, spiritually dead, morally blind, unregenerate state, they had neither the desire nor the ability to ‘know’ God in this way. On the contrary, asserts Paul, God sought and found you—he ‘knew’ you, or claimed and called you—even while you were still in your sins, and enslaved to pagan beliefs and practices. (Cf. Matt. 11:27-30)

However, when God called you, he drew you to himself in order to reveal his Son in you. Furthermore, when you heard the message of redemption through faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus, you abandoned your pagan ways to follow Christ. (Cf. John 17:1-8)

How, then—asks Paul—are you now turning back to exactly the same kind of useless ritual and ceremony which you once abandoned? Granted, you may not now be returning to your former *pagan* rituals and ceremonies. However, you are in very great danger of turning to *Jewish* rituals and ceremonies. Whether Jewish or pagan, however, rituals and ceremonies are among those beggarly elements that form the basic principles of this world. In respect of justification or sanctification, those things are utterly powerless to achieve the desired aim (salvation).

In its time, Jewish ritual and ceremony was God-ordained. It formed the elementary building blocks of Jewish worship, praise and sacrifice to God. But all who believe in Christ have passed this elementary stage, for the Lord Jesus Christ is God’s ultimate Sacrifice for sin. Therefore, the basic principles relating to types and shadows of the Messiah or Saviour do not apply—and *must not be made to apply*—to your new life in Christ (vv. 3-7; Col. 2:20-23; Heb. 7:18-19).

However, if you commit yourselves to such rituals and ceremonies, you will again become enslaved to a system of rules and regulations: in other words, a system based on law-observance. This system, however, is a system that cannot—and *was never intended to*—justify anyone, or to assist in his or her sanctification (Gal. 3:3).

In verse 10, the apostle Paul gives an example of the kind of ritualism or ceremonies to which he is referring:

Galatians 4:10

Under the terms of the old covenant, God had instructed Israel to observe specific events in the calendar. These included such occasions as the various appointed feasts at different seasons of the year. The three principal festivals were:

- The *Passover* (or, the feast of unleavened bread) (Ex. 12:1-51; 23:15)
- The *Feast of Pentecost* (or, the feast of harvest, weeks, or firstfruits) (Ex. 23:16; 34:22; Num. 28:26), and,
- The *Feast of Tabernacles* (or, the feast of ingathering). (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:33-43; Deut. 16:13)

On other occasions, Israel was required to observe the weekly Sabbaths (Lev. 23:1-3) and the Sabbatical year (Ex. 23:10-11), the feast of Trumpets (Num. 29:1-6), the years of jubilee (Lev. 23:1-35; 25:10-13) and other significant occasions.

Each of those occasions had a specific purpose in Israel’s history and religious worship, and each formed a part of the nation’s service to God. None of those special days,

months or years, however, was intended—*in and of itself*—to be a means of justification or sanctification through ritual observance.

Although certain days—such as the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) (Lev. 16:3-10)—were extremely important events in the calendar, the celebration of the day itself did not lead to justification or the forgiveness of sins. Rather, forgiveness of sins, and salvation as a whole, were provided through the people's faith in God's Word concerning the atoning sacrifice that was made on that Day. (Rom. 3:21-28; 8:3-4)

Frequently, however—at the time Paul was writing—Jewish teachers were inferring that strict observance of such days, months and years would ensure a person's acceptance with God.

For the Christian, however, these special events in the calendar formed no part of his worship or service to God. For example, by the atoning and once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the celebration of the Day of Atonement has been completely fulfilled and abolished. (Cf. Heb. 9:26; 10:10-14)

With the exception of the Lord's Day (replacing the Jewish Sabbath), none of the celebrated days, months or years was relevant to, or necessary for, the believer. The Christian, however, could observe certain days—such as a festival of (harvest) thanksgiving—*voluntarily*, if he wished to do so. Similarly, today, the church celebrates special occasions such as Easter and Christmas. This is done voluntarily, however. These days were not instituted by God and they form no part of any required duty or ritual. They are celebrated as an expression of worship and praise to God and to his Son. The observance of special dates, therefore, must not be made a condition of acceptance or worship in any church fellowship. (Rom. 14:5-6; Col. 2:16-17)

Pagans, too, observed special days, months, and years—often connected with astrological signs and seasons. They observed these special events to honour their false deities and to indulge in vile pagan revelry. Those pagan festivals formed an integral part of their religious ritual and worship. Thus, Paul is the more amazed at the Galatian believer's return to observing special events in the calendar.

Probably, on this occasion, the Galatians had not turned back to their old pagan ceremonies. It is more likely that—under the influence of the Jewish false teachers—the Galatian Christians had turned instead to the observance of Jewish special days, months and years. Whether Jewish or pagan, however, this represented a return to the basic principles of religion, or to the elementary principles of this world. However, to revert to such ritualism and ceremonies—whether Jewish or pagan—was to depart from living by faith in Christ.

Thus, in verse 11, Paul exclaims:

Galatians 4:11

In the past, Paul had laboured hard among the Galatians. Fearlessly and faithfully, the apostle to the Gentiles had proclaimed to them the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and had taught them to live by faith in their risen Lord. Now, however, it seemed that (humanly speaking), Paul had wasted all his efforts. Instead of holding steadfastly to the gospel, and to the apostles' teaching, the Galatian believers were listening to, and following, the false teachings of the Judaizers.

This teaching, however, insisted that the observance of rites and ceremonies was just as essential to salvation as faith in the gospel. This was the 'gospel' of faith *plus works*. It was a grossly distorted version of the true gospel: For the true gospel proclaimed and magnified the grace of God—not the works or 'good deeds' of man.

Paul, therefore, agonises over his Galatian brothers and sisters. The apostle fears that they will be drawn further and further into this false teaching and away from the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. (Cf. 2 Cor. 11:2-3)

To this end, the apostle writes in verse 12:

Galatians 4:12

Paul now appeals with more tenderness and warmth to his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ throughout Galatia. He exhorts those dear—but misguided—believers to become like himself.

Paul says he became like the Galatians. When endeavouring to win people to Christ, the apostle adapted his approach to the people among whom he was working. To the Jew, he became like a Jew—although without placing himself under bondage to the Mosaic Law. To the Gentile, Paul became like a Gentile—although without placing himself in a position of indifference to the teaching of God’s Word. The apostle Paul had become all things to all people in order to win them for Christ. However, Paul did not compromise the truth of the gospel for any individual or for any group of people. (1 Cor. 9:20-23)

Paul states to the Galatian believers that he had become like them so that he might win them to Christ—without compromising the truth. Now, the apostle appeals to these believers to become like him: i.e., to become as one who holds faithfully, steadfastly and lovingly to Christ, and to the truths of the gospel.

Paul further encourages the wayward Galatians by assuring them that they had not done him any wrong; nor had the apostle taken offence at their apparent rejection of his teaching. Paul is more annoyed at the false teachers for leading the Galatian believers astray, than with the Galatians for allowing themselves to be beguiled and misled.

In verse 13, the apostle continues:

Galatians 4:13

Much has been written about what Paul might have meant by this remark. Some have supposed that the apostle is referring to a condition such as malaria—in which case, the area in which Galatia lay was considered beneficial to recuperation from such illnesses. Others have supposed that Paul suffered from an eye condition, from epilepsy, or from some other previously unrecorded illness. Yet, others think that Paul is here alluding to his acknowledged thorn in the flesh. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

Clearly, then, no one can be certain of the exact nature of Paul’s illness. Whatever it was, however, the apostle says that this illness had afflicted him while he brought the gospel to the Galatian people.

From this, we learn that illness, chronic ill health, or disability is not necessarily a barrier to being called to, or engaged in, the Lord’s service. God can use people with any such condition to accomplish his purposes, in the right location; and to fulfil these eternal purposes at exactly the right time.

In verse 14, Paul writes:

Galatians 4:14

Paul now recounts how the Galatians had received him when he first came to them with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul’s ill health or disability may have proved a trial to the Galatians—but they did not despise him because of this. On the contrary, the Galatians received him as though he were a holy angel. They welcomed him as though he

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were a specially designated messenger from God, which, as an apostle, Paul was. (2 Cor. 5:20)

Again, the Galatians received Paul as if they were receiving the Lord Jesus Christ himself. This accords with the Lord's teaching when he said to his disciples that anyone who receives one of them in his name, receives him; and anyone that receives him, receives the one who sent him. (Matt. 10:40; see also Luke 10:16)

Also, it may be noted that—in Paul's day—many people considered illness an affliction or punishment from God because of some sin. (Consider the attitude of some of Jesus' disciples toward the man born blind. (John 9:1-3)) The Galatians, therefore, might have been tempted to view Paul's affliction as a punishment from God—rather than as something through which God's name would be glorified. However, they did not treat Paul with contempt or scorn on that account. On the contrary, they welcomed him and received his message as from the Lord Jesus himself.

However, since those early days of great joy in the Lord, a dramatic change had taken place in the Galatians' attitude toward Paul and toward his message. This radical change perplexed Paul considerably—although, of course, he knew who had caused it. Appealing to the Galatians, however, for an explanation of their almost bizarre turnaround, the apostle writes in verse 15:

Galatians 4:15

What had happened to the Galatian believer's first love and to their joy at finding Christ revealed in the gospel? They had abandoned their first love for Christ by setting their hearts on rituals and ceremonies, instead of the person of the crucified and risen Redeemer. The Galatians had lost their joy in the Lord and in their salvation, because they no longer lived by faith in the Son of God, but rather were depending once more on works of human effort.

However, when we fail to love Christ and trust him wholeheartedly for every aspect of our salvation, then eventually we will forfeit the blessings of assurance of sins forgiven. In addition, we will lose that sense of assurance of peace with God. We will lose also the sense of assurance of eternal life, and the joy of the Lord. Of course, our salvation itself remains eternally secure, since this is an unmerited gift of God. Nevertheless, we miss many other blessings when we do not walk by faith (Gal. 3:14; 5:22-23; Rom. 5:2; 15:13).

Paul knew that the Galatian believers were heading down this road. By giving heed to a false 'gospel', they were being drawn away from wholehearted devotion to Christ. They were being enticed further and further into error by those who cared nothing for the flock of God, but only for the furtherance of their own distorted beliefs, and for their own personal advantage.

Paul now illustrates the contrast in the earlier and later stages of the Galatians' spiritual journey. Originally, such had been their love for Christ and for his cause, that—had it been possible—they would have plucked out their very eyes and given them to Paul. This may be an intense figure of speech. Effectively, the apostle may be saying that the Galatians would have given him anything, had that been possible—even their most precious possession (considered as their eyes or eyesight). In other words, they would have gone to any lengths to help Paul in his work for the Lord.

The reference, however, may be an allusion to the possibility that Paul suffered from an eye condition or from poor eyesight, which the Galatians wished they were able to remedy or help. However, as far as a physical eye condition is concerned, we cannot establish anything definite from the use of this expression in the above verse. Other Scripture writers use this kind of expression metaphorically elsewhere in God's Word, and Paul may be

doing this here. He may simply be illustrating graphically just how zealous the Galatians had been for the gospel in the past—contrasted with their present attitude.

The important issue concerning Paul's condition was not the nature of the condition itself. Rather, it was the fact that Paul's illness, ill health or disability was no obstacle to the Lord or to Paul's being called and appointed to the Lord's service. Even if the illness or disability occurred after the Lord had called Paul to his service, the Lord must have foreknown that such a condition would afflict Paul during the course of his ministry. This, however, was not to result in the apostle's disqualification from active ministry on health grounds. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus had determined that his grace would prove sufficient to meet Paul's every need. (2 Cor. 12:9)

Continuing in verse 16, Paul asks:

Galatians 4:16

Paul had told the Galatians nothing but the truth—the truth as the Lord had revealed it to him: the truth that the apostle preached consistently to the Gentiles. This was the same truth of the gospel as the other apostles of Jesus proclaimed. This truth concerned the message of the Lord's life, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection on the third day. It concerned Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice of atonement for sin.

Since, however, Jesus the Lamb of God had taken away the sin of the world once-for-all, no more rituals or ceremonies could be required to signify the covering over of sin, or for any other typical purpose. Christ was the end of the law to all who believed. This was the truth—the truth of the gospel.

However, had Paul now become the Galatians' enemy because he had proclaimed to them this message of freedom from the law? Would they rather have had the message of bondage to legal works, and to rituals and ceremonies to which they had been accustomed in their former paganism? Would they rather forsake their freedom in Christ and adopt the Jewish forms of ritual and ceremony, as they were being persuaded to do by the Judaizers?

If so, they are returning to a state of slavery and misery. For observance of the law cannot set a person free to serve Christ. Neither can observance of ceremonies win the blessing of God, when God has sent his own Son to make atonement for sin and to fulfil every demand of the law *on the sinner's behalf* (Gal. 3:1-5). Forgiveness, therefore, and justification comes as a gift of God's sovereign grace. It is received by all who call upon the name of the Lord in true repentance and in genuine faith in Christ: i.e., in his person and work on the sinner's behalf.

Misplaced Zeal

Galatians 4:17-20

Galatians 4:17

Here we see something of the true purpose and motive behind the Judaizing teacher's desire to seduce the Galatian Christians: The Judaizers were extremely zealous to win followers to their own cause. Their motives for doing so, however, were evil rather than good. By enticing the Galatian believers to follow them, the Judaizers were driving a wedge between those believers and Paul. The false teachers were attempting to alienate the Galatians from Paul, so that—ultimately—the Galatians would come to depend on the Judaizers for their teaching. Their form of teaching, however, sought to escape persecution by avoiding the offence of the cross, and by adhering to Mosaic laws and customs (ch. 6:12; cf. Matt. 23:15; Rom. 10:2-4).

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Thus, instead of nourishing and strengthening God's flock on the pure Word of God, these false shepherds were leading the flock away from true nourishment. In effect, they were attempting to confuse and scatter God's flock, so that they could gain control over them. In this way, the now confused Galatians would look to the false teachers for their instruction and guidance. This, however, would lead them away from the paths of truth and righteousness, and of faith and love.

By warning the Galatian believers against the false teacher's wrongly motivated zeal, Paul is not decrying or condemning all forms of zeal or of zealous endeavour. Thus, in verse 18, the apostle writes:

Galatians 4:18

In and of itself, zeal can be good. Provided it is not confused with fanaticism (which is evil), zeal for a good end can be edifying, commendable and healthy. Thus, Paul desired that all believers should zealously commit themselves to following Christ, and to serving him with a pure heart.

The apostle was especially concerned that the Galatians had not shown the same zeal in following Christ as they had at first. If they had, this zeal would have grounded them much more firmly in the teachings and principles of their faith. For one reason or another, however, the Galatian believers had not maintained their initial zeal for the Lord, or for the teachings that Paul had delivered to them. Now—because of their lack of commitment to the Lord and to his Word—they had become easy prey for false teachers peddling erroneous doctrine.

Paul realises what has happened to these Galatians. Therefore, in verses 19-20, the apostle writes with deep parental concern:

Galatians 4:19-20

Paul agonised over his erring children. While with them, the apostle had laboured long and hard in their midst; he had prayed earnestly over them; he had taught them every important truth of the gospel, and he had seen them established in their newfound Christian faith.

So intense had been Paul's missionary labours, that he likens them to the extreme pains of a mother in childbirth. Paul had gone through such almost unbearable pains and difficulties, in order to bring the Galatians to their new birth in Christ. When they came to Christ, however, the apostle was overjoyed to see the results of his intense labour pains—new spiritual births among the peoples of Galatia. Now, however, things have changed. Now, once more, Paul finds himself enduring pains like that of a woman in labour.

The apostle's most earnest desire for the Galatians is that they should feed on, and be nourished by, the teaching of God's Word. Paul longs deeply for these believers to commit themselves wholly to Christ and to his truth—as he had delivered that truth to them. Only by so doing, can they ever hope to become increasingly like Christ; and only then will Christ be formed in them.

In verse 20, the apostle expresses his deep desire to be present with the Galatians, and to speak to them face to face. Then, he might be able to alter the tone of his approach. But, since this is not possible at present, Paul has to admit that the Galatians' behaviour and attitude toward him and his teaching have left him deeply bewildered. How can those whom the Lord has released from a spirit of slavery and misery, wish to return to that abject condition?

Paul finds this very idea abhorrent and incomprehensible. To return to the law, and to rituals and ceremonies, stands utterly opposed to the message and the spirit of the gospel.

Sarah or Hagar, Freedom or Bondage

Galatians 4:21-31

In verses 21 and 22, the apostle is forced to ask:

Galatians 4:21-22

Now (infers Paul), do you want to follow the teaching of the law? Well, then, do you not know what the law teaches? (By 'law' here, Paul is referring to the Pentateuch as a whole.) Have you not read what is written in the law about Abraham? The Judaizers, of course, made much of the Pentateuch and of their biological relationship to Abraham. Hence, for example, their emphases on circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant.

However, says Paul, there is another matter to consider in relation to Abraham: the fact that Abraham had two sons—one of whom was born of a slave woman, and the other of the free woman. (The later sons of Abraham are not relevant here.)

Continues Paul in verse 23:

Galatians 4:23

Now, implies Paul, the Judaizers make a great deal about their claimed descent from Abraham, and of the rite of circumcision, which God gave to Abraham as a sign of the covenant. However, not all who are descended from Abraham are Abraham's true seed. (Rom. 9:7-8)

Remember (says Paul) that Abraham had two sons. The first of these (Ishmael) was born in the natural course of events (i.e., 'according to the flesh' without regard to God's plan and purposes). Ishmael was not born to Abraham's wife, Sarah, but to his slave, Hagar. Believing that God needed some help in fulfilling his promise to give him a son and heir—especially in his old age—Abraham accepted Sarah's suggestion to father a child by his slave girl. Thus, Ishmael was born. But *Ishmael was not the son of God's promise*. (Gen. 16:1-4,15-16)

Nearly fourteen years later, when Abraham was about 99 years old and Sarah was well past natural childbearing age, God reaffirmed his original promise to Abraham. Shortly afterward, Sarah conceived; and—in Abraham's hundredth year—she bore him a son (Isaac). Although born naturally to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac was conceived under miraculous circumstances, considering his parents' advanced ages. Therefore, *Isaac was the son of God's promise*. (Gen. 17:1-7,15-21; 21:1-5; Heb. 11:8-12)

Even when it seemed utterly impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have children, God acted to fulfil his word. Many years before, God had promised this child to Abraham; now Isaac was the son and heir whom the Lord had solemnly sworn to give to Abraham. Because he had believed the Lord's promise, God had reckoned Abraham righteous in his sight.

So, says Paul, Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. But only one was the son of God's promise. So, too, with Abraham's descendants throughout the ages: not all are the true spiritual children of Abraham (or the children of God's promise), but only those who had a faith like Abraham.

Continuing this theme in verse 24, the apostle writes:

Galatians 4:24

Now, says Paul, let us use Hagar and Sarah to illustrate this great truth. Let us say that those two women represented two distinct covenants: one of law and works (Hagar, the bondswoman), and the other of grace and faith (Sarah, the freewoman).

The first of these two covenants—here represented by Hagar—originates from Mount Sinai. Now you know that Mount Sinai is where God gave his law to the people via his servant Moses, and where God established his covenant with Israel.

However, the law did not bring freedom or life to Israel. On the contrary, by justly condemning sinful mankind, the law brought upon Israel and all mankind bondage and death. Those therefore who seek to be justified through keeping the law, find that the law condemns them and makes them its slaves. Like Hagar, they become bond slaves to their master: in this case, the law.

Thus, in verse 25, Paul writes:

Galatians 4:25

Hagar corresponds to Mount Sinai in the Arabian Desert. She represents everyone who is held in slavery to, and by, the law; everyone, that is, who attempts to fulfil God's will, honour his name, or win his favour, by human effort and by observance of laws, rituals, and ceremonies.

But, at the time Paul was writing, this was exactly the situation prevailing among the Jews. Because of their rejection of Christ, they remained in bondage to the law, and to all its statutes and ordinances. Moreover, this was the very bondage into which the false teachers had been enticing the Galatian believers. (Cf. Matt. 23:37-39)

However, infers Paul, those who belong to Christ do not associate themselves with Hagar, the slave woman. Rather, their association is with Sarah, the freewoman. Sarah, however, corresponds—not with the present-day city of Jerusalem—but with the Jerusalem above: the Jerusalem or Mount Zion that is in heaven above (i.e., the throne and dwelling place of God). (Heb. 12:18-24)

To this end, Paul writes in verses 26 to 27:

Galatians 4:26-27

{Cf. Isaiah 54:1}

Those who belong to Christ are the spiritual children of Sarah, the free woman. Sarah, not Hagar, bore the son whom God had promised to Abraham through faith. Again, Sarah's promised son Isaac was the son through whom ultimately Christ would descend, according to his human nature. Sarah corresponds to the Jerusalem that is above—the 'city of God' or throne of God in heaven. Sarah's children are the children of God's promise, through faith. (Rev. 3:12; 21:2)

Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1 to illustrate his point. This passage referred originally to the promise of Israel's return from Babylonian captivity. However, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul now uses this passage to portray Sarah and her children.

Originally, Sarah was barren. She remained so until—by the grace and providence of God—he enabled her to conceive and bare Isaac in her old age. However, over and above this remarkable birth, God also gave to Sarah all those who were to become the spiritual seed of Abraham: i.e., all believers. Thus, Paul can say that Sarah is our mother,

and that we are the children of Sarah, the free woman—not of Hagar, the slave woman. (Cf. Rom. 6:16-18)

To this end, the apostle Paul writes in verse 28:

Galatians 4:28

Paul reminds the Galatian believers that they are children of promise. But what was the origin of that promise? It was Abraham's faith in the word of the living God. Abraham believed God when the Lord said he would make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

We must remember, of course, that—at the time that Abraham believed—he was childless. However, through his faith in God's promise, the Lord reckoned Abraham righteous in his sight.

Now, says Paul, you Galatians are reckoned righteous in God's sight, through your faith in his word, the gospel—not through what you can achieve by works of the law, or by the observance of any rites or ceremonies. (Rom. 4:13-25)

Concerning the fact that Abraham had two sons, the apostle writes in verse 29:

Galatians 4:29

Abraham's son, Ishmael, was born as the direct result of human effort, and by purely natural processes. Ishmael represents all those who are born of the flesh, who have no part in God's promise, and who remain spiritually dead or unregenerate.

On the contrary, Abraham's son, Isaac, was born as the direct result of God's promise. That is, Isaac was born by divine intervention (through the power of the Holy Spirit). Isaac represents all those who are born of the Spirit; who are the children of God's promise; who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and who are being sanctified by that same Holy Spirit. (Cf. John 3:5-7)

At that time, however, Ishmael, the son of the slave woman, mocked and persecuted Isaac, his younger (half-) brother. In the same way, those who are of the flesh (i.e., spiritually unregenerate) often mock and persecute those who are born of the Spirit. (Gen. 21:9; Heb. 10:33-34)

But does God permit his own children to be mocked and persecuted by ungodly and unspiritual individuals, without ultimately taking action? No, he does not. God acts to protect and preserve his own—and so he did with Isaac.

Thus, in verse 30, the apostle writes:

Galatians 4:30

{Cf. Gen. 21:10}

Here we have an example of both the kindness and the severity of God: Kindness toward those who believe, but severity toward those who disobey.

The inheritance and the promises of God apply only to those who belong to God through faith in his Son. Those who do not have the Spirit of God within them cannot share in the blessings of God.

God would never permit his own children to suffer ultimate harm at the hands of persecutors—unless this was in fulfilment of his express will and purposes for them at the time. However, Isaac had to be protected, since—through him—God would continue to fulfil his

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promise to Abraham. Thus, to preserve Isaac, and to ensure that Ishmael did not attempt (albeit, futilely) to interfere with God's purposes for Isaac, the Lord commanded Abraham to send away Hagar and her son. (Gen. 21:9-12)

The Lord did not utterly abandon Hagar or her son. On the contrary, God blessed Ishmael by making him the father or ancestor of many nations. (Gen. 21:13-18) However, the Lord would not share his glorious inheritance with those who were unspiritual, or who chose to worship gods other than the one true God. Any descendant of Ishmael might come to know the Lord, but he could do so only through the way that God had appointed; that is, the way of faith, as exemplified by Abraham, Isaac and—later—Jacob.

Concerning Hagar and her son, Ishmael, Paul writes in verse 31:

Galatians 4:31

We are not under the law as slaves to the law with all its rules, rituals and ceremonies. This is the position represented figuratively by Hagar, Mount Sinai, and the present-day city of Jerusalem. This also is the situation regarding the present day Jewish people as a whole (at least until the time of restoration). It is the situation also respecting the entire unregenerate world of mankind.

Only through belief in the promise of the gospel, and through faith in Christ, is anyone set free from the law with all its conditions. This is the position represented figuratively by Sarah, Mount Zion (in heaven), and the Jerusalem which is above. (Cf. Heb. 12:18-24)

Galatians Chapter 5

Deceived by False Teaching

Galatians 5:1-15

If, however, we are free from the demands of the law, infers Paul, we cannot return to legal bondage. Indeed, we must do all in our power to resist resolutely all forms of legalism (and license), and to live by faith in the Son of God.

To this end, Paul writes in chapter 5, verse 1:

Galatians 5:1

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (NIV)

Christ did not die on the cross to no effect. He died on the cross to fulfil every demand of God's righteous law against us. By that death, the Lord Jesus released us from the sentence of death, and from slavery to the law through sin. (John 8:32-36)

Since Christ has secured our release by atoning for our sin, then he intends us to remain free from the law and from all its conditions. However, freedom is not licence. We are free—not to do as we please—but to do as God pleases (v.13; Rom. 6:18; cf. Jude 3-4).

Thus, says Paul to the Galatians, "*Stand firm*". Stand resolutely in your freedom in Christ. Do not yield for one moment to those who tell you that you must observe the law's ritual and ceremonial requirements. If you do, you will lose your Christian freedom. You will take upon yourselves once more the heavy yoke of slavery to the law. You will come to depend for your salvation—not on Christ—but on your own efforts at keeping rules, regulations, rites and ceremonies. (Matt. 11:28-30; Acts 15:10-11; 2 Thess. 2:15)

Thus, in verse 2, Paul adds:

Galatians 5:2

Paul begins this sentence with an exclamation: Behold! Look! Mark my words! Pay very close attention to what I am about to say! Paul then immediately adds his own name. By coupling his opening exclamation with his personal name in this manner, the apostle is appealing to the Galatians to respond urgently and favourably to what he is saying:

(2b) ... "if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. (NIV)

If the Galatian believers were to yield to the false teacher's demands for circumcision, then they would be accepting that the law—together with all its rites and ceremonies—was an essential element of salvation; or, more specifically, of justification. However, if they accepted that observance of the law was necessary to justification, then they would be rejecting the finished atoning work of Christ on their behalf: For Christ died for their sins, and was raised again for their justification. (Rom. 4:25)

If, however, justification comes by the law, then Christ was of no value to these Galatians. Indeed, if the law justifies them, then Christ died in vain (ch. 2:21).

By this time, the Galatians ought to have realised where their error was leading them: A person must either be justified through faith in Christ, or by works of the law. He could not be justified by both, or by one supplemented by the other. The two methods of justification are diametrically opposed to one another and mutually exclusive.

In verse 3, Paul continues:

Galatians 5:3

Here, the apostle reminds the Galatian believers that by yielding themselves to the law in one part, they become obliged to yield to the law's demands in every other part. This is because a person may be justified by observing the law *only if, throughout his life, he fulfils the law completely in every single detail*.⁸ If, however, that person were to fail in any one point, he would be guilty of breaking the entire law—or the law as a whole. Therefore, as far as sinful mankind is concerned, justification by the law is an impossibility (Gal. 3:10,12; Jas. 2:10).

However, if the Galatians chose the way of the law and yielded to circumcision, then they would be choosing to reject the way of grace and freedom from the law's demands. To this end, Paul writes in verse 4:

Galatians 5:4

Any person, who seeks justification and righteousness through observing the law, cuts himself or herself off from Christ. For those whom Christ has redeemed from the law's demand, and from the condemnation of the law, live by faith—not by works. However, if a professing believer no longer lives by faith in Christ—and in his perfect work on their behalf—then that person has fallen away from grace. That individual has departed from living in, and by, the grace of God: For works and grace cannot co-exist.

Paul is not saying here that a genuine believer can lose his salvation. That would be contrary to everything that he and other writers of Scripture say elsewhere in God's Word. Rather, the apostle Paul is saying emphatically that a person must accept that justification is by God's grace through faith, and that he or she must live through faith. In this case, the person is delivered from God's judgment and is saved.

(This does not prevent that person from stumbling into sin, or from being deceived temporarily by false teaching—as were the Galatians. However, if their profession of faith in Christ is genuine, God's grace will keep them and restore them to the right way.)

However, where a person repudiates any profession of faith that they once made, and attempts (vainly) to achieve justification through works and through servile obedience to the law, that person is demonstrating that he or she has never experienced the grace of God in salvation or justification. In this case, the person remains under God's wrath and judgment, and is lost.

Attempting to achieve justification through works of the law represents a departure from God's method of providing salvation by grace through faith in his Son. It amounts to an outright rejection of God's method of justification. Therefore, the Galatians had to realise that—concerning salvation—grace excludes works, and works excludes grace. (Rom. 11:6)

⁸ *fulfils...in every single detail*: Even if this were possible, it would not result in a person's justification unless that person had been born without a sinful nature (or created originally perfect, as was Adam). Since the fall of man, no one can hope to be justified before God by keeping the law. This is why justification can only be by God's grace, through faith in Christ. (GL)

This is not to assert, nor is it to imply, that grace excludes the fruit of the Spirit as an essential evidence of justification. God's grace in salvation requires that the fruit of the Spirit be produced in every believer's life. Paul will deal with this very important truth later in this chapter. (Gal. 5:16-26)

Paul continues in verse 5:

Galatians 5:5

But how, in fact, do we achieve that righteousness which is acceptable to God?

We do not *achieve* it. Rather, we *receive* it as a gift of God. This righteousness comes to us—not by our own efforts at keeping the law, or by observing legal or ceremonial requirements—but by the free grace of God.

The righteousness of which God approves is given to us by God. We receive this gift by faith in the Son of God and in his redeeming work on our behalf. And the desire and ability to repent of our sins and to exercise faith in God's Son, is itself a gift of God's grace to us. The Spirit of God regenerates us, enabling us to repent and believe. God then justifies us, crediting or reckoning to our account the perfect righteousness of his own Son. Consequently, God now sees the believer as clothed with the righteousness of Christ. The imparting of this righteousness to us is accomplished through the work of the Spirit. This same indwelling Holy Spirit sanctifies the believer daily, making him or her increasingly more like Christ.

Ultimately, we will experience the completed work of the Spirit within us when the Lord Jesus presents us free from all accusation and blame, in the presence of his Father. This is the culmination of our sanctification (in glorification). It is for this final sanctification or glorification that we hope in Christ with an assured, certain and settled hope. And, as Paul says to the Galatians, we anticipate this by faith. (Rom. 8:24-25; 2 Tim. 4:8; Jude 24)

What, then, is the value of circumcision? Paul answers this question in verse 6:

Galatians 5:6

For those who are united in and to Christ, circumcision is of no account. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his seed. That covenant, however, has now been fulfilled. Christ is the ultimate promised Seed of Abraham, and those who belong to Christ are the true children or seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:28-29).

Again, since Christ has established a new covenant in his blood, the old covenant of law and works has passed away. Therefore, whether a person is circumcised or uncircumcised is irrelevant. He is justified by faith in Christ and in his perfect work on the sinner's behalf. All that matters to a regenerated and justified believer is that he expresses the reality of his faith through a life of love (Gal. 6:15).

In verse 7, the apostle continues:

Galatians 5:7

Like athletes in a race, the Galatian believers had started well enough. They had persevered in running the Christian race for a while; striving with all their might to reach the finishing line. Then, suddenly, when someone (the false teacher) had cut across their path, the Galatians had deviated from the right course. They had permitted someone—who was not even an accredited 'competitor' (such as an apostle)—to sidetrack them, and to deflect them from the appointed course. Now, the Galatians had strayed from the path that

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God had marked out for them—the path of truth and righteousness. Instead, they now found themselves following the path of error and unrighteousness. (Cf. Heb. 12:1)

Thus, Paul challenges the Galatians: *Who kept you—who prevented you—from obeying the truth?*

The truth, of course, originated from the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. (John 14:6) Any departure from the Lord, or from his express teaching, is a departure from God and from the truths of his infallible Word. Thus, Paul continues in verse 8:

Galatians 5:8

The persuasive teaching, to which the Galatians had been giving heed, had not come from the Lord. He who had called them in his grace had called them to produce the fruit of the Spirit. He had not called them to perform works of merit, or to return to the bondage of legal requirements, regulations, rituals or ceremonies.

Therefore, based on the teaching that Paul had given them previously, the Galatians ought to have realised that anything not originating from God's grace, or expressed through love and faith, was not of God. Based on the same apostolic teaching, they should have known that anyone who did not enjoin them to continue living by faith in the Son of God had not been appointed or sent by God or his Son. (Gal. 1:6-7).

But, if not from God, then it was not for good, but for evil. And, concerning the pervasive influence of evil teaching, were these Galatian believers not aware of this well-known principle? —

Galatians 5:9

This principle may be expounded thus:

- Begin by introducing just a single droplet of ink into a cup of clear water, and we contaminate and spoil the entire cup of water.
- Begin by introducing even a single OT rite or ceremony into the Christian church, and we contaminate and spoil the pure word of the gospel.
- Begin by introducing a single legal command, and we open the floodgates for many other statutes and ordinances, and for even greater contamination and spoliation of God's pure and holy Word.

Compromise of the truth, or accommodation with error, is the yeast that leavens—or permeates—the entire batch of dough, making it unfit for consumption and worthless.

So it is with those who would accept a little error here and there, or a few ritual or ceremonial accretions to the gospel. Eventually, the pure message of the gospel becomes overwhelmed by legalism and by rites and ceremonies. Sooner or later, the teaching of the law supplants the message of God's grace. Ultimately, the teaching of works and of human effort and good deeds replaces the message of faith in Christ. These however, are the very conditions that bring people into slavery—the kind of slavery from which Christ delivered these Galatians, while they were yet living according to their former pagan rites, rituals and ceremonies.

In verse 10, the apostle writes:

Galatians 5:10

Paul nevertheless remains confident that the Galatian believers will agree with what he has just said to them in this letter. The apostle remains assured that these erring believers would yet return to sound teaching and practice—as soon as they realised where the false teacher (or teachers) were leading them.

As for the person who is chiefly responsible for leading the Galatians into error and sin, Paul is certain that God will deal with him. Eventually—and regardless of what position that person might occupy—the Lord will penalise him for the damage that he has been causing to the church. As James tells us, those who teach will be judged much more strictly at the judgment bar of God. How much more stringently will God judge those who teach error or false doctrine? (Acts 15:1-2,24; Jas. 3:1)

In verse 11, the apostle adds:

Galatians 5:11

The Jews took great offence at the message that proclaimed the gift of righteousness through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and through his work on the cross. To them, the cross was an object of shame and disgrace; as it was the instrument used by the Romans for inflicting the death penalty on common criminals. Therefore, to Jewish minds, the cross became a real obstacle to faith—especially, since they could not conceive of their Messiah as being a criminal or as being crucified. They had not understood that the Messiah was not dying for his own sins and misdeeds, but for the sins and misdeeds of others. (Rom. 9:30-33; 1 Cor. 1:23-24)

According to popular Jewish understanding, the promised Messiah would come to set up his kingdom on earth. He would overthrow the Roman yoke, and rule over the nations; and he would bless his people with every earthly and messianic blessing. However, even although their own Scriptures had foretold it, the Jews could not accept that the Messiah would come to suffer and die. They certainly could not comprehend why it should be necessary for him to die on a cross of shame for the sins of others. (Ps. 22:1ff; Isa. 42:1; 52:3 - 53:12; Dan. 9:24)

The Law of Moses was dear to the heart of the Jews. So also were the Scriptures that spoke of God's covenant with Abraham, and because of which they practiced circumcision on all their male children. If Paul were still preaching the message of circumcision, then this message would have been acceptable to the Jews. For, to the legalistically minded Jews of Paul's day, those who preached circumcision were preaching that righteousness was attainable by observance of the law and by human effort.

Clearly, however, the Jews had confounded completely the teaching of their own (OT) Scriptures; for, in relation to God's covenant with Abraham, they erred grievously. When God instituted the rite of circumcision with Abraham, it was the outward visible sign of God's promised covenant with the patriarch. However, God had made this covenant with Abraham *before he had instituted the sign of circumcision*. So God's covenant was not based on Abraham's obedience to the rite of circumcision, but on the prior promise that he had made to Abraham, and which Abraham had believed wholeheartedly.

Paul himself may once have preached circumcision—before his conversion to Christ. Now, however—since Christ had fulfilled every scintilla of the law—Paul no longer preached circumcision as a necessary sign of obedience to God. Instead, the apostle now proclaimed righteousness received through Christ, who died on the cross, and through the obedience of faith in his gospel. This message, however, was wholly unacceptable to Jews and to other legalistically inclined teachers. They believed that they must *do* something to earn—or, at least, to contribute toward—their salvation.

Thus, because the message of God's grace sets aside the works of man, proud and sinful mankind is offended. In response, men and women criticise or persecute the one who preaches Christ crucified, raised and coming again. To avoid such criticism or persecution, Paul argues that it would be necessary to augment the pure Christian gospel with the message of works or ceremonies, such as circumcision. This, of course, Paul would never do—for this kind of message is no longer the gospel of God's grace toward lost and undeserving mankind.

To depart from the gospel of God's grace is a most serious matter. It can be done only by distorting or perverting the pure Word of God, and by changing God's Word to suit the views or tastes of sinful mankind. However, no human being on earth, nor any angel in heaven, has a right to alter in the least degree the eternal and infallible Word of God (Gal. 1:8-9).

To express the seriousness of this case, the apostle writes in verse 12:

Galatians 5:12

Paul now refers to the Judaizing teachers as 'agitators'. They are those who stir up trouble in God's church, and who continue to cause untold confusion with their evil doctrine. (Phil. 3:2)

But, argues the apostle, if those false teachers think that circumcision is so important to righteousness, why don't they go the whole way and castrate themselves! Then they would attain to an even greater degree of righteousness—if their evil doctrine were to be followed to its logical conclusion. For the greater the sacrifice, the greater the righteousness attained!

Such perverted teaching, of course, would be detestable in the eyes of God. At no time, has God ever enjoined such gross mutilation of the body, either to gain approval in his sight or to further holiness of life. Such an action would be wholly unnatural and reprehensible to God. Indeed, God not only condemns bodily mutilation but also—under the terms of the Old Covenant—he excluded from his service anyone whom men had so mutilated. (Deut. 23:1)

Paul, however, considered that the teaching of circumcision on religious grounds—when it was no longer valid—was little better than the teaching of bodily mutilation, which had never been valid, and which God had expressly forbidden.

Even so, the apostle has been careful to note that—*in and of itself*—circumcision is not necessarily wrong. For example, if a person wished to undergo circumcision in order to avoid unnecessary offence, then he was at liberty to do so—so long as he was not compromising any important principle in relation to Christian freedom.

Again, today, if a person needs to be circumcised on health or medical grounds, then there is no reason why he should not be circumcised. God does not disapprove of necessary medical procedures, so long as they are not intended for unnatural ends (e.g., castration or gender alteration).

However, as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham, circumcision is no longer valid; nor is any other ceremonial rite of the Mosaic Law. Whether, therefore, a person is circumcised or uncircumcised is wholly irrelevant to God. What matters, as Paul has already said, is faith—expressing itself through love (v.6)

In verse 13, the apostle Paul continues:

Galatians 5:13

Far from being bound by the demands of the law, God has called the believer to freedom through faith in Christ Jesus. However, we must realise that freedom is not licence (v.1). Freedom allows us to follow the Lord's way through faith in him and through living by the power of the Holy Spirit. Freedom, however, does not permit us to depart from the ways of righteousness, or to indulge the desires of the sinful nature. Those who continue to indulge their old sinful nature are exercising license—not freedom. (Rom. 6:18-23; 1 Pet. 2:16; cf. 2 Pet. 2:19)

To be free in Christ means that we desire to serve Christ. Again, to be free in Christ also means that we desire to serve one another; and we do so in love. The love of God pervades our souls, as the Holy Spirit sheds it abroad in our hearts. (Mark 10:42-44; Acts 20:35; Rom. 15:1-3; 5:5)

Thus, concerning love, the apostle writes in verse 14:

Galatians 5:14

The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." (NIV; Lev. 19:18)

It is not legal, ritual or ceremonial observance of the law that fulfils the law. Rather, *love* is the fulfilment of the law. Those who love God and love their neighbour will not seek to wrong their neighbour in any way. Therefore, those who love God and one another have fulfilled the requirements of the law. (Matt. 22:36-40; Rom. 13:8-10)

However, such, it seems, had not been the case among some of the Galatians. Instead of loving one another, they had been debating with, and strongly disagreeing with one another. They had been forming party schisms within their fellowships. Some of them were siding with the Judaizing teachers; others were opposing them vigorously; and others still were dissociating themselves from either of the first two groups, thereby forming a third distinct group.

Granted, the church must expunge error and false teaching from its midst. Nevertheless, it must not condemn those individuals who had been deceived and led into error. Rather, they who were more spiritually mature should restore them. But they should do so in a spirit of gentleness, love and caution; taking great care lest they—i.e., the more mature believers themselves—be led astray (Gal. 6:1).

However, continues Paul in verse 15:

Galatians 5:15

In the churches of Galatia, those who were carping and criticising unjustly, or who were complaining and arguing, or who were not prepared to abandon their erroneous and destructive teachings, were causing very serious divisions within the church of Christ, which is his body. However, to fight against one another was to risk bringing about the destruction or disintegration of the body. (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:3-5)

Therefore, Paul warns those carping individuals to come to their senses. He implies that those who had erred needed to recognise their present departure from sound teaching for what it was: a departure from God, and a following after men. Now, they must forsake their error and return to the Lord. Now, they must put away all forms of false teaching and be reconciled to God and to one another. Now, they must take steps to heal the wounds that had arisen in their midst. Now, they needed to learn once again to live by faith in the

Lord Jesus Christ, and in the power of God's Holy Spirit. They needed to learn to love one another deeply, as Christ loved them.

Live by the Spirit!

Galatians 5:16-26

The apostle Paul writes in verse 16:

Galatians 5:16

The sinful nature (or 'flesh') desires to find its own ways of winning acceptance with God—rather than accepting the free gift of righteousness that God provides to all who believe.

To the Galatians who had been bewitched by the Judaizers, this meant attempting to merit God's favour by rigid obedience to the law, and to its rites and ceremonies. This, however, was a classic example of sinful pride in action. For no one can merit the righteousness of God. They can only accept it humbly as an unmerited gift of God's grace. Sinful mankind's proud nature, however, cannot accept something that is freely given. In his sin and pride, he feels that he must perform good works to achieve his righteousness before God.

Now then, infers Paul, you ought to know that—to please God—you must live by the Spirit, not by the proud sinful nature. If you do this, you will not gratify the desires of that sinful nature. This applies in relation to works of the law (i.e., legal obedience to rites or ceremonies, or the dutiful performance of meritorious deeds or acts). It applies likewise to any kind of evil desire that springs from your old sinful nature.

Thus, in verse 17, the apostle writes:

Galatians 5:17

Even as believers, we—like the Galatians—still must contend with the old sinful nature. However, we must not allow the old nature to gain the upper hand: for this nature desires only those things that are contrary to the Spirit, and are opposed to the will and purposes of God for us. Similarly, the Spirit of God within us desires only that which is good, righteous and holy—the very things that stand opposed to the desires of the sinful nature.

Hence, the inward conflict between the old and new natures, or between the desires of the sinful nature and the desires of the Spirit. All too often, we fail to do what we would like to do, and what we know we ought to do, because we yield to the temptations arising from the old nature. (Rom. 7:18-19,21-25)

Yet, this need not be. We cannot achieve complete perfection in this life—although we must always endeavour to become ever more conformed to the image of Christ. Again, we cannot do this in our own strength, or through any attempts at keeping the law. However—by God's grace and through the power of his Holy Spirit—it is possible to live a life that pleases and honours the Lord. (Phil. 3:12-14)

Thus, in verse 18, Paul writes:

Galatians 5:18

The law condemns the acts of the sinful nature, but it cannot deliver us from those acts. So long as we continue to yield to the desires of the sinful nature, we remain under the condemnation of the law. However, when we come to Christ, we are no longer under the

condemnation of the law. Then, we become the children of God. Then, we are led by the Spirit of God. But, if led by the Spirit of God, we cannot and will not yield to the desires of our old sinful nature. On the contrary, we will desire only the things that the Spirit of God desires—to the glory of God. (Ps. 143:8-10; Isa. 48:16-18; John 16:13)

If, however, we were to continue to live according to the desires of our old sinful nature, then that nature would manifest itself in our lives in an unmistakable way.

The Acts of the Sinful Nature

Galatians 5:19-21

But what exactly are the kinds of acts to which Paul is referring? The apostle answers this in verses 19 through 21. In verse 19, Paul writes:

Galatians 5:19

(19) The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; (NIV)

Paul deals first with sins from the sexual realm. Each represents a perversion of the natural gift of sex—a gift that God gave to mankind to be used and enjoyed to the full within the sanctity of the marriage relationship. (Gen. 2:18,22-25; 1 Cor. 7:3-5) Paul, however, is not speaking here of the right and honourable use of sex. (He does this in 1 Cor. chapter 7.) Rather, in this place, the apostle is speaking of the abuse, distortion or perversion of sexual relations.

The first specific sin in Paul's list is:

1. *Sexual immorality (or fornication)*

Sexual immorality includes all forms of sexual abuses. For example, sex before marriage, or outside of the marriage relationship (adultery), constitutes sexual immorality. So, also, do sins such as prostitution, homosexual practices and so-called homosexual 'marriages'. (Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:9)

All these and other sexual abuses, vices and sins constitute sexual immorality, and God utterly forbids and condemns them all. (Eph. 5:3-7) However, God is willing to receive and forgive anyone who genuinely repents and renounces his sin totally. The same principle applies to almost all sins more generally.

Normally, the term 'sexual immorality' is understood to include not only the sinful *acts*, but also all sinful or immoral *thoughts, attitudes and inclinations*, together with every immoral *word, expression or gesture*. However, since in the present passage, some of these would be included under the next term (impurity), Paul is probably distinguishing them on this occasion.

2. *Impurity*

Impurity is next on Paul's list—and it includes all the forms of sexual uncleanness just mentioned. Impurity represents sins that are usually harboured in the mind, or expressed verbally or bodily.

Also included under (sexual) impurity is using deliberately the eyes to watch, or the ears to hear, unclean material, such as indecent or pornographic magazines, films or videos, or any other material that pollutes and degrades the mind and soul that God created. (Matt. 15:18-20) As with every other sin, this is a vio-

lation and desecration of God's holy temple. That temple is our body—the dwelling place of God's Holy Spirit.

The above examples are not exhaustive, but serve to illustrate the meaning of sexual impurity. Those, however, who continue to indulge in all manner of sexual fantasies, practices and expressions, may eventually become debauched. This is the next word on Paul's list.

3. *Debauchery (or licentiousness)*

This is unrestrained immorality—usually, of a sexual nature and associated frequently with drunkenness. Those who indulge their sexual lusts will find that—ultimately—those lusts will enslave them. (1 Pet. 4:3-5)

The Galatians would have been familiar with the licentious practices associated with their former pagan forms of idol worship. As with Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai (Ex. 32:17-25), some at least of these Galatians would once have worshipped graven images and indulged in frenetic sensual orgies⁹. Like present-day sexual orgies, or drunken revelries, this is an example of debauched or licentious behaviour, which, when practiced consistently, leads to a wholly depraved nature or character. Yet, even from among such people, God can redeem his own—for such were some of these Galatians before being called to Christ. And from similar vile and wicked forms of behaviour, God delivered some of the Corinthians. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

We must remember that Paul was addressing these remarks to Galatian believers—not to unregenerate men and women. The apostle was warning the Galatian Christians of the very great danger of yielding to and indulging the evil desires of their old sinful nature. Since, therefore, believers are not immune from the temptation to commit such sins, it is essential that they flee the temptation to sexual immorality in all its forms, and learn to live by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Yet, for those who have already sinned, but repented and renounced their sin, the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses them from all sin—even from such sins as these. (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 John 1:9)

In verses 20 and 21a, the apostle continues with his list of sinful acts:

Galatians 5:20-21a

(20) idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (21a) and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like... (NIV)

In verse 20, Paul mentions:

4/5. Idolatry and witchcraft.

Idolatry is the worshipping of any god other than, or in addition to, the one true God. Idolatry is also any attempted representation of the true God by man-made images or icons. (Exodus 20:2-6,23; Deut. 5:7-9)

Again, idolatry is also the cherishing in our hearts of someone or something that is more important to us than God. *Whatever means most to us, is the true object of our worship.* (Ezek. 14:3-4)

⁹ orgies: also listed separately below (GL)

Also included in this category of sins is the sin of witchcraft. Witchcraft includes all forms of this evil art itself, together with every form of occult magic and all other occult and spiritualistic practices. This includes any attempt to contact spirits, or to mediate with the dead; any attempt to involve oneself with spirit rituals or practices or to participate in any form of satanic or demonic worship or sacrifice. (Deut. 18:10-12; 1 Chron. 10:13-14)

With their former pagan backgrounds, the Galatians would be familiar with both idolatry and witchcraft. Very often, both of those evils were inseparably linked, as occult or spiritualistic rituals and practices formed part of idolatrous pagan worship ceremonies.

However, infers Paul, such things may have been part of your old way of life, but they represent acts or practices arising from the corrupt sinful nature. You must now, therefore, forsake all such practices, and walk by faith in the living, sovereign God. Your life is in his hands—not in the hands of fate, or of the stars, or of the spirits.

Next in Paul's list is the sin of:

6. *Hatred*

Hatred includes harbouring bitter anger, or holding a grudge, against someone. Hatred is internalised—and sometimes, unexpressed—anger, rage or bitterness. According to the teaching of the Lord Jesus, those who hate someone incur the same judgment as those who commit murder. (Matt. 5:21-22)

Next in this list is the sin of:

7. *Discord*

Included here are all forms of unwarranted and unnecessary disagreement, and also strife and quarrelling. Anything that results in sinful discord or dissension, however, is not of love, but of the old nature.

Next in the list is:

8. *Jealousy*

Jealousy can be either good or bad, depending on the motive. However, in the present context, it is quite clear that Paul is referring to sinful jealousy.

Jealousy includes such attitudes as fierce indignation; envious and contentious rivalry; a begrudging nature, or an attitude of extreme possessiveness. At times, it also includes being earnestly desirous of other people's wealth, possessions, or position. In this case, jealousy is similar to covetousness or envy.

Next in Paul's list is:

9. *Fits of rage*

Anger by itself may or may not be justified. Anger expressed, but controlled, for the sake of righteousness, justice or equity is justified anger. God is angry with the wicked every day. (Ps. 7:11) Jesus was angry at the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. (Mark 3:5) In both cases, this is fully justified anger expressed by God himself.

We are not able to judge and act like God. Nevertheless, we are made in God's image and may be angry for a just reason, *as long as our anger is fully restrained*. However, anger over which a person loses self-control, is sinful anger, and as such is wholly inexcusable for a child of God. Again, anger that produces

bad temper, fits of rage, or even bouts of violence, is positively evil and can never be justified. This is yet another expression of the old sinful nature. (Matt. 5:22-24; Eph. 4:26-27, 31; James 1:19-21)

Next, Paul mentions:

10. *Selfish ambition*

In and of itself, ambition need not be sinful. Indeed, if a person is ambitious to honour the Lord through his work, this is commendable. However, selfish ambition is self-centred ambition. Here, the intention is not to honour the Lord or accomplish God's purposes, but to further one's own aims regardless of God's purposes for that person's life. This is an example of selfish ambition.

Next, Paul mentions:

11. *Dissensions.*

Dissensions are those disagreements or differences of opinion that lead to, and result in, discord and schism in the church fellowship. In the present context, Paul may be thinking of dissension arising among the Galatians because of disagreement with those favouring the Judaistic group. Thus, at least two groups have formed within the church—one group dissenting from the other.

Dissension, therefore, is to split off into different groups or factions as a result (in this instance) of doctrinal differences or disagreements. (Cf. 1 Cor. 11:18)

Next in Paul's list of sinful acts is:

12/13. *Factions and envy*

Because of certain disagreements within the church, it seems likely that the Galatians were forming themselves into factions or party groups. This, however, was sinful, since it divided the body of Christ and caused disharmony and disunity within the church. (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:3-9, 21-23)

Granted, false teachers and false teaching had to be rooted out. Nevertheless, the church itself was to remain united. Those who repented of, and renounced, their former sins were to be forgiven and received back into the fellowship of God's people and God's church.

Another sin in the same category as factions is the sin of envy. It could be that Paul grouped factions and envy together because he saw some direct relationship between them in the Galatian churches. Certainly, a very similar situation existed in the church at Corinth, where the same apostle writes concerning the divisions there:

(3) You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? (4) For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? (1 Cor. 1:3-4 NIV)

Here, Paul relates jealousy and quarrelling with the divisions in the Corinthian church. In the Galatian church, the apostle links the kindred sin of envy with the factions in that church.

Again, the apostle may have grouped factions and envy together because those two sins can split a church asunder. This was the very considerable risk among the Galatian fellowships.

Any thing or any attitude that fragments or divides God's church is evil. (Matt. 12:25) Moreover, the desire to have what other people have is sin—the sin of envy.

Next in Paul's list of sins is:

14. *Drunkenness*

This includes not only the sin of drunkenness itself, but anything else that leads to an inexcusable and unnecessary loss of bodily or mental control. (Eph. 5:18)

Also included in this category, is the use (or misuse) of non-prescribed drugs, or anything else that alters the normal functioning of the body or mind. This is loss of self-control, and this in itself is a sin against God and a cause of grief to God's Holy Spirit. (Eph. 4:30)

In his list of sinful acts, Paul next mentions:

15. *Orgies*

Orgies include all forms of wild or excessive partying, celebration or carousing. Usually, such partying is associated with drunkenness, the use of drugs, and sexual immorality. (1 Pet. 4:3-5)

This was one of the sins committed shamelessly by Israel while Moses was on Mount Sinai. When Moses descended from the holy mount bearing the commandments of God, he found the people shouting, idolising and cavorting naked around a gold calf, and indulging in the vilest pagan revelry. (Exodus 32:6-8; 1 Cor. 10:7)

Orgies are the last sin to be individually specified in Paul's list. However, the apostle then adds the words ...'and the like'... intimating that the 15 sins mentioned in this list are by no means the only sins of which one can become guilty. The sins quoted are merely examples to warn us of the consequences of indulging the sinful nature.

To this end, Paul adds in verse 21b:

Galatians 5:21b

(21b) ...I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (NIV)

(Cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11)

As Christian may—on occasions—fall into any one of the sins listed above. Yet, if he repents and forsakes that sin completely, the Lord will forgive him and receive him back into his fellowship and love. However, if a person were to practice habitually one or more sins such as these, then he must seriously consider whether he possesses the Spirit of God: For a person cannot practice such sins habitually while he is being indwelt and sanctified by God's Holy Spirit.

However, if he is not being indwelt and sanctified by the Spirit of God, then he does not belong to Christ or to God. (Rom. 8:9) Thus, Paul's solemn warning holds true: Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Thus, the Word of God itself makes it abundantly clear that the Lord will not accept or tolerate within his fellowship those who continue in the wilful practice of sin. Likewise, God

will not accept or tolerate those who continue to indulge the desires of the sinful nature while claiming to belong to Christ.

According to God's own Word, those who practice such sins will not inherit his kingdom. That is, the Lord will exclude them from eternal life and salvation; from the assurance of his presence and from the certainty of his special blessings—blessings bestowed only upon those who belong to Christ. (Eph. 5:5-7)

However, everyone who repents and renounces their sins—of whatever sort, and however serious—and who calls upon the name of the Lord for mercy and salvation, will find the hand of mercy extended to them. In his grace, God will forgive, heal and cleanse everyone who turns to his Son in faith, and who utterly abandons his former sinful way of life.

The Fruit of the Spirit

Galatians 5:22-26

In verses 22 and 23, the apostle goes on to show what the Christian's life and conduct should be like. It should be characterised—not by the acts of the sinful nature—but by the fruit of the Spirit. The first of these is love.

Thus, in verses 22 and 23, the apostle writes:

Galatians 5:22-23

(22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (NIV)

(We will examine each of the nine fruits of the Spirit mentioned in these verses individually.)

1. *Love*

Love to God involves unremitting devotion, loyalty and faithfulness to God, complete trust in God, and unreserved obedience to his Word and will in all things. (Deut. 6:5; 10:12; Matt. 22:37; 1 Cor. 2:9)

Love to our fellow-believer involves caring for that person as one who is united to us in Christ Jesus. (John 13:34; Rom. 12:10; 1 Pet. 1:22)

Love to our neighbour involves showing concern for him, and providing assistance where there is need. Love does no wrong to our neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law (vv.13-15; Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 13:1-13).

2. *Joy*

Heartfelt joy. Not the same thing as exuberance—but inward, deep, lasting spiritual joy. This joy comes to us as a direct consequence of our salvation in Christ. This spiritual joy is associated not only with the blessings we receive in Christ, but also with the sufferings that the Lord calls upon us to endure for his sake. (Phil. 4:4; 1 Pet. 1:6-8; 4:12-16)

3. *Peace*

Peace with God, and peace with oneself (although not necessarily to the exclusion of all inward conflicts and tensions, especially those that attend spiritual warfare).

Peace or tranquillity in the midst of spiritual strife, and in the everyday conflicts of life. This heart-peace comes from the Lord himself. It is made effective in our lives when we are walking in line with the will of God for us, and when we are fulfilling the desires of the Holy Spirit, and not the desires of the sinful nature. (John 14:27; Phil. 4:6-7; Col. 3:15)

4 *Patience*

A long-suffering disposition or attitude of mind—a forbearing disposition that prevails even under the most adverse of circumstances or severe provocation, demonstrates patience.

We are called upon to be patient (and to persevere) in the trial of our faith, in the conflict against the powers of evil, and in all our dealings with our fellow men and women.

Patient endurance (with perseverance) is a virtue required of all the people of God. It does not imply passivity or inactivity in the things of God, but rather a steadfast endurance and determination in holding firmly to the course set before us. (Heb. 12:1-3; Jas. 1:2-4, 12-15; 5:10-11)

5 *Kindness*

Care, thoughtfulness, and consideration for our fellow-believers, and particularly toward those in need. Kindness must be exemplified by practical measures to alleviate suffering and hardship, or to comfort the sorrowing in their distress and grief. (Jas. 2:14-16)

Kindness does not speak out of turn, or without due thought for the consequences of idle or careless remarks. A wrong word can pierce like a sword. A right word can heal like a balm. (Prov. 19:17; 25:11; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12)

6 *Goodness*

Goodness includes all manner of good, right and benevolent attitudes and actions toward our neighbour, and for the sake of Christ's name.

True goodness originates spontaneously from a person's heart, and the good things that that person is prepared to do for others in the name of Christ exemplify it. Inasmuch as we have done it unto one of the least of these his brothers, we have done it unto Christ. (1 Cor. 10:24; Jas. 4:17; 2 Pet. 1:5-11)

7 *Faithfulness*

Faithfulness is absolute and unwavering love and loyalty to a person.

Faithfulness to God must come first, for we are bound to the Lord by covenant loyalty.

Faithfulness to God's people (the church) accompanies faithfulness to God.

Faithfulness to a husband or wife parallels faithfulness to God, and involves a degree of love kindred to that which Christ has for the church.

Faithfulness to other members of our family and friends comes next; then faithfulness to the wider sphere of man's civil relationship and to society in general. For civil government and its institutions have been ordained of God. (Mark 12:28-31; Luke 20:21-25; Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 2:10)

8 *Gentleness*

Gentleness (or meekness) is not weakness. It requires great strength of character, and courage, to show a gentle spirit in the midst of an antagonistic world.

Gentleness is the opposite of a hard, selfish, arrogant and proud disposition (these attitudes being typical examples of the acts of the sinful nature).

While we must stand firmly and uncompromisingly by the principles of our faith, yet we must not impose our convictions or principles on other people. Rather, in a Christ-like spirit of love, compassion and tenderness, we must gently instruct those who err; exhort those who need encouragement; give hope to those who despair, and comfort those who are enduring sorrow, grief or loss. (Eph. 4:2; Phil. 4:5; 1 Pet. 3:15-16)

9 *Self-Control*

Self-control is self-discipline or restraint: i.e., the willingness to govern all our attitudes and actions in accordance with the teaching of God's Word.

Self-control involves the exercises of moderation in all things, the avoidance of all excesses, and the steadfast refusal to indulge the desires of the sinful nature. Self-control must be applied to every area of a Christian's life: his thoughts, speech, and acts. (Prov. 16:32; Titus 2:11-14; Jas. 1:26)

The above nine fruits of the Spirit represents the kind of fruit that we must exhibit in our lives in ever-increasing measure. This fruit is the evidence that we possess a new nature. It is the only tangible proof that a person has been born again by the Spirit of God.¹⁰

In verse 24, Paul continues his remarks to the Galatian believers:

Galatians 5:24

Of course, unless a person belongs to Christ, he cannot effectively subdue the desires of his sinful nature, nor live a life that is pleasing to God. It requires the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit to subdue sinful attitudes, desires and practices.

Yet, the believer must be willing to yield to the Spirit's control and to Christ's rule in his life. Only to the degree that Christ exercises Lordship over the believer will that believer experience deliverance or victory over the desires of his sinful nature. However, by God's grace and by the Spirit's power, each believer should be able to bring forth an ever-increasing amount of the Spirit's fruit.

Thus, in verse 25, the apostle writes:

Galatians 5:25

The Spirit granted us a new birth in Christ Jesus. By this same Holy Spirit, we live that new life; and, by the Spirit too, we are being sanctified—daily and hourly. Let us then, exhorts Paul, keep in step with the Spirit. Let us do those things which please the Spirit of God—as revealed in God's Word—and avoid anything that is questionable, or that might grieve God's Holy Spirit.

Then, in verse 26, the apostle adds:

¹⁰ The above commentary on verses 22 and 23 is quoted (with amendments) from the author's unpublished work, *Bible Doctrine: Sanctification*.

Galatians 5:26

Those, however, who are being led by the Spirit, and are producing spiritual fruit, must take care lest they become spiritually proud or conceited. They must not consider themselves better than other, perhaps less spiritually mature, believers. (Phil. 2:1-4)

Though not everyone has attained to the same degree of spiritual maturity, yet everyone who has been truly born again of God's Spirit are God's children. As such, the Father loves them.

These children must be encouraged to make progress in their faith. Therefore, none of us ought to act proudly or conceitedly toward them. None of us ought to provoke them. None of us ought to do anything that might cause envy or jealousy among the saints of the Lord. For acts such as these do not represent the fruit of the Spirit. Rather, they are the acts or attitudes of the sinful nature.

Galatians Chapter 6

Support One Another

Galatians 6:1-10

Galatians 6:1

Paul now appeals to the Galatian believers as his brothers in Christ. Though some among them had strayed from sound teaching, yet they were still God's children and fellow-heirs with Christ. (Cf. 2 Thess. 3:14-15)

Now, implies Paul, if someone among you is caught in some sin—or overtaken by a sin and entangled in it—then you must not stand idly by. Nor must you condemn him, turn away from him, or condone his sin. Rather, those among you who are spiritual should seek to restore him, prayerfully and with great compassion. Do not be harsh or unkind toward this erring brother. Rather, endeavour to restore him gently, in a spirit of meekness and humility. (Cf. Gal. 2:11-13)

Each of us must remember that we ourselves will be tempted one day—and one day we ourselves may fall. Therefore, we must not criticise those who fall into sin, but pray for them and encourage them to repent and seek the Lord's mercy and forgiveness. (1 Cor. 10:12; Jas. 5:19-20)

Again, while we are appealing to an erring brother or sister, we must be extremely careful that we ourselves are not tempted and enticed into the same trap. We must watch ourselves diligently—and we must ensure that God's people are upholding us in their prayers.

In verse 2, Paul continues:

Galatians 6:2

Everyone has their own heavy burden to bear in life. As far as possible, we must help to bear the burdens of our fellow-believers. Although, often, we cannot fully appreciate the exact nature or degree of another person's burden or affliction, yet we must try to support them by practical means. We must try to assist and encourage them. We should give them added hope and strength to aid them from day to day. We must let them see our love for them, and we must care for them and be prepared to stand by them and help bear their heavy load.

Let each of us, infers Paul, be careful to help carry one another's burdens. Then, we will fulfil the law of Christ—which is to love our neighbour as ourselves, and to provide for our neighbour's needs (Gal. 5:14; Luke 10:29-37; see also Isa. 58:6-7,10-11).

Then, in verse 3, Paul declares:

Galatians 6:3

Let no one think more highly of himself than he ought. Never pretend to be better than others. (Rom. 12:3)

Paul advises those who are more spiritually mature among the Galatian believers not to think themselves better than their less mature brothers and sisters. They are all one in Christ Jesus. Everyone stands upon the same level. (Rom. 12:16)

Expository Notes

If a believer happens to be more spiritually mature or more gifted than others are, then he or she ought not to boast of this. Rather, they ought to boast or glory in God who causes each person to grow spiritually, and who grants to everyone various gifts to use in his service.

Thus, Paul exhorts these Galatians not to deceive themselves by believing that they are more mature than others are, or that they have greater gifts than others do. They needed to remember that everything that they had received had come to them from the Lord. (1 Chron. 29:14; 1 Cor. 4:7) Apart from the Lord, they would be nothing. But, because of him, each one of these believers is special and important in his sight—and so are their less spiritually mature or less gifted brothers and sisters. Therefore, they ought to keep leaning on the Lord who had so richly blessed them. They ought to give God all the glory for what they have and are—and so should each of us.

In verses 4 and 5, the apostle adds:

Galatians 6:4-5

Each one of us should weigh our own actions in the light of God's Word. We should consider whether everything we think, say and do is honouring to the Lord. Thus, we ought not to compare ourselves with other people, but with the Word of God. (Cf. Luke 18:11-14) If we live humbly and sincerely, and in accordance with God's Word, then we will not look critically at others. (Rom. 14:10-13)

Indeed, as verse 5 says,

(5) ...each one should carry his own load.

- *Concerning our conduct or actions*, each one should bear his own burden. He should assume full responsibility for his own personal conduct—without making comparisons with the conduct of other believers.
- *Concerning our trials and afflictions*, however, we should help bear one another's heavy burdens—as verse 2 declares.

Paul now turns his attention to the needs of those who teach God's Word. Thus, in verse 6, the apostle writes:

Galatians 6:6

Paul and some of his co-workers had waived their right to the support of the churches. They preferred instead to work for themselves in order to provide for their daily necessities. Paul did this to avoid burdening the newly formed and sometimes poor churches that he served. However, this concession on Paul's part was not to be understood as a rule for all the Lord's servants. As a rule, those who taught or preached the Word of God were to be supported financially by those who were being instructed in the Word. The churches were responsible for supporting those who taught them. To neglect this privilege and duty was to disregard the words of Scripture: *The worker deserves his wages*. (Matt. 10:10)

Thus, God's people were to provide willingly and cheerfully for the financial or material needs of their pastors, teachers or other spiritual instructors and evangelists. God would reward the churches for taking care of his servants. (1 Cor. 9:3-14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18)

Still discussing the principle of remuneration, and of doing good to others, the apostle writes in verses 7 and 8:

Galatians 6:7-8

*(7) Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.
 (8) The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature¹¹ will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. (NIV)*

There is no point in deceiving yourselves, or being led astray¹², says Paul to the Galatians. God cannot—and will not—be mocked or disregarded. He not only expects, but also commands, that true and faithful teachers be supported financially in their work of preaching the gospel and building up the church. (1 Cor. 9:14) Moreover, the Lord expects this support to come from the churches they serve or to which they belong. However, the churches are comprised of individual members—each one of whom will reap what he sows in this regard. (2 Cor. 9:6-7)

If, instead of giving to the work of the Lord and to the support of his genuine servants, a person keeps his money to spend on his own desires and interests, then ultimately he will reap what he has sown. By sowing to the sinful nature, he—from that nature—will reap corruption or spiritual ruin. If, on the other hand however, a person gives whatever he can afford to help support the Lord's servants in their ministry, then that man is sowing to please the Spirit. And, from the Spirit, this man will reap the blessings associated with eternal life.

These remarks by the apostle were all the more apposite in the light of the false teacher or teachers in their midst. Those who had followed the way of law-works and religious rituals and ceremonies were sowing to their sinful nature (or 'flesh'). They were attempting to augment God's grace by observing rituals and ceremonies ('works of the flesh'). Had they been depending on the grace of God alone for their salvation, they would have been sowing to the Spirit and reaping the fruit of the Spirit, both in respect of discriminating between sound teaching and erroneous teaching, and more generally in their personal character and conduct. Had they been supporting the true and faithful teachers as God required, perhaps the false teachers would never have gained a foothold in their local churches.

The general principle of sowing and reaping, of course, can be applied to many other areas of Christian life and conduct, and there are many instances where the application of this principle would hold true. However, taken in its proper context, verses 7 and 8 appear to be connected directly to Paul's remarks in verse 6. This becomes even more apparent when we consider verses 9 and 10 (cf. also 'flesh' in vv.12-13)

In verse 9, Paul writes:

Galatians 6:9

Paul encourages the Galatian believers to keep on going—despite the present difficulties in their churches. He exhorts them not to falter, grow weary or faint-hearted in doing good. Rather, they were to continue to do all the good they could—whether in support of the Lord's genuine servants, or more generally to others.

As a rule, there is a gap between sowing and harvest. Nevertheless, if these believers kept on labouring for the Lord—without giving up—their harvest of blessing would surely come.

¹¹ Or *his flesh, from the flesh* [NIV footnote to Gal. 6:7]

¹² *Led astray*: the primary meaning of the word translated 'deceived' in verse 7. (GL)

Paul continues in verse 10:

Galatians 6:10

Paul now broadens his directive. Not only should the Galatian churches do good to those who needed their support in ministering God's Word, but they should also do good—or provide for the needs of—all kinds of people. Nevertheless, even although the Galatians should be kind and charitable, according to their means, yet their first priority must always be toward helping those who belonged to God's family: i.e., their brothers and sisters in Christ. (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 6:10-12)

'What Counts is a New Creation'

Galatians 6:11-18

In verse 11, Paul writes:

Galatians 6:11

Several explanations have been offered for this remark of Paul's. Some think that the apostle is referring to the comparatively long letter he has just written—perhaps, on this occasion, in his own hand. This might be the case, since the epistle to the Galatians is thought to be one of Paul's earliest epistles. Therefore, it would pre-date the apostle's longer letters written later. It might also be the case that Paul wrote the whole of Galatians in his own hand, instead of dictating most of it to an amanuensis or secretary. Where he used such assistance, as frequently he did, the apostle added only the closing remarks in his own handwriting.

However, many other commentators believe that Paul is not referring to the *length* of the letter that he has just written, but to the *size* of the letters with which he wrote. In this case, some think that Paul used large letters for increased emphasis. Others, however, believe that the apostle used large letters in his closing remarks simply because he suffered from poor eyesight. The writer of these notes tends toward this latter explanation, although admittedly we have no clear supporting evidence.

In verse 12, the apostle continues:

Galatians 6:12

The Judaizing false teachers were not so much concerned about inward spiritual realities as about the observance of outward physical and ceremonial rites and regulations. The more people they could win over to their way of thinking, and to the acceptance of circumcision, the more successful they considered themselves to be. (Cf. Matt. 23:15)

These individuals were not spiritual men. They were carnal men who took pride in the flesh, in outward observances and in self-achievement. The same can be said of anyone who emphasises physical or ceremonial observances for entry into God's kingdom, and who downplays or disregards the necessity for spiritual regeneration and sanctification. (Cf. Matt. 6:2,5)

By emphasising circumcision, the Judaizers appeared (superficially) to be putting much more stress on upholding the Law of Moses. Many legalistically inclined believers found this kind of teaching acceptable, and even desirable. However, by refusing to accept that Christ had fulfilled and abrogated the ceremonial and ritual laws, these people were setting aside the work of Christ. They were trying to augment Christ's perfect provision of righteousness through the cross, with self-earned righteousness.

Again, by emphasising the OT teaching regarding circumcision, they avoided in large measure the persecution of the cross. For those who seek to establish their own righteousness through legal obedience do not accept the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ. Nor do they accept that the righteousness of one perfect individual (Christ) can be imputed to repentant and believing sinners as a gift of God's unmerited grace. Therefore, by rejecting Christ and his work of redemption, they sought to avoid the persecution of the cross (Gal. 5:11).

Although not every Judaistically inclined teacher had come to this point of virtual apostasy from Christ, this is where their teaching would have brought them. This is why Paul is so deeply concerned for the Galatian believers, lest they too become bewitched by this evil teaching and led astray from the pure gospel of Christ and of God's sovereign grace to sinners.

In verse 13, Paul adds:

Galatians 6:13

Those who insist on obeying the law concerning circumcision do not themselves keep the law in all respects. They insist on circumcision only so that they can consider others (in this case, the Galatians) as more members won over to their party—the circumcision party. (Rom. 2:17-27)

In their hearts, these people still considered 'the circumcised' (the Jews) to be superior to 'the uncircumcised' (the Gentiles)—and certainly more favoured by God. This, of course, was wholly false—for God himself had broken down this dividing wall of hostility through his Son's death on the cross. (Eph. 2:13-16)

The Judaizers, however, did not desire to make their boast in a person's spiritual progress, but in their progress in accepting such rites and ceremonies as circumcision. They gloried in the flesh. They gloried in the fact that they could make a person one of their own by physical incision. In addition, they gloried that this person would then bear the marks of their particular party—the marks of circumcision.

They Galatian believers may not yet have succumbed to the demands for circumcision. However, they were certainly on the verge of doing so. Hence, Paul's tone of urgency in warning them of their grave danger should they become ensnared in the legal or ceremonial requirements of the old order.

The Judaizers prided themselves in the flesh, but the only real place for glory and pride was not in self or self-achievement, but in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, in verse 14, Paul writes:

Galatians 6:14

The Galatian believers ought not to be taking pride in their own achievements; for, in relation to salvation, their own achievements accomplished nothing. Rather, as with Paul, they should have been boasting in what Christ had achieved for them through his righteous life, and through his blood shed on the cross.

In Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, God had given these Galatians a full and free salvation—including righteousness from God, which they never could have earned. However, since this was God's gift to them, these believers must glorify God—who yielded up his own Son to the cross on their account.

Therefore, infers the apostle to the Galatians, let the things of this world, and the ways of this world and of human achievement, be nailed with your sins to the cross. Let us die to

the things of this world and to the ways of this world. Instead, let us live our new lives in and for the service and glory of Christ our Redeemer (Gal. 2:20).

In verse 15, the apostle writes:

Galatians 6:15

Concerning our spiritual standing before God, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any account (Gal. 5:6; Col. 3:10-11).

When God instituted the rite of circumcision, he declared it a *sign* of his covenant with Abraham and his seed. He did not declare it a *saving* or *justifying* rite. What justifies and saves—and what really counts—is a new creation: i.e., regeneration of the soul brought about by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit, and by the power of God's living and eternal Word—the Bible. (2 Cor. 5:17)

It is through faith in God's Son, and through his eternal, living (or 'quickening') Word, that a person is created anew or regenerated by the Holy Spirit. However, saving faith, too, is a gift of God's grace. Through faith in Christ alone, and in his perfect work for sinners, we find salvation, and with it, peace with God. (Eph. 2:8-10)

Thus, in verse 16 Paul adds:

Galatians 6:16

The only rule we must obey is that of obedience to the faith of the gospel. Those who thus trust in Christ alone for their salvation will indeed experience peace with God and everlasting mercy from a loving heavenly Father. These are the true Israel of God: those who—like Abraham—are justified by faith in the unfailing Word of God. (Rom. 9:6-8)

In verse 17, the apostle adds:

Galatians 6:17

Let no one cause me any further problems in this matter. I have demonstrated to you, dear Galatian brothers and sisters, why you must not follow the way of the Judaizing teachers. I have shown you that—to do so—will most certainly lead you away from Christ, and from the gospel of God's grace (Gal. 1:6-7).

It is for the sake of this glorious gospel that I now bear in my own body the marks (Gk., *stigma*) of Christ Jesus—the marks of affliction and persecution. Such marks as these are the only marks worthy of your calling in Christ Jesus. Therefore, have nothing to do with those who wish to place on your body the marks of circumcision, in order to avoid the marks of persecution for the cross. Remember, they avoid a suffering, dying Messiah—but we preach Christ crucified, risen and coming again. Glory to his name!

Finally, in verse 18, the apostle writes:

Galatians 6:18

Paul closes his letter to the Galatian churches with a blessing or prayer that they may experience in full measure the abundant riches of Christ's grace in their lives. By his grace, the Lord will enable them to stand against those who would seek to deceive and mislead them. By this grace, the Lord Jesus would empower them to live a life of love, and to witness to others of the love, power and glory of their glorified and exalted Lord and Saviour.

Paul's final address to the Galatian believers as 'brothers' shows that the apostle considers them as the beloved of the Lord, and as his own dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

As such, the apostle is confident that they will heed his letter to them, and accept his instructions as a word from the Lord himself.

Thus, we ought to consider every part of God's Word as his voice to our souls: it is a word from the Lord himself. He speaks to us at a particular time of need, and he directs our daily lives by means of that Word. If we follow the rule of God's Word—and that Word alone—we will not stray from the path marked out for us by the Lord our God, and by his Son—the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, we will enjoy full fellowship with our Father in heaven, and with his Son and with the Holy Spirit who indwells and sanctifies us, and who keeps us eternally secure in Christ Jesus until the day of our final redemption in glory.