

Galatians 3:3-5 “The Experience of a Living Faith”

GAL 3:3-5 “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing - if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?”

Last week Paul set the stage for his argument that these believers in Galatia had taken what was spiritual and were now making it into something considerably less than spiritual.

We’re talking about eternal life which can only be obtained through the Spirit of God. We’re talking about walking in this spiritual life which can only be accomplished through the Spirit of God. The problem Paul was dealing with was not just a bunch of professing believers who decided they wanted to promote salvation through fleshly means, but what that message conveyed about the God who gave them life.

Remember, ultimately this life and the life to come is to promote the glory of God. Whenever we try to go forward through any means other than through His Spirit we rob our Lord of His glory to the extent that people around us see this salvation as something we accomplish through our own means.

God has graciously intervened by rescuing us from ourselves as He promised to send a Savior through the seed of a woman, way back in the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord. He fulfilled that promise when He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to die in our place as He took our penalty for sin.

For us to step in and begin altering this message of grace, either by adding to or taking away from the message, or by living out this hope in anything less than grace, is to communicate to the world that God didn’t get it right and we have to step in and help Him out.

This was abhorrent to Paul who was a recipient of this grace and who understood that anything less than giving all the glory to God is to create the illusion that the flesh can produce something spiritual, when in fact the only thing that sinful flesh can produce is death.

That's like saying that a rock can somehow transform itself into a bird, which is precisely what evolution teaches. To suggest that non-living matter can will itself into some sort of life form is nothing short of science fiction. And yet, there are scientists, who are otherwise pretty smart people, who blindly follow this tall tale of evolution.

And in a similar manner, there are people who claim to know Jesus Christ, who create an atmosphere where their fleshly approach to eternal life and godliness is seen as something to be emulated.

And whether they realize it or not they then turn the living word of God into Grimm's Fairy tales as they twist the truth and turn the word of God into some distorted work of fiction.

If we are to live this life of the Spirit, then we must walk in the Spirit according to the word inspired by the Spirit. And Paul is going to demonstrate how this word of the Spirit comes into play if we are to understand what the Spirit of God expects of His people.

And this is why Paul asks the question in verse two.

GAL 3:2 "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?"

What they heard was the word of God as Paul had shared the message of hope and life through Jesus Christ, not through anything to do with the law.

And so, the stage is set. The law, as a means of attaining eternal life is of the flesh. Believing what God has ordained regarding our salvation is of the Spirit. And so, the question: did you receive this life through the flesh, through the law, or did you receive it through the Spirit, through what you believed from God?

GAL 3:3 "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

Paul begins verse three the same way he begins chapter three as he addresses these Christians as foolish. And by the way, whenever a phrase like this is repeated in the same context it is meant to show that this is a very serious matter that deserves such repetition. It adds weight to the argument that this is something that needs to be changed.

The word foolish in verse three is the exact same word used in verse one, and it could also be translated, not understanding, or

unwise. As I said last week, it doesn't mean they were stupid, or lacked the intelligence to understand these spiritual truths. It means, they had opted for a lie, becoming sidetracked as they entertained false teachings.

That's why Paul asked the question in verse one, "who has bewitched you?" In other words, who has fooled you with their craftiness and their smooth talk into believing their falsehoods?

But in verse three Paul raises another question which is designed to get them thinking correctly.

GAL 3:3 "... After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

After beginning with the Spirit. Eternal life doesn't begin unless it begins with the Spirit. There are more religions in this world than we could conceive and they all begin with the flesh. They all depend on what we can do to attain eternal life. They all have a set of rules and a set of standards by which the follower can earn his way to perfection.

The sad reality is that nothing they do will allow them to begin on this path of eternal life, because the path they're on is the same old path they've been on since the fall of man. The rule seems to be, "all roads lead to God." The problem is that they've left God out of the equation who makes it clear that there is only one path that leads to Him and it is a path which begins with the Spirit who points us to Christ.

The Christians in Galatia were trying to merge the Spirit with the flesh. That's like trying to mix oil with water. They simply don't mix. And yet, like that small child who is insistent that they have the answer to the problem, they continue to try and push that square peg into a round hole and claim it's the right solution.

Paul will shock them back to reality as he points them to the only solution; "are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

He assumes they've begun by the Spirit, since they call themselves Christians. But, as is the case with so many people who claim to be Christian, the question needs to be raised, what are you doing with the Spirit in going forward in your walk with Christ?

The NIV says, "are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" This is not the best translation. The NASB puts it this way: "'are you now being perfected by the flesh.'"

The idea here is, are you being completed in the Spirit, in the sense that you're being conformed into the image of Christ, by approaching this spiritual life in the flesh?

We might look at it this way. Imagine going to law school for some four years and taking your bar test and passing. You begin your career with this brand new start. But, instead of continuing your career with what you've been taught in this country, according to the laws of this country, you decide you're going to practice law in Zimbabwe, Africa.

How in the world can you practice law in Zimbabwe when their laws are nothing like ours? It's an entirely different system. They're not compatible. And until you spend the time learning their laws you're simply trying to attain your goal with the wrong foundation. It will never happen.

Paul is saying to these Galatians that their foundation is spiritual. How then can you build on that unless your approach to salvation is spiritual? The answer is you can't. Our goal will not be obtained because we're on the wrong playing field.

Can you imagine going home this afternoon and turning on the football game, expecting to see the high level of competition of the NFL, only to discover that the two teams who come out onto the field are dressed out in hockey uniforms and skates?

As interesting as that might be, there's no way you can expect to watch a football game, or for that matter a hockey game. They're on the wrong field with the wrong equipment. The game will never start. It will never get off square one.

This is what Paul is telling the Galatians. If you're going to approach your life in Christ by coming out on the wrong field in the wrong equipment, you might as well call the game because all of your efforts will never accomplish what this match was intended to be.

Now the question needs to be raised, what does Paul mean by the flesh? The NIV uses the phrase human effort in place of the word flesh. And the reason this is not the best translation is because it "makes the reader think the issue is one of effort, (i.e., merit seeking), versus non-effort (i.e., faith.)" (Scot McKnight)

The reality is that there is effort, there is an application of what you know to be true. But the effort, or the application, is either a

system which is based on man's approach to God, or God's approach to God.

There's a tendency for Christians to believe that once we've been saved by grace that we no longer need to be concerned with what we do with this new life. And so, there's the danger of doing nothing with it since we're going to heaven anyway.

Paul is not suggesting that there is no effort on our parts when it comes to faith, or that simply because we have the Spirit of God that there is no effort since the Spirit will somehow do it for us.

I can't tell you how many times over the years I've had people tell me that they can't live some aspect of the Christian life because they don't feel compelled by the Spirit to walk in the Spirit. In other words, they didn't have some sort of spiritual "feeling" to accompany what they know to be true.

Years ago I had a young woman tell me that she was having a real problem resisting the urge to steal. She knew what God's word had to say about stealing, but it seemed that whenever she went into a store she couldn't help herself to pick up something and put it into her purse.

Now, there are people today who would call that the disease of kleptomania. In fact, this girl had convinced herself that she had this disease and could therefore not help herself, nor take responsibility to stop this behavior. She wanted prayer to have the Spirit of God give her the desire to stop this behavior.

My counsel to her was quite simple. Though I was certainly willing to pray for her, she didn't need prayer, she simply needed to stop stealing. And I told her that. But she was looking for a "move of the Spirit" to move her to right behavior. But as I told her she already had the Spirit, and needed only to submit to what the Spirit has already told her. You shall not steal. And if you have the Spirit that law is not some commandment on stone it should be a law written on the heart.

In this case she needed to put forth the effort, the application of what the Spirit already told her in the word of God, and gave her the power to accomplish. She didn't need a spiritual bolt of lightning from heaven to motivate her to walk in the Spirit.

Instead she was walking in the flesh whose desires were only to please self. She didn't have a disease problem, she had an obedience problem and "a lack of love for the new life Christ gave her" problem. And so, we should never think that there isn't effort on our parts when it comes to walking in the Spirit. This is why the NIV tries to make the distinction of "human" effort as opposed to the Spirit.

But flesh is really the better translation because though it may certainly mean the soft body parts we associate with the flesh, the intention is that it pertains to what motivates this flesh or body.

What is the system of thought that accompanies the fleshly man or woman? Well, the answer is always self or what we call number one in one form or another. It doesn't take into account that there is a spiritual answer to our problems because we can solve them or at least find a fleshly approach to our problems without God.

But the natural man, or the fleshly man is really identified by the power that rules him and how that power motivates him in this life. Paul identifies this when writing to the Romans.

ROM 6:19-23 "I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Paul makes the distinction of flesh and spirit by the fact that we have left one master who controlled us in sin, as we now embrace a new master by faith in Christ, who desires to empower us to His glory. The problem is all believers now have two natures: a new nature in Christ which desires to live for Him, and the existing sin nature, the natural man, who wants to continue down a path of self.

Unbelievers only have the one nature, the sin nature. They don't struggle with the new nature, the nature of life, because they're still dead in their trespasses and sins. But you and I do struggle with this dual nature as did Paul.

ROM 7:21 -25 "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in

God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God -through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”

Paul understood how the law of the sinful nature still wages war in his own life, but he also knew that the new law of life which the Spirit gave him was not to be held down by his sinful nature. Why? Because he died to sin and sin no longer was his master. His new master was the one who died in his place and gave him a resurrection life of power.

The Christians in Galatia were opting for a power which was weak and ineffective in pleasing God. They thought that since they could reason with the law it was a better alternative than simply trusting God as they placed their faith in His promises.

After all, if we've got a checklist of do's and don't's we can actually measure our progress as we keep these laws and therefore God will be pleased with our human efforts. But the effort God is looking for is an effort we place in the Spirit who empowers us and motivates us to seek Christ and obey Him out of thanks and gratitude for the free gift He's given us by faith.

We can't perfect or complete this walk in Christ through anything the flesh could produce, because the flesh will always seek self instead of wanting to please God. That's the very definition of sin. When Adam and Eve sought to please self by taking what God had clearly said they couldn't have they sinned and were cut off from God.

How can that sinful selfish nature ever please God? It can't. And yet, man will always make that attempt, and unfortunately, even Christians are not exempt from this attitude.

So, Paul reminds his readers in Galatia that they must consider what it means to live spiritual lives to God's glory as he contrasts that with what they're doing.

GAL 3:4-5 “Have you suffered so much for nothing - if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?”

What's interesting about these passages from verses 3-5 is that Paul is dealing with the personal experiences of these Galatians. We touched on this last week that Paul is going to bring up the issue of how they view or feel about their personal experience with God.

And though feelings are not to rule our lives it doesn't mean we can't use our personal experiences or feelings when it comes to identifying how God might be working in our lives.

After all, how many married couples only deal with their mates on a factual level? I love my wife because she's a woman, 5 feet two inches, brown hair, blue eyes, likes to take walks by the beach and keeps a good house.

No. Relationships work on a variety of levels including how we feel about them, and the experiences we share with them. And in a similar way, the relationship we have with our Savior doesn't discount these aspects of relationship. And though this relationship is based on faith in the truth, we have placed our faith in a person who loves us and expects our love in return.

And this is why Paul raises the next question in our text.

GAL 3:4 "Have you suffered so much for nothing - if it really was for nothing?"

Most translations give the impression that these Galatians were suffering for their faith. In other words, they gave up certain things because of their relationship with Christ which is based solely on faith. And if this was the case they suffered in vain since they are now substituting faith with a fleshly approach to their salvation.

It's like going to school for your whole life to be a Doctor. You spend countless hours in class, studying, staying up late every night to make good grades. You intern in a hospital under grueling hours and conditions and sacrifice any social life so you can be the best doctor you can be.

And then, just as you're about to graduate and go into practice you decide one night that you'd rather be a ballerina and you quit the profession. Was all of that hard work for nothing? Did you give up your life for nothing? Was it all in vain? And the implication is that this is foolishness.

And that's the point Paul has been making all along. To whatever degree you came to grips with the fact that only Christ and His

sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for your salvation, and your willingness to follow Him by faith, you left your old life behind as you embraced Christ, is it now all in vain since Christ is now not sufficient as you add the law?

In other words, why did you trust Christ in the first place, knowing that hardships would follow? And now that you've suffered such hardships were they all in vain, did they mean nothing now that you've chosen a different path which won't produce the same kind of hardships?

Why bother? Why put yourself in such a position if you had no intention of staying the course and running the race to the end? Why call yourself a Christian? Call yourself a "Christ plus the law" person while you please the Judaizers who take delight in appealing to your flesh and sin nature.

We aren't told in this letter that the Galatians were experiencing any specific persecution or suffering. And so, if they were, and they were now denying the all-sufficiency of Christ's atonement, any suffering for Christ would certainly have been in vain.

But there may very well be another translation to this passage in verse 5. John MacArthur in his commentary on Galatians makes an interesting point on this verse.

He says, the word "suffer is from [the Greek word] *pascho*, a word that carries the basic idea of experience and sometimes that of pain or hardship. Since the context suggests nothing of suffering or hardship, it seems best to take the word here to refer to experience, the believers' personal experience with Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father.....

..... Paul is asking, "did you experience so many things in vain? Did you learn nothing at all from them? Can't you think things through and see that the claims of the Judaizers cannot possibly square with the gospel you have been taught and have experienced yourselves?"

All of us have experiences in our Christian lives which are directly related to our relationship with the living Savior. How else do we explain the new desires we have to follow Christ? How else do we explain the pain we feel when we do something we know doesn't please God?

How do we explain the ways in which God comes through for us? For example, how do we explain how God supplies our needs

when we don't see a way for that need being met? How do we explain a love that we have for people that is different from the way we used to feel about people as we saw them only as obstacles?

These are real life experiences that we can't deny and they are associated with this new life we have in Christ. And these Galatians had experienced these very same things. How then, Paul asks, can you have so many of these real and genuine experiences in Christ, and all of a sudden deny this relationship by trying to deny what you had been taught regarding how this relationship is designed by God to work; through the Spirit, not the flesh?

Why go back there, when you know that your fleshly attempts in the past didn't create this relationship and the experiences that accompanied it?

But Paul softens the blow as he then suggests in verse 5, "if it really was for nothing?"

Here Paul holds out that they understood that it really was something, that it was something they had not forgotten or denied but were only entertaining because of this bad influence of the Judaizers. Paul is giving these Christians the benefit of the doubt.

And by doing this Paul is admitting the Holy Spirit is still in control of the situation. Paul is admitting that as much as he wants to convince them that what they're doing is wrong he still has to rely on the work of the Spirit as they submit to Him. Paul can't change them and he knows that God loves these Galatians infinitely more than Paul could.

When we deal with other Christians who are struggling or are getting involved in things which are not beneficial to their walk with Christ, we can love them with the truth, we can encourage them in the faith, but ultimately they must make the right choice.

But we must never exclude the work of the Spirit who wants them to walk after Him and not the flesh. That believer is still a child of the living God and the Father wants them to walk as one of His children.

But the Father will often use the means to help His children and that's you and me in Christ. We play a role, we just can't play the Holy Spirit. We encourage other believers to walk in the Spirit, but we're not the Spirit. We point people, and we need to be good

pointers as we point them to Christ who must be accepted by faith and then continue to live that life by faith.

GAL 3:5 “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?”

These would have been some of the experiences they had; miracles and wonders that only the Spirit of God could accomplish. The law doesn't accomplish such things because there is no life or power in the law, except the power of death.

Consider your life today. Is it a life of hope and expectation, or a life which is bogged down with trying to go forward in this salvation through some fleshly effort on your part?

That's not life, that's a wage you're trying to earn. If you've believed what you heard regarding Jesus Christ then you have life which is secured and held fast by the one who gave you life, and that's God Himself. He'll never let you go. And here's the reason why.

ROM 8:1-4 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”

We received this life by the Spirit. May we continue to seek the Spirit and the things of the Spirit as we grow in this new life in Christ. And may we treasure the experiences we have in Christ as we give Him glory through lives of love and obedience.