

Galatians

Abraham: Justified by Faith or by Works?

Galatians 3:6-9

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Scripture

When asked about Christianity, actress Sophia Loren was reported as saying several years ago in the *USA Today*, “I’m not a practican, but I pray. I read the Bible. It’s the most beautiful book ever written. I should go to heaven; otherwise it’s not nice. I haven’t done anything wrong. My conscience is very clean. My soul is as white as those orchids over there, and I should go straight, straight to heaven.”¹

In a *Reader’s Digest* interview, Muhammad Ali stated: “One day we’re all going to die and God is going to judge us—our good deeds and bad deeds. If the bad outweighs the good, you go to hell. If the good outweighs the bad, you go to heaven.”²

Another *Reader’s Digest* article told of a 67-year-old man named Bill who had donated over 100 pints of blood over the years. No doubt many people owe their lives to this man’s kindness. How do you think this man’s good deeds go over in heaven?

Here’s what Bill thinks: “When that final whistle blows, and St. Peter asks, ‘What did you do?’ I’ll just say, ‘Well, I gave 100 pints of blood,’” Bill says with a laugh. “That ought to get me in.”

Bill was probably joking. But if he was serious, if he truly believes that his good deeds will give him a ticket to heaven, then he has perfectly articulated the gospel of works. If Bill is counting on the giving of 100 pints of blood to get him to heaven—he is trusting in the wrong blood.

Today I would like to continue our series in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In the section we are going to study today, we shall see that the only way to get to heaven is by faith and not by works.

¹ Sophia Loren, actress, *USA Today* (2-4-1999).

² “Ali,” *Reader’s Digest* (December 2001), 93.

Let us read Galatians 3:6-9:

⁶ Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” ⁷ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” ⁹ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:6-9)

Introduction

One Monday morning several years ago I woke up early. After my devotions I read the *Center Daily Times*. It had become my habit to read the “Obituaries” section of the newspaper. (I’m told that is the pastoral thing to do!)

I was shocked to read that Matthew Babb had died. Matthew Babb was the eleven year-old son of Perry Babb, pastor of the Church of the Harvest, and his wife, Jackie. Matthew died the previous Saturday as a result of a horse riding accident.

I went to the viewing for young Matthew Babb on Monday night. I arrived early and there were only twenty people ahead of me. I left thirty minutes later, and there were about one hundred and fifty people in line, and cars were streaming in to the Assembly of God church parking lot for the viewing. When I got to talk with Perry and Jackie, it was very difficult and very emotional, perhaps more for me than for them. After all, how do you console a family struck by a sudden and tragic accident that has taken the life of their oldest child? I told them how sorry I was for them, and they told me that nothing in life had prepared them for this experience.

But as I spoke with them, I sensed something that I always sense at a Christian funeral. Do you know what it was? Hope! Yes, they had a hope that, although the loss of Matthew was excruciatingly sad and painful, it was, nevertheless, only a temporary parting. They knew that one day they would be reunited with Matthew

in heaven. Why? Because they, like Matthew, were basing their hope for salvation upon their faith in Jesus Christ.

Just a few days after the funeral for Matthew Babb I had a haircut. There was no-one else in the barber shop the entire time my hair was being cut—which was a first! I suppose because there was no-one else around, my barber felt more inclined to talk about spiritual matters—also a first! He told me that he did not go to church anymore because he was fed-up with the church.

“The way I figure it,” he said to me, “God will accept me because I’m a pretty good person.”

And so my barber was basing his hope for salvation upon his good life, his works.

One of the things I have noticed over my few years in the ministry is that almost everyone has an opinion about how to get to heaven. Unfortunately, that opinion is seldom grounded upon the sure foundation of truth.

The question is: which is right?

Is a person saved by faith?

Or is a person saved by works?

If you know anything at all about what God says in Scripture, or, if you have been here for the past several weeks, you know that a person is saved by faith—and by faith alone.

This, in fact, is the great doctrine that the apostle Paul is defending in his letter to the Galatians.

Review

Paul, you remember, wrote this letter to the Galatians because some false teachers, known as Judaizers, were teaching them that in order for a person to be saved they had to have faith in Jesus Christ plus be circumcised and obey the law of Moses (cf. Acts 15:5).

Paul was astonished that the Galatians were so quickly abandoning the gospel that Paul taught them and were believing the teaching of the Judaizers. He had taught them clearly and faith-

fully, and yet they were being duped into believing what Paul called “a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (1:6-7).

The great Puritan commentator, John Brown, summarizes beautifully Paul’s purpose in writing his letter to the Galatians:

The leading purpose of the apostle in this epistle is to point out to the Galatian Christians the falsehood and danger of the principle which some Judaizing teachers had been attempting, with but too much success, to impose on them, “*that the observance of the Mosaic law was equally necessary with faith in Jesus as the Messiah to secure for them the divine favor and everlasting happiness,*” and to recall them to, and establish them in, the great fundamental truths of the gospel which he had taught them, “*that Jesus Christ was the only and all sufficient Savior; that his vicarious obedience, sufferings, and death, were the sole ground of the sinner’s justification; and that faith, or believing the gospel, was the sole means of the sinner’s justification*” (emphasis his).³

Paul’s purpose in writing to the Galatians was to state again for them how a person is justified before God (i.e. how a person comes into right standing before God).

It is in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans that Paul most clearly and forcefully expresses himself concerning justification by grace through faith.

In Romans, Paul tells his readers what justification is.

In Galatians, Paul tells his readers what justification is not.

He tells the Galatians that all attempts to secure justification by human or personal merit are unacceptable to God.

Paul’s method is simple. In the opening two chapters of Galatians he defends his right to speak authoritatively to the Galatians. He argues that both his apostleship and his message are of divine origin. The proposition, stated in verses one, eleven and twelve, is supported by several arguments, which terminate at the end of chapter two.

³ John Brown, *An Exposition of Galatians* (LaFayette, IN, n.d.) 41.

In chapter 3, Paul gives a classic defense of the doctrine of justification by faith, a defense he had introduced in 2:16-21. After having shown the Galatian Christians from their own experience in 3:1-5 that they were justified by faith and not by works, Paul now defends that doctrine from Scripture.

Since the Judaizers wanted to take the believers back to the Law of Moses, Paul quotes the Law of Moses as one of the weapons in his arsenal. And, since the Judaizers magnified Abraham in their teaching, Paul also uses Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people and supreme patriarch of Judaism, and calls him as his chief witness!

Lesson

So, Paul turns to Abraham to show that he too was justified before God by faith and not by works.

I. Abraham Was Justified by Faith (3:6-7)

First, Abraham was justified by faith.

Paul writes, **“Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham”** (3:6-7).

The Judaizers undoubtedly used Abraham as certain proof that circumcision was necessary to please God and become acceptable to him.

In Genesis 12:1-3 God called Abraham to leave his home in Ur of Chaldea: “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”

And then God promised, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Later, God commanded Abraham in Genesis 17:10 to be circumcised along with his descendants as a sign of God's covenant (i.e. promise), "This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

Putting these two accounts together the Judaizers argued something like this: "Isn't it obvious that if the rest of the world, that is, the Gentiles, are to share in the promised blessings to Abraham, they must first take on the sign that marks God's people, the Jews? If all the nations of the earth will be blessed in Abraham, they will have to become like Abraham and be circumcised."

"But that doesn't follow," Paul replied in effect.

Paul quotes Genesis 15:6: "**He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.**" The *moment* Abraham **believed God**, he was accepted as righteous in the presence of God.

In fact, if the Judaizers had been more careful in their study of Scripture, they would have realized that it was at least fourteen years *after* **God** had already accepted Abraham as righteous that the command was given for circumcision.

Clearly, Abraham was saved, not because he was circumcised, but, because **he believed God**. Abraham was saved, then, by faith and not by works.

Commentator John MacArthur says, "The Judaizers, like most other Jews of that day, had completely reversed the relationship of circumcision and salvation. Circumcision was only a *mark*, not the *means*, of salvation."⁴

Friends, salvation is never received because of fulfilling certain religious rites. Abraham was not saved by the rite of circumcision; he was saved because **he believed God**.

Not one of us will be saved because of a rite, any rite, whether it be circumcision, baptism, communion, or whatever. **God** will accept us **as righteous** because we, like Abraham, believe God.

⁴ John F. MacArthur, *Galatians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1987), 73.

To underscore the importance of what he was saying, Paul added, “**Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham**” (3:7).

The Jewish people were very proud of their relationship to Abraham. The trouble was that they thought that this relationship guaranteed them salvation.

Paul is making the same point as John the Baptizer and Jesus.

John warned the Jews that their *physical* descent from Abraham did not guarantee *spiritual* life (cf. Matthew 3:9).

Jesus made a clear distinction between “Abraham’s seed” physically and “Abraham’s children” spiritually (cf. John 8:33-47).

The point is this: Only genuine believers—**those who believe**—have any claim to a spiritual relationship to **Abraham**, or to God. Jews with no faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are not true **children of Abraham**, whereas Gentiles **who believe** in him are.

It should be said that no-one is saved by virtue of being related to someone. Do you have parents **who believe** and are true Christians? You cannot get to heaven because your parents are believers.

It has well been said, “God has no grandchildren.”

One day, each one of us must stand before God and answer for ourselves. You cannot say, “God, my father was a believer in Jesus Christ. Please let me into heaven.”

Or, “God, my mother was a Christian. Please let me into heaven because of her.”

No. God will say, “What about *you*? Do *you* believe in me for your salvation?”

Some time ago I was talking to a girl about salvation. I asked her to tell me how she knew she was going to go to heaven. The first thing she said to me was, “I have always been a Christian because I grew up in a Christian home.”

She was basing her eternal hope on the fact that she was born in a home to religious parents.

Friends, don’t be deceived. Don’t make the same error as this girl or the Judaizers. Make sure that you can stand before God and

say, “I am a Christian, not because of my parents, but, because I trust in Jesus Christ.”

II. The Gentiles Were Justified By Faith (3:8-9)

Second, not only was Abraham justified by faith, the gentiles were justified by faith.

Paul says in verses 8-9: **“The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”**

Paul quotes Genesis 12:3: **“All nations will be blessed through you.”** From the very beginning of Abraham’s relationship with God, the blessing of salvation was promised to all nations. God preached the good news to Abraham centuries earlier, and Paul preached the same good news to the Galatians: Sinners are justified by faith and not by keeping the law.

The logic here is evident: If God promised to save the Gentiles by faith, then the Judaizers were wrong in wanting to take the Gentiles back into law. The true children of Abraham are not the Jews by physical descent, but those who have faith, the same faith as Abraham, the man of faith.

When Gentiles are saved, they are saved as Gentiles, just as Jews are saved as Jews. No one from either group is saved or not saved because of racial or ethnic identity. Those who are saved are saved because of their faith, and those who are not saved are not saved because their unbelief.

The Judaizers were wrong in teaching that a person is saved by faith in Jesus Christ plus circumcision. They thought that only Jews could be saved. Paul shows how God intended, right from the time he called Abraham, to save a great company of people from all nations. And they did not have to become Jews first in order to be saved.

Pastor Max Lucado tells the following story:

I make no claim to being a good golfer, but I love to play golf, watch golf, and on good nights I even dream golf.

So when I was invited to attend the Masters Golf Tournament, I was thrilled. A pass to the Masters is the golfer's Holy Grail. Mine came via pro golfer Scott Simpson.

Off we went to Augusta National Country Club in Georgia where golf heritage hangs like moss from the trees. I was a kid in a candy store. It wasn't enough to see the course and walk the grounds; I wanted to see the locker room where the clubs of Ben Hogan and Paul Azinger are displayed.

But they wouldn't let me in. A guard stopped me at the entrance. I showed him my pass, but he shook his head. I told him I knew Scott, but that didn't matter. "Only caddies and players," he explained.

Well, he knew I wasn't a player or a caddie. Caddies are required to wear white coveralls. My clothing was a dead giveaway. So I left, knowing I had made it all the way to the door but was denied entrance.⁵

God has one requirement for entrance into heaven: that we be clothed in Christ.

When someone prays, "Take away my sinful rags and clothe me in your grace," Jesus in an act visible only to the eyes of heaven, removes the stained robe and replaces it with his robe of righteousness.

What did Jesus do for you and me? He put on our coat of sin and wore it to the cross. As he died, his blood flowed over our sins and they were cleansed.

Because of this, we have no fear of being turned away at the door of heaven.

And all of this is received by faith. There is nothing that can be added to faith. There is nothing that needs to be added to be faith. We are saved by faith—and by faith alone.

⁵ Max Lucado, "Back Door," *Christian Reader* (May/June 2000), 96.

Conclusion

In defending his doctrine of justification by faith, Paul shows that Abraham was saved by faith and not by works. That is in fact the way that all people are saved. All people are saved by faith and not by works.

Perry and Jackie Babb know that Matthew is in heaven because he trusted Jesus Christ. He is not in heaven because he was baptized or because he was circumcised or because he took communion or because he attended church or because his parents are Christians or even because his father is a pastor. No. Matthew is in heaven because, like Abraham, he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

My barber is in bad shape. He believes he is going to go to heaven because he is a good person. I hope you can see that that is not the teaching of Scripture. His opinion of how he is going to get to heaven rests on the quicksand of error and not on the sure foundation of truth. The only way he can get to heaven is by believing that Jesus Christ is the only and all-sufficient Savior; that his vicarious obedience, sufferings, and death, are the sole ground of his justification; and that faith, or believing the gospel, is the sole means of his justification.

May God help us all come to a clear understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith. Amen.

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and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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