

# Chapter Three

## Commentary

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Paul begins this section by an appeal to the “practical” righteousness that the Galatians had themselves experienced. There is little doubt that the primary audience Paul is now addressing is made up of non-Jews who were being compelled to become proselytes, i.e., become circumcised. So it is also the case that these Gentiles had forsaken their lives of paganism and turned to walk in righteousness. Their ability to do this, to overcome the deeply ingrained culture of idolatry, was nothing less than proof that God had done a miraculous work in their lives, a work enabled and energized by the Ruach. This was a clear reality in the lives of the Galatians, and Paul now appeals to this as the first argument that they are already fully covenant members and do not therefore need to take further steps to become covenant members.

### **1 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Yeshua Messiah was publicly portrayed as crucified?**

Having carefully discussed and explained his own experiences, and the Antioch incident (which was for Paul very similar in principle to the very issues being faced in Galatia), Paul now turns to the primary problem facing the Galatian congregations. He already has explained the actions he took with Peter in Antioch, and it is clear his perspective has not changed. Here, in his first direct address to the Galatians since 1:13, Paul emphasizes the work of the Spirit in the believer, a theme which is central to the overall message of this epistle.

*You foolish Galatians* – Paul has returned to his sharp rhetoric! He is thoroughly amazed that those who had so evidently seen the work of the Spirit through changed lives could equally be so easily dissuaded by the Influencers. Is it possible that they did not understand and personally know the reality of their own salvation? Impossible! Something else must be at work here.

*who has bewitched you* – Paul is convinced that the Influencers have mesmerized the Galatians through their smooth words and sophistic strategies. But it is not beyond reason to suggest that Paul may have also considered a demonic influence at work, since it is beyond his thinking that something less could account for the Galatians’ about-face. Had the Influencers put the “evil-eye” upon the Galatians!? Indeed, to use such language fired a shot across the bow of the Influencers! Their message was not merely an alternative theology, it was the kind of thing with which even the demons could work. The word “bewitched” (βασκαίνω, *baskainō*) is used only here, and may have a sense of “begrudge.” Some have suggested that

The implication is that the other missionaries in Galatia must begrudge the Galatians’ experience of the Spirit, received without any commitment on their part to observe the works of the law.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the case, Paul’s perspective is clear: the reality of the work of God among the Galatians was irrefutable evidence that He had drawn them into the covenant.

<sup>1</sup> Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 152.

before whose eyes Yeshua Messiah was publicly portrayed as crucified – “Their looking at the cross ought to have had sufficient power to avert or counter any evil spell.”<sup>2</sup> Here is the center of Paul’s message—here, and always (cf. 1Cor 1:23; 2:2)—the crucified and risen Savior. First and foremost Paul wonders how anyone who had clearly seen (i.e., understood) the death of Messiah for them could turn from it to seek other ways of right-standing before God. Apparently Paul had so graphically and biblically explained and “painted the picture” of Yeshua’s selfless death for His own (note the Greek προεγράφη, *proe-graphē*, “to set forth for public notice”<sup>3</sup>), that he could speak of the Galatians as actually witnessing the crucifixion. For all practical purposes, they had stood at the foot of Yeshua’s execution stake.

Here is the core issue for us as well. How easy it is to become overly familiar with the “message of the cross,” so familiar that we fail to see it as central and foundational to all we are and all we hope to be. Paul came preaching “Messiah crucified,” and it was this message, energized by the Spirit, that fastened onto the hearts of the Galatians in the first place and arrested them from their lives of idolatry, drawing them into the covenant family of God, confessing Yeshua to be their Master. Like Paul, we must ever see the atoning work of Yeshua as the very warp and woof of the fabric of faith in which we live. A stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greeks, the death of the Messiah must constitute for us the very theme of our song. For it is by the blood of Messiah that we are set free to worship the Creator. It is by His death for us that we are made the righteousness of God in Him. It is our union in His death and resurrection that constitutes for us the very life that is the totality of our existence.

Here, as in 2:19, the tense of the verb “crucified” is perfect where we might expect the aorist. The risen Savior, alive at the right hand of the Father, is nonetheless constantly bearing the scars of His sacrifice for us. He was crucified once, never again to taste death, but never can that picture be erased from the spiritual conscience of the believer. For while glorying in His resurrected life, we can never forget the supreme price He paid that we might be His. “Crucified, and still portrayed as crucified” is the sense that Paul gives. And after seeing such a sacrifice, how could one ever turn to another way?

**2–3 This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Torah, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?**

The question Paul now puts to the Galatians is significant. It does not center on what Paul did for them, nor seek to shame them for their apparent lack of allegiance to him as their teacher and mentor. He does not ask them to think back at a point of decision, nor some ritual event that gave them “membership” in a group. Rather, he asks them to make a careful assessment of how it was that the Ruach HaKodesh did His evident work in their lives. Here we see a clear principle in the Apostle’s theology: the life of faith is one characterized by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. It is out of the question to think that salvation could be summed in what modern

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2 Ibid.

3 BDAG, “προεγραφο”.

theologians have called “positional righteousness.” As noted above, the righteousness of Messiah, imputed to the believer, secures and in every way guarantees the actual or “practical” righteousness of the child of God. Thus, Paul may point to the evident work of the Spirit in the lives of the Galatians as proof that they have been drawn into the family of God. This happened, not through a man-made ritual, nor through so-called Torah observance, but by God’s sovereign grace infused into the life of the believer through the indwelling Ruach HaKodesh, the Spirit of holiness.

Here, as before, the “works of the Torah” refer to those stipulations set forth by the Influencers (and those they represented) as the requirements for “group-membership.” Like the Qumran sect (who also used the phrase), the Influencers were teaching that covenant membership—to be a full-fledged, *bona fide* covenant member—was afforded only to those who were the “seed of Abraham,” something naturally given to the Jew, but something acquired by the Gentile through becoming a proselyte (=circumcision). But Paul’s point is clear: did they receive the Spirit or not? Were their lives overtaken by the Spirit of God, evidenced by their pursuit of righteousness, and their lives of holiness? And if so, was the Spirit of God active in their lives because they had become proselytes, or because they obeyed (heard) the gospel message, received by faith? The answer is clear. Like Cornelius and those Gentiles gathered with him who received the Ruach HaKodesh (much to the surprise of Peter, Acts 10:44ff; 11:15–18), so these Galatians had received the Spirit, evidenced by their changed lives and perseverance in the faith. And like Cornelius and his household, the fact that the Ruach HaKodesh took up dwelling with them was proof that God had received them into His covenant. For surely God Himself does not dwell with the unrighteous.

The phrase “hearing with faith” is literally “the out from faith hearing” (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως). We should understand the word “hearing” in its Semitic sense of “obeying,” “acting upon what one hears.” Thus, it was not that the Galatians simply heard the message of the Gospel as Paul delivered it, but that they obeyed the message through the exercise of faith. This, no doubt, resulted in evident repentance of sin, and a calling out for God’s mercy as displayed in Messiah Yeshua. Thus, “obedience that comes as the result of faith” is contrasted by “works of the Torah.” One is the gift of God, the other is the program of men.

*Are you so foolish?* – Paul has asked a question, but he already knows the answer. So here, as previously, he is using rhetorical means to bring the Galatians to their senses. Surely they received the Spirit as the gift of God’s grace through their confession of Yeshua as the Messiah, and their willingness to submit to the Gospel message. To think otherwise could only be the “logic” of a fool. But it is understandable how these non-Jewish believers could be overwhelmed by the unified voice of the Influencers, especially with the apparent backing of James. (We should presume that the Influencers referenced James and the Jerusalem community as agreeing with their position.) After all, the Gentile believers were the “newcomers.” How could they stand in the face of this formidable opposition? Moreover, the Influencers did not present themselves as the “opposition,” but as representatives of a long standing tradition and reality. As far back as they could look, the Gentiles had entered the covenant through becoming proselytes. Why should it change now? The story told by tradition had great strength.

This line of reasoning could not have escaped Paul either. Did he honestly think that these Gentiles, some of them no doubt new to faith in God through

Messiah, could reason against the generational “widsom” of Jewish leaders, the so-called “party of the circumcision?” One must consider the very real possibility that Paul’s language here is, in fact, ironic rebuke, in the sense of expecting his words to shame the Gentile believers into action, the kind of action of which they otherwise may have felt incapable.

*Having begun by (with) the Spirit ...* – Paul uses the terms “begin” (ἐνάρχομαι, *enarxomai*) and “finish” (ἐπιτέλεω, *epiteleō*): what does he mean by these? While *enarxomai* has the basic meaning of “begin,” *epiteleō* can mean “to bring about a planned result,” “to accomplish.” The two words are used together in 2Cor 8:6 and Phil 1:6—

So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. (2Cor 8:6)

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Messiah Yeshua. (Phil 1:6)

It seems clear that Paul is considering the aspect of justification (being declared righteous) as the “beginning” and the on-going accomplishment of sanctification (righteousness within the life of the believer) as the work of “completing” or “finishing” one’s salvation. The fact that the other two times Paul uses these words together also clearly reference the relationship of justification and sanctification would strengthen the idea that he also has them in mind here.

But the primary antithesis is that of Spirit and flesh, an antithesis not uncommon in Pauline literature.<sup>4</sup> Here, as also possibly in 2:20, Paul most likely uses the word “flesh” to denote ethnic identity. The idea is certainly not that the Influencers were teaching that living righteously (being completed) was something done apart from God. Rather, the more obvious message of the Influencers was that to be reckoned as a “complete” covenant member required a conversion process through which one acquired a new pedigree. The matter of one’s ethnicity (“flesh”) was all important in the minds of the Influencers.

Paul’s point, then, is parallel to Romans 4. For there, Paul argues that Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised. From being in the class of “sinner” as the Galatians were being told they were, they, like Abraham, had been declared righteous without circumcision (=ritual of conversion). Abraham, at the beginning of Genesis 17, was admonished to “keep on walking before Me and be perfect.” My translation “keep on walking” is based upon the fact that the verb הלך, (*halach*, “to walk”) is in the hitpael which has the sense of “walk around,” “walk here and there,” “walk back and forth.”<sup>5</sup> The idea conveyed, therefore, is of continuing action. Abraham was already walking with God, and already demonstrating his faith by his obedience. Thus, circumcision came as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he already had. He gained no further covenant status by being circumcised. Rather, circumcision was a sign of the covenant of which he was already a member.

The same was true of the Galatians. Their faith in Yeshua had confirmed them as *bona fide* covenant members. They did not need circumcision in

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4 Rom 8:4-6,9,13; 1Cor 5:5; 2Cor. 7:1; Gal 3:3; 4:29; 5:16-17; 6:8; Phil 3:3; 1Tim 3:16.

5 HALOT, “הלך,” hitpa.

order to “complete” their covenant status. This they had, not on the basis of the “flesh” (=pronounced ethnic status on the basis of becoming a proselyte) but on the basis of the work of the Spirit Who produced faith in them and marked them as covenant members by His evident presence in their lives.

For Paul, the presence of the Ruach was an indication of the eschatological blessing promised by the Prophets. Ezekiel said that in the last days God would sprinkle Israel with clean water (a reference to the ceremony of cleansing by the ashes of the Red Heifer), and put a new spirit within her (Ezek 36:22ff). Joel likewise prophesied of the pouring out of the Spirit upon all “flesh” in the last days (Joel 2:28f [Heb. 3:1f]). Isaiah 44:3 promises that the Spirit of God would be poured out upon the descendants of Israel in the last days. For Paul, then, the evidence of the Spirit within the lives of the Galatian believers was proof that God was keeping His promise and that they had been gathered into the covenant by their faith. For the Galatians to go back to Paul’s “former life in Judaism” in which covenant status was based upon ethnic identity was in no way a “completion” but an undoing of the Gospel message itself. Such thinking was sheer folly.

We should note here that for Paul, the evidence of the Spirit accompanies the “beginning,” not some second phase of one’s salvation. For Paul, as well as for Yeshua, the reception of the Spirit was the beginning of true discipleship, not some “second blessing” subsequent to initial faith. The presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer (i.e., a life changed by the Spirit’s work into one of obedience and righteousness) is, for Paul, the sure proof of right-standing before God. It is not some additional, extra blessing, but the very essence of salvation itself. “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Rom 8:14). Thus, for Paul, the activity and presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer is the norm, not the exception.

Moreover, he was concerned about a teaching on completion or perfection which actually ran counter to and nullified the shared experience of the Spirit, as both the common basis of all Christian fellowship (2Cor 13:13) and as characterizing the whole life of discipleship from the beginning. As is also implicit in Paul’s talk of the Spirit as “first fruits” (Rom 8:23), the “end” is already contained in the “beginning.”<sup>6</sup>

#### 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

The word “suffer” (πάσχω, *pasxō*) can have a broader meaning than “suffer.” *BDAG* notes that the word originally meant all the experiences that befall a person, whether good or bad, but that as the word evolved it was used more and more of those things that cause trouble in a person’s experience. Thus, the word can mean “have a good experience,” and they translate the phrase in v. 4 as “have you had such remarkable experiences in vain?” So the NRSV translates our verse: “Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing.”

It would appear, then, that a neutral sense for the word may well be warranted, and that Paul is pointing to their own experience in their life of faith, comprised of both experiences of joy and of sorrow. Surely they may have suffered rejection by their families, and may have experienced economic loss. But they also witnessed the moving of the Spirit among them (in signs and wonders) and the evident change of their lives as they were conformed to the

6 Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 156.



ways of God.

The fear that Paul labored under was that somehow all of this would be “in vain,” that having run, he might not finish (cf. 2:2). The failure that Paul speaks of here is most likely not that of salvation at its core. Surely the Influencers believed that they were saved and that they also had received the Spirit. To have denied these things would have marked them in unmistakable terms as “unbelievers.” Rather, Paul is concerned that the open door to the Gentiles was being closed, and that their inclusion into the covenant God made with Israel was now to be choked off by the insistence upon a man-made ritual, the “works of the Torah,” which would ultimately undermine and deny the Gospel as it is in Yeshua. It seems clear that in Paul’s mind, Galatia was a test case, and a core one at that. If the Galatians could be persuaded that they were second-class citizens apart from becoming proselytes, then the whole mission to the Gentiles would be skewed and would ultimately fail. It appears to me that this is Paul’s greater concern.

**5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Torah, or by hearing with faith?**

Paul returns to the foundational question: what are the sure identity markers for those who are “in Messiah?” His answer, which he has already given in v. 2, is the evidence of the Spirit in His work of sanctification. Paul speaks of God “providing” (ἐπιχορηγέω, *epichoregeō*) the Spirit. This Greek word is used four other times in the Apostolic Scriptures<sup>7</sup> but never in relationship to the Spirit. Paul never accredits the giving of the Spirit to Yeshua even though the Gospels record Yeshua’s promise that He would send the Spirit. The two texts which caused such division in the 6th Century Christian Church (over whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father only, or from the Father and the Son, known as the *filioque* controversy) are:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (John 14:26)

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me .... (John 15:26)

Paul always ascribes the giving of the Spirit to God (1Cor 2:12; 2Cor 1:2; Gal 4:6; 1Thess 4:8; cp. Eph 1:17). In the mystery of the Godhead, Paul maintains a careful balance in which he ascribes to Yeshua the divine nature but keeps certain roles separate. The fact that the word “who provides” is a present participle in the Greek would indicate that Paul considered the present work of the Spirit within the life of the believer to be an on-going activity by the benevolent action of the Father. In other words, from Paul’s perspective, the presence of the Spirit is evidence of the abiding work of grace in the lives of believers. This continual activity of “providing the Spirit” would paint a picture, not of repeated endowments of the Spirit but a steady supply (in the picture of the metaphor). The point for Paul’s current argument is that the initial giving of the Spirit in the conversion of

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<sup>7</sup> 2Cor 9:10; Col 2:19; 2Pet 1:5,11.

the Galatians was not simply a past event, but something that was the initiation of a life lived in the Spirit. The relationship they enjoyed with the Father was made possible through the sustained presence of the Spirit. Thus, the grace of God in the continual supply of the Spirit to the Galatians as Gentiles was all the proof necessary (at least for Paul) that God was pleased with them, and that they needed no additional ceremony (works of the Torah) or ethnic status (flesh) to obtain a full covenant relationship with the Almighty.

But the evidence of the Spirit among the Galatian believers was not only in the daily walk of sanctification. He had also manifested Himself in the working of miracles. Once again, the verb “working” (ἐνεργέω, *energeō*) is a present participle, so that we might translate: “He who keeps on providing you with the Spirit and keeps on working miracles among you ....” Miracles is δυνάμις, *dunamis*, a word that means “power” but is often used of the miraculous work of God.<sup>8</sup> It is not uncommon to see the word “powers” (miracles) used with “wonders” (τέρας, *teras*) and “signs” (σημεῖον, *semeion*).<sup>9</sup> What Paul implies here is that the presence of miracles among the congregations of Galatia were, in fact, proof of the Spirit’s presence. Here we have Paul’s firsthand report that miracles were in existence in the earliest gatherings of The Way, something to which the Apostolic Scriptures give ample evidence.<sup>10</sup> These miracles functioned as signs to substantiate Yeshua’s promise to the disciples, that they would receive the “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). As they went about performing miracles, and as the believing communities formed and also witnessed miracles, the victory of the risen Messiah was manifest without dispute.

These miracles, then, were the sure proof of the Spirit’s work, given to verify the reign of Yeshua as Messiah. Having stated this, Paul returns to his primary question: did the Galatians experience these miracles as a result of becoming proselytes or as the fruit of the gifts of the Spirit given to them when they believed? The answer to the rhetorical question is obvious: the holy presence of the Lord in the abiding work of the Spirit was the seal of their genuine membership in His family.

----- Excursus on Miracles -----

## 1. The Words Used

τέρας, *teras* – usually translated “wonder” (16x in the Apostolic Scriptures)

In the Apostolic Scriptures *teras* is always used with either σημεῖα, *semeia*, “signs” or δυνάμις, *dunamis*, “power” or both. Only once does it stand by itself, and that in a quote from the Tanach (Acts 2:19 quoting Joel 3:3 [Eng 2:30]) for the Hebrew מֹפְתִים, *mophetim*, “signs.” The order of words when used together seems to bear no significance on the meaning, though usually *teras* stands second: “signs and wonders.”

The basic meaning is “wonder,” “omen”<sup>11</sup> and is doubtlessly added to *semeion* and *dunamis* as indicative of the amazement or astonishment which accompanied these supernatural events.

The Patristic literature regularly employs θαῦμα, *thauma*, “object of wonder,

8 E.g., Matt 7:22; 11:21,23; 13:58; Mark 9:39; Luke 1:35; Acts 2:22.

9 E.g., Acts 2:22; 2Cor 12:12; Heb 2:4.

10 Acts 10:38; Rom 15:19; 1Cor 12:6, 11; 1Thess 1:5; 2Tim 1:7; Heb 2:4; 6:4-5.

11 BDAG, “τέρας”.