

THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE  
GALATIANS 3:1-14

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Most religions, including some versions of Christianity, teach that in order to be right with God, in order to go to heaven, in order to deal with our sins, we have to be good enough or work hard enough or avoid sin enough. According to the Religion of Islam web site, **“Islam teaches us that salvation is attainable through the worship of God alone. A person must believe in God and follow His commandments.”** There you have it. But how does a Muslim know when he or she has been obedient enough?

Hormoz Shariat (PROJECTOR ON--- HORMOZ SHARIAT) grew up in Teheran, Iran. His family followed the predominant Shiite brand of Islam in his country. He prayed five times a day. In high school he took classes in Islam. When the revolution took place in 1979 and the government of the Shah of Iran was overturned, Hormoz joined other young people in the streets shouting “Death to America.”

But Hormoz was a very smart guy, and he wanted to get a good education. So he came to the US and was able to enroll in graduate school at USC. Back in Iran his younger brother was arrested on a minor political charge. He spent two years in jail and was killed by a firing squad. Hormoz began to have doubts about Islam. He said that it “didn’t do anything for me,” and “I couldn’t feel the presence of God.” In his religious observance he felt like he was just trying to please the fearful Allah.

For the first time Hormoz read through the Quran. He was not impressed by what he read. Being in the US he decided that the logical thing to do as a scientific person was to take a look at Christianity. So he started reading through the Bible. When he got to the Gospels in the New Testament he discovered a Jesus he had never known about in Islam. He was drawn to this description of a God of love.

In 1980 he visited a church in southern California. He discovered warm and caring people who embraced him, in spite of his Iranian background. He heard about the gospel of grace and the good news that people could be right with God simply by believing in Jesus. Hormoz Shariat became a Christian. He eventually planted a church of Iranians and became head of a Christian organization that reaches out to Muslims in Iran. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We have been studying the New Testament book of Galatians. We have seen that its author, the Apostle Paul, was very concerned that these Christians in newly formed churches in south central Asia Minor get the gospel right. There were Jews who claimed to be Jesus followers who were trying to tell the Gentile Christians that in order to be truly right with God they had to not only believe in Jesus but also practice Judaism.

We have pointed out that even in Christianity there historically has been this temptation to add on to the Christian message, to say that there are other things besides simply believing in Jesus that make us right with God. In the passage in Galatians #2 which we looked at last week, we were introduced to a new term that describes a Christian's relationship with God. We found that we are justified, or declared righteous, as a result of simply believing in Jesus. We pick up the story this morning in #3 as the Apostle Paul hammers home this lesson about the true gospel.

I.

In vv. 1-5 of #3 the author teaches that **THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS PROVEN BY EXPERIENCE**. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE...) In v. 1 he writes, **"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified."**

Paul is coming down pretty hard on these Galatian Christians. He calls them foolish. He uses the same word which is used by Jesus when he was walking with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. They did not recognize the risen Jesus. Jesus charged them with being "foolish and slow of heart to believe."

Paul also calls the Galatian Christians "bewitched." The term he uses means literally "to exert an evil influence through the eye." The Greeks and Romans had a superstitious belief that people could show an evil eye toward someone. Paul is saying that you Galatians act like someone has affected you with an evil eye. But you Galatians with your eyes saw Jesus portrayed as crucified. The Galatians did not see Jesus Christ physically crucified. But Paul told them about his own dramatic conversion. He also presented the message about Jesus which focused upon His crucifixion. The notion that Jesus died on the cross for their sins was the heart of his message.

According to v. 2 the author continues, **"Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?"** This is the first time in this letter that Paul speaks about the Holy Spirit. He equates becoming a Christian with receiving the Holy Spirit.

How was it, he asks, that they received the Holy Spirit? Was it by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Most of these Christians in Galatia were Gentiles. They had little or no familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures. So, of course, it was not by the law. They simply believed the gospel message about Jesus.

Acts #13 describes how people in Galatia responded to the message which Paul and Barnabas presented to them. Toward the end of the chapter the author of Acts summarizes the response of many of these Gentiles. He says in v. 48 that they were **"rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord."** (ACTS 13:52) In v. 52 the author Luke writes, **"And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."**

This was the experience of these first Galatian Christians. They were clearly justified, declared right with God. They had received the Holy Spirit, which was reflected in the

joy which they had. There was no following of the Old Testament law that was involved with this. They heard the message about Jesus and believed. That is the gospel.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 3 Paul asks another question: **“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”** It is evident that these Galatian Gentiles truly became Christians. They were invaded by the Holy Spirit. They were declared to be fully righteous before God. So why do you think that you need the help of the flesh to improve your standing before God? In other words, why do you need human effort to win God’s approval. The apostle’s point is that once we truly believe in Jesus, we are never going to be more acceptable to God. We are in. We are part of His family forever.

Verse 4: **“Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?”** We are not told in the Book of Acts about specific persecution which these new Christians suffered. But generally we can imagine that dramatic changes in lifestyle among people in a very pagan culture would have resulted in some push back. Christians stop going to the pagan temples. They stop getting drunk. They stop carousing. They start talking about Jesus. Some of their friends and employers and slave masters and family members don’t want to hear that.

Toward the end of Acts #14 we read about how Paul and Barnabas encouraged these new Christians. In v. 22 (PROJECTOR ON--- ACTS 14:22) the author says that they were **“strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”** So that assumes that these young Christians were going to encounter some head winds and perhaps already had. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then in v. 5 the Apostle Paul asks another rhetorical question: **“Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?”** Paul is confronting this issue facing the Galatian Christians. Jews who claim to be Christians are trying to convince the Gentile Christians that they need to start following the Jewish laws and traditions. Paul is reminding them that God’s Holy Spirit came to live within them simply by believing the gospel message about Jesus. Forget this human effort deal to try to follow the Old Testament law.

Paul also speaks of works of miracles that were done among them. The word is *dunamis*, from which we get our word “dynamite.” The Apostle Paul seems to have had supernatural power at times to perform miracles. At the beginning of Acts #14 we are told about the visit of Paul and Barnabas to the Galatian town of Lystra. They are preaching the gospel there when they encounter a man who has been lame since the time of his birth. He has never walked. This lame guy listens to their preaching and responds to it. So Paul tells the guy to stand up and walk, and he does. The people around him, who knew the guy, are blown away. The text says that the people started calling Paul and Barnabas gods. Paul and Barnabas calm them down and start talking about Jesus.

In the history of the Christian church when the gospel about Jesus enters new areas, sometimes God reveals Himself by doing miraculous things. Such is the case in Iran in recent years. The news that we hear on TV is that Iran is a threat to world peace and that its leaders want to destroy Israel and the US. Yet missions experts tell us that the fastest growing movement of Christians of any country of the world is happening in Iran.

There is a city in Iran called Qom (PROJECTOR ON--- QOM), which is the largest center in the world for teaching the Shiite brand of Islam. Just a few miles away is Fordo, which is a center of nuclear weapons development. But in Qom there are over fifty Shiite seminaries.

Ali, which is not his real name, was a brilliant seminary student. Just as the Apostle Paul was regarded by his Jewish mentors as a rising star among Jewish rabbis, so Ali was regarded as a rising star among Islamic imams. His teachers were grooming him to go to Sunni countries in the Middle East to work on convincing religious leaders that Shiite Islam was the true path to Allah. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But then toward the end of his seminary training, this odd and unexpected thing happened. Ali began having dreams about Jesus. It happened at least six times, and this Jesus was trying to tell Ali something about salvation. Islam teaches that Jesus was a prophet, but this Jesus in his dreams seemed to be pointing to something more than just prophecy.

One night as he was contemplating these dreams the thought came to him that he needed to find a Bible. Although the Quran makes references to the Bible, Ali knew of no Bible that anyone had in Qom. It could be seen as a dangerous thing to possess. But Ali remembered that his parents in his hometown of Teheran had Christian neighbors.

So he decided to visit his parents. He went next door and came up with this story that he was doing a study in seminary concerning what Muhammad said about the Bible. So he needed a Bible as a reference. He asked this neighbor if he could borrow one. The neighbor happily gave him one to keep. Ali decided that if he was caught with this Bible, he would say that he was studying it to find mistakes in it that would support the Islamic view of the Bible.

But Ali began to study the Bible with great interest. According to his testimony, Jesus appeared again in his dreams. In these dreams Ali actually had conversations with Jesus. He asked questions and got answers. Upon his graduation from seminary he was sent to Syria with the purpose of ministering to Shiite imams and evangelizing Sunni imams. In Syria Ali sought out a Palestinian refugee whom he had learned was a Christian. This Palestinian's father had served as an advisor to Yasser Arafat. But now the two of them determined that they would seek opportunities in Syria to tell about Jesus. They vowed that, if necessary, they would die together for their Christian faith..

Since I read about this story, I do not know what has happened to them. But miracles played a part in Ali's coming to know Jesus. This was also true for some of the Galatian

Christians. Paul's point in this first part of our passage is that the truth of the gospel of grace through faith is proven by experience.

II.

In vv. 6-9 of Galatians #3 we learn that **THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS PROVEN BY THE TESTIMONY OF ABRAHAM**. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE...) In our black Bibles v. 6 is the completion of a thought begun in v. 5. In my NAS translation Paul writes, **"Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."**

In our culture this reference to Abraham may not mean a whole lot. But to Jews back then and even to many Jews today Abraham is regarded as the father of the faith. In ancient days Jews were sometimes called sons of Abraham. The Judaizers of Paul's day were appealing to the law of Moses for support about their belief that Gentiles had to become Jewish. Paul is going back before Moses to Abraham. He is quoting a passage from Genesis #15 v. 6. That verse says that it is faith alone which produces justification, a declaration of righteousness.

(ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY) Abraham lived about 2000 years before the time of Jesus. God appeared to Abraham and told him to leave Ur in what we know today as Iraq and go to Canaan, what we know today as Israel. The first three verses of Genesis #12 describe this command and promise (GENESIS 12:1): **"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (GENESIS 12:2) And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (GENESIS 12:3) I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."** We will come back to this last verse about being a blessing to the nations in a moment.

The challenge to Abraham's faith for many years was that he had no son of his own. He kept getting older and still his wife did not get pregnant. Finally at one point God brings Abraham out under the night sky and tells him to look up and start counting the stars. God tells Abraham that this is how many descendants that Abraham will have. It is at this point that we are told that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Eventually Abraham did have a son, and today all Jewish people claim Abraham as their ancestor. Paul is citing this story and this verse to support his contention that salvation comes from faith and not from works.

Paul continues in v. 7 of our passage, **"Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham."** The defining characteristic of sons of Abraham is not physical descent, as the first century Jews so often claimed. Paul says that it is faith in God which is the defining characteristic. That God package now includes Jesus Christ. So the applicable message to us is that it is not membership in a particular church or denomination. It is not baptism or helping the poor or trying to avoid sin--- as good as those things may be. It is faith in God, specifically now in Jesus, which marks us out as true sons of Abraham, as true Christians, as people who are going to heaven.

According to vv. 8 & 9, **“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”** Paul is referring to that verse, still up on the screen, Genesis 12 v. 3.

In the first three verses of Genesis #12 God promised that He would make Abraham famous, that he would make of him a great nation, that he would bless his friends and curse his enemies.. He promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan. Then, last of all, he said that through Abraham all of the nations of the world would be blessed. That promise is fulfilled in Jesus, a physical descendant of Abraham, a Jew, who eventually died on the cross so that whoever believes in Him, Jew or Gentile, might have eternal life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So Paul is telling the Galatian Christians that the truth of the gospel of grace through faith in Jesus is proven by their own experience. He is telling these Christians, many of whom are Gentiles who are now learning about the Old Testament, that the story about Abraham also proves that it is not good works but faith alone in God which produces salvation.

III.

Then in vv. 10-14 Paul is telling his audience that THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE THROUGH FAITH IS PROVEN BY THE LIMITATION OF THE WORKS OF THE LAW. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE...)

According to v. 10, **“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’”**

Paul is quoting from Deuteronomy #27. Here is the high standard of righteousness presented in the Old Testament. If one wants to earn righteousness by following the law, the requirement is perfection. But it is impossible for any normal human to follow that law perfectly. Jesus rightly said that the greatest commandment contained in the Old Testament is the command to love God with all of our being. But how can a person do that perfectly? There is only one person who ever did that--- the God-man Jesus Christ.

Part of the problem with any religion which says that eternal salvation comes from following a set of rules and commandments is that it is difficult or impossible to know when one has done enough. How obedient, or how many good works must one do, in order to be in with God? Then what happens if we mess up? Have we lost it all?

Paul continues in v. 11, **“Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”** We saw last week that to be justified means to be declared righteous. Paul here is appealing to another Old Testament

passage. This comes from the Book of Habakkuk, where the prophet says pretty much the same thing that God said in Genesis #15 v. 6. The righteous person lives by faith.

Verse 12: **“But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’”** Living by law requires a different operating principle than living by faith. Any law serves a certain purpose. It gives one a sense of right and wrong. But the Old Testament law was not intended to directly provide salvation. It did teach right and wrong. It also pointed people toward their need for a Messiah. As we have seen, the Old Testament also spoke of the need for faith in God.

According to v. 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 hanged on a tree.’”** This is a quotation from Deuteronomy in the Old Testament.

The manner of the death of Jesus was a problem for many Jews and Gentiles in the first century. Crucifixion involved hanging on a tree of sorts. People in the Roman Empire associated crucifixion with rebellion against the Roman government. That was the penalty for the worst offenses in the empire. Jews rightly saw crucifixion as a judgment and a curse from God. Who wants to follow a person who has been cursed by God. The Jews were looking for a Messiah who would lead them in victory, who would overthrow those dastardly Romans and set up a proper Jewish kingdom. So who would want to follow Jesus?

But this is the point of the Christian story. Jesus did become a curse. He became the object of God’s judgment because He bore the penalty for the sins of the world. He was our substitute. He received God’s judgment in our place. But then also He rose from the dead. That is the Easter story. Jesus rose from the dead and proved that He was not only a human being but also God.

Our passage concludes in v. 14. Jesus became a curse for us **“so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”** Thus the promise of Genesis #12 is fulfilled in Jesus. Gentiles as well as Jews can become right with God through faith in Jesus.

If anyone could get to heaven on the basis of following a strict religious law, it would be Dina. Dina was a high ranking official in Iran’s Female Secret Police. She worked under cover and hunted down women who did not follow Iran’s strict religious dress code. She would watch women endure as many as eighty lashes for violating codes of modesty. Initially the beatings didn’t bother her.

On Christmas Eve in 2010 seventy Iranian church leaders were arrested and sent to the notorious Evin prison near Teheran. Dina visited that prison and saw what horrible things happened there. She saw women tortured and raped. She learned that prison officials routinely raped girls before they executed them. The first time that Dina visited Evin prison, she threw up after she came out of the place. It was too much even for her.

There is a call-in satellite TV program based in north Texas which is designed for Iranians. It is led by Hormoz Shariat, whom I introduced to you at the beginning of the message. Dina started calling in to the program. Initially she was pretty vicious. Sometimes she screamed at Hormoz, telling him that he was going to hell. She was a regular caller. On one occasion she declared, **"I pity you Christians because your destiny is hell. Islam is the only way, and Christians are in a false religion. In the end you will pay for this. Allah will send you into the flames."**

Then one night Dina called in with a different attitude. **"I am not married, and my mother is suffering with cancer."** Hormoz replied, **"I'm sorry to hear that, Dina. What will you do now?"** **"We have both decided to kill ourselves tonight. This will be a first for you, Hormoz, won't it? We are going to commit suicide right now, on your program. I only wish you could watch me. At least my mother and I will go to heaven--- which is more than I could say for a pathetic Christian like you and others who watch your program! What do you have to say to that?"**

Hormoz prayed quickly and asked for wisdom about how to respond. He said to Dina, **"This is really sad to hear, Dina. But since you're going to kill yourself anyway, why don't you give Jesus a week? If He doesn't answer a single prayer for you or do anything in your life in seven days, then just go ahead and kill yourself. That's what you were going to do anyway. You have nothing else to lose."**

The conversation went on for a while. Hormoz finally convinced Dina to give Jesus a try. Dina did not tell her mother what happened. But on the fifth night Jesus appeared to her mother in the night. The next morning she woke up and felt no pain. She felt well.

Dina called in to the TV program to talk to Hormoz. She said, **"Hormoz, last week I repeated the words you told me to say, but I didn't take them seriously. But God did. Tonight my mother is with me again. She's standing here beside me! I didn't want Jesus to be the answer. All week long, I thought of everything in my life that was negative. I was trying to feel depressed. But each time I tried to concentrate on my problems, I was flooded with peace. I would stop by the mirror, amazed at the smile on my face. As for my mother, she's well, Hormoz. She's well! And so am I! Jesus is everything you promised. Thank you, my friend."**

After this Dina resigned quietly from the Morality Police. Her mother remains healed of cancer. Eventually Dina married another former Muslim. At last report she is now hunting Muslim women with whom she may share the gospel. Her story is told in this book, written by a missionary to the Middle East. (*Dreams and Visions*, Tom Doyle)

The Christian gospel is a wonderful story to share. It is a story of the offer of eternal life to any who will believe in Jesus. The Apostle John wrote in 1 John #5 vv. 11-13 (1 JOHN 5:11), **"And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (1 JOHN 5:12) Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 JOHN 5:13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."** We can have eternal life now, simply by believing in Jesus.