

Life-long Faith

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? 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 — just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? – Galatians 3:1-6 ESV

You can sense the frustration in Paul’s words as he begins his theological defense of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. From his perspective, it is as if his readers had been cast under a spell. His previous efforts, while living and ministering among them, seem to have been in vain. He had gone out of his way to convince them of the grace of God made available through the cross of Christ alone, but now they were allowing themselves to be ‘bewitched’ into believing that more was necessary. They were buying into the lie that circumcision was an added requirement to salvation. Paul’s problem was not so much with the rite of circumcision as it was with the problem of legalism.

Jesus Christ had died a gruesome death on the cross in order to provide a means of salvation for men and make possible their justification before God. He did for humanity what humanity could not do for itself. He satisfied God. His death was the propitiation for our sins. He fully satisfied the righteous wrath of God against the sins of mankind. And yet, here were the Galatians allowing themselves to be convinced that His death had not been enough. They needed to do more!

Paul was not against good works. He was not propagating a life of moral, ethical, and spiritual complacency. Paul’s issue is with works being tied to and made a requirement for salvation and justification. Jesus paid it all. His sacrificial death on the cross was fully and completely sufficient to ransom men and women from their sins and restore them to a right relationship with God.

The message of false teachers will always fall into one of two categories. Either you have not done enough to be truly saved or now that you are saved, you don’t have to do anything. Theologians refer to these two extremes as nomism and antinomianism. We might recognize them as legalism and license. One promotes a doctrine of salvation based on religious rule-keeping. The other can result in a rejection of any moral requirements altogether. In essence, it teaches that we are no longer obligated to keep God’s moral law because we have been set free from it. And while there is a degree of truth to that assessment, it can easily lead to a justification of sin and a life of moral ambiguity. Both legalism and license share the same root problem: Self-centeredness. One places self at the center of man’s redemption, making human effort the key to salvation. The other promotes self to the point of making salvation all about

self-gratification. Rather than holiness, license preaches happiness. Instead of encouraging death to self, license promotes a life of self-satisfaction.

Both of these extremes are dangerous. And Paul was constantly having to deal with both. In the case of the Galatians, the greater threat was legalism. They had placed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior, but now they were being convinced that there was something missing. Which is why Paul asked them, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (Galatians 3:2 ESV). The answer was obvious. As Gentiles, they had done nothing in the way of keeping the law of Moses. And yet, they had come to faith in Christ and had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. None of them had done anything to deserve this incredible gift of grace from God. And Paul took it a step further, asking them, “After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?” (Galatians 3:3 NLT). In other words, Paul was asking them if they thought their salvation was up to God, while their sanctification was up to them.

The issue Paul was raising was regarding their sanctification. Not only are we saved by faith in Christ, but we are also transformed or made Christ-like by the very same process. We can no more sanctify ourselves than we can save ourselves. God doesn't save us, then leave it up to us to perfect ourselves. Again, Paul is not discounting the role of good works in the life of the believer. He is simply emphasizing the source from which those good works are to flow. Paul told the believers in Philippi, “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6 ESV). Later on, in this same letter to the believers in Galatia, he will write, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22 ESV). God not only saves us, He sanctifies us. Paul told the Corinthians, “And the Lord – who is the Spirit – makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image” (2 Corinthians 3:18 NLT). We don't make ourselves more like Christ, that is the Spirit's job. Our role is to remain submissive and obedient to His activity in our lives. Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, “if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13 ESV).

For Paul, the entire process of salvation, justification, and sanctification was the work of God. At no point does the responsibility for redemption fall on man. The only thing we are required to do is trust. We are to submit our lives to His will and relinquish our right to self-autonomy. Paul stated his position well back in chapter two: “My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20 NLT). Faith isn't a once-in-a-lifetime event; it is a life-long pursuit. Faith is a lifestyle, a way of life, and the key to our salvation, sanctification, and ultimate glorification.

A People of Faith

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 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." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. – Galatians 3:7-9 ESV

In his defense of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, Paul appeals to the patriarch of the Jewish people: Abraham. As he did in his letter to the Romans, Paul argues that Abraham was deemed righteous before God because of his faith.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." – Romans 4:1-3 ESV

Paul contends that it was Abraham's belief in God and the promises He had made to him that led to God's declaration of his righteous standing. It had nothing to do with works. In fact, it would be hundreds of years before the law would be given. And God declared Abraham as righteous long before He commanded the rite of circumcision. Paul clarified this point as well in his letter to the Romans.

For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. – Romans 4:9-11 ESV

You can see why Paul was so upset with those who had shown up in Galatia representing the party of the circumcision. They were demanding that all the Gentile converts be circumcised as a non-negotiable requirement for their acceptance into the fellowship. And yet, in his letter to the Romans, Paul clearly revealed the fallacy behind this belief. He made it perfectly clear that God declared Abraham righteous long before the requirement of circumcision had been given.

The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. – Romans 4:11-12 ESV

Abraham was to be the father of many nations, not just that of the Jews. Later in this same chapter, Paul will divulge how God intended to make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations and become a blessing to the nations. "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16 ESV). Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy

Spirit, unpacks this familiar Old Testament passage and reveals that God’s plan all along had been to bless the nations through Abraham by making the Messiah one of his descendants. It would be through Jesus and by faith in His finished work on the cross that the nations would be blessed. The Jews (circumcised) and the Gentiles (uncircumcised) would discover the blessings of God through faith in His Son. Paul was adamant in his belief that righteousness was available through faith alone in Christ alone.

*For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. – Romans 4:13-14
ESV*

No one could save themselves, including the Jews. Yes, they had the law of God, but they were incapable of keeping it. All the law could do was expose their sinfulness and condemn them as unrighteous and unworthy of God’s goodness. The law revealed God’s righteous expectations and man’s incapacity to live up to them. The law made the holiness of God tangible, but also unattainable.

*Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. – Galatians 3:23-24
ESV*

Paul wanted the Galatians to realize that their salvation was solely based on faith in Jesus Christ. There was nothing missing. There was nothing that needed to be added and there wasn’t anything more they needed to do. It was the finished work of Christ and their complete dependence upon it that had resulted in their salvation. And Paul reminded them that “those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Galatians 3:9 ESV). Faith is foundational to all that we are as believers. Without faith, we have nothing. Without faith, we are nothing. “In walking with God, a man will go just as far as he believes, and no further. His life will always be proportional to his faith. His peace, his patience, his courage, his zeal, his works – will all be according to his faith” (J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*). We are saved as a result of faith. We grow spiritually in proportion to our faith. We live our lives according to faith. The author of Hebrews reminds us, “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6 ESV). Our works, devoid of faith, are worthless. And our faith, if not placed in the finished work of Christ and kept there, can easily transform into self-reliance – a kind of faith that seeks to earn favor with God through self-effort. At the heart of biblical faith is a God-dependence that recognizes self as insufficient and Jesus as the only solution to our sin problem.

Free from the Curse

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.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” 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” — so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. – Galatians 3:10-14 ESV

In Paul’s own inimitable style, he begins to weave Old Testament Scripture into his defense of justification by faith. First, he quotes from Deuteronomy 27:26 using the Greek Septuagint translation: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all the things written in the book of the law, to do them.” And he concludes that those who attempt to keep the law to achieve justification before God are cursed because they are incapable of keeping ALL of the law perfectly and completely. So, for Paul, “it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law.” And it is clear to him that even the Old Testament Scriptures teach that “the righteous shall live by faith.” Here he quotes from Habakkuk 2:4. In Paul’s understanding of the Old Testament, even the great saints of the past achieved righteousness before God through faith in Him. The passage from Habakkuk that he quotes could better be translated: “The one who is righteous by faith will live.” In other words, our righteousness is achieved by faith in the Word of God and, as a result of our faith, we live. It is NOT our living that produces righteousness. That was the false message of those who were troubling the Galatians and distorting the gospel of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:7).

Once again, Paul appeals to the Old Testament Scriptures, this time quoting from Leviticus 18:5: “The one who does them shall live by them” (Galatians 3:12 ESV). Here Paul addresses the problem with law-keeping. If you’re going to use the law as your basis for justification before God, you will have to spend your entire life keeping them. It will be a never-ending task of trying to live up to and keep every single command given by God. There will be no room for mistakes. You can’t afford to have an off day. Every single sin will count against you. In fact, the apostle James puts the gravity of this point in fairly disturbing terms: “For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God’s laws” (James 2:10 NLT). So if you want to make law-keeping your preferred method of restoring your relationship with God, you will have your work cut out for you. And that work will never achieve its desired goal.

Paul brings out an important point. The law is not of faith. Keeping the law has little to do with faith in God. It is all about faith in self. It is based on self-reliance and depends upon self-sufficiency. God has given the rules, now it is up to man to live up to them. And in order to make the task more attainable, man, in his law-keeping, begins to justify or rationalize his law-breaking. Sin becomes subjective. Man develops loopholes and work-arounds to somehow make his sin seem less sinful. He begins to compare his sins with those of others. He attempts

to find others whose sins are more egregious than his own. It becomes a case of righteousness by comparison. Somehow, we convince ourselves that God will grade on the curve and excuse those sins we've committed. He will simply reward us for having tried hard. But Paul would have us remember that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23 ESV). Our sin demands a payment. Our rebellion against a holy God brings us under His wrath and condemnation and, in His justice, He must punish our sin.

This is where Paul brings in the good news. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13 ESV). In other words, Jesus took our place on the cross and suffered in our place. The punishment for man's sins fell on Him. The prophet Isaiah predicted the death of Jesus and the impact it would have on mankind:

*Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. – Isaiah 53:5-6 ESV*

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV). It is interesting to note that the Mosaic law had a requirement regarding the death of a lawbreaker. "And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God" (Deuteronomy 21:22-23 ESV). Paul refers to this passage when he says, referring to Christ's death on the cross, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Galatians 3:13 ESV). Even the method by which Jesus died illustrated the curse of God He took on in order that men might be made right with God. He endured what we deserved and did for us what we could never have done for ourselves. His death gave us access to life. Our death would have led to eternal separation from God.

We are made right with God through faith and faith alone. Law-keepers don't live by faith, they attempt to live by keeping the law. Their hope is in themselves and their ongoing efforts to live up to God's holy standard, rather than in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Faith requires dependence upon God. We must accept His means of salvation rather than attempting to rely on our own. We must recognize our incapacity to live holy lives and place our trust His Son's death on the cross in our place. He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. And by His wounds we are healed.

God's Unbreakable Promise

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. – Galatians 3:15-18 ESV

As a former Pharisee, Paul had a scholarly understanding of the Old Testament. But it was after his conversion, when he had received the indwelling Holy Spirit, that Paul truly began to understand that the Old Testament was a foreshadowing of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. Post-conversion, his comprehension of the Scriptures was both magnified and clarified. Familiar passages took on a whole new meaning when he was able to view them through the lens of the gospel. In the case of Genesis 13:15 and 17:8, where Moses records God's covenant to Abraham, Paul exegetes these all-too-familiar passages by revealing that through them, God had been promising the coming of Christ. He was the "seed" or "offspring" through whom all the nations would be blessed. God's promise to Abraham would ultimately be fulfilled through Jesus. But what is Paul's point in bringing this new interpretation or understanding of God's promise to light? He was attempting to answer the argument that the Mosaic law, which came after the giving of the promise by God to Abraham, somehow superseded or supplanted it.

On the contrary, Paul argues, God had made a binding covenant with Abraham and his "offspring." That God-ordained covenant could not be nullified or broken. It was a unilateral covenant, made by God and could only be annulled by God. But Paul argues that at no point did God revoke or replace the covenant, even when He had given Moses the law some 430 years afterwards. In fact, Paul points out, the inheritance tied to the promise of God could be received only through the promise of God. It was not accessible any other way, especially not through the keeping of the law. And the inheritance of which Paul speaks is tied directly to the idea of justification by faith. This was the crux of the problem taking place among the Galatian believers. They were being told that their justification was tied to the keeping of the law, most specifically to God's command regarding circumcision. In other words, they were being sold a bill of goods that promised them a right standing before God through law-keeping and self-effort, not faith in Christ alone.

Paul wrote to the Colossian believers:

*May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in **the inheritance of the saints in light**. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. – Colossians 1:11-14 ESV*

He prayed for the Ephesians...

*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are **the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...*** – Ephesians 1:17-18 ESV

For Paul, the promise of God made to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ, was all about the wonderful reality of a restored relationship with God, for both Jews and Gentiles. And this incredible gift was only available through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. It could not be attained through self-effort. Paul went on to tell the Ephesian believers that he wanted them to understand

what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places... – Ephesians 1:19-20 ESV

Our salvation, justification, sanctification, and glorification are all tied to the work of Christ on our behalf. Our righteousness comes from Christ. Our right standing before God is as a result of His shed blood. Our future inheritance is tied His sacrificial death on the cross. All that we are and all that we hope to have is based on the finished work of Christ. And for that we have much to be grateful.

Salvation by God

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. – Galatians 3:19-22 ESV

There's that word, "offspring" again. Paul continues to unpack the true meaning behind Genesis 13:15 and 17:8 where God made His promise to Abraham. The offspring to whom God referred was Jesus, according to Paul. And the law was given by God after He had made the promise to Abraham in order to expose the extent of mankind's sinfulness. God gave His chosen people the law "because of transgressions." What was God's purpose in giving the law? Paul seems to be saying that the law was given by God to reveal or expose man's sin. It clearly articulated God's holy and righteous expectations. There could be no debate. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (Romans 7:7 ESV). Prior to the giving of the law, man could have rationalized away his sin or simply claimed ignorance. But the law made it perfectly clear what God expected and demanded of mankind, especially His chosen people. In Romans, Paul also seems to be saying that the presence of the law acted as an impetus to sin, not causing man to sin, but provoking man's sin nature to rebel against it. When the law said, "Do not...", man's sin nature automatically and reflexively responded, "I will...". Paul went on to say, "sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (Romans 7:8 ESV). Indwelling sin, which opposes God, stands opposed to His holy law. It rejects it and entices man's fleshly, sinful nature to disobey it. Like a parent telling their child not to touch a hot stove, the prohibition creates in the child an even deeper desire and curiosity to do that which has been denied.

In verse 19, Paul says the law "was put in place through angels by an intermediary." Moses provides us with some insight into the meaning behind Paul's statement. Just prior to his death, Moses gave a blessing to the people of Israel, saying, "The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand" (Deuteronomy 33:2 ESV). Angels played a mediatory role, while Moses played an intermediary role. The law was given, and it placed responsibilities on God and upon man. God was obligated and committed to bless when men obeyed His law.

And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all

the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. – Deuteronomy 28:1-2 ESV

But He was also required to curse or punish when man disobeyed.

But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. – Deuteronomy 28:15 ESV

In contrast, when it came to the Abrahamic covenant, the promise God made to Him regarding his “offspring”, the sole responsibility of the covenant fell upon God. There was no intermediary. The promise was made by God and would be fulfilled by Him. Moses could add nothing to the equation. He was simply required to believe God, and Paul writes in Romans, “No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness’” (Romans 4:20-22 ESV).

The law did not stand opposed to or somehow replace the promise of God. It was not intended to be a replacement for the promise. And it was never designed to produce in man a righteousness that would restore him to a right relationship with God. What it did was show men just how sinful and helpless they really were. Whether motivated by genuine love for or fear of God, men were incapable of keeping His righteous decrees. The law simply confirmed that they were law breakers.

The law was designed to be temporary in nature. It was to be in effect until the promise was fulfilled and “the offspring” came. With the coming of Jesus and His death on the cross, the law’s binding hold on man was released. Jesus became the fulfillment of the law, having obediently kept every single requirement. He did what no other man had ever done. And His sinless perfection made Him the perfect, blameless sacrifice that God required to atone for the sins of mankind. Jesus paid it all. His sinless, unselfish sacrifice of His own life satisfied the just demands of a holy God.

In Romans, Paul writes of the unbelievable impact of Jesus’ death on our behalf:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die — but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. – Romans 5:6-9 ESV

Law-keeping is not the answer to man’s sin problem. The law was never intended to provide salvation. It was designed to show man His sin and place him under God’s holy, just condemnation. The law was not even capable of driving men to God. As Paul indicated, it actually inflamed man’s sin nature and drove him further from God. Lawbreakers hate the law.

They look for ways to disobey it and get around it. They see the law as oppressive and unnecessary. But Jesus came to free men from the law. He came to provide a means by which they could be made right with God apart from the law. And Paul makes it very clear that Jesus died for us *while* we were still sinners. We didn't see our need for a Savior and run to Him. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were blinded by our own sin natures and by Satan himself. And yet God, in His grace, opened our eyes to see the glory of the offer of the gift of His Son's death. The scales fell off our eyes and His Spirit gave us the supernatural ability to say yes to that which we, if left to ourselves, we would have always said no.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. – Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV

Even our faith is a gift from God, otherwise it would be a work. It is not our doing, but a gift from God. Our salvation is the sovereign work of God, from beginning to end. As when Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, shouting, "Lazarus, come forth!", God calls us out of the death and darkness of sin, providing us with not only life but the capacity to obey. That is truly amazing grace.

Now That Faith Has Come

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. – Galatians 3:23-29 ESV

Captive. Imprisoned. Under the authority of another. Incapable of setting yourself free and unable to escape from the wrath of God and His just condemnation. That was the former state of those to whom Paul wrote. At one time they had been unbelievers, enemies of God. Long before Jesus came and died, all mankind had been held captive by sin. God had provided the law through Moses to the people of Israel in order to make known to them His requirements for living in obedience to His righteous will. But as Paul has already made abundantly clear, the law was not intended to provide a means of justification for the Jews. It simply made clear to them God's revealed will and exposed their complete inability to live up to it. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Romans 2:12 ESV). The Gentiles we held captive by sin even though they did not have the law of God. But the Jews, while they had been given the law of God, found themselves in the same sad state. Paul explained why: "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2:13 ESV). Simply having knowledge of the law was not enough. It had to be obeyed – perfectly and completely. And the Jews had failed. All men were under God's condemnation for their rebellion against Him. But through the law, He had given the Jews a description of what they would have to do in order to justify themselves before Him. The reality was, they couldn't pull it off and God knew they couldn't. He had a better, more perfect means of justification prepared. He would one day send His Son to take on human flesh, live a sinless life, and yet die a sinner's death as a sacrifice and substitute for men. His death would satisfy God's need as a holy, righteous judge to pronounce judgment and allow Him to pour out His wrath as a punishment on mankind's sin.

Paul uses the statement, "Now before faith came..." He is referring to the coming of Christ and, more specifically, His death, burial and resurrection. Jesus provided a means by which men could be made right with God, but it was only available through faith in Him. Paul says, "the law was our guardian until Christ came." The law functioned as a kind of tutor or teacher, educating the Jews as to God's expectations for holy and acceptable living. It was intended to show them what God demanded of them and provide them with boundaries for life until "the coming of faith would be revealed." But once Jesus came and accomplished His God-given task of dying on behalf of sinful men, the law took a backseat. Justification with God became a reality, not a pipe dream. Through faith in Jesus Christ as their sin substitute, men and women could be made right with God.

Five times in these verses Paul uses the word, “faith.” The entire redemption plan of God, including man’s salvation, justification, and sanctification, is according to faith, not works. It is by faith that we move from enemies to sons and daughters of God. It is by faith that our sins are transferred to Christ, and we receive His righteousness. It is by faith that we inherit the riches of eternal life. It is by faith that our sins are forgiven. It is by faith that we receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. It is by faith that we become heirs of the promises of God.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13 ESV). Here in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says something very similar: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27 ESV). We have received the Spirit of God and through His empowering presence we are now capable of “putting on” Christ. In other words, we now have the capacity to become like Him, to take on His character. And as Paul emphasizes, this applies to Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free men, males and females, and every other individual who places their faith in Jesus Christ. They become Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. In other words, not according to the law. We don’t have to try and earn our right standing before God, it is provided for us by faith in the work of Christ.

Faith has come. Jesus has accomplished the will of His Father and provided a means by which men can be saved. And now that faith has come, we are to live by faith. There is no going back to religious rule-keeping. Those who have been made righteous by God through faith in Christ are to live by faith. Now that faith has come, faith is to be our sole means of living. As Paul stated earlier in this same letter, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20 ESV). We are saved by faith. We are to live by faith. We are to do all by faith. We are to be a people of faith. “So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Galatians 3:9 ESV).

And yet, as people of faith, we can find ourselves living by sight rather than by faith. We can easily fall back into the trap of thinking our right standing before God is somehow up to us. While we can easily accept the concept of salvation by faith, we find it hard to understand that even our sanctification is a byproduct of faith. This doesn’t mean we play no role. It simply says that even any works of righteousness we do in this life are totally dependent upon our ongoing faith in Christ and His Spirit’s work within us. Which is why Paul said that the life he lived after coming to faith in Christ, he lived by faith in Christ. Now that faith has come, faith is all we need.