

5. Old Testament Faith (4Q 2011—Galatians)

Biblical material: Gal. 3:1–14, Rom. 1:2, 4:3, Gen. 15:6, 12:1–3, Lev. 17:11, 2 Cor. 5:21.

Quotes

- Laws control the lesser man... Right conduct controls the greater one. *Mark Twain*
- Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws. *Plato*
- Nobody has a more sacred obligation to obey the law than those who make the law. *Sophocles*
- The law will never make men free, it is men that have to make the law free. *Henry David Thoreau*
- In matters of conscience, the law of the majority has no place. *Mahatma Gandhi*
- No law or ordinance is mightier than understanding. *Plato*
- It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for law, so much as a respect for right. *Henry David Thoreau*

Questions

What was the real issue for the church in Galatia? How does this problem still relate to our Christian experience today? What is the role of Law for the Christian? How do we explain the truth about God from this Old Testament example about Abraham? Is God's identification of Abraham as "right" enough to make him "right"? How about us?

Bible summary

Here in Gal. 3:1-14 Paul expresses his astonishment at what has happened to the believers in Galatia. He calls them foolish—why? The primary issue is that "You began by God's Spirit; do you now want to finish by your own power?" (Gal. 3:3 TEV). The problem is that they are reverting to Law as the method of salvation, as if the Law could save! As Paul also points out in Romans, the Law is good, but cannot save you.

Paul then uses the Old Testament example of Abraham to explain what he means. God accepts Abraham as right with him, not because of performance or legal observance, but because Abraham trusts in God. (See also Rom. 4:3, Gen. 15:6). That was, and is, the basis for salvation, says Paul.

He then looks at two "curses." The first is depending on the Law to save you (verse 10). The second is Christ becoming a "curse" for us (question—did God curse Christ then?) The end result is that "Christ did this in order that the blessing which God promised to Abraham might be given to the Gentiles by means of Christ Jesus, so that through faith we might receive the Spirit promised by God." (Gal. 3:14 TEV).

In the account regarding Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 the original plan for Israel is explained—they were meant to be a blessing to all the other nations. God is not exclusive; he wanted to work through Israel to bring his salvation to everyone through Abraham and his descendants.

Lev. 17:11 is referenced, stating that blood (which is life) takes away sins. However this can be greatly misunderstood—salvation is not in the hemoglobin! (See Heb.10:4). Even when applied to the "blood of Christ," it is in what this means in terms

of God's self-sacrifice for us, not in his physical blood. The final text explains that "Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21 TEV).

Comment

The idea of simply stating that Abraham is "right" might suggest that either God doesn't really see our sinful selves (as has been stated by some), or that God is not being truthful. Both these ideas are clearly problematic. However when it is understood that any "rightness" comes as a result of Abraham's trust, then things become much clearer. This is not to do with any "imputed" or "imparted" righteousness, terms that are much loved by some theologians. It simply means that God says Abraham is right because he trusts in God, not because of his spiritual performance. He is not saying that Abraham is sinless or perfect, but that because Abraham trusts God, then the relationship is right and will bring the eventual good result.

This is the argument that Paul is making here in Galatians and Romans. It was because of Abraham's trust in God that he is right—it has nothing to do with observing the Law. Certainly as a result of a right relationship with God you do identify with God as to what is true and right, and in God's grace this is how you live (despite the missteps!) But this is not "magical" transfusion of "rightness" from God that in some mysterious way "makes you right" when you are not. Nor is God stating an untruth—for what would that say to the Universe in the great controversy? What the angels and the other created beings want to know is not whether sinful rebels have been "pronounced" righteous, but whether they have truly changed! God would never make such a misleading statement—declaring us right when we are clearly not. No, God is looking at the trusting attitude of Abraham, and saying, "I will reward your attitude of trust, and as I work with you to restore you and heal you, you will be transformed into someone who truly lives right."

This example from the Old Testament shows us that God has not changed and that salvation is still dependent on trusting him. It is not enough, and never will be, to say "But I did what I was told!" God is not looking for performance, but friendship; not compliance, but love. We will do right because it is right, trusting in the God who is truth and right incarnate.

Ellen White Comments

With such a leader—an angel expelled from heaven—these supposedly wise men of earth may fabricate bewitching theories with which to infatuate the minds of men. Paul said to the Galatians, "Who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth?" Satan has a masterly mind, and he has his chosen agents by which he works to exalt men, and clothe them with honor above God. But God is clothed with power; He is able to take those who are dead in trespasses and sins, and by the operation of the Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead, transform the human character, bringing back to the soul the lost image of God. {FE 332}

Abraham believed God. How do we know that he believed? His works testified to the character of his faith, and his faith was accounted to him for righteousness. We need the faith of Abraham in our day, to lighten the darkness that gathers around us, shutting out the sweet sunlight of God's love, and dwarfing spiritual growth. Our faith should be prolific of good works; for faith without works is dead. {FLB 115}

Prepared July 28 2011 © Jonathan Gallagher 2011