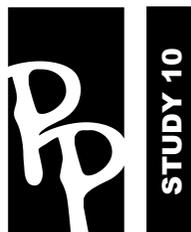


FIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE
GALATIANS TO CONSIDER



Galatians 3:1-5

This Study Paper contains the following

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: Miracles
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

Paul has concluded the section about his dispute with Peter. From that incident Paul had emphasised to the Galatians how it was wrong to try and force Gentiles to first become like Jews so that they could fully become Christians. Now Paul turns his attention back to the Galatians and wants them to think about these issues. He does this by asking a series of questions. In this way Paul is showing why the Galatians were wrong to reject the message of salvation by faith and to accept a religion of law-keeping.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

You foolish Galatians!

The word “foolish” here does not mean “silly” or “ignorant”. It means “not using the mind to think about this matter”. The Lord Jesus used this word “foolish” in Luke 24:25 because those disciples had **failed to think about** the prophecies of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Who has bewitched you? (Question 1)

The behaviour of the Galatian believers was now so changed that it seemed as if someone had cast a spell on them in the sense of deceiving them. Formerly they were happy to trust Christ alone for their salvation; now they are being persuaded that they must keep the law of

Moses for their salvation. They are not **thinking carefully** about their beliefs.

Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. “By my preaching”, says Paul, “the message of Jesus Christ crucified was held up in front of you like a public notice for you to read.” That should have prevented their eyes from wandering to anything else! We learn here that the death of Christ was central to Paul’s gospel preaching. See 1 Corinthians 2:2. Notice that it was not a picture or a statue of Christ crucified that Paul held before them. Paul talks about the **hearing** of the message (verse 2). Visual representation, if used, needs verbal explanation. Paul called the gospel “the **message** of the cross” (1 Co.1:18).

Verse 2

I would like to learn just one thing from you:

Paul focuses on one thing and the remaining four questions follow this line. There is only one answer that the Galatians will be able to give. This is at the heart of the problem

Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? (Question 2)

Paul does assume that they are real believers. (The Spirit’s power was present doing miracles among them – see verse 5). But the Galatians must now admit that this experience of the Spirit’s work did not come because they kept the law of Moses. Most were Gentiles who had never heard of Moses! Their spiritual experience came by their believing Paul’s preaching about Christ’s death. The letter to the Galatians has some important teaching on the Holy Spirit. This will come out as we progress through the letter. The point to note here is that the Holy Spirit lives in the body of every believer, even if the person is muddled in his understanding. This would apply to the error-prone Galatians.

Reason 1.

The Spirit came to them because they believed what they heard.

Verse 3

Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Question 3)

The word “foolish” is the same word as in verse 1 – i.e. “unthinking”. Having begun the Christian life by depending on Christ, do you think you can improve your spirituality by depending on yourselves now? That is illogical thinking! There is a hint here that the Galatians had a desire to progress in the Christian life, but that they were going about it

the wrong way. Believers still possess human nature alongside the indwelling Spirit. There is always the danger that believers will attempt to accomplish spiritual objectives in the strength of human nature, rather than by faith.

Reason 2.

It is foolish thinking to move away from the basis upon which you first became Christians.

Verse 4

Have you suffered so much for nothing – if it really was for nothing?
(Question 4)

In Acts 14:2,5,19,22 there are examples of persecution of believers in South Galatia. Such persecutions were often caused by Jews who hated the gospel of Christ and who hated Gentiles. Paul says, “If you were convinced it was right to suffer persecution for Christ’s sake then, how can you give up Christ now?” There are many followers of other religions who suffer persecution. Does that prove that they are right? Not at all. To rely on persecution as evidence of being right is a false notion. People whose suffering is not based on following Jesus Christ and his teachings are experiencing it all in vain, for nothing.

Reason 3.

Your suffering was in vain if you now believe that your salvation is gained by following a set of rules.

Verse 5

Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?
(Question 5)

Both these verbs – “give” and “work” – are in the Greek present tense; i.e. this spiritual activity was still going on as the Galatian believers heard gospel preaching. This suggests that there were **no** such spiritual signs following the ministry of the false teachers. This difference is a strong argument that salvation is by faith in Christ and not in keeping the laws of Moses. In verse 2 we have the believer experiencing the Spirit within him. Here in verse 5 we have the action that follows. The Spirit works miracles in the believers, which is seen by the faith they exercise. If people practise a religion by following rules, it is their own effort that they are relying on. They are still spiritually dead, because the Spirit is not living in them. It follows that if there is no Spirit within, there can be no activity of the Spirit that produces works of faith. The Spirit blesses wherever there is faith in Christ alone.

Reason 4.

He who gave you the Spirit still works wonders among you because the basis of your belief was faith.



Summary

Paul has challenged the Galatian believers by asking them a series of questions. This is to make them recognise that their failure to think properly about their spiritual experience has made them fall under the influence of those who taught a false gospel. There are many false gospels in the world today. We too must think carefully to avoid being deceived. God does not require us to follow him blindly, but reasons with us. The Christian faith is one that requires thought so that we can understand the truth. This protects us from error.

It is a sad fact that many people today, both within Christian churches and in other religions also, still hope to be accepted by God because of religious things they themselves try to do. Many hope for salvation because of their own character and not because of Christ’s death and resurrection. See Matthew 7:21 – 23. Saved ones are those known by Christ as trusting in him alone.

In our next study, we will see Paul set out a further reason to show the Galatians their error of following a man-centred approach.

A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

1. The content of the gospel.

Notice that Paul does not merely say he preached that Jesus was a good man, a great man, a doer of good works, a great thinker. Paul insists that the essential thing about Christ was that he had been crucified – “was clearly portrayed as crucified” (verse 1). The gospel message is not only good advice to us from Jesus, but the good news that by his death on the cross Christ has done everything necessary for salvation. To ignore or deny that Christ by his death procured a complete and perfect salvation for all the elect is to insult him. That is why Paul argues so strongly against the false teachers who wanted to add something to Christ’s work.

2. The Christian's use of his mind.

The Galatians were rebuked for being “unthinking” (verses 1,3). In these verses (1 – 5) Paul is compelling the Galatians to think about their experience by asking questions. God does expect us to be believers who think carefully about our faith. It is a pagan practice to worship unthinkingly and without knowledge (see Acts 17:23).

We need to use our minds in worship. We cannot truly praise God for all he is and all he has done unless we understand what the Bible teaches about him.

We need to use our minds to believe. Faith is our acting on the basis of facts that we learn from Scripture to be true, about God, about ourselves and God's grace in Christ.

We need to use our minds to be holy. Jesus defeated Satan in the temptations by knowing what the Bible taught (Matt. 4:1 – 11). We must know what God has done for us in order to know how to live pleasing him.

We need to use our minds to seek guidance. God has shown in Scripture what is his general will for his children. Our obedience to his will must be thoughtfully and carefully worked out from Bible rules and principles.

We need to use our minds to evangelise. Paul said: “We persuade men” (2 Co. 5:11). The gospel facts must be preached to people convincingly, thoughtfully, as suited to the condition of the hearers.

Therefore Christians ought to be good thinkers! We can be led astray by false ideas if we fail thoughtfully to test them by what the Bible teaches.

3. The Holy Spirit and the believer.

It is sometimes suggested that the believer receives the Spirit at a second spiritual experience some time after conversion. In these verses – 2,3,5 – Paul speaks of the Galatian believers receiving the Spirit when they first heard the gospel preached. Clearly, in Paul's view, the Spirit is received at the beginning of the Christian life (verse 3). Then the Spirit's ministry continues in them as they continue to hear the preaching (verse 5). There is no second stage of blessing indicated here. The believer is the temple of the Spirit from the beginning of belief.



Focus Point:

Miracles

A miracle is the result of God's working in nature in a special way. God is revealing himself to mankind, to nourish faith in his intention to save. When God created the world he made the laws of nature and he works within them. But God can act outside of these laws or use them in a special way. For example, when God sent disease to the Philistines through rat fleas (1 Sam. 5:9) it was a special use of nature. When one boy's meal fed 5,000 others it was beyond the natural (John 6:9).

Three main words are used to describe miracles

Powerful act

God is a mighty God and does mighty things. He can control the storm (Mark 4:41), he can raise the dead (John 11:38-44). This power can also be seen working through weak people (2 Co. 12:9).

Wonders

These miracles cause amazement.

Signs

God does not do miracles for their own sake. Miracles point to some truth that God wants to be declared. Christ's signs show us that he is the one promised in the Old Testament, that he is the Son of God. The purpose of miracles is to teach some great truth about himself. The words *wonders* and *signs* are often linked.

We must not think that all wonders and signs are God at work. God's enemies sometimes do wonders. The test is whether the message accompanying the miracle confirms God's Word (Deut. 13:1-5, Matt. 7:21-23).

Miracles will not lead to faith

Faith, however weak, must come before the miracle. Seeing a miracle will not lead unbelievers to faith but rather it will harden them against God (John 12:37). When unbelievers see a miracle, they will try and find some natural reason for it so that they do not need to believe in the supernatural. This helps us to understand why Jesus did only a few miracles in Nazareth (Mark 6:5). The unbelief of the Nazarenes did not make Jesus unable to heal, but it made miracles the wrong thing for him to do. Without faith to understand the message that the miracle taught, such miracles would have been no more than meaningless signs.

Therefore any miracles would only have hardened the people's hearts against the gospel.

The Bible is not full of miracles one after the other

Supernatural miracles did not happen throughout the whole of biblical history. God sent them at critical points in the history of his plan of salvation. The two most critical times are the exodus of Israel from Egypt and the ministry of Christ. There are other phases where miracles were present such as in the days of Elijah and Elisha and in the days of the apostles when the New Testament Church was being established.

Do miracles take place in the 21st century?

The Spirit's working in a supernatural way, to bring a person who is dead in their trespasses and sins to have eternal life in Christ, is the pattern outlined in Galatians 3:5 and continues until the return of Christ. This power accompanies faith and is a demonstration of what has taken place through Jesus dying on the cross.

Other events take place that cannot be explained. Even with the advancement in medicine there are people who are healed, defying all known knowledge. It is right for Christians to pray for healing within the framework of God's will. Some people will be healed whilst for others God will call an end to their life. God uses signs and miracles to accompany the preaching of the gospel in special circumstances. In one large Asian country for example, there was a short period between 1976 and 1980 when the church experienced a relaxation of persecution. The preaching of God's Word bore much fruit and it was reported that many terminally ill people were healed, food supplies remained at the same quantity without replenishment and evangelists were wonderfully protected. The signs and miracles were for a season only.

However, we cannot expect to see the type of miracles seen in the ministry of Christ, where the dead could be raised to life. Also, it is not a gift that is given to a particular person to administer. If such a person claims to have the gift of healing, then they should expect to be at the bedside of terminally ill patients and for their complete healing to take place. A person may be used by the Spirit to be involved in such an individual incident, but we are not to expect from biblical teaching that a person will have a full-time ministry of healing. Always remember the test that has to be applied – it is for the nourishment of faith and not to convict a person of their sin. Only the gospel can do that.



Over to you

It is healthy for you as a preacher to continually examine your own spiritual state and motivation. You can do this by looking at the questions Paul posed to his Galatian readers;

1. Is there any modern teaching that dominates your thinking? Does it take away from the basic beliefs set out in Scripture?
2. How did you receive the Spirit? Was it by believing what you heard? If so be careful what you preach!
3. You may have started out well in your Christian ministry. Yet with all those people listening to you every week it may have gone to your head (you have become proud). Now you are trying to do things in your own strength, persuading yourself that you are becoming more skilled in preaching. Are you so foolish?
4. Are you going through a difficult time for nothing or is it because you are God's faithful messenger?
5. When people are saved in your congregation, is it because of your religiousness or because they have heard and believed the message that pointed them to Jesus Christ?