

Gal. 3:1-5

9/28/2025

## **“By Faith Alone”**

### **Introduction: The Reality of Backsliding**

Our Christian life often entails many ups and downs. While we wish that our spiritual walk would always be marked by growth and an upward trajectory, reality often points us in a different direction. We all backslide for various reasons. Of course, none of us desires it. Yet none of us—without exception—is immune to it. The only difference is in degree. What is truly comforting, however, is that God knows our spiritual reality all too well. He has compassion on us in our weaknesses and leads us toward restoration through His Word.

In today's passage, Paul rebukes the Galatians, who are wandering and departing from the gospel. Rebuke, by nature, is uncomfortable. But when we receive biblical rebuke in the eyes of faith, we come to see it not as condemnation or criticism, but as the loving discipline of our Father—meant for our restoration and growth in godliness. Seen in that light, Paul's rebuke is not merely an apostolic reprimand but is, in fact, a pastoral expression of God's care—for the Galatian church and for us. It is my prayer that, as we stand before the mirror of today's Scripture, those who find themselves slipping away from the gospel and from their walk of faith would, through the Word, receive the challenge, courage, and restoration granted by the Holy Spirit.

### **Paul's Rebuke**

Paul begins his rebuke in verse 1 with these words: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” (Galatians 3:1, ESV). The first thing we must pay attention to here is the phrase: “Who has bewitched you?” The Greek word translated as “bewitched” (ἐβόσκανεν) carries the meaning of casting a spell, or to exert an evil influence through the eyes (BDAG). This suggests something deeper than mere deception—it hints at a spiritual dimension, a reality that transcends what we commonly experience in a human interaction. Paul seems to be pointing to a kind of spiritual delusion.

This leads us to consider the very real presence of spiritual warfare in the life of every believer.

Admittedly, terms like “spiritual warfare” or “spiritual battle” can feel uncomfortable for many of us. Consider the times we live in—an age of self-driving cars, artificial intelligence, and real-time access to global events with just a tap of a screen. In such an age, isn't it almost anachronistic to speak of spiritual beings or spiritual warfare? Doesn't it all sound like medieval superstition? Yet, the fact that we cannot see or feel something does not mean it isn't real. Right now, in this very room, there are countless unseen chemical interactions happening on a molecular and atomic level. Their invisibility doesn't negate their existence. More importantly, we must pay attention to spiritual warfare because Scripture warns us of its reality.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, in Chapter 17.3, gives us a sobering description of how even true believers can fall into grievous sin. It explains:

“Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.” (WCF 17.3)

These dangers are not descriptions of unbelievers, but of believers. The Confession identifies the influences leading to such sins: Satan, the temptations of the world, and the remaining corruption within the believer. Paul also describes this reality vividly in Ephesians 6, where he says: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12) The believer stands in the midst of a threefold assault: from the world, from the sinful flesh, and from Satan himself. This is the unavoidable spiritual battlefield of every Christian walking on this earth.

Revelation 12:17 makes this battle even more explicit: “Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.” Who is the dragon—Satan—determined to attack? Those “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Satan has no need to attack unbelievers—they already belong to him as his minions. But those who bear the testimony of Jesus—those redeemed by Christ and called to His Kingdom—he despises. That is why he constantly wages war against us, using the world and the sin still dwelling within us to tempt, deceive, and draw us away from the gospel.

What is Satan's core strategy? “...It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Who has bewitched you?” (Galatians 3:1). In this verse, we can clearly identify what it is: it is to obscure our eyes from Christ, to block our ears from hearing the gospel that proclaims Him and His cross. Satan has no power to take away the salvation of those who belong to Christ. However, he does know how to make the lives of believers more miserable than those of unbelievers. How? By blinding them so they no longer see Christ clearly. Satan knows that Christ is the only source of power by which believers can overcome him. He is far stronger, far more intelligent, and far more cunning than we are. Therefore, the only way we can overcome him in this battle is by abiding in Christ. “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” (Hebrews 2:14) It demonstrates that the only way to overcome the one who holds the power of death is to look upon the cross of the One who destroyed him by His own death.

But at this point we must ask: When did the Galatians see Jesus Christ as crucified? Most of them never saw Jesus in person. What they saw was through the proclamation of the gospel—and it was through that proclamation that Jesus Christ crucified was made vivid and clear before their eyes. Why? Because the heart of Paul's gospel preaching was Christ and Him crucified. Every time the gospel is preached, it is the calling of the preacher to proclaim and paint Christ and His cross with words. And in the moment when that Christ is seen—by faith—victory is granted to those who are in Him. This is precisely what we see in Numbers 21:9. The people were healed the moment they looked upon the bronze serpent. This event was a shadow of the greater reality that Jesus Himself explained in John 3:14–15: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Just as healing came to those who looked upon the bronze serpent, so eternal life comes to those who look upon the crucified Christ. And it is precisely this gaze that Satan desperately wants to block.

## Paul's Questions

In verses 2 through 5, Paul presents four questions to the Galatians. Though framed as questions, they are not genuine inquiries. Instead, these are rhetorical questions—used to press upon the listeners a truth they already know. The goal is to remind them of the gospel they had already received, and to bring them back to meditate on it afresh.

Paul's first question, in verse 2, asks how they received the Holy Spirit: "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:2). Here, to "receive the Spirit" is synonymous with becoming a Christian. As Paul writes in Romans: "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." (Romans 8:9) There is no such thing as a believer without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As 1 Corinthians 12:3 makes clear, no one can even confess Jesus as Lord except by the Holy Spirit. So Paul's question here is really: How did you become a Christian?

Each of us may have a different story about how we came to faith in Jesus, but all of us share one essential, unchanging truth: Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17) And whenever the gospel is proclaimed, there is One who is actively working through the Word—that is, the Holy Spirit. This is precisely what the Reformed doctrine of Effectual Calling teaches. Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 31: What is effectual calling?

"Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel." This is a work that begins and ends with the Holy Spirit. There is no room for our own works or merit. The works of the law have no part in how we receive the Spirit or become children of God. Our salvation begins when the Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts.

As Paul writes: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:5, 8) The Spirit was given not when we were good, seeking, or worthy—but while we were dead in sin, hostile to God, and utterly undeserving. This is why we refer to the beginning of the Christian life as being born again—regeneration. But what part do we play in our own rebirth? Can a baby choose the conditions of its own birth, or decide when and how to be born? Of course not. So it is with the new birth. Regeneration is a miracle of grace, not a product of effort. It is a sovereign act of God, brought about through faith, and entirely by the working of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 3, Paul goes even further, asking: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3) The answer Paul is pressing toward is obvious: Absolutely not. This echoes what he had already stated in Galatians 2:21: "If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." If salvation could be completed by our own strength or obedience, then there would have been no need for Christ to die on the cross. The cross of Jesus is not merely the starting point of our salvation—it is the declaration that throughout the entire process of salvation, we are utterly powerless and helpless apart from Him. It proclaims that salvation—from beginning to end—rests solely in Christ.

The cross is the place where both the sacrifice of atonement (the removal of sin) and the burnt offering of perfect righteousness (the fulfillment of perfect obedience) take place simultaneously. Atonement alone is not enough to save us. We also need a perfect righteousness. And it is on the cross that Christ, having

become fully human and having obeyed the entire law perfectly, fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf. No one can add to or subtract from the finished work of Christ. Justification is a legal act that happens the moment we are united to Christ by faith—we are declared righteous, fully and finally. This, too, begins and ends with grace.

But what about sanctification? We often think of sanctification as faith plus our works—but this mindset frequently leads to confusion and error. In the process of salvation, the principle is the same for both justification and sanctification: It is the work of the Holy Spirit, brought about through hearing and faith. The difference is this: while justification is a full legal declaration, sanctification is the progressive transformation of our inner being—our old self being put off, and our new self being renewed in the likeness of Christ. Yet even this process is entirely a work of the Spirit. We can see this clearly in how Paul describes sanctification in 2 Corinthians 3:17–18: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Notice that Paul does not define sanctification in terms of moral effort or good deeds. Rather, he describes it as the result of beholding Christ—as we fix our eyes on His glory, we are transformed, from glory to glory.

This is not to say that good works are unnecessary. Rather, good works are the natural and necessary fruit of abiding in Christ and beholding Him. They are the evidence and outworking of the Spirit’s transforming work within us. Ultimately, all of salvation—justification and sanctification alike—is the work of God’s grace through faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

At this point, Paul asks the Galatians whether the suffering they endured for the sake of the gospel was in vain. His implied answer is clearly “No.” In fact, Paul intensifies the question with a second emphasis: “Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?” (Galatians 3:4) This double-layered phrasing is not uncertainty—it’s a rhetorical reinforcement, affirming that it could not possibly be in vain.

To believe the gospel is to walk the path of suffering. The gospel of grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone is also a gospel of suffering. Jesus Himself repeatedly warned His disciples about this reality. He said the world would hate them because it first hated Him (cf. John 15:18–19). The reason the world doesn’t accept you is because it didn’t accept Him. Paul likewise taught that the Christian life is one of sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and that it is through suffering that we also come to share in His glory: “...and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:17–18)

Yes, the gospel brings suffering. But suffering for the sake of the gospel is never in vain. Even when the world mocks it, when it seems fruitless, when no visible results seem to appear—God is at work. Isn’t the cross of Christ itself the greatest proof of this? The road of suffering that Christ walked led to His resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of God. Because of His suffering, there is now no more punishment for sin left for those who are in Him. So then, when we suffer as Christians, we are not suffering to atone for sin. That was accomplished once for all on the cross. Instead, we are participating in Christ’s suffering in order to also share in His coming glory—in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. But even now, in this life, we begin to experience the fruit of that suffering. What is that fruit? It is the sanctifying work of the Spirit, forming the image of Christ in us. It is the increased intimacy with God, the presence of the Spirit within, and the deepening joy of knowing Christ. Paul speaks of this in Galatians 4:19: “My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” This is the purpose of gospel suffering—that Christ would be formed in us. And that is never in vain.

## Conclusion

Paul's purpose in addressing the Galatians was not merely to rebuke them, but to lead them beyond rebuke—into spiritual restoration, by reminding them of the reality of spiritual warfare and the truth of the gospel.

All of us must live with a constant awareness of the spiritual battle we are in. We must remain spiritually awake, continually preaching the gospel to ourselves, so that our eyes stay fixed on the cross of Christ. But antinomians (those who reject the law entirely) tend to neglect this spiritual warfare. They enjoy the benefits the gospel brings, but feel uneasy when it comes to beholding Christ or abiding in Him. They prefer a Christianity that is comfortable, not one that speaks of sin, the cross, or costly discipleship. They do not want a gospel that calls them to suffer for Christ.

On the other hand, legalists are those who have never truly understood the gospel of grace. Deep down, they are skeptics of grace. They believe nothing in life is truly free, and that even God's grace must come with some hidden catch. They are willing to suffer—but if you trace their suffering to its source, it is often rooted in self-righteousness, in the pursuit of personal merit, self-vindication, or heavenly rewards. But such suffering is devoid of love—love for Christ and love for others.

True Christians are those who receive salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, through the gospel. They are those who run the race of salvation, fixing their eyes on the One who is both the author and finisher of their faith (Heb. 12:1-2). They look to Christ—who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, was conceived in the flesh and obeyed the Father perfectly unto death on a cross—and in union with Him, they are being carried forward in that same salvation. It is Christ's obedience, from beginning to end, that secures our salvation. And by the means of grace that God has given us, we continue to fix our eyes on the cross of Christ. He is the One who has given us the Holy Spirit. He is the One who never wastes our suffering, but uses it to conform us into the image of His Son. He is the One who is bringing about His Kingdom through our ordinary and broken lives. And in Him, our lives are secure. He will not fail. What He has begun in us, He will bring to completion—until the day of glorification, when we shall see Him face to face, no longer sharing in His suffering, but finally sharing in His glory. Until that glorious day comes, let us continue to look to the cross and the resurrection, and live by the power of the Spirit, as those who have been united with Christ by grace.