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Security of the Believer—Evidences from Galatians

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Introduction

The Galatian church controversy is rightly seen as focused upon the question of what is required for salvation. Certain men were insisting that in order for a Gentile (or anyone, for that matter) to be saved, individuals must submit themselves to the covenantal rites of the native Israelite: specifically, circumcision, though other aspects of diet and worship practice were undoubtedly in view as well (see 4:10). Paul vigorously attacks this notion, and recounts how he even withstood the Apostle Peter in person at Jerusalem (Galatians 2; Acts 15), because Peter had fearfully acquiesced to the Judaizing party and scandalized the Gentile believers. Paul's words could not be clearer: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails

anything, but faith working through love” (5:6); and “by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (2:16). Salvation, Paul asserts, is *sola fide* in Christ’s finished work (2:16-21).

Intrinsic to Paul’s arguments to the Galatian believers, however, is his presupposition that salvation is a permanent condition. Enjoying redemptive grace is not simply a matter of fleeting peace, but is the inheritance of all whom God the Father sovereignly elects, all for whom God the Son sovereignly stands as propitiation, all to whom God the Spirit sovereignly applies this wondrous redemption (Ephesians 1:3-14). This understanding on Paul’s part undergirds every argument in the letter to the Galatians.

A. Divine Rescue

Paul’s thinking on the security of believer shows itself as early as 1:4, when he blesses the Church in the name of Jesus Christ, “who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” The key term here is “rescue” (NIV) or “deliver” (KJV, etc.), from *evxe, lhtai*, the subjunctive aorist middle from *evxaire, w*. Native to the meaning of this word is the thought of choice on the part of the rescuer, and the aorist tense strongly suggests that this rescue takes place once. The subjunctive helps to communicate the thought that Christ’s redemptive act on the Cross was purposeful and intentional, and should not be taken as though there were any doubt or uncertainty about the outcome. Underscoring the certainty and finality of Christ’s work is the last phrase in this verse, “according to the will of our God and Father.”

The significance of this verse in the Paul’s greeting cannot be overestimated in our consideration of the issue of the security of the believer. Paul’s confidence in the redemption that the Judaizers were subverting rests in the finished work of Christ brought about according to the will of the Father. He set out to rescue His people from their sins, and accomplished that goal perfectly and finally.

B. A Different Gospel?

Further evidence of the permanency of the redemption found in Christ alone is found in 1:6-9, by way of contrast. Here, Paul expresses his dismayed amazement that, in light of the rescue that God has effected through Christ, the Galatians were quickly deserting

that precious security for a “different gospel;” that is, one having to do with adding man’s works or merit into the picture. Man is fallible, finite, and fickle. No “gospel” based upon man’s ability to do anything could leave the soul secure. Indeed, Paul declares that a works-based “gospel” is no gospel at all (1:7). So strongly is Paul opposed to any teaching that perverts the true gospel that he declares those who proclaim such falsehood as accursed.

In light of Paul’s declarations, how preposterous is the idea that one truly redeemed because of Christ’s work alone could somehow be lost. It is a false gospel that produces insecurity, for such a gospel is based upon fallible works of men (even if they were working to obey genuine commands of God, which, in the case of the Galatians, they were not). The gospel of Christ, on the other hand, is one of sovereign grace and divine certainty: let no one preach otherwise!

C. Dead to Law

Paul’s face-to-face confrontation of Peter (2:14-21) reiterates the doctrine that there is no justification through works of sinful flesh. His argument here is inescapable: indeed, it seems that Peter recognized and repented of his error immediately, even championing the very truths of which he had been living in denial (Acts 15:7-11). Paul’s argument in verse fourteen could be summarized by the cliché “What is good for the goose is good for the gander.” He goes on to ask how a believer could desire to return to the burden of the law (and, by implication, ask others to do the same), seeing that Christ’s faith, and faithful complete obedience, has secured the justification that we seek (2:15-18). If redemption is accomplished by our keeping of the law, Christ’s death was pointless (2:21).

The climax of Paul’s thinking here comes in verses nineteen and twenty. His language rings with finality. The aorist tenses in verse nineteen (*died*, aorist active indicative; and *might live*, aorist active subjunctive) make clear that Paul is not thinking about a transient relationship. Once in Christ, one is dead to the law permanently, with the permanent expectation of living freely and conscientiously before the Lord.

The same sort of finality comes through in verse twenty. The word “crucified,” in the perfect passive indicative, tells us, first, that we do not crucify ourselves unto redemption, but the work is done by Christ on our behalf and that we are recipients of its effects. Second,

the perfect tense again indicates that the work was done and completed in the past, with the ongoing benefits being applied to us so that we might truly “live.” That real life, it turns out, is not because we somehow get a shot of life from the Lord, who then sends us on our way to attempt to stay alive by our works. This new and lasting life is such because “Christ lives (continuous present tense) in me.” We are “justified by the faith of Christ” (2:16), and we “live by the faith of Christ,” who demonstrated his complete love for me by dying once for all on my behalf.

Paul has not exhausted his thinking on this subject by far. After recounting his words to Peter in Jerusalem, he further develops his conception of a person’s relationship to the law in 3:10-14. If you insist upon your salvation being a result of your own keeping of the law, you are cursed, since no one can be justified that way (3:11). Keeping the law is the evidence of genuine faith, not the entrance to it (3:12). But, Paul says, Christ has redeemed us from this curse (3:14). Again, the verb tense here is critical. The aorist active indicative of *redeemed* tells us that Christ’s redemption was accomplished once in the past, and does need to be repeated. And He did so not just for the benefits we derive from justification in this life – Westminster Shorter Catechism 32: “What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life? A. They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, (Romans 8:30) adoption, (Ephesians 1:5) and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them (1 Corinthians 1:26, 30) – but to secure for us eternal benefits by his one, finished work.” Note the last phrase in WSC 36: “What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification? A. The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification, are, assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, (Romans 5:1, 2, 5) joy in the Holy Ghost, (Romans 14:17) increase of grace, (Proverbs 4:18) and *perseverance therein to the end* (1 John 5:13; 1 Peter 1:5)” [emphasis added]. As Paul puts it in verse fourteen, “that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Paul speaks of that promise as well in Ephesians 1:13, 14. The redeemed one is “sealed” by the Spirit unto the inheritance of eternal life. That is as secure as one can get.

D. Heirs in Abraham

“Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (3:3) Paul is at a loss to understand why anyone would think they could improve upon the Spirit’s sanctifying work by adding human ability into the process of perseverance. In fact, the principle carries over into every area of ministry: the spirit does it all through the exercise of faith, not the exercise of human muscles or efforts (3:5). Abraham’s faith was exercised at a point in time, and the righteousness was imputed to him at a point in time, permanently and finally (3:6). This truth is the basis of the blessing of the promises to Abraham (verses seven through nine). The Lord Jesus asked if the misguided Sadducees remembered his father’s declaration, “ ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). Jesus was defending the doctrine of the resurrection in that passage. His point was that God, who is the God “of the living,” has not failed Abraham yet. Paul builds on that argument in his comments to the Galatian church by asserting that accordingly God will not fail those who are his spiritual progeny out of all nations. “So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham” (3:9).

E. Destined to Inherit

Paul’s thinking now shifts to the character of the believer’s status with God (3:18-4:7), particularly as that status relates to the matters of inheritance. Key terms throughout this section are *promise*, *inheritance*, *law*, and *covenant*. In contrast to a law that is not eternal (3:17a), a covenant is permanent once established. This covenant is a matter of God’s promise, and temporal law cannot annul it (3:17b). Paul’s point cannot be missed: one’s eternal inheritance is not a matter of temporal law-keeping, but of God’s unchanging and eternal promise (3:18). The law, in stark contrast to God’s promise, is designed to imprison fallen man in his sin, so that the glories of God’s gracious promise to those who place their faith in Christ’s perfect obedience and atonement might be most stunningly revealed (3:22, 23).

The Apostle goes on to speak to those that are already numbered among the “joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17), who have “received the adoption as sons” (4:5) in terms of their ongoing

relationship to their new Father: “You are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (4:7). In this permanent relationship, once again the Spirit’s ministry comes to the fore. In human adoption, once the papers are signed, the adopted child is considered just as much a child of the parents as any natural born children would be. Especially if the child is older, though, it may take constant reinforcement on the part of the parents to help the child feel secure in the new relationship. That reinforcement is roughly analogous to the work of the Spirit that Paul has in mind here: tender communion, and a constant reminder that we are his. He writes of this truth in a slightly different way in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” God does not adopt his children, make them new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15), and tenderly confirm to them his love and constancy only to break his promise, disinherit his children, and cast them out. They are secure in him because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8), and because God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). “The zeal of the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 9:6, 7) will perform all his holy will through Christ and bring it to pass. Man’s work has nothing to do with it.

F. Getting Out of a Debtor’s Prison

Since the inheritance of the believer is grounded in the eternal purpose and promise of God, the believer’s life ought to manifest itself in a manner that is consistent with the coming inheritance. “Therefore” (5:1) the believer must live in the freedom that Christ gives and not revert to the old thinking that one secures life by law-keeping. Paul makes it abundantly clear in 5:1-10 that anyone who tries to gain life and maintain it through both Christ and law-keeping is hopeless: a “debtor” (5:3, ASV) who profits nothing, but is rather severed from the very One in whom he professes to trust, because his actions tell a different story.

These words are written to those who are numbered among the saints (5:7). Those who would link the security of the believer to works, rituals, or any effort of fallen flesh shall bear their judgment (5:10). The inverse, though, is also apparent: in Christ we are released from the debtor’s prison unto a secure life of faith that shows itself through selfless love for God and others. Once again, Paul asserts the link between faith and the Spirit (5:5) by pointing out that the eager

expectation of the believer is for the consummation of all of God's promises. This is the "righteousness" for which we hope, and in which we are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise.

G. Do Not Lose heart

A key reason that the subject of the believer's security is an issue is simply that there are many times in our Christian experience when we feel keenly how far we are from thinking and living in a way that pleases God. Paul acknowledges this problem, but does not resort to abandoning his hope for either himself (compare Romans 7!) or the Galatian church. Instead, in 5:16-18 he encourages believers to "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." Paul has no qualms about admitting that the Christian life is a constant battle, striving against sin. But his comments do not allow for the idea that a Christian can lose his or her salvation, because he recognizes *the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit*. He develops this thought further in 6:7-9, where he reminds his readers that a man reaps what he sows. To the one in the Spirit he says, "He who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life." Our everlasting life and security is dependent upon the Spirit's keeping power, not our ability to perform. Those that walk in the flesh have no such confidence, and they should truly be anguished at their hopeless condition: for truly they are "strangers from the covenants of promises, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). But in the Spirit, we have confidence and work joyfully within our relationship with God, "for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (6:9).

H. A New Work

The final evidence of the believer's security in Paul's letter to the church at Galatia is found in 6:15, particularly taking into account the context of the statement. Here is Paul's final argument against the teaching of the Judaizers, who wanted to add works and ritual to the gospel to effect the genuine salvation and security of believers. Noting that even the most ardent Judaizer could not keep the very law they attempted to impose so stringently upon others (6:13), Paul insists that the only foundation of our redemption is the Cross. The

reason is simple: the application of Jesus' merit to our account makes us new creatures. "Old things have passed away; behold all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christ, the externals just don't matter at all when it comes to the *keeping* of our souls: He has made us new. The believer is secure in Christ's creative work.

Conclusion

Many forces beat upon our hearts to discourage us, hamper our progress in sanctification, and cause us to fall away from our Lord. Some of those forces are intrinsic to our own sinful natures, some are environmental, some are religious, some are demonic. But the seed is good, and when the Master prepares the soil to receive it, the result will be an abundant harvest. This is His promise, and the Apostle experienced the truth of that promise in his own life. In this precious letter, Paul conveys to the reader the same confidence in the finished work of Christ, who makes all His own new, and keeps them securely for eternity.