

## Spirit and Flesh

Devotional Reading: [Ephesians 1:3–14](#)

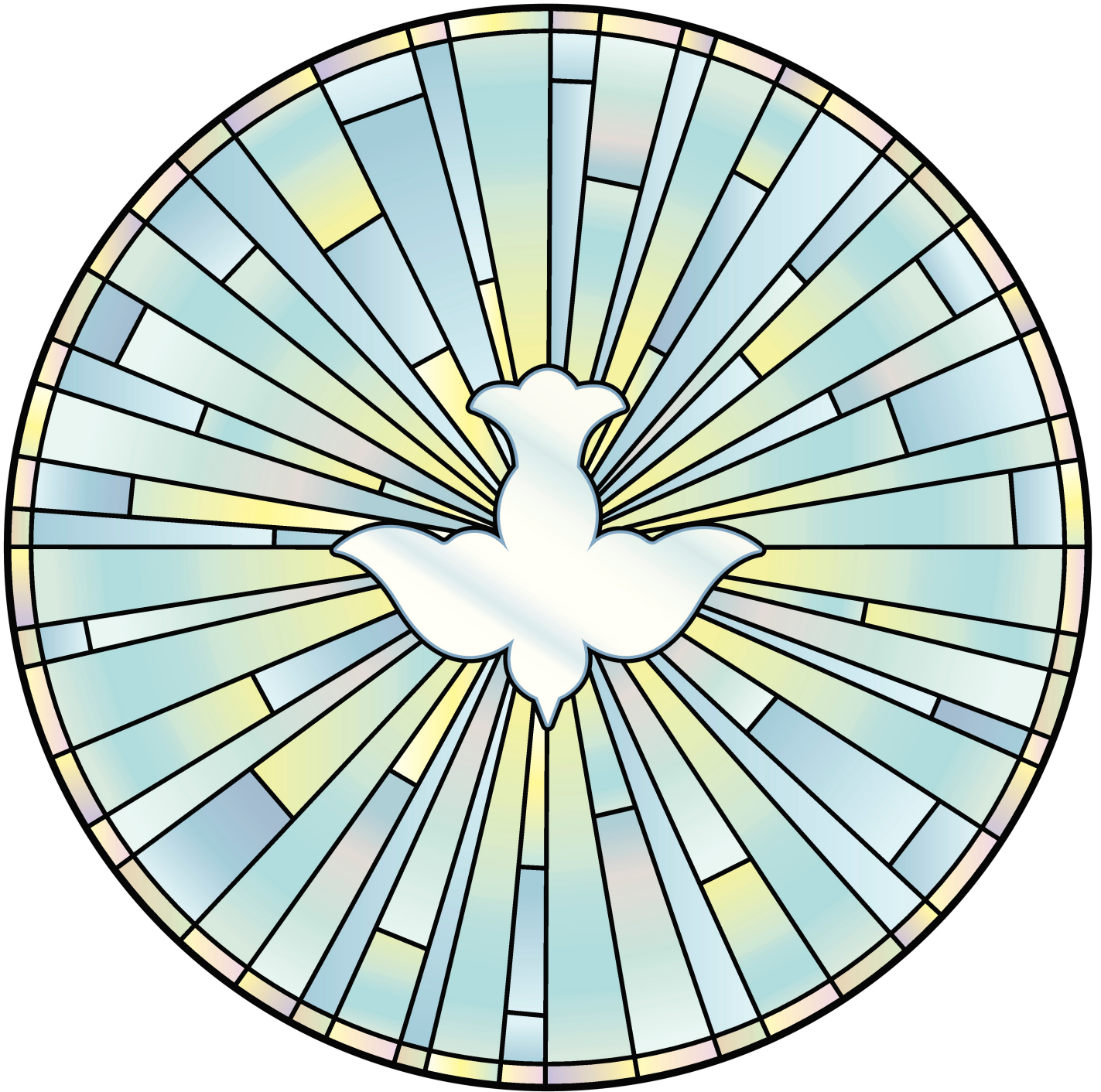
Background Scripture: [Galatians 3:1–18](#)

### Galatians 3:1–14

<sup>1</sup> You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. <sup>2</sup> I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? <sup>3</sup> Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? <sup>4</sup> Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? <sup>5</sup> So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? <sup>6</sup> So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

<sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

<sup>10</sup> For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” <sup>11</sup> Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.” <sup>12</sup> The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.” <sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.” <sup>14</sup> He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.



## Key Text

*Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?—Galatians 3:2b*

God's Law Is Love

## Unit 2: Faith Triumphs, Law Fails

## Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State why Paul referred to the Galatians as foolish.
2. Contrast the nature and motives of the Spirit with those of the flesh.
3. Make a plan to apply the lessons of the contrast to his or her service in Christ.

## Lesson Outline

### Introduction

A. Not Our Works

B. Lesson Context

#### I. After the Law (Galatians 3:1–5)

A. Foolishness (v. 1)

*April Is for Fools*

B. Receiving the Spirit (v. 2)

C. Continuing in the Flesh (vv. 3–5)

#### II. Before the Law (Galatians 3:6–9)

A. Abraham’s Faith (v. 6)

B. Abraham’s Family (vv. 7–9)

*My Father’s Daughter*

#### III. Cursed Under the Law (Galatians 3:10–14)

A. Evidence from Scripture (vv. 10–13)

B. Blessing Through Abraham (v. 14)

### Conclusion

A. Christ Is Enough

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

Abraham *Ay-bruh-ham.*

Galatia *Guh-lay-shuh.*

Gentiles *Jen-tiles.*

Habakkuk *Huh-back-kuk.*

heresy *hair-uh-see.*

Judah *Joo-duh.*

Judaizers Joo-duh-ize-ers.

Moses Mo-zes or Mo-zez.

## Introduction

### A. Not Our Works

After taking my undergraduate course on God’s grace and our response, a student followed me to my office to express a concern. She told me that she believed that Jesus is God and that through him, we can go to heaven. She explained that she had messed up a lot of her life and felt that Christ could not forgive her for all of it. She continued to tell me that before she surrendered herself in baptism, she wanted to get everything in her life right first. I did my best to explain that whether our works have been mostly decent or full of evil, we all come to Christ the same way—in need of a Savior.

The Galatians might have related to her story as well. Faith is well and good, they might have said, but what of the Law of Moses?

### B. Lesson Context

Paul’s letter to the Galatians arose from a real-life crisis. He was confronting a menace to the churches he had planted in the province of Galatia. This danger was the false teaching that it was necessary to keep the Jewish law to be saved.

Paul’s argument against this heresy necessarily involved exposition of Scripture. The effect of Paul’s masterful and inspired use of Old Testament passages demonstrated that the gospel was not a radical departure from the Old Testament. Properly understood, the Old Testament also teaches a relationship to God based on faith rather than works.

We must keep in mind that the Jews in Paul’s time had a very different understanding of the word *law* than we do. We tend to think of law as including civil rules and regulations—prescriptions that govern our conduct. While there was an element of that within Old Testament laws, that system was primarily meant to maintain a right relationship with God. To the Jews, these laws consisted of not only regulations concerning relationships but also ceremonial regulations covering such matters as worship and diet. Moral and ethical living was only a part of what the Jews thought of when they used the word *law*.

## I. After the Law (Galatians 3:1–5)

### A. Foolishness (v. 1)

**1. You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.**

In [Galatians 1:11](#), Paul addressed the members of these churches as “brothers and sisters,” and in [Galatians 4:19](#), “my dear children.” But here, Paul addressed them very differently. The Greek word

translated *foolish* does not mean uninformed or ignorant. Instead it implies that the *Galatians* knew the truth but were not acting on it (compare [1 Timothy 6:9](#); [Titus 3:3](#)). Paul loved these people and was gravely concerned about their error.

The Greek verb translated *bewitched* is found only in [Galatians 3:1](#) in all the New Testament. Its root is the Greek word from which we get our word *fascinate*. This word has a deeper meaning than the sense of “enthralled” or “entertained,” though. It meant to cast an evil spell on someone. There was no doubt among the people of Paul’s world that magicians and witches were able to do just this (see [Acts 8:9](#); [13:6](#); [19:19](#)). But Paul’s question about bewitching is not intended to be taken literally. He used the word to describe the effect that lofty rhetoric and arguments were having on the Galatians. Rather than magicians, sorcerers, or witches, the people were being mesmerized by false teachers.

For Paul, the heart of this truth is *Jesus Christ ... crucified* (see [1 Corinthians 1:23](#); [2:2](#)). Paul presented the crucified Christ so vividly that it was as if the cross was displayed directly before his audience. The word translated *clearly portrayed* was normally used to refer to a placard that was set up in a public place. Jesus’ crucifixion was clearly, unmistakably set before the Galatians through the preaching of the gospel. Other commentators believe that this verse simply describes how Jesus himself was put on public display when he was crucified. In either case, the Galatian error was not in misunderstanding the truth, but in abandoning it.

#### What Do You Think?

Why is Jesus’ crucifixion a good summary of the gospel?

#### Digging Deeper

What errors have you seen introduced to faith when Jesus’ crucifixion is forgotten or disregarded?

## April Is for Fools

Ever wondered about where that most prank-filled day of the year comes from? Several explanations have been posited, but the precise origin of April Fools’ Day is uncertain. Perhaps the best explanation derives from the year 1582. A change in the French calendar resulted in the new year beginning on January 1.

You can imagine that news of such a momentous change took a while to travel! Those who celebrated at the traditional spring equinox around April 1 were considered fools for not knowing that the year was already three months old. It really wasn’t fair to hold a nation responsible for this knowledge, given the seemingly arbitrary move of the year’s start from the beginning of spring to early winter.

This example could not be further from the situation Paul faced with the Galatians. They *were* responsible for the gospel truth. Acting like fools who did not know the truth was dangerous. The Galatians needed to keep the truth in the forefront of their minds. What will you do to keep the truth before you and not fall for any schemes that will make *you* the fool?

—J. K.

## B. Receiving the Spirit (v. 2)

**2. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?**

This second rhetorical question contrasts *works of the law*—obedience to the Law of Moses—with *believing what you heard*. One of the major distinctions between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God is the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is true that mention of the Holy Spirit can be found in the pages of the Old Testament, but the actual phrase *Holy Spirit* occurs only three times there: [Psalm 51:11](#); [Isaiah 63:10, 11](#). And only in [Psalm 51:11](#) is there a sense of the Holy Spirit indwelling a believer (in that instance, King David). While the Spirit of God is often present (see [Genesis 1:2](#)), there is no description of the Holy Spirit being given to the people of Israel individually in the “indwelling” sense of the New Testament.

Paul’s point is that the Old Testament laws do not promise anything like the Spirit. It is not “keep the Sabbath and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The gift of the Holy Spirit, experienced by the Galatian believers, is a part of the new covenant. This gift is seen only prophetically in the Old Testament (see [Ezekiel 37:14](#)). One does not receive the Holy Spirit through his or her own righteous efforts at obedience (see commentary on [Galatians 3:3, 11, 14](#), below). Considering the conversion experience of the Galatians, this second question can only be truthfully answered one way. They received *the Spirit* because of their faith, not their works. The thought is similar to that found in [Romans 10:17](#): “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”

## C. Continuing in the Flesh (vv. 3–5)

**3. Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?**

Paul’s use of the phrase “the flesh” can be understood in six distinct ways, as determined by context (see also in [lesson 6](#)):

- of creatures generally ([1 Corinthians 15:39](#))
- of our bodies specifically ([1 Corinthians 6:16](#))
- of the human race generally ([Galatians 2:16](#))
- that which is morally neutral ([Romans 1:3](#))
- that which is morally negative ([Galatians 6:12](#))
- of rebellious human nature ([Romans 8:3–12](#))

The fourth definition is in view here. Paul asked, *Are you so foolish?* using the same word as in verse 1. If the Galatians’ Christian lives began by receiving *the Spirit* through faith, how could growth be maintained by striving to live Christ’s life in *the flesh*?

Our Christian life starts with, is maintained by, and comes into completion only through surrender to Jesus and dependence on the Holy Spirit. To revert to the old covenant is to disregard and endanger this precious gift. It is to buy the lie that we can be made perfect by our own efforts apart

from faith.

### What Do You Think?

What makes living by the law seem easier or better than living by the Spirit?

### Digging Deeper

What are some helpful habits you practice that remind you that the Spirit's work is not the result of your own effort?

#### 4. Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain?

The churches in Galatia had witnessed and experienced persecution ([Acts 14:1–25](#); compare [Galatians 6:12](#)), as well as suffering common to all people. Rejection of the law as a means to salvation was not without consequences. But if there was a return to law-keeping by Jewish or Gentile Christians, this suffering would have been *in vain*, both for the Galatians and for Paul himself (see [4:11](#)).

#### 5. So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

This verse echoes the question of [Galatians 3:2](#) (above). God both gives *his Spirit* and works *miracles* ([Hebrews 2:4](#))—these things are taken as fact. But those miracles (examples: [Acts 14:10, 19–20](#)) did not come from those who were teaching that believers must follow *the law*. Whatever spiritual blessings the Galatians experienced came as a result of their faith in Christ rather than through legalistic observances.

## II. Before the Law ([Galatians 3:6–9](#))

### A. Abraham's Faith (v. 6)

#### 6. So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

The substance of this verse is a quotation of [Genesis 15:6](#) (see also [Romans 4:3](#)). If the Galatians required further evidence that faith pleases *God*, they needed to look no further than *Abraham* (see commentary on [Galatians 3:7–9, 14](#), below; see [3:16, 18, 29; 4:22](#), not in our printed text). Abraham lived centuries before Moses, who gave the law to Israel. Therefore no one could assert that Abraham was counted as righteous because he followed the Law of Moses (see [Romans 4:9–11](#)).

Abraham's example of faith in action remains an example for us all (see [Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17–19](#)), not least the Galatian believers. Abraham's obedient works were not motivated by wanting to earn a reward but by his confidence in God. Thus, to hold up Abraham as the main example of a person blessed and justified by God necessarily excludes circumcision from the discussion—and this was the linchpin of the Judaizers' demands.

### B. Abraham's Family (vv. 7–9)

#### 7. Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.

Abraham's *faith* was his defining trait. *Those who have faith* act as his *children* when they, too, are defined by their faith (compare [John 8:37–47](#)). This does not mean that salvation is only for those of a physical descent of Abraham; the promise made to Abraham is primarily spiritual (see commentary on [Galatians 3:8](#), below). Allowing works of the law to interfere with this identity was like claiming their father had not taught them about the life of faith.

### My Father's Daughter

I am my father's daughter. Anyone who knows Dad's side of the family says I'm the spitting image of his middle sister. I absorbed his love of reading and tendency to overstuff my bookshelves. My enjoyment of both playing and watching sports of many varieties can be directly traced to father-daughter days at the ballfield or ice rink. We share a sharp sense of humor reinforced by a shared taste in comedies. Neither of us will ever be described as morning birds.

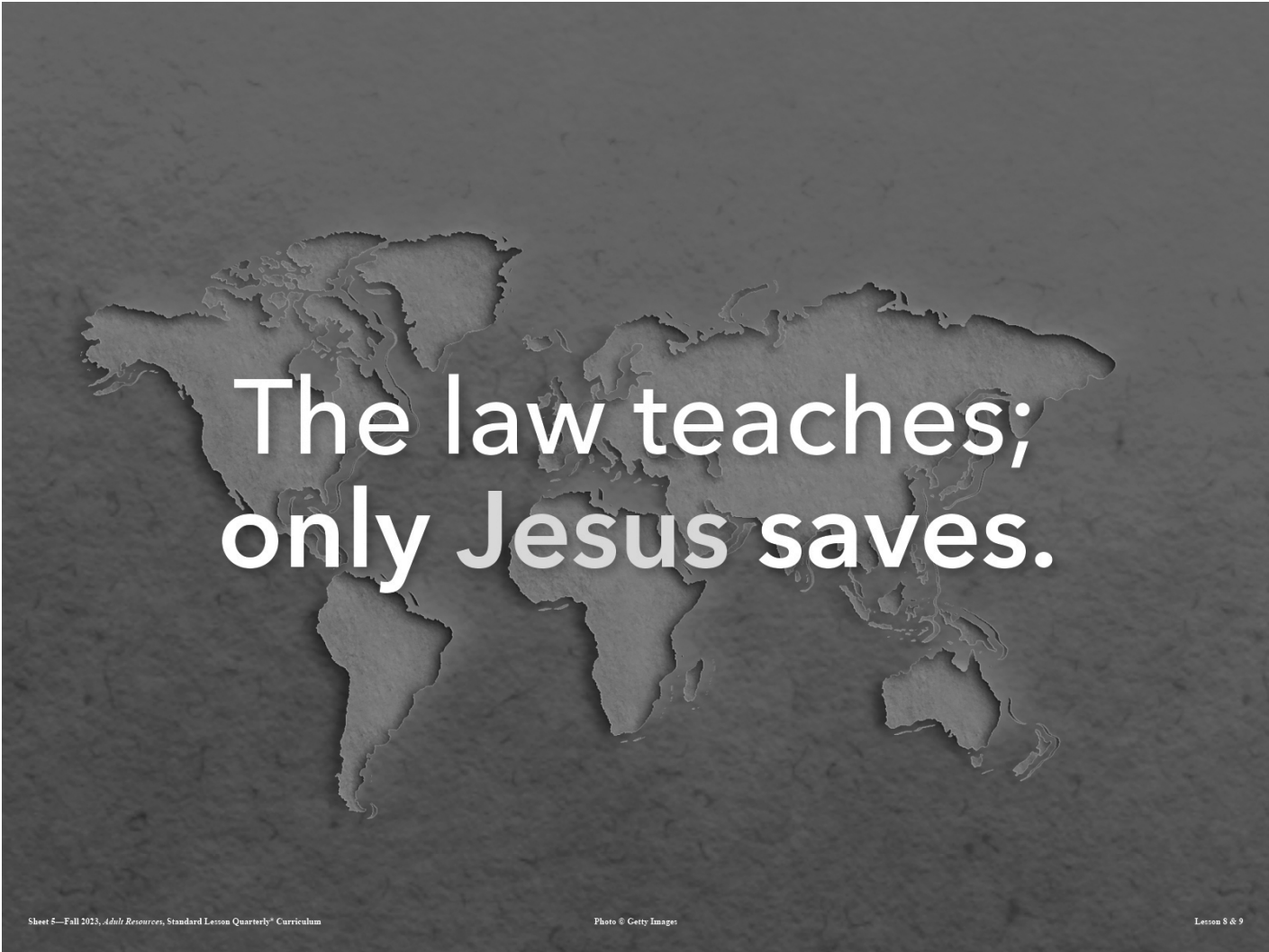
And we share our faith. Dad was the preacher in my congregation during my teenage years, when so much of my faith took shape. Because of this faith, I can also claim that I am my father Abraham's daughter. So could the Galatians, and so can *you*. So we can ask ourselves: What habits might prevent us from being recognized as our father Abraham's—and ultimately *the* Father's—faithful children?

—J. K.

**8. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."**

We might forget that the Old Testament (Paul's *Scripture*) reveals that God would *justify the Gentiles by faith*, instead confusing God's focus on Israel with a supposed concern for Israel alone. But before *the gospel*—before the good news of salvation based on faith in Jesus—God had made it clear to Abraham that *all nations will be blessed through you* ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)). And this, Paul asserted, was in essence the gospel. Justification through faith opened the door to any person, regardless of association with Israel. Since this promise, too, came long before any practice of circumcision or the Law of Moses, Paul interpreted it as a promise based on faith. Thus, Paul was not preaching some new or misguided gospel but the oldest and truest gospel message of all.





The law teaches;  
only Jesus saves.

Sheet 5—Fall 2023, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

Photo © Getty Images

Lesson 8 & 9

Visual for [Lessons 8 & 9](#). Encourage learners to keep this truth in mind during the week ahead in anticipation of studying [lesson 9](#).

**9. So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.**

This represents a summary of Paul’s argument so far. Anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who is faithful to Christ is *blessed*. Far from being a departure from what the Scripture revealed, this puts the faithful in the same company with faithful *Abraham*.

**What Do You Think?**

What benefit have you experienced because of study of faithful people in the Old Testament (examples: [Hebrews 11](#))?

**Digging Deeper**

What blessings do you experience that they were still looking forward to?

**III. Cursed Under the Law**  
**([Galatians 3:10–14](#))**

## A. Evidence from Scripture (vv. 10–13)

**10. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”**

*As it is written* introduces a paraphrase of [Deuteronomy 27:26](#), which is part of a list of accursed lawbreaking behavior ([27:15–26](#)). Everyone who broke *the law* on any count was *under a curse* (compare [Romans 3:19–20](#)). If the Galatian believers submitted themselves to *the works of the law* (in this case, exemplified by circumcision; see [Galatians 2:12](#), [lesson 7](#)), they would be subject to the curse. The only escape was accepting the gospel based on faith, not works.

**11. Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.”**

Paul quoted [Habakkuk 2:4](#) to further bolster his assertion that *the righteous will live by faith* (see [Galatians 2:16](#), [lesson 7](#)). Habakkuk is unique among the prophets for his presentation of dialogue with God (some call it arguing). Habakkuk ministered in about 605 BC—a time when evil, selfish men controlled the southern kingdom of Judah. Their dishonesty and injustice seemed to go unpunished (example: [Habakkuk 1:2–4](#)). When Habakkuk complained about this, God told him that he was sending the Babylonians to wipe out the nation of Judah for this evil ([1:6](#)). Habakkuk objected to this in strong terms. He did not think it fair for God to use a “more” evil nation like Babylon to punish his own “less” evil nation ([1:13](#)).

God’s answer to Habakkuk was that it was not for that prophet to know or understand all of God’s dealings, particularly on the international level. Habakkuk’s job was to trust God. In the end, it was the prophet’s faith that would save him ([Habakkuk 3:16–19](#)).

**12. The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.”**

Paul returned to the theme of the law as condemning rather than saving. The law has a valuable function, and that is to define what actions constitute sin (see [Romans 7:7](#)). The law was not given to those who were already matured in their faith or had the Spirit of God to guide them. Using the example of little children, Paul later explained that the law was given as a tutor to lead them to Christ so that they might be justified ([Galatians 3:23–25](#); [4:1–7](#); see [lesson 9](#)).

If one commits to following the law, one must carefully follow all laws. This can never work, however. It didn’t work for Abraham or Paul. And it didn’t for the Galatians or us. Life from the law is found only in perfection, as Paul’s quotation from [Leviticus 18:5](#) shows, and none of us can attain perfection. Under a law system, our righteousness before God becomes a transaction, a payment for good deeds. Because of our sin, our just reward is death (see [Romans 6:23](#)). There is no middle ground between law-keeping and faith-living as means for salvation. Thus, Paul’s stark statement: *the law is not based on faith*.

**13. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”**

“The wages of sin is death” ([Romans 6:23](#)); this is *the curse of the law*. We are made aware of our sins but unable to will ourselves into perfection. Therefore, we have all earned a death sentence.

But praise God! Our redemption came through Christ. Our sinless Savior was made a curse for us through his death *on a pole* (the cross). To be killed in this manner was reserved for the vilest of criminals. The law teaches that this manner of death is used to shame the one being executed (compare [Deuteronomy 21:22–23](#); [Acts 5:20](#); [10:39](#)). Jesus was born under the law and endured the curse that falls on lawbreakers. But Jesus was no criminal. And because he was sinless, he was able to do what no one else could do: he perfectly satisfied the justice of God by absorbing the curse ([Romans 3:21–26](#)) in accordance with God’s purpose and foreknowledge ([Acts 2:23](#)).

#### **What Do You Think?**

How would you counsel a Christian who feels like his or her life is still under the curse?

#### **Digging Deeper**

What Scriptures inform your answer?

### **B. Blessing Through Abraham (v. 14)**

**14. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.**

Paul tied it all together in the final verse for this section. Through the atoning death of *Christ Jesus*, the promised *blessing given to Abraham* is realized. Even *the Gentiles* can receive this blessing, best seen in the gift of *the Spirit*. All of this is based on *faith* rather than law-keeping. The arguments and teachings of the Judaizers were put to rest, and Paul did this by using Scriptures from the law itself.

#### **What Do You Think?**

What Scriptures give you confidence that the Spirit is at work in your life?

#### **Digging Deeper**

In what seemingly irredeemable circumstances can remembering the Spirit’s work nurture hope?

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Christ Is Enough**

Who among us does not remember a parent, a teacher, or some other authority figure chiding us saying, “You know better”? Paul addressed the churches with the same lingering concern parents everywhere feel for their children. The Galatian churches were in danger of forgetting the truth of the gospel and embracing a works-oriented striving for salvation.

Sometimes our wrong thinking causes us to rely on law or works to please God. But this is not where salvation is found. We cannot gain salvation, forgiveness, or right standing before God by our works. These things are accomplished only through the work of Jesus and the grace of God ([Romans 3:23–26](#)). We receive the Spirit because of Jesus’ gift following our faith response, not because we

cleaned up our lives or obeyed all the right rules. As we reflect on this passage, we do well to ask whether our lives betray a continued striving for salvation rather than a joyful acceptance of it. Do we live and act based on the truth that Christ's work on our behalf is enough?

### **B. Prayer**

Father, forgive us for the times when we have fallen back to our old ways of trying to earn what you have freely given. Help us instead to live our faith in action as a loving response to Christ's work for us. In his name we pray. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Our faith is in Christ alone.

## **Involvement Learning**

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

### **Into the Lesson**

Write *righteousness* on the board. As a whole class, create a definition of the word with supporting Bible verses. Check this definition against a dictionary and make any desired revisions. Ask each learner to think of one person whom he or she knows personally and considers righteous. Without giving names, invite participants to share words or phrases that describe how these people speak or act in ways that show they are righteous. Write these responses on the board under the definition. (Keep the words on the board to refer to later in the lesson.)

Transition to the Bible study by saying, "As we study today's passage of Scripture, pay attention to God's standard of righteousness."

### **Into the Word**

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Galatians 3:1–5](#). Have learners use concordances to find examples of foolish behavior throughout the Bible. What actions or speech patterns are associated with fools? Examples include "[saying], 'There is no God'" and doing evil ([Psalm 14:1](#)), "[despising] wisdom and instruction" ([Proverbs 1:7](#)), and disregarding Jesus' teaching ([Matthew 7:26](#)). Compare these examples to the definition and examples of righteousness that were developed in the Into the Lesson activity. Are there any similarities? What key differences do the learners see?

As a class, answer these questions: 1—Why is Paul calling the Galatians "foolish"? 2—How do the

examples we found match the behavior Paul is condemning? 3—How do Paul’s questions help the Galatian believers to identify their error and to understand and know what is true?

Ask another volunteer to read aloud [Galatians 3:6–9](#). In pairs, have learners find examples of promises made to Abraham and of Abraham’s faith. Verses to consider should include (but not be limited to) [Genesis 12:1–9](#); [15:1–18](#); [17:1–22](#); [18:18–19](#); [22:1–19](#). Come back together as a class to discuss how the promises made to Abraham pointed to the gospel of Jesus.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Gospel to Abraham” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Instruct partners to work together to complete as indicated. After a few minutes, ask the partners to present their findings for whole-class discussion.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Galatians 3:10–14](#). Then have small groups look up Old Testament references Paul included—[Leviticus 18:5](#); [Deuteronomy 21:23](#); [27:26](#); [Habakkuk 2:4](#)—as well as [Matthew 5:17–20](#). Ask, “How do Jesus’ words connect the Old Testament verses with the verses in [Galatians 3](#)?” Allow time for group members to discuss before sharing their insights with the whole group. (Possible response: Jesus fulfills the law, so through him we are made righteous.)

## Into Life

Say, “Consider the people who came to your mind in the first activity. Do their lives reflect God’s standard of righteousness through faith?” Refer to the words that were listed on the board. As a whole group, label the phrases that happen through the law or through faith. Then consider how God’s promises have already been fulfilled and what remains to be fulfilled.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “One in Christ” exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete as indicated.

Give learners one minute to write down one way they continue to be motivated by the flesh instead of by the Spirit. Then ask them to brainstorm with a partner how to be open to the Spirit’s presence and leading in the week ahead as they seek opportunities to serve Christ. Have partners pray for each other in these efforts. Encourage them to come to class next week prepared to tell their partner about their experiences in the Spirit.