

# Paul's Vehement Opposition to Legalism

by Art Katz

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*Paul's vehement opposition to legalism was rooted in his personal experience of the revelation of Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, which showed him that the death of Jesus was a statement against the flesh and self-righteousness.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 6:1, John 14:6, Romans 3:20, Romans 6:4, Romans 7:12, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:21, Galatians 5:4, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 3:9

**Topics:** "The Atonement of Christ", "Grace vs. Legalism"

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## Description

Art Katz emphasizes the Apostle Paul's vehement opposition to legalism, particularly in his letter to the Galatians, where he warns against adding the Law to faith in Christ. Paul understood that any attempt to achieve righteousness through the Law contradicts the purpose of Jesus' sacrificial death, which was to condemn the flesh and self-righteousness. His personal encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus profoundly shaped his understanding of grace and the necessity of seeing the death of Jesus as a complete atonement for sin. Katz argues that this revelation is crucial for believers today, as any return to self-righteousness undermines the grace of God and the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. The sermon calls for a deeper understanding and appropriation of the atonement to avoid making the grace of God ineffective.

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## Transcript

The Apostle Paul said that the Law was holy and good, but he spoke strongly to the Galatian believers who were including some aspects of the Law to their faith in Jesus. I never understood why he was that vehement, but this book, "Of God or Man? Light from Galatians", by John Metcalfe, published by the John Metcalfe Publishing Trust, has helped me to see it more clearly than ever before. It has to do with recognizing that Jesus condemned in the flesh everything that is of the flesh, and that the Law (any attempt by man in his own effort, by moral or other means, to bring righteousness to his life, or use such a means to obtain salvation), is a contradiction to what Jesus died for.

The death of Jesus is a statement against anything man does in the flesh by his own effort. In Judaism, observation of the Law is one of the prominent means by which one tries to obtain righteousness. To this very day, self-righteousness through one's own conduct--ritual observance and various other practices--by people who have animosity toward Jesus and the faith, is the last gasp contest between self-righteousness and divine righteousness; it is a fight "to the death." It is an utter paradox that men would employ murder in order to maintain the system by which they hope to establish their righteousness.

The death of Jesus and the persecution of the early church is an example of that. So, why is Paul that vehement? I believe the answer lies in his personal history, with the way in which the revelation of the Lord apprehended him on the road to Damascus. This writer, John Metcalfe, says here, "He saw that all that was obnoxious to the wrath of God in his life, nature and flesh had been condemned vicariously in the death of Jesus on the cross. . . and in the eye and judgment of God he, Saul, had died when Christ died (page 42)."

Just to paraphrase this: Paul had a glimpse of the death of Jesus in a way that comprehended his own flesh; he died in Christ. In the natural, Paul was an exemplary Jew, and perfect according to the Law. However, he saw that what he had honored and celebrated was vile and deserved the death to which it had been brought at the expense of the death of God's own Son. Until we see, in some measure, the death of Jesus as a statement of judgment and condemnation on all flesh, we will be, like the Galatians, tempted to augment our faith in Christ by performing acts which issue out of ourselves and our own uncrucified nature.

They will become supplements to the salvation that is uniquely and exclusively in Him. Paul was vehement about this because of his personal experience of the revelation that came to him in the appearance of the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. This encounter was needful for the great apostle because he would be laying the foundations of the faith for the Church and for all subsequent generations of it. He had to nip in the bud every perverse thing that was already arising in his own time and generation, as for example, when Peter came to Antioch and ate with the Gentile believers until some Jewish believers came up from Jerusalem, sent by James.

When he immediately changed his tactic and would not eat with the Gentiles, he went back to the Law, and Paul confronted Peter to his face in that moment. Paul would not let the moment pass, because the issue of the Gospel and the truth of the Gospel were at stake. We need to appreciate the fact that his vehemence and jealousy for the Gospel rested in the death and resurrection of Jesus, or else he would not have been so insistent upon taking to task any condescension to the Law as a complement or a supplement to the salvation that is exclusively in Christ.

These were great issues in the commencement of Paul's apostolic ministry, and they are great issues now. Paul recognized the threat of the Law, which could be holy in itself, but when it is a means for self-righteousness, let alone the attainment any kind of salvation through works, it is a statement against the death of Jesus. I did not understand that before. I just looked upon his Damascus experience as simply the way that God met him. But here is the thing: When God said through Isaiah in chapter six, "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up," something happened to Isaiah.

He said, "Woe is me, I am undone, I am a man . . ." What Isaiah saw is, in essence if not exactly, what Paul saw on the road to Damascus, namely, the revelation of Christ and Him crucified. We see this as only a formula, a doctrinal requirement; we have not had the vivid exposure or revelation or appropriation as it came to these men. One was the chief prophet; the other was the chief apostle, and that is why they must, of necessity, have the revelation of Christ and Him crucified in the most vivid and powerful terms, because it would affect every subsequent consideration.

The Church that does not follow them in that degree of revelation and seeing loses the apostolic and prophetic quality of the faith until the crucifixion itself becomes just a commonplace. There is the death, but also the resurrection that makes the death effectual as justification. The resurrection showed that

death had propitiated the wrath of God and quenched the fire of eternal vengeance. It revealed everlasting righteousness already achieved to perfection (page 42). Resurrection is the stamp of the Father's approval on the death of His Son.

The fact that He did pay the price, that He satisfied every righteous requirement by which sin had to be met in righteousness by the blood of an innocent victim, and that He was resurrected, is the statement of the acceptance and vindication of that death. Paul met Jesus as the resurrected Christ. He had the revelation of the death, he had the vindication of the resurrection in the very first confrontation on the road to Damascus; and it was so powerful that it blinded him. Because Paul died with Christ, he saw his own death in Christ's death.

He then also believed that he lived with Him. Who else is there that has this profound conviction, that if I die with Christ, I now also live with him? That death and resurrection makes my union with Him not only His death but also His life? That's why it is the same Paul who says, "For me, to live is Christ." Again and again, Paul makes it very clear that all that issues from him issues out of union with the life of the Son of God, because he is also in union with the death of the Son of God, a death that he deserved as a notorious sinner when he sought in his own flesh to establish his own righteousness and became thereby, a persecutor of God Himself.

Henceforth therefore Saul of Tarsus would live in that union, and live by faith in that death. . . . He would live in that union [of] the power and life . . . which he felt from his [Pauline] calling, reckoning his natural life in the flesh . . . as having been crucified with Christ at Calvary. For crucified it was, and, mortifying it, he would live by the faith of the Son of God, dwelling in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, being brought into the everlasting love of the Father (page 42).

By a mystical and divinely created union the Son had received the sinner into Himself, and that in all Saul's corruption, so transferring it to the sinless, the substitutionary, the sacrificial and the atoning Son of Man. Thus was all judged and borne away in death. To this Christ's faith was addressed, and resurrection shows was justified and triumphant in the event. . . . nevertheless the union still stands. In resurrection it stands. All the glory of the Son of God is made over to and actually united with Paul from the hand of the Majesty on high (page 43).

This shows Paul's sonship and the authority that issued from it. It shows the remarkable revelation and knowledge that he had, and the authority that he expressed when he rebuked the apostle Peter earlier, and that to his face before the hearing of others. It all issued out of the sonship that was Paul's by virtue of union with the Son, both in death and in life. I do not know that we have sufficiently appreciated that now. Calvary was the faith of the Son of God to be made a sacrifice for men who could not work, helpless sinners who could do nothing, those cursed by the law.

So that in their place, made as them, as their real substitutionary sacrifice, both the justice of the Law and the everlasting righteousness of God might be poured out, and poured out, and poured out in vengeance and judgment till the last drop, to the uttermost drain, till all was totally exhausted and seen to be exhausted, in the drooping head and dripping blood of the slain and dead sacrifice (page 44). I am happy for this description because this is the way Paul saw the atonement of Jesus: Dripping to the last drop unto death--a statement of God's provision for failed sinners, for those attempting by law and self-righteousness to attain to some kind of righteousness in a failed way.

It is a statement that the only thing that could meet them was the substitutionary atonement of His blood to the last drop, unto death. So this is not a polite little Jesus on the cross looking like a ballet dancer heaving a last breath and giving His spirit to the Father. This is seeing the sacrifice richly and deeply, and seeing that it covers the entire multitude of the failings of men and their sin. Whether they are Law seeking, or Law rejecting, they are equally sinners, but the blood and the life given up to the last drop covers the multitude of all that transgression.

This is the foundation of Paul's apostolic life, the revelation of the cross, the suffering and the death to the last drop, and the union that comes in that death, with the life that issues from it in resurrection. All requirement of justice, legal and divine, is forever satisfied, world without end. The sinner is justified in Christ for time and eternity beyond all further question. Yet, if men go back to the Law, any part of it, sign of it, or all of it, they are saying, "It was not so."

And that Paul calls, Frustrating the grace of God, or Christ dying in vain (page 44). If men go back to the Law after this, it frustrates the grace of God and makes the sacrificial death of no account. It is Christ dying in vain. Can you see why Paul was so vehement with the Galatians? "What has deceived you so much that you can think that adopting Jewish Law will complement your salvation in Christ? Why, embracing as little as one figment of the Law, you make the death and the shedding of that blood null and void.

You make the grace of God vain." That is why Paul was so insistent, because he esteemed every last drop of that blood that was required for the effecting of salvation. Nothing less or other than that would do, because all flesh is inherently sinful and evil, and no good thing can come of it. Christ in the flesh suffered death for the flesh. To go back to the flesh and any form of righteousness through law is to make that sacrifice null and void, and to make the grace of God vain.

If righteousness comes by the Law, Christ died in vain. That the Son of God came down from heaven and became flesh and man, and suffered that excruciating death to the last drop - that was vain? That was needless - as though the Law could have been perfected, and it would have sufficed? See what I mean? Paul embraced the atoning death of Jesus and the revelation of his own sinful nature that came to him on the road to Damascus. The effect of hearing, "Why do you persecute Me?" was devastating, and it had to be, if this man was to become the foundational apostle of the Church.

So what is the point for us? The point is, we need the same appropriation of the atonement and sacrifice of Jesus. We need to see the same condemnation of flesh and self-effort that Paul saw in the vivid revelation that came to him, affecting all his subsequent days and making him the vehement opponent in Galatia to those Jewish believers who were seducing Gentile Christians. They thought that they needed to embrace some aspect of the Law to fulfill their faith and come into the full Jewish inheritance, which is where we are today.

This is a struggle now. Though it may not be Jewish Law that tempts you, any act of self-righteousness is a return to the flesh and makes the sacrifice of Jesus vain. This is Paul's total and exclusive concentration, which is the foundation of the faith that God made in him. It is not only the embrace of the death of Jesus that brings his own flesh to death, but he is joined with Him in newness of life as well. He becomes a son of God; he can say "Abba Father". The new life has come in as the old life has gone out.

He is another man - another authority, another reality - because the two go together. There is no appropriation of the life of God that results in sonship and service without first, the embrace of the death that results in the complete annihilation of any hope in the flesh for righteousness. That is why there are so

few sons to be found in Christendom today. They do not embrace the death. They may make doctrinal condescension to the death, but not in the depth of Paul's appropriation.

It has to come as it did also for Isaiah, through revelation. We would be wise to ask for some measure of that revelation, or our faith will remain shallow and inadequate, and we will have made the grace of God of none effect. For Isaiah and Paul, the key word is "saw": "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." Paul saw the crucified and resurrected Christ. There is a seeing that is the key, and God has to grant that grace; we need to request it; we need to ask for it.

PRAYER: So Lord, we have fallen short of the apostolic truths, of insistence on the salvation that has come exclusively through Your blood. We have settled for something doctrinal, something merely verbal that we think that we have because we can articulate it or make reference to it. But we have not the vivid sense that Paul had, for if we did, we would be enemies of the flesh and of the Law, and of any attempt to establish our righteousness by what issues from the flesh, which You condemned in Your suffering unto death.

So Lord, I am asking for the church of the last days, that Paul's great struggle would not be in vain, that the Church would not lapse again into the temptations of the hour that came to the Galatians under the seducers that wanted to Judaize and bring to them the attractive aspects of the Law, any aspect of which would have made null and void the sacrifice of Christ. Lord, make this dear to us, we are pleading with You. We are asking for revelation; it is the heart of the faith.

You gave it to these great men who are apostles and prophets, and to whatever degree we have a destiny in which those words are incorporate, we ask for a comparable revelation. May it come in Your time we pray, and we would strike our chest and say, "Woe is me, I am undone, for I am a man. . . ." We thank you Lord for Paul, for the purity and depth of his faith, for his unwillingness for a moment to allow the faith in any way to be compromised in condescension to men, and for his insistence on the truth of the Gospel, confronting the chief apostle Peter to his face in that very moment, in the hearing of others.

Thank you for that jealousy that is the statement of his sonship and the statement that issues out of his union with You. That was not just human verve, that was itself the life of God being expressed with the same indignation that Jesus would have expressed it, had He been there in that situation - and was there in the resurrection that is the life of Paul. Come, my God and bring us to that reality, for that is the only reality, and we ask it in Yeshua's holy name, for Your name's sake. Amen A transcribed and edited message given in 2006.

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