

Can a Christian “Fall from Grace” and Lose Salvation?

An Exegetical Analysis of Galatians 5:4, 7

By Chris Villi

Introduction

Many people who believe that it is possible for Christians to lose their salvation cite Galatians 5:4, 7 as a proof text. They argue that the folks whom Paul states have “*fallen from grace*” and “*have been alienated from Christ*” in v.4 had formerly been “*running a good race*” (v.7). From a cursory reading of the text, we may reason that if they were running well and walking with the Lord and have subsequently fallen from grace and become alienated from Christ, they must have lost their salvation. But, when we read this passage in the context of the entire letter and develop an understanding of what Paul is attempting to communicate to the churches in Galatia, will we come to the same conclusion? Let’s find out.

The Overall Context of the Book

Before looking at any passage in particular, we must first understand the overall picture of Galatians. Why did Paul write the letter, to whom did he write, and what was he intending to communicate to his original recipients?

In terms of the historical setting, Paul writing in A.D. 49-50, most likely addressed the churches that he founded in the southern Galatian cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (cf. Acts 13:14-14:23).

The purpose of Paul’s writing was to counter the “Judaizing” false teachers (also known as the “circumcision group”) who were emphasizing the Law and thereby undermining the doctrine of justification by faith. Although the Jerusalem council clearly addressed this issue shortly before this letter was written (A.D. 49, see Acts 15), the Judaizers were defiantly ignoring the council’s decree and attempting to force Gentile believers to become Jewish proselytes and submit to the Mosaic Law. Paul was motivated to write this brief letter due to the fact that the believers in Galatia were beginning to become theologically confused by opening themselves to this teaching.

Analysis of the Text Preceding the Passage in Question

Paul addressed the “*churches in Galatia*” (presumably believers throughout the region of Asia Minor). But, there is something different about his opening greeting that is worth noting. He does not address the readers specifically as believers like he does in most of his other epistles (i.e. Romans 1:7 – “*those who are loved by God and called to be saints*”; 1 Corinthians 1:2 – “*those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy*”; 2 Corinthians 1:1 – “*saints*”; Ephesians 1:1 – “*saints...faithful in Christ Jesus*”; Philippians 1:1 – “*saints in Christ Jesus*”; Colossians 1:2 – “*holy and faithful brothers in Christ*”; 1 Thessalonians 1:4 – “*brothers loved by God*”; 2

Thessalonians 1:3 – “*brothers*”). Although this is interesting, there is really not much, if any significance, since he refers to them as “*brothers*” throughout the remainder of the book (e.g. see his closing in 6:18). So, we should not get too caught up with the different greeting. Paul most likely did not commend his readers in his usual manner due to the urgency of his writing.

To understand why Paul wrote the letter and the central thread of his teaching throughout, we need not look any further than 1:6-7, which sets the stage for the entire letter. Here, Paul clearly identifies his audience and the predicament in which they found themselves. We can think of these verses as containing Paul’s thesis statement. Here, we learn that the Galatians are quickly deserting God because people are throwing them into confusion. Notice here that Paul says that they were “*called...by the grace of Christ*”. This likely refers to effectual calling as opposed to general calling (cf. 5:8, 13; Romans 8:28-30). So, it is clear that Paul is addressing believers. Based on the phrase “*you are so quickly deserting*”, we understand that the target audience of Paul consisted of saved people who were currently being confused by false teachers who perverted the gospel of grace. It is also worth noting here that the KJV translation is not particularly accurate at this point. The Greek verb for turning/deserting is a present tense middle/passive indicative verb, but the KJV translates it as “*removed*”, which would give the indication that the action was complete and final, when in fact, it was in process. The Galatian believers did not desert God; they were in the process of flirting with a works-based system that emphasized keeping the Law of Moses. Paul declared that even considering such a thing was equivalent to “*deserting Him who called*”.

For the remainder of chapter 1, Paul endeavored to reestablish his apostolic authority in the minds of the Galatians in order to set himself over and against the false teachers.

In chapter two, Paul gives Peter as an example of a true believer who “*was not acting in line with the truth of the gospel*” (v.14) because of the Judaizers. In the following verses, Paul elaborates on the nature of Peter being out of line. It had to do with confusion over “*justification by observing the Law*” (vv.15-21). Notice three things here: (1) the relationship of these verses to Paul’s overall purpose of writing, which was stated in 1:6-7; (2) Peter is a true believer who was allowing seriously bad theology (i.e. justification by works of the Law) to influence his actions; (3) the powerful verses we always quote, vv.20-21, flow from the example of Peter's actions.

In chapter 3, Paul calls his audience “*foolish*” (3:1, 3) and “*bewitched*” (3:1) right before he mentions that they have “*received the Spirit*” (v.2, 5) and “*began with the Spirit*” (v.3). Next, he states that all who believe are justified by faith and blessed like Abraham (vv.6-9). On the other hand, everyone who relies on observing the Law is under a curse (v.10), and the Law cannot replace grace (vv.11-13). Therefore, the Spirit that they have received (cf. vv.2-5) was received by faith (v.14).

He then goes back to his example of Abraham in 3:15-20. The key verses in this section are 17-18: “*What I mean is this: The Law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the Law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.*” Notice that God is the one doing the action here. He is the one who gave

the promise of the inheritance. Therefore, the inheritance is guaranteed for that reason. So, if anyone trusts in the Law for the inheritance, they do not receive it. They trust in vain.

Paul, for the remainder of chapter three, explains the purpose and function of the Law (i.e. to lead people to Christ) and concludes with the words, *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”* (vv.26-28). Please understand the thrust of Paul here. He is telling them to take their focus off of the Law and put it back where it belongs...Christ. He is telling them that if they indeed placed their faith in Christ, then they are Abraham's seed and heirs of promise through faith, not Law. In other words, he is saying, *“Wake up and smell the coffee! Stop allowing yourselves to be influenced and confused by false teaching that has only a curse and no promise. You have the Spirit by faith...start acting like it.”*

He repeats this with emphasis in chapter 4: *“Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”* (4:6-7). Here, he is telling them to stop acting like slaves. Why would someone who is a son and an heir want to act as if he was a slave? This is confirmed by what he says next. In verse 8, he says, *“formerly when you did not know God”*. He contrasts this with, *“but now that you know God and are known by God”* (v.9). Then, he immediately asks them, given this, how they can be turning back to the Law (vv.9-10). It makes no sense to move in reverse. Again, as he did with Peter, Paul attempts to bring them to a remembrance of their beginnings as believers in vv.12-16 through his ministry and message and to warn them about the influence of the Judaizers (vv.17-20). He then explains to them, through the example of Hagar and Sarah, that the Judaizers understanding of the Law was seriously flawed, because the Law served to point to Christ (vv.21-27). Notice that in v.28, Paul indeed does call them *“brothers”* and declares that they are in fact *“children of promise”*. He repeats this in v.31. These verses are also significant for understanding chapter 5.

We have now arrived at chapter 5 with the context of the entire epistle in view. Paul begins the chapter with the words, *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”* (v.1). Notice that Paul uses the pronoun *“us”* in order to say that he believed they were saved. He then challenges them, as believers, to not allow themselves to get confused and act like unbelievers by being unnecessarily burdened by the Law. He then warns them of the seriousness of such an error in v.2 (i.e. *“Christ will be of no value to you”*).

Analysis of the Passage in Question

Now that we have laid the groundwork, we can finally tackle our passage in question in 5:4ff. It is critical to note that the interpretation of this passage somewhat hinges on the meaning of the word *“justified”* in v.4. Here, the normal Greek word for *“justify”* is used. Since there are two possible meanings for this word, we must make a conclusion regarding which Paul was using here. The two primary meanings of *“justify”* are: (1) A technical term referring to God

“declaring a sinner righteous” in His sight. In this sense, justification is the beginning of salvation. (2) A term referring to the vindication of oneself before another.

So, which is the correct view? Well, both are grammatically possible, and both can be effectively argued. Let’s analyze each one. Before doing so, one crucial observation must be made. Given what we have already established, whether or not Paul was using the word in the sense of being declared righteous before God, we must conclude that he was speaking to believers. The “*you*” in 5:4 represents the same group of people as the “*you*” in 1:6, 3:3, 5:7-10, etc., so we cannot arbitrarily assign the “*you*” in this verse to be the subset of unbelievers in the congregations who never believed in the first place. There is no grammatical or contextual reason to assert that Paul suddenly began writing to a subset of his readers. There is no way to get around the fact that those he addressed in 5:4 were believers. These were people who have “*fallen from grace*” and have “*estranged themselves from Christ*”, but not in a way that caused them to lose their salvation.

In defense of the first interpretation, there are four reasons to believe as most people do that Paul was referring to salvation (“*justified*” = “*declared righteous by God*”).

(1) This is Paul's chief way of using the word in his writings, especially Romans and Galatians. Every other use of this term in Galatians (three times in 2:16, and once in 2:17, 3:8, 3:11, and 3:24) clearly holds to this definition. So, in this sense, it is hard to imagine that Paul would suddenly switch up and use the same word in a different manner.

(2) As mentioned in the section above on the overall context of the book, the purpose of Paul’s writing was to counter the false teaching of the Judaizers. Their teaching was also dealt with by the Jerusalem council shortly before Paul wrote this letter. Acts 15:1 informs us of the content of these teachers: “*Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’*” In verse 3, we see that Paul and Barnabas were indeed referring to the “*the conversion of the Gentiles*”. The view of the Judaizers is then summarized in verse 5: “*It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.*” In response to this assertion, Peter was very clear, “*Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.*” (Acts 15:10-11). After this, we see James’ statements and the council’s decision in support of Peter. As a result, the council sent a letter with Paul to Antioch, which was one of the southern Galatian cities to which the epistle to the Galatians was written. Given this background, it seems clear that Paul was using the term “justification” with regards to salvation.

(3) In 1:6-7, which serves as the thesis of the letter, Paul mentions that his audience was in the process of deserting Christ for “*a different gospel*” (v.6). Since justification in the sense of being declared righteous before God is tied to believing the gospel, it would only make sense that Paul is using the term in this manner.

(4) Paul clearly speaks about salvation by grace through faith in 3:26-28, which serves as a summary of everything stated in chapter 3. This also supports the possibility that Paul was using the term “*justified*” to refer to being declared righteous by God.

So, there are four clear and compelling reasons to believe that Paul is using the term “justify” here to refer to God’s declaration of righteousness at the moment of salvation. However, the other use can be effectively and convincingly argued for the following four reasons:

(1) Paul uses the word in Romans 15 times. The first time he uses it, he says, “*the doers of the law will be justified*” (2:13). Here, he is clearly using the term in a similar manner as James does in James 2:20-26. He again uses the word in the same manner in 3:4. He then uses it in another way in 6:7 (to be set free). But, apart from these three, he consistently uses it as a technical term (i.e. “*to declare righteous*”) the other 12 times (3:20, 3:24, 3:26, 3:28, 3:30, 4:2, 4:5, 5:1, 5:9, 8:33, and twice in 8:30). Given the fact that Paul did clearly use the term to signify vindication twice in Romans when his thrust was to use it in the technical sense, we can conclude that doing the same in Galatians is certainly not unimaginable.

(2) Given the context of the entire letter and the immediate context in which Paul just called them heirs, brothers, and children of promise in the end of chapter 4 and said that they, as believers, have been set free in 5:1, it is definitely possible that he is speaking to those who are trying to be justified (i.e. vindicated) by the law as believers. This makes sense in light of his earlier illustration of Peter doing the same thing. Peter was undoubtedly a true believer who was allowing bad theology to influence his actions and therefore “*not acting in line with the gospel*” and the Galatian believers were in danger of the doing same thing.

(3) This interpretation is consistent with Paul’s statement in 1:10, “*Am I now trying to win the approval of men [i.e. vindication], or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.*”

(4) The literal Greek rendering of v.4 is “*You are estranged from Christ, you who are justified by law; you fell from grace.*” Contrary to 1:6, where the KJV uses the wrong tense and most other translations are correct, here we see the opposite. The KJV gives the literal translation of the Greek (i.e. “*whosoever of you are justified by the law*”) while most other translations (e.g. NASB, NIV, ESV, NKJV) provide a form of interpretation. The NASB says, “*you who are seeking to be justified by law*”. The ESV says, “*you who would be justified by the law*”. The NIV says “*you who are trying to be justified by law*”, and the NKJV says “*you who attempt to be justified by law*”. Notice that all of these translations give the sense of trying, attempting, seeking, etc. on the part of the Galatians. The translators have rendered the text in this manner, because they view the verb “*justified*”, which is a present passive indicative verb, as a special use of the present tense called a conative present. A true conative is defined as a present tense verb that is used to indicate/connote that an unsuccessful attempt is presently being made. They judge the verb here to be conative, because “*Obviously, [the normal present tense] meaning for this text would contradict the whole point of Galatians. Paul is not declaring that they are being justified by the Law, but that they think they are (or they are trying to be), though their attempt can only end in failure.*”¹ So, this particular present passive indicative verb is interpreted in this

¹ Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 534.

manner, because Paul said, “*a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.*” (2:16). Given the fact that it is impossible to be justified (i.e. declared righteous) by the Law, it would seemingly be a contradiction for Paul to then address the same folks as “*you who are justified by the law*”, as 5:4 literally reads. Hence, we arrive at the interpretive conative translation with the idea of “*seeking*”, “*attempting*” or “*trying*” to be justified. However, if Paul wished to communicate the idea of seeking/trying/attempting in this verse, he could have used a grammatical construction containing the present active participle for seeking/trying/attempting combined with the infinitive verb form of justify, just as he did a few paragraphs earlier in 2:17. Here in 5:4, he did not use that construction, so it is possible to assume that the verb is a simple present tense verb, and to understand the text to say, “*you who are justified by the law*”. When we do so, we conclude that Paul is using the word “*justified*” here to mean “*vindicated*”. This interpretation is true to the text, does not contradict 2:16, and makes sense given the immediate context as well as the greater context of the letter and of the Scriptures in total. Interestingly enough, this term “*justified*”, taken to mean “*vindicated*” here actually refers to the *sanctification* of the Galatians, not their *justification*. Paul made this clear in 3:3, “*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*”

So, with regards to the meaning of the term “*justified*” in verse 4, there seems to be valid evidence that Paul used the term to indicate that confused believers who think they are vindicated in following the customs of the Law have removed themselves from the true source of vindication (i.e. Christ and His grace). They seek to be vindicated by something that has no power to vindicate them, since the only One who does is not their focus.

However, if Paul used the term here in its technical sense (i.e. declared righteous unto salvation), he still could not have been referring to unbelievers who were attempting to be justified by works of the Law for reasons stated above. So, he would have to be referring to believers who were trying to be declared righteous before God through the works of the Law. Of course, it does not make much sense for believers to seek justification, since they already have it...unless, of course, they were really confused about the nature of justification, which is certainly plausible here. If this is the case, we would understand that the believers heard the message of grace from the lips of Paul when he visited them as a missionary. Upon hearing the message and being effectually called by God, they received the truth of the gospel with child-like faith. Then, some time after Paul left, the Judaizers slipped in and began to confuse them in regards to justification. Although they were justified by grace, out of uncertainty they began to think that works could add to the grace they had received. They were bamboozled into thinking that the works of the Law were a necessary accompaniment to the work of Christ on the cross. They were graciously saved by sadly confused, so they began attempting to merit for themselves what Christ had already merited for them and applied to them. It is in this sense that they minimized Christ’s work, “*turned away from Christ*” and “[*fell*] from grace” (5:4). This is the most-likely scenario.

So, the way in which we interpret the term “*justified*” is important in that it gives us a different picture of the background and thrust of what Paul was saying. Although both interpretations are valid, only one can be correct. Nevertheless, with regards to answering our question at hand, we can confidently state, that whether we hold to the position that “*justified*” here means “declared

righteous in the sight of God” or that it means “vindicated”, we arrive at the same two conclusions: (1) Paul was definitely addressing believers, not unbelievers. (2) The passage cannot be referring to the loss of salvation.

The fact that the text cannot be referring to the loss of salvation is further supported by the fact that Paul did not say “*you have fallen out of grace*” but “*you have fallen from grace*”. In other words, they have nullified the power of Christ in their lives. So, at the time of Paul’s writing, the Galatian believers were dealing with theological confusion, not spiritual defection. This is the thrust of the epistle to the Galatians.

Finally, we must take into account the fact that Paul’s whole purpose for writing the letter was to win back the Galatians to the truth so that they would “*take no other view*” (5:10) than Paul’s. Given this fact, Paul would not have written the epistle if his readers had already lost their salvation (if it were possible). Hebrews 6:4-6 indicates that, hypothetically speaking, if it were possible for someone to completely fall away from Christ, it would also be impossible for them to ever again be restored to repentance and justified. Knowing this, Paul would not have written a letter to a group of people who had already lost their salvation and their hope to ever regain it. That would not make any sense.

Analysis of the Text Following the Passage in Question

The remainder of the book strengthens the assertion that Paul regarded his recipients as believers (remember the “*you*” in v.4 is the same “*you*” throughout the book unless otherwise qualified). For example, he calls them “*brothers*” and declares that they have freedom in Christ in 5:13. He tells them to “*live by the Spirit*” in 5:16, which is impossible for unbelievers who are spiritually severed from Christ and do not have the Spirit.

Like any good pastor, in 5:18-25, Paul gives them a litmus test so that they can indeed “*test themselves to see whether they be in the faith*” (1 Corinthians 13:5). If they are living holy lives, it is a credit to the Spirit of God. If not, they may be in danger of hellfire. As Jesus had said, “*the tree is known by its fruit*” (Matthew 12:33).

Finally, Paul, after giving some practical instruction in 6:1-11, reveals the motives of the Judaizers. As seen in the example pertaining to Peter in chapter 2, the temptation of those reverting back to the Law was based on the desire to “*avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ*” (v.12). Paul then warned the hearers one last time about the devastation of believers having the wrong focus, i.e. man-centeredness instead of God-centeredness (vv.13-15). The final word of Paul – whoever, in the final analysis, aligns with his teaching will prove to be a true believer (v.16).

Conclusion

It is not exegetically supportable to believe that salvation can be lost on the basis of this passage in Galatians or, for that matter, any part of the epistle. Paul wrote to believers who were in the

process of being duped by false teachers with the hopes of bringing them to their senses. With strong language, Paul declared that they had fallen from grace (5:4)...not the grace that justified them, but the grace that was sanctifying them (cf. 3:3). In other words, by beginning to focus on works, they were in effect nullifying the power of grace in their lives, since grace and works cannot mix. As Paul stated in Romans 11:6, when we focus on works, “*grace is no longer grace*”. When this is the case, “*Christ will be on no benefit*” (5:2) and sanctification will be devoid of His power (cf. John 15:5).

The immediate context of the passage supports this interpretation. 5:7 is basically a restatement of the thesis statement in 1:6-7, saying that their theological understanding and focus was initially solid but has become distorted. Following that, v.10 is a key verse. Here, Paul states that he is confident in the Lord that these confused Galatians (the same people who are referred to as “*you*” in v.4) will not continue in their confusion by finally and permanently adopting the view of the false teachers. Just as Peter himself was confused for some time and came to his senses at Paul's rebuke and instruction, Paul believed that God would bring about the same result for the recipients of this letter. Notice that Paul didn't say, “I am confident in you”; he said, “*I am confident in the Lord concerning you*”. In other words, Paul believed that God “*is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy*” (Jude 24).

What if Paul's hearers decided not to hearken to his message? Would they eventually lose their salvation, since they were already “*quickly deserting Him who called*” them? Paul did not directly answer this question in the letter. He only confirmed his confidence in Jesus' promise: “*I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*” (John 10:28-29). With that in mind, Paul could state with certainty, “*I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view.*” (5:10).