



Falling From Grace in Galatians 5:4

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. Galatians 5:4

What does it mean to fall from grace, especially as that phrase is used in Galatians 5:4? The interpretation of that verse has important implications for the Christian.

Some Misinterpretations

Unfortunately, Galatians 5:4 is misunderstood by some. One faulty interpretation is that it describes the action of an unbeliever who rejects the gospel. Yet it is clear that the apostle Paul is writing to Christians in this epistle. In the immediate context, he declares that they have been set free by Christ (5:1) and calls them “brethren” (5:11). The New King James translation, “you who *attempt to be justified*,” does not refer to unbelievers trying to be saved, but acknowledges that under the law the most a person can do is attempt to be justified, because ultimately “no one is justified by the law” (3:11).

Another inadequate interpretation, the common Arminian one, is that Paul is addressing believers who lose their eternal salvation. Not only is this against the whole tenor of scriptural teaching about the security of salvation, it misunderstands the concept of grace in relation to salvation as well as the argument that Paul sets forth in Galatians. Below is a brief exposition of this verse in its context.

The Context Developed

The context shows that Paul assumes the readers’ saved status from the beginning of the epistle (1:2-4). He reminds them that they were called “in the grace of Christ” (1:6). The concept of grace is at the heart of the proper interpretation of Galatians, and at the heart of the Galatians’ misunderstanding of their relationship with God. Apparently they did not understand all the implications of their salvation by grace and were easily confused by false teachers (1:6-9; 3:1; 4:17; 5:7,12). Paul is seeking to dissuade the Galatian believers from trusting in the Old Testament law as a means of sanctification. That would be contrary to the principle of salvation by grace. That is why he criticized Peter for not being consistent with grace (2:11-14) and explained “I do not set aside the grace of God” (2:21). Since the Galatians began their Christian lives “in the Spirit” they should not think they could grow to maturity by their own fleshly efforts at keeping the law (3:2-3). The law only brings a curse (3:10).

As believers who have been justified through faith, the Galatians are now “sons of God” (3:26) and no longer slaves to the law (4:5-7). They need to “stand fast” in their liberty and not become entangled in the bondage of the law (5:1). If they revert to legalism, Christ will not profit them in sanctification (5:2), because keeping the external requirements of the law by fleshly efforts cannot bring anyone closer to God. To be acceptable to God, they must keep the whole law perfectly (5:3), an impossibility.

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Interpretation of Verse 4

In verse 4, Paul explains that believers who revert to the law are estranged from Christ.” “Estranged” translates the verb *katargeō*, which means to be separated or loosed from something, or to render something ineffective, inoperative, or powerless. Paul uses the same word in 2:21 in the sense of set aside. His readers have been estranged in their relationship with Christ (not cut off in their position as Christians) in that His grace is inoperative for them if they go back under the law, which is what circumcision signifies (5:2). They are in Christ, but not living by the power of His grace.

The verb translated “fallen” is *ekpiptō* which has a broad range of meaning, but usually means to fall from something or to lose one’s grasp of something. The Galatians had lost their grasp of grace, not Christ, salvation, or justification. A believer can not be *un*-justified (cf. Rom. 8:30), but a believer can certainly live in contradiction to God’s principle of salvation and sanctification by grace.

At the essence of Paul’s argument is the contrast between grace and law. They are opposites which do not mix; they are mutually exclusive. One either trusts in the grace of Christ for righteousness, or the law. Adherence to one system repudiates the other. It is only through faith in God’s provision that both positional (3:24) and practical righteousness (5:5) is obtained, not through the works of the law.

Therefore, with the phrase “fallen from grace” Paul is not addressing the Galatians’ position in Christ; he is addressing their practice, or their Christian walk. The position of the Christian is sure: Every believer stands in grace (cf. Rom. 5:2) as a child of God (3:26) set free from the bondage of the law (5:1). But Christians can compromise their position with inconsistent practice by trying to keep the requirements of the law or some other external system in their own efforts.

Application

If we as Christians live in outward obedience and submission to the externals of any law or religious system, we do not elevate our spirituality, but lower it. Such legalism can not make us closer to God, but creates a chasm in our relationship to Him. We fall from grace. Perhaps we could say we have a “falling out” with God, because we spurn His gift of grace—the same grace that saved us—in favor of our own achievements.

This spirit of legalism goes beyond adherence to the Old Testament Law. For example, if we worship to impress others, we do not “impress” God. If we have daily devotions only to satisfy a schedule, we do not “satisfy” God. If we trust in our sacrificial service to earn God’s favor, then we ignore God’s sacrificial gift to us. Only life in the Spirit under the grace of God can produce the righteous life that God desires.