

No Need for Messiah to Die

I love Galatians, at least partly, because it's a letter written with high emotion, as a quick response to a serious challenge and Paul holds nothing back. The stakes are so high and we get a full picture of how Paul understands the gospel and its implications for how we live. What's more important to us than that?!

Today we're going to look at Paul's perspective on an event that had taken place before his visit to Galatia. It had taken place in Paul's home church of Antioch, which is located on the coast of what is now Syria, north of Israel. Peter had come to Antioch and was staying with the believers there for a while - it sounds as if it might have been a few weeks. And here's Paul telling us the story:

But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him publicly, speaking strongly against what he was doing, for it was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians, who don't bother with circumcision. But afterward, when some Jewish friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore because he was afraid of what these legalists would say. Then the other Jewish Christians followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was influenced to join them in their hypocrisy.

When I saw that they were not following the truth of the Good News, I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you trying to make these Gentiles obey the Jewish laws you abandoned? You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles. And yet we Jewish Christians know that we become right with God, not by doing what the law commands but by faith in Jesus Messiah. So we have believed in Messiah Jesus, that we might be accepted by God because of our faith in Christ, and not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be saved by obeying the law."

But what if we seek to be made right with God through faith in Messiah and then find out that we are still sinners? Has Messiah led us into sin? Of course not! Rather, I make myself guilty if I rebuild the old system I already tore down. For when I tried to keep the law, I realized I could never earn God's approval. So I died to the law so that I might live for God. I myself no longer live, but Messiah lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I am not one of those who treats the grace of God as meaningless. For if we could be saved by keeping the law, then there was no need for Messiah to die. (2:12-21)

Peter had an amazing experience while staying at the home of Simon the tanner in the seacoast town of Joppa, where Tel Aviv is today. He was sleeping on the roof of the home when he had a vision of a sheet being let down from above which contained all kinds of foods that were not kosher for him, as a Jew, to eat. It happened three times and then, after he had refused the food the third time, claiming that he'd never eaten anything unclean, the Lord spoke to him and said, "If God says something is acceptable, don't you say it isn't." And from there, he was able to respond positively to go to the home of the Gentile army officer named Cornelius where he preached the

Gospel and the people there were filled with the Holy Spirit and received God's grace. The story is told in Acts 10 and 11. This event became a pivotal point in Peter's life. At the momentous Council in Jerusalem, held in 49 A.D., the year after Paul's letter to Galatia, Peter once more referred to the events at the home of Cornelius as a turning point in his ministry:

Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God, who knows people's hearts, confirmed that He accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He gave Him to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for He also cleansed their hearts through faith. Why are you now questioning God's way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the special favour of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 15:7-11)

Somewhere between his rooftop vision and visit with Cornelius, and his speech before the Council in Jerusalem, Peter made a trip to Antioch and was squeezed by some people that had influence, people from Jerusalem, friends of James who led the Jerusalem church and who was Jesus' brother.

Have you ever been squeezed? Some people wanted you to come down on their side of an issue and other people wanted you on their side and there just wasn't any "in between", no neutral ground? In this case, the issue was really, really important. It had to do with what the Gospel they were preaching everywhere was really about. Did the Gospel make it possible for Gentiles to be accepted by God and live as followers of Jesus without becoming Jews? Or does following the true Messiah of the Jews mean that you have to embrace the whole package, the laws of Moses, the traditions of the elders, Sabbath observance and circumcision and dietary laws? The Gentile god-fearers - that's the term you find in the New Testament which describes people who would attend synagogue services and who respected Jewish faith and practice - these god-fearers had resisted becoming full-fledged Jews for generations, but now that they had been introduced to Jesus and had been filled with the Spirit, they were more willing to consider going all the way into Judaism, if that's what was really required. And there was pressure on them to do just that.

Now, why would the Jewish Christians want to insist on Gentiles conforming fully to Judaism? What's the motivation for this pressure that they're putting on the Gentiles. I think we can look to three main areas of concern that would motivate them in this direction.

1. One area would be in the reluctance that people of Jewish background would have to perhaps losing out on the special Jewish exemption by which they, as Jews, were allowed to distance themselves from the pagan festivals that all other people who were part of the Roman Empire were expected to participate in. The Jews were allowed to skip the honouring of the statues of the gods in the public parks and were not required to pour out libations at the worship sites in public or in homes. The Romans realized that Jews simply could not, by virtue of their covenant with God, participate in these rituals and that was unique in the Empire.

What would happen to Jewish Christians if Gentile believers also began to ignore the pagan festivals? Perhaps they anticipated what did happen to the Christians during the reign of Nero some sixteen years later when a huge fire destroyed 2/3 of Rome. While a popular rumour started to spread that Nero had set the fire himself, he turned the tables and blamed the Christians. There was no Jewish exemption for them and they were persecuted horribly. It's not unlikely that these Jews who had come to faith in Jesus the Messiah, were afraid to lose their privileged status with those who were lords over them, the civil authorities who governed the Empire.

2. A second reason why the Jewish believers in Jesus would want the Gentile believers to adopt the boundary markers of Judaism would be to provide a consistent line of unbroken history. Jesus had come as Messiah, and Messiah should continue the expectations created by the prophets of Hebrew Scriptures. There should be no break with the traditions and practices that Jews all over the known world had maintained. This continuity, of course, would make it easier for them to maintain relationships with Jewish family members and business people and friends and neighbours who had not trusted in Jesus. They could say that Christians are just Jews who still follow all the traditions but who have added in Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. It removes some of the distinctiveness of their new faith and makes it easier for them to continue in old patterns and relationships - but what does it do to their faith?
3. The third reason, not for all but possibly for some, would be a fear that in breaking with the Jewish boundary markers, the things that set them apart from the Gentile world, they could be angering the God who had sent their ancestors into exile for being unfaithful to Him in centuries past. Why flirt with that danger?

We notice that Paul doesn't accuse James of any wrongdoing in this passage. He doesn't say that James sent these troublemakers to Antioch; he simply says that they were Jewish friends of James.

James is an interesting character, one that I think we need to understand better. He wasn't a follower of Jesus during his brother's earthly ministry, but we're told that Jesus appeared to him after His resurrection. Until that point, James was a Pharisee, one who tended towards what we call legalism, a man who promoted the heart of the Jewish religion to others. After Jesus appeared to him, James became a follower and, within what looks like a fairly short time, became the leader of the Jerusalem church.

Whether James sent them or not, these Jewish believers from Jerusalem came from James and so, we assume, reflected some of his influence. Paul describes them in this passage as "legalists" and says that their influence was so intimidating to Peter, other Jewish Christians, and even Barnabas (Paul's partner in ministry to Galatia), that these key people began to back down from their acceptance and inclusion of Gentile believers.

These actions infuriated Paul and he lashed out at Peter publicly, accusing him of trying to make the Gentile Christians obey laws that Peter himself had abandoned. He

called Peter a hypocrite - someone who pretends by his outward actions to be something that he's really not. And he pointed out to Peter that his actions were having a negative impact on the Jewish-background believers. He didn't need to say that these actions would also be confusing and troubling for the Gentile-background believers. But at the root of it, he's telling Peter, "This is not what we believe!" "You're not acting consistently with what you're preaching!" That's a great definition for hypocrisy.

Well, what do Peter and Paul believe that would cause Paul to challenge Peter's hypocrisy? Paul says, "You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles." What is that about? It sounds more than a little self-righteous, but Paul is not claiming some kind of perfection here. He's simply using the standard Jewish way of referring to Gentiles. Those of Jewish background were proud of their heritage - the laws of Moses, the traditions of their faith, the worship of the one true God - and it clearly made them separate, distinct, from the pagan cultures that surrounded them. So they came to classify everyone who didn't worship the one true God, but who bowed down to idols and participated in the pagan cult practices as "sinners". Paul is merely saying, "Peter, you and I weren't brought up in that world. We had a morally and intellectually more fulfilling world view than these Gentiles and yet, even we knew that that wasn't enough."

And then he comes right out and declares the Good News: "We Jewish Christians know that we become right with God, not by doing what the law commands, but by faith in Jesus Messiah", or possibly, "by the faithfulness of Jesus Messiah." So we have believed in Messiah Jesus that we might be accepted by God ..." and a breath later he adds, "For no one will ever be saved by obeying the law." That might be hard for a devout Jewish believer to accept, but then Paul expands on this thought in verse 19: "For when I tried to keep the law, I realized I could never earn God's approval. So I died to the law so that I might live for God." How did Paul die? By identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus Messiah. He died to the life of trying to please God by obeying Torah.

He states this transformation of thinking and of living for God with this powerful statement in vv. 19, 20:

I have been crucified with Christ. I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

And then the chapter ends with Paul restating his basic argument (v. 21):

I am not one of those who treats the grace of God as meaningless. For if we could be saved by keeping the law, then there was no need for Christ to die.

Again, we see Paul's emphasis throughout this letter to the churches of Galatia: Jesus is the centre of everything. Jesus is what this new life is all about, not my cultural boundary markers, not that people see me avoiding eating with Gentiles or observing Sabbaths. Jesus changes everything, so Paul now lives in response to Jesus. "I live

my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Let's remind ourselves of the context of these bold statements from the apostle Paul. The message he has preached to the Galatians, mostly Gentiles, is being undermined by some Jewish Christian agitators who want the new believers in Galatia to, let's put it bluntly, to look Jewish, to act like Jews, to make it appear that Jesus the Jew started a new movement that was always intended to stay within Judaism. At the heart of that conviction is the idea that righteousness comes from obeying Torah, from submitting to the rules laid down through Moses. And these particular Jewish believers are especially concerned with external appearances, with how it all looks.

And Paul stands up to them and says, in effect, “Then why did our Messiah have to die? I'm not going to be one who casually dismisses this great act of compassionate love by God! I'm not going to treat His grace as if it was meaningless! But, if you insist on demanding that Gentile Christians pursue their faith as if they were Jewish Christians, then that's exactly what you're doing - you're acting as if God's grace is meaningless and Jesus' death unnecessary.”

This is a powerful argument, one that the agitators would have a difficult time countering. In saying this, Paul is defending the gospel of grace and declaring that Jesus' death and resurrection are central to the plan of God for our salvation. The cross was not an unfortunate outcome that should have been avoided, but a fulfillment of God's purpose for the human race, His great act of loving redemption.

Let's stop there and look at some applications that can be helpful to us as we attempt to live “out of” the Good News:

1. One of the difficulties of living the Christian life is that not everyone sees things the same way. Some people tend towards a kind of legalism, a rules-based religion that they believe they find in certain passages. Others are focused on grace and the freedom that the Gospel brings. Some are weighed down by guilt and self-condemnation while others are careless about the things that Jesus asks of us. When these issues come up in discussion, we can hear the arguments of those who see things differently than we do, and, even if we don't agree with them, we feel badly, we feel their judgment and we have a hard time not falling into condemnation ourselves. We need to hear Paul's passionate response to this “pressure to conform” to ideas that are not the Gospel, but which sound like they might be. Paul says very clearly that no one can be justified by works of the law, that if that was a possibility, then Jesus would not have had to die. So, resist the various strains of Christian legalism, (if that's a legitimate term) and stand firm in grace.
2. A second application is related to the first one because when Peter and Barnabas and others yielded to the pressure to fit in with the agitators they became hypocrites - teaching one way of living and practising another. This is something that generations have criticized about the church they went to, about their parents,

about the elders of the church, etc. etc. “They don’t practice what they preach,” they say, and it’s true. This is part of living in this broken world. We don’t even do what we want to do and certainly fall short of the ideals we profess. But here’s the thing: as much as others complain about hypocritical Christians, the world is full of hypocrisy. And the church isn’t actually full of hypocrites - there’s always been room for more and there still is today. Our challenge is to live consistently within our beliefs, to live up to the example of Jesus, to show love and forgiveness where we might feel resentful.

3. There’s a powerful verse near the end of this section which I will use as the final application for today, verse 20: *I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.* There is a resource that we are encouraged to draw on daily, continually, and that is the Spirit of the Living God who is always with us. When we lean into Him, wait for His leading, look for His direction, we grow and we live more and more by trusting in the Son of God.