

What Keeps us Going?

The letter Paul wrote to the Galatians was never intended to be a book about how to become a Christian. The issues Paul addressed in this letter have to do with how a person keeps going in their faith. What will the Christian life look like compared to the life of a Gentile pagan or compared to a pious Jew? How will Christians who are travelling between churches know which ones are true believers and which ones have crossed over the line into heresy or unbelief?

The agitators who have come to Galatia after Paul and Barnabas had finished their mission there are insisting that the new Gentile believers in that region start looking and acting like Jews. We've talked about their reasoning and have started to look at Paul's response. Last week, we landed on Paul's strongest reasoning yet for the gospel of grace: if we could be saved by law-keeping, then there was no need for Jesus to die. And that thought lies behind the beginning of chapter 3:

Oh, foolish Galatians!

One older paraphrase says, "Dear idiots of Galatia!" That's a bit of the sense here.

What magician has cast an evil spell on you? For you used to see the meaning of Jesus Messiah's death as clearly as though I had shown you a signboard with a picture of Messiah dying on the cross. Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by keeping the law? Of course not, for the Holy Spirit came upon you only after you believed the message you heard about Christ.

Have you lost your senses? After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?

You have suffered so much for the Good News. Surely it was not in vain, was it? Are you now going to just throw it all away? I ask you again, does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law of Moses? Of course not! It is because you believe the message you heard about Messiah.

In the same way, "Abraham believed God, so God declared him righteous because of his faith." (Gen. 15:6) The real children of Abraham, then, are all those who put their faith in God. What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would accept the Gentiles, too, on the basis of their faith.

God promised this good news to Abraham long ago when He said, "All nations will be blessed through you." (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18) And so it is: All who put their faith in Messiah share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith. (Galatians 3:1-9)

The first thing we learn from this passage is that Paul was not a Canadian. Canadians can call people idiots, but usually behind their backs. Here is Paul saying, "You fools" to a group of people who have been taken in by some persuasive critics of his gospel and he is not backing down or apologetic about his criticisms at all. There is no "well that may be all right for you, but that's not how I see things" from Paul, just a forceful attack against the beliefs they are in danger of adopting. "What magician has cast an evil spell on you?" he asks them. What sorcery has persuaded these people to abandon something that had brought them life and joy and the fullness of the Holy

Spirit? What was once clear as day to them is now confusing and troubling. They can no longer grasp the fullness of what Jesus accomplished for them on the cross and have lost their faith. They no longer trust what Jesus did and are beginning to look at what they can do, how they can earn God's favour. How could it come to this?

Sometimes we can be watching a movie and it becomes so real to us that we start to identify with one or another of the characters and we are feeling with them in their dangers and in their successes. When the film ends and they have achieved their heart's desire, we feel elated as we leave the theatre. And, a few days later, as we tell a friend about the movie, we remember some of the main parts, but we find we've forgotten other parts and the emotion isn't there like it was. And a month or two down the road, we recall that we really liked that movie, but we don't remember much of what we liked about it.

And here's Paul saying, "You used to see it!, the meaning of Jesus Messiah's death, as clearly as though I had shown you a signboard with a picture of Messiah dying on the cross." "You used to get it, fully; the Lord of Glory giving up His life for you. You used to feel His pain and respond to Him with worship and thanksgiving and godly sorrow at your own sin. You knew what it meant and you allowed it to change your whole life. And now someone has cast a spell over you so that you don't see it, you don't really remember what you experienced and so it just doesn't mean that much to you anymore. What magician did that to you?"

The magician behind the agitators is none other than the prince of evil, the devil, the ruler of this world. Maybe you remember Jesus talking about him to the people in John 8:

You are children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning and has always hated the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

He is known as the deceiver and the accuser and he does his business, often, through other people. He uses people we respect or admire or like because they are the ones we will listen to. Or he uses voices that prey on our weaknesses. For example, if we grew up feeling like we were less than adequate, that we could never quite measure up to the expectations of others, he will speak to us about areas of our life where we feel most vulnerable and inadequate - it's cruel, but that's the devil's way of dealing.

In Galatia, he used the voices of people that the new believers there would be most likely to listen to with seriousness - the voices of people that were in some way connected to the Jerusalem church, the mother church, and who spoke with authority and spoke to a fear that these new believers seem to have had; that the Gospel is too good to be true.

To counteract these voices, Paul asks a question that can only have one answer: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit by keeping the law?" Obviously they can't say that they

were such good and obedient followers of Torah that they were granted the Holy Spirit. They knew very well that the Spirit was given to those who declared their faith in Jesus Messiah. But what keeps them going in their faith? It seems clear that the agitators are saying they need more to continue.

What a sneaky lie. They are telling the Galatian believers that you can get into the door by believing in Jesus - that's your ticket that admits you to the Kingdom of heaven - but you need something more in order to keep going forward as a Christian. "You need (according to the agitators) to become part of the bigger community of Christians that are headquartered in Jerusalem and join them in their Jewish customs and practices. Then you'll be fully "in Christ" and you'll know how to live in a way that pleases God. You'll be following God's law, living the way He told us to live all those hundreds of years ago when He had just delivered us from slavery in Egypt. Without the law, how will you know what to do and not do? How can you ever learn how to please God if you don't obey Torah?"

And how does Paul answer that objection? With the Spirit. "You began with the Spirit and you need to keep going with the Spirit." Later on, in chapter 5, we read the familiar passage about the fruit of the Spirit. Just before that, in 5:18, Paul writes, "But when you are directed by the Holy Spirit, you are no longer subject to the law." And that's the key, that's the answer to the objections of the agitators. The new thing that comes through faith in Jesus is the life in the Holy Spirit and that life, guided by the Spirit living within us, is not subject to the law, but it's no less from God, no less pleasing to God - in fact, more so. This is the presence of God within us, leading us and guiding us and empowering us to obey that leading. Why would we ever think we needed to find a road map for life when the One who is steering it is the God who has called us to Himself? So Paul, who recognizes the gift that the Holy Spirit is to each believer, draws the attention of the Galatian Gentile Christians back to the Spirit. "You started your Christian lives in the Spirit ... and now you're going to get the rest of the way in your own strength? Seriously? With a little jump start from the Spirit you think you can achieve perfection simply by your own effort!" No wonder Paul is so frustrated with these people.

Then he takes it up even a notch higher: "You have suffered so much for the Good News. Surely it was not in vain, was it? Are you now going to just throw it all away?" He's making every effort to convince the Galatians that this is a serious mistake they're making, with hugely damaging consequences. He talks about their journey into faith as possibly being "in vain" and asks them if they're intending to "throw away" this grace that God has shown them.

There are times in all of our lives when we don't really think through the consequences of our actions. We may, like the Galatians, have fought hard for some-thing, sacrificed so that we could move forward in an area of our lives, only to throw it away because of some impulsive decision, or because of the pressure others put on us to move in a different direction. Only some time later do we feel the regrets that our actions cause us, the sense of loss at what we've given up for the little that we gained. What regrets

the Galatians will experience, both in the short term and the long term, and Paul is hammering it home.

He repeats the question about their experience of both the law and the Spirit in verse 5:

I ask you again, does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law of Moses? Of course not! It is because you believe the message you heard about Messiah.

And now, in verse 6, he draws Abraham's faith into the discussion - which he also does at length in Romans 4. Here, it's concise and to the point. He quotes Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, so God declared him righteous because of his faith." This is a new point in Paul's argument against the agitators, this teaching from way back in Genesis about Abraham, the man of faith, who was counted righteous by God because of it. And Paul adds this explanatory note to that quotation: "The real children of Abraham, then, are all those who put their faith in God." This would have been shocking to the Jewish believers - their whole sense of identity came from being physically descended from Abraham. They were the children of Israel and Israel was Abraham's grandson. They saw themselves as the inheritors of God's promises to Abraham and to the Israelites as the descendants of the Patriarchs.

But even John the Baptist wasn't too impressed with the claim of the Jews to be God's people because they were descended from Abraham. In Matthew 3:9 he confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees with these words:

Don't just say, "We're safe - we're the descendants of Abraham." That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham.

And, in John 8, in the same passage where He also described the character of the devil - a liar and murderer - Jesus confronted the religiosity of the Jews with this stinger:

If you were children of Abraham, you would follow His good example. (v.39)

Then He went on to describe how they were actually imitating the actions of the devil.

Digging deeper, Paul notes that God's promises to Abraham included the Gentiles from the beginning, when God first promised to bless Abraham in Genesis 12: "All nations will be blessed through you." (12:3) That promise, to bring blessing to the nations through Abraham, is repeated in Genesis 18:18 and 22:18. Remember what I said in another message about things that are repeated three times - we're supposed to pay attention and recognize that these are important sayings that we should pay special attention to.

Notice, also, how Paul frames this promise that God had made to Abraham. Before he cites it, he says, "the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would accept the Gentiles, too, on the basis of their faith." And then, right after he quotes the promise made to Abraham, he writes, "And so it is: All who put their faith in Messiah share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith." (Gal. 1:9)

This is clearly Paul's attempt to reorient the thinking of the Galatians about what it means to be a descendant of Abraham. They are thinking Mosaic law, which came about 600 years later, and the physical boundary markers that identified a person as being Jewish - circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, avoiding unclean foods, restrictions on who you eat with and those kinds of things. Paul is saying, "No, those aren't the important things you get from being Abraham's seed. The important thing that gets passed down is the spiritual life that set Abraham apart from all his contemporaries. He wasn't set apart because he had better bloodlines or was more observant of a law that didn't even exist yet. He was set apart because of his faith; he trusted God, and people who trust God are his true descendants.

So, let's summarize the key points that Paul is making in this part of his defense of his gospel, and highlight the ones that are new.

1. You Galatians used to understand perfectly the significance of Jesus' death on the cross.
2. You've forgotten that the Holy Spirit was given when you believed, not because you were good. This is the first mention of the Spirit in this letter.
3. You're throwing away the benefits that God in His mercy has bestowed on you. That's new, although in 1:6 Paul had said that they were turning away from God, which is similar.
4. Abraham's true children are not his physical descendants, but those who, like him, trust God completely. This is the first mention of Abraham and his legacy of faith in this letter.
5. The book of Genesis repeatedly points ahead to the coming of Messiah as the opening of the door to the Gentiles, the nations, to be accepted by God through faith in Messiah.

Paul continues to build his argument, to undermine the rationale of the agitators and to relieve the pressure that the Galatian believers were under. But before we leave this week's study, we need to think about what it all means for us, all these centuries later than the time when the early church was sorting out these key issues of our faith. How do Paul's corrections speak to us and our concerns?

1. The central thing I think Paul is telling us is that our whole lives must now be based on what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. We can't dip back into, or let our attention focus on, the failures of the past or the weaknesses of the present. The agitators and the Galatian believers who were being influenced by them were looking back, finding security in "the way things had always been", but their call was to find security in the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Messiah who had given His life for them, and in the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, who would speak the counsel of their Lord to them. It could never be "the way things had always been" without abandoning Jesus. He was now to be at the very centre of their lives and that's our primary calling, too - put Jesus at the centre.
2. Second application: sometimes I get asked about whether or not Christians are expected to do this or follow that requirement of the Old Testament law. Are we

supposed to worship on Saturdays or avoid certain foods, like pork? We see in this passage how God has moved from the physical seed of Abraham to the spiritual seed, from being born into God's family to being born again into God's family of faith. I think that's true of the idea of warfare that we see so much of in the Hebrew Scriptures - it's to be replaced by spiritual warfare, by doing battle with spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. We need to contend, not in physical violence, but in prayer and fasting and sacrifice. As you think about applying the Hebrew Scriptures to our lives, think about the spiritual applications - they will often be more relevant.

3. Finally for today - think about God's plan, that it includes nations of people who were at one time far from Him (maybe still are). Our mission is not to decide who might or might not be open to the Good News, but to share it wherever we can. There is greater openness to the Gospel today than I have seen in years. The Spirit is moving. Be a witness to the truth and then witness His love and power in action in people's lives.