

You never leave it behind Gal 3:1-14

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Telling stories from the past is usually done with a point.

You know, if your parents tell you

about how they used to take you to visit the grandparents,

the point is not to remind you of what a lovely time we all had.

The point is that you ought to be taking your children to visit us!

For most of the first two chapters of Galatians,

Paul has been telling stories from the past.

And they are stories with a point.

He's reminded them of his own conversions and call to be an apostle.

The point: his gospel was give to him directly from God;

his call to preach that gospel to others also came directly from God.

He's reminded them that when he went to Jerusalem,

the other apostles received him and his gospel warmly.

The point: there is no dispute in the church about the gospel,

Peter and Paul are on the same page.

He's also reminded them about when there was a dispute.

It was not a dispute about doctrine, it was about practice.

Pater had agreed with Paul

that salvation was by faith not keeping the Law.

But on one occasion he didn't live in line with that,

choosing to isolate himself from Gentile believers.

Paul had called him out on that.

Because it's really important we don't just say we are united,

we act like we are united.

That the gospel affects our lives.

Well the stories are over now.

And Paul wants to address the Galatians about their own situation.

And no prizes for guessing that he told these stories with a purpose.

The Galatians had come under pressure to retreat from the gospel.

They had come under pressure

to add Jewish ceremonial law to the gospel.

So Paul is going to try to steer them back onto the straight and narrow.  
Of course he does this because he loves them.  
He's not a control freak trying to control their lives.  
He's not a power hungry empire builder  
trying to keep his label on a church wanting to go in its own direction.  
He's a loving pastor,  
who knows that to stray from the gospel means death for the church.

And so he addresses the situation of the Galatians.

3:1

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?

Before your very eyes

Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified."

Paul is saying that it's like an enchanter

has come and put a spell on them.

The enchanter has made them forget what was once so clear to them.

But what has been forgotten?

Clearly the Galatians haven't forgotten that Jesus was in fact crucified.

It would be hard to forget that, wouldn't it?

What they have forgotten is the significance of Jesus' cross.

The cross of Jesus means that we are free from the OT Law.

It's still our Scripture but it doesn't govern our behaviour.

A dear friend who is not a Christian

was trying to pour scorn on my Christian faith on FB this week.

She was talking about how she doesn't need to go

and buy some doves in the sanitary aisle in Coles,

so she can sacrifice them

to cleanse herself from the ritual impurity of menstruation.

But that's exactly right.

She doesn't have to.

And none of us have to come under any of the burdensome ritual laws.

Why?

Because Christ has been crucified.

So when people came to the church in Galatia

and told them they needed to come under the Law,

they should have just said,  
"No. Christ has been crucified.  
We don't need to do any of that  
because Christ died to free us from the Law."

Paul follows up with a question about their Christian experience.

3:2

"I would like to learn just one thing from you:  
Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law,  
or by believing what you heard?"

Where did the Spirit come from?

He's been talking about salvation  
and how we are saved by faith.

Why does he suddenly jump to the Holy Spirit?

Because having the Holy Spirit is a sign that you are a Christian.

If you don't have the Holy Spirit,  
you are not a Christian.

The Holy Spirit is given to every person who is genuinely converted.

And there was no question in the mind of the Galatian Christians,  
that they had experienced the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Maybe they had seen the Spirit's work in granting them love, joy, peace,  
patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self control.

Maybe they had seen some of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit  
at work in their church.

Maybe they had seen the Spirit's power to restore broken relationships.

Whatever it was that they had seen,

they were in no doubt that the Holy Spirit was at work in their church.

So here's Paul's question.

When they saw the Spirit at work,

was it a result of their faith or their obeying the Jewish Law?

It's a rhetorical question, right?

God is active amongst his church

because we have put our faith in Jesus.

And so Paul really drives the point home 3:3,

"Are you so foolish?

after beginning by means of the Spirit,  
are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?"

My car has worked nicely running on petrol from the day I bought it,  
but I think milk tastes better than petrol,  
so I've decided to give my car some milk in the fuel tank.

How's that going to work for me?

God gives the Spirit to those who put their faith in Jesus.

We live the Christian life by faith in Jesus.

If we decide to live the Christian life by some other way,  
that is going to be about as successful  
as putting milk in your petrol tank.

Hint - this is an illustration of failure.

Don't try it out!

What does it all mean for us?

It means that we grow as a Christian in the same way we are saved.

We grow by applying the gospel to our lives.

All of us have areas of our lives

where we would like to be more like Christ.

I'd like to be more patient.

Patience has always been an issue for me.

Maybe you would like to cast off anxiety  
and be able to rest in confident trust of God  
through the difficulties of life.

Maybe you find yourself to be a bit self absorbed,  
you would like to grow in caring about the needs of others.

There are plenty of ways that all of us could grow.

How are we going to do that?

Here are two contrasting options:

1. You've got to try harder and beat yourself up about your failures.
2. You need to apply the gospel to yourself.

So let's suppose I was impatient again.

How should I pray about that?

Option number 1 would be:

"O Lord. I've stuffed up again.

I keep getting impatient with people.

I promise that I will try harder.

Please help me. Amen."

Option number two would be

"O Lord. I've been impatient again.

It's almost like I believe

that having things done according to my schedule will make life good.

Help me to realise that it's Jesus dying for me that makes life good.

Amen."

Can you see that option number one

allows Jesus' death to be the cause of my salvation,

but thinks that I will grow in godliness by human effort?

Whereas option number 2 recognises

that Jesus' death provides the forgiveness of my sins

and Jesus' death provides my ongoing Christian growth.

Listen to 3:3 again -

"Are you so foolish?

after beginning by means of the Spirit,

are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?"

We must let the gospel shape our Christian living

as well as providing our forgiveness.

So Paul has shown the Galatian Christians from their own experience that they need to hold firm to the gospel.

The next thing he shows them is that what he is saying about faith is true to the absolute heart of Judaism.

Who is the father of Judaism?

Surely it's Abraham.

It's Abraham who was called out to the land of Ur

to come to the land of Canaan

and be the Father of God's chosen people.

So if it's true that Abraham relied on faith not good works,

then that absolutely seals it.

3:6 is a quote from Gen 15.

So also Abraham "believed God,  
and it was credited to him as righteousness."

What actually happened?

God took Abraham on a bit of a walk outside at night.

God pointed out the stars.

There are lots of them.

And God told Abraham

that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars.

And Abraham believed what God told him.

Now that was no mean feat.

Abraham was an old man, somewhere between 75 and 100 years old.

He had no children.

And God told him he would have descendents like the stars in the sky.

But Abraham believed God's promise to him.

Now there are two observations I want to make about that.

1. Abraham believed God.

Sometimes Christians say, 'believe in God and you will be saved'.

But it doesn't say, "Abraham believed in God.'

It says, "Abraham believed God."

There's a difference.

To believe in God, means to believe that God exists.

To believe God,

means to listen to the promises that God makes you and trust them.

I understand the temptation

that would make us want to think folk who believe in God are OK.

We live in a time and place

where people are turning away from belief in God,

even to claim that much is required for salvation can seem exclusive.

Jesus called it a narrow road for a reason.

It's because few find it.

To be saved you have to believe God.

And that means to listen to the promises he makes to you

and rely on those promises for your salvation.

It's about a whole life given over to following Jesus.  
It's a whole lot more than just believing in God.  
Abraham believed God.

Second observation.

2. God credited to him as righteousness.

What does it mean to be righteous?

It means that you are right in God's sight.

You've done nothing wrong.

Was Abraham righteous?

Hardly.

A couple of chapters before

God credited Abraham's faith as righteousness,

Abraham through cowardice had passed his wife Sarah off

as his sister to the Egyptian King

causing the Egyptian King and Sarah to fall into sexual immorality.

Abraham failed on numerous occasions.

He was no more righteousness than the next person.

But God credited his faith as if it were righteousness.

Was Abraham's faith a good work

that made him acceptable in God's sight?

No it wasn't.

That would just be replacing one system of good works -

the Jewish Law -

with another system of good works -

faith.

Faith is not a good work that earns us merit in God's sight.

Instead faith is treated by God as if it were righteousness.

It's not righteousness.

But God choose to provide forgiveness

for those who put their trust in his promises.

We haven't earned it.

We don't deserve it.

But God justifies us anyway.

It's a bit like this.

In the next school holidays,  
I'm taking Cherida and our three youngest children  
on quite a fancy holiday.

It's through the generosity of friend.

We've done nothing to earn it.

But in order to be able to go,  
we do actually have to believe Tony will make it happen.

Now he's close to 80 years old,  
and organising yachts on the other side of the world  
is quite an undertaking.

So we could laugh off his promises,

"Nah Tony. You can't do that."

But if we did,

then we wouldn't get a holiday.

On the other hand we could trust his promises.

"OK Tony, we believe you can do this."

And if we trust his promises,

then we may very well get a holiday.

But have we earned the holiday by trusting in his promises?

Not at all.

It's still a generous gift that we've done nothing to deserve.

It's very important that we don't start thinking about faith  
as a good work that earns our salvation.

You see the devil is an evil schemer  
who delights to spoil everything good.

If he can't manage to take your salvation away,  
what he would really love to do,

is turn you into a proud and arrogant Christian,  
who is a great turn off to others.

Then even if the devil can't stop you going to heaven,  
he can stop some other people.

How might he manage to do that?

By convincing you that you've earned your salvation by your faith.

Then you will start to look down on other people who haven't managed to earn their salvation by their faith. And soon your proud self righteous attitude will be a stumbling block to other people becoming Christians. Don't let your pride and self righteousness be a stumbling block to others.

This is a particular danger if you've been a Christian for a while. So if that's you, examine how you think of your faith.

Are you actually thinking your faith is a good work that earns your salvation?

'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'

God credits righteousness.

We don't earn it.

Well Paul continues to discuss the example of Abraham and how Abraham shows us that the only way to be saved is by faith, that relying on the law puts you under a curse.

And there's one final verse I want to comment on in his discussion.

3:13

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us,

for it is written:

cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole."

Trying to earn your salvation by obeying the Law puts you under a curse.

First of all because it can't be done.

If you think you can love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,

and love your neighbour as yourself,

for just one day,

then you are fooling yourself.

Let alone keep all the individual stipulations of the Law.

It's just not possible.

But it's necessary if we want to be right in God's sight.

We're under a curse because we need to do something that is impossible.

But Christ has redeemed us from that.

He became a curse for us.

He didn't just pay some money,

deal with the problem in some way external to himself.

He took on the problem of our sin

and he took the sin upon himself.

When God the Father looked on Jesus on the cross,

he was saying,

'I love my Son and how he's sacrificially serving humanity.'

But he was saying something else too.

'My Son is foul.

He is polluted by the sin of the world.

I can have nothing to do with him right now.

He's under a curse.'

On the cross, Jesus became a stench in the Father's nostrils.

Praise God he was raised again.

Praise God the Father and the Son now live in love and perfect unity.

But let's never forget what it cost Jesus to save us.

He became a curse for us.

That's how much he loves us.

1. That our Christian life continues as it begins - by faith

2. That we would believe God

and recognise righteousness is not earned by faith.

3. That we would always remember

that Christ became a curse for us and be filled with love for him.