

April 6, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Begin – and End – with the Gospel

Galatians 3:1 – 5

As we bite into chapter 3, I want to remind you of what we have learned from the first two chapters of Galatians. First, there were **false teachers who were distorting the gospel of grace** by preaching a grace-plus gospel and causing many in the Galatian churches to stumble – Paul said they were '*...deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ*' Galatians 1:6 This is an issue which has plagued the church for 2000 years and we are still dealing with these false teachers.

Secondly, we found that these guys were **defaming Paul and discrediting the message** by calling his apostleship and message into question. They maintained that he got his gospel second-hand and that the real authority were those apostles in Jerusalem. So Paul spends a bit of time disabusing the Galatians of the notion that he was preaching a sort of lesser gospel by giving his testimony that his gospel came directly by revelation from Jesus Christ and not from any man. '*For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*' Galatians 1:12-13

These false teachers were also sowing disunity, and Paul effectively dealt with the wedge these guys were trying to drive between those apostles in Jerusalem and himself by showing how fundamentally united their theology and teaching really was. '*...and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*' Galatians 2: 9

Throughout these first two chapters we begin to understand the issues Paul was dealing with in regards to these false teachers of a distorted gospel. These guys came along after Paul had established churches all over Asia Minor, not only in the province of Galatia, but many of the other Roman provinces as well. They were preaching that **we are saved by grace and by keeping the law – grace plus works**. These guys preached circumcision and dietary restrictions and observance of particular days and feasts of the Jewish calendar as necessary instruments of salvation. They did not think it sufficient to trust in Christ alone for righteousness. They evidently said that if you rely on faith alone you become a Gentile sinner and make Christ the agent of sin. '*But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!*' Galatians 2:17 So they taught that trusting in Christ must be coupled with 'works of the law.

But Paul says that if you buy into this distorted gospel – **grace plus works** – you nullify grace and you promote a different gospel – a gospel that cannot save you, but rather condemns you. There are many people who are trying to earn their way to heaven – Christians and non-Christians. Buddhism requires you to earn merit by following an eight-fold path to enlightenment– Islam demands that you fulfill the duties required by its five pillars – Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions – Judaism requires you to fulfill the Law of Moses, and so on. Every religion but Christianity demands that you do something to earn your salvation. There is something in us because of the fall and sin that says 'If we work hard enough – we can do it.'

My wife's grandfather, George – who was not a Buddhist, or a Muslim, or a Hindu – but would describe himself as a Christian – was fully convinced that he was good enough to go to heaven. And he got very irate when the husband of one of his granddaughters suggested that all his good works were filthy rags in the sight of God and wouldn't get him into heaven. In fact he brooded over that for years. And nearly every time Kim and I visited him, he'd bring up this subject. Until one day, by God's grace, his eyes were opened to the truth of the gospel and he realized he'd never earn his way to heaven and bowed his head and received the grace of God into his heart. That is the gospel – the good news – that Christ came to deliver us from the bondage of sin and the sentence of death and the eternity of hell into the freedom of righteousness and eternal joy and satisfaction in Him. **And this is the message for which Paul was contending with the Galatians – who had begun by the gospel of grace – but were being sidetracked by the gospel of grace plus works.**

1 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

Paul doesn't pull any punches here – he calls them 'foolish' – and not just once – he says it again in verse 3. The Phillips translation puts it this way, 'You dear idiots...' Something had happened to cause these believers to do something stupid. Paul says they were bewitched – the word means to cast a spell on someone. It was as if they had been hypnotized by someone into believing a lie. The message Paul brought to them had been *"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."* Galatians 2:20 And now it was as if they were dismissing the grace of the cross and embracing the works of the law.

The message of the cross is ***'It is no longer I'***. It is the death of the pride of man that says *'I can do it.'* We hear that cry echoed in the Old Testament when Moses put before the people all that the Lord had commanded them to do and they answered, *'All that the Lord has spoken we will do!'* Exodus 19:8 And they found that they couldn't, and wouldn't do any of it. That is why the message of the cross-centered gospel is so crucial – it puts to death the notion that we can do anything on our own to merit salvation or live righteously before God. The cross of Christ comes into our lives and puts us to death so that we might live.

It was astonishing to Paul that anyone who had received the message of Christ crucified for our sins could get caught up in a legalistic approach. Christ's death on the cross shows how utterly foolish it is to depend on works to save us – and also shows how utterly sufficient was His sacrifice for our sins. The death of Christ is the death of pride – but also the hope of righteousness. The cross kills the independent, prideful, self-sufficient, rebellious 'I' – and brings to life the Christ-reliant, faith-living 'I' that does not depend on itself for anything.

The tone of this section is so gently sarcastic: *2 This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? 5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?*

These rhetorical statements serve to bring out some very important points by raising some crucial questions. I think the questions are: ***What is the relationship between becoming a Christian and receiving the Spirit? How do you receive the Spirit? How do we continue to live the Christian life? What does Paul mean by the flesh? What is the relationship between suffering and the Christian life?***

First of all, ***what is the relationship between becoming a Christian and receiving the Spirit?*** Paul asks the Galatians: *did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?* The assumption here is that all who have entered into relationship with Christ have also entered into a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Those who are Christians are those who have received the Spirit. *'However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.'* Romans 8:9 Some would teach that receiving the Holy Spirit is a further work of grace in the Christian's life – but Paul makes it clear that to receive Christ is to receive the Holy Spirit. When we come to Christ – we get all of Christ. Apprehending all of who He is will take some time however.

The second question raised here is ***how do you receive the Spirit?*** This is so important because Paul makes the clear distinction between receiving the Spirit – i.e. being born again – by adhering to the law or by receiving Him by means of faith. In other words, was there some act of contrition, was there some moral exercise, was there some ritual by which the Holy Spirit was imparted to you and you were born again, or was it by some other agency? And the clear answer is that we received the Spirit by means of faith. *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;* Ephesians 2:8 It is incredibly important to understand that His grace came down to us and ignited faith to believe in Him in our hearts and we were saved. And Paul is reminding the Galatians that that is how their new life began.

And the clear implication is that if that is how the Christian life begins – then that is how the Christian life is continued. Here Paul answers the question, ***how do we continue to live the Christian life?*** *3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?* In other words, if you couldn't clean up your act to save yourself in the first place – how do you expect to be sanctified in your life by your own efforts now? The word ***'perfected'*** here means ***to complete, or finish*** and speaks to the full accomplishing of the work of Christ in the Christian till he is taken up to glory. And if we can't even begin the work in the first place, why in the world would we think we ever could complete it?

But this is just what we do. We received salvation because God worked for us – now we have this sinful logic that says we must work for God – as though He needed our help. We leave the cross and the place of grace and faith, and strike out on our own. We view the cross as just the starting point – instead of the beginning and end and everything in between. ***It is the beginning of a new life free from the tyranny of sin and the prospect of eternal loss – and it is the end of our prideful independence and self-sufficiency – and it is the means through which we are perfected, finished, completed in Christ.***

This is clear from Paul's word in verse 5: ***5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?*** The word 'provides' here comes from the Greek word **choregos**, that described work of the guy who provided for all the needs of a theater group – their food, lodging, clothing, props, costumes, and so on. Very often the **choregos** would spend a fortune to produce the play that won the prize. The word meant to supply lavishly – to provide for totally. And here the word adds the superlative, **epi, epichoregeo** which means over and above. So what Paul is saying here is that the Christian life is one in which God who saved you in the beginning – is providing you with an overabundance of the Spirit to sanctify you in every area of your life – spirit, soul and body. In other words, Christ is enough – you cannot help yourself by some magic incantation or ceremony or pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps – it is God in the beginning, and God at the end, and God all the way through.

Which is why we lift high the cross. The reason the cross of Christ is so vital to our lives as Christians is because of what the Bible calls the flesh. Paul makes his point by contrasts, and in verse 2 the contrast he makes is between the works of the Law and hearing by faith. ***Did you receive salvation by doing something or by hearing something? And the answer is we heard something of the word of God that generated faith in our hearts to believe in Jesus and we responded to that word and we received salvation. Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.*** Romans 10:17

The contrast he makes in verse 3 is between beginning by the Spirit and trying to be completed by the flesh. ***Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? So naturally we need to know what Paul means by the flesh.*** And the short answer is that the flesh here is not talking about our bodies but about **the sinful 'me'**. Paul uses the phrase 'the old man' in contrast to the 'new man' in Ephesians 4 to talk about the flesh. ***This flesh is that old sinful nature that cherishes its independence and self-reliance and is hostile to God.*** Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans that ***'...the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*** Romans 8:7-8 Clearly something needed to be done. If the flesh is hostile to God and does not subject itself to His commands, and could not even if it wanted to, and has no possibility of pleasing God – steps had to be taken. ***And God did. He sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and crucified that flesh on the cross so that we might live to God and not for ourselves.***

Finally, we come to the question of **what is the relationship between suffering and the Christian life?** Paul says, ***Did you suffer so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain?*** C. S. Lewis describes the role of suffering in the life of the believer as **“soul-making.” It is the shaping of the Christian with the hammer and chisel of adversity.** He said **“God whispers to us in our pleasures; speaks in our consciences; but shouts in our pains.”** And Paul is telling the Galatians ***'If you make self-effort the means of your salvation then your suffering for the sake of Christ means nothing. Because if you are doing everything right – then suffering should not be part of your life.'*** And there are those who preach that very thing. ***But the fact is that suffering comes into a believers life to wean him away from the sinful pleasures of this life to the soul-satisfying joys of the next by introducing him to the cross.*** Joni Erickson-Tada puts it like this: ***'Suffering is the sheepdog that drives me to the cross.'*** That is why only Christians can boast in their afflictions and glory in their weaknesses.

And so we end where we began – at the foot of the cross. It is a journey of a lifetime with one station along the way – the cross of Christ. This is where we lay our burden of sin down – and it is also where we live – it is where we begin life with God and it is where everything comes to an end. We begin – and end – with the gospel.

*Our gracious God and wonderful Savior,
Thank You for the gospel of grace that came to us quite apart from anything we earned or deserved. Praise to You, Lamb of God for opening this way of life and praise to You Holy Spirit for applying this way to our hearts. O Lord, impress this gospel on our souls until its power and truth pervades every cell of our being. Let it be heard, acknowledged, confessed and felt. Bring us to the cross to claim glory from its shame and strip us of every pretense of righteousness by our own hand. Save us from ourselves, from the tyranny and deceit of sin, from the treachery of our perverse nature, from continual denial of the charges against us, from a life of constant rebellion against You, from wrong principles, views and ends, from thoughts and affections, desires and pursuits that are alienated from You, O gracious Lord. Draw us to Yourself with unbreakable bonds that nothing in heaven and on earth may ever draw us away from You. Satisfy us with Yourself and make us glad in God so that we might make others glad in You as well, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus our Savior, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***