

## Back to Life by Faith

There's something amazing about Paul in his ability to take us immediately right to the very essence of what it means to be Christian. And perhaps the most dangerous thing we could do when dealing with such a brilliant mind as Paul is to try and reduce his message to one short slogan. But if we dared to do so, might be this one : *We are justified by faith*. That is an idea that changed the world. Changed Paul's world. Changed the world throughout history. Perhaps this is why, five hundred years ago, justification by faith made such a deep impact on Martin Luther. The young monk was brought to the brink of despair by the fear he would in the end be rejected by God, he finally discovers by reading Paul's letter to the Galatians this life giving truth: we are justified by faith. And so gripping was his discovery he said this:

*"This is the truth of the Gospel. It is also the principle article of all Christian doctrine, wherein all knowledge of godliness consists. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually."*

I now to have the awesome privilege of beating it into *your head*. For this word justification is so crucial that unless one understands it, one has simply not understood Christianity. We are "justified by faith". That means we are brought into acceptance with our God not by any *work we have done, do or will do*, but solely through *God's work in Christ*, specifically on the cross.

At the linguistic level, to be justified can, in the language of the law court, simply mean the opposite of being "condemned". To be justified is to be cleared of all charges— declared innocent by the judge, or righteous. But in the *Bible* justification refers to *God's act of setting right what is wrong* with the sinner, not only pardoning and forgiving, but from that moment on reckoning that person righteous.

This is such an important idea to lay hold of, because if one takes a different view, that we must start from scratch somewhere within ourselves and try to cobble together our own moral reform, life will unfold in very different direction than it would if one believes that salvation is a gift from God from start to finish, a work *God* initiates and *God* works into one's life, and *God* will bring to completion.

So in Galatians, Paul is about to give the *classic summary* of his most important, core teaching: though dead in sin, we are brought back to life by faith. But to understand this, we must first note two important details of historical context. First:

### **The common life in the newborn Christian church**

The Christian faith radically changed individuals and whole communities. It brought traditional enemies and culturally clashing peoples all to the same table. But despite the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the church, this didn't go as smoothly as one would wish. Paul, in fact has just related in *Gal 2:11-14* a very disturbing argument he once had with Peter. The situation, very briefly, is this: Peter at some point left the solidly Jewish church in Jerusalem and came to minister in the mixed church at Antioch. No longer in a purely Jewish church, Peter's lifestyle changes. He is regularly entering into the non-kosher situations: he is eating with Gentiles at a common table – *that is*, until messengers from Jerusalem arrive who remind Peter that there are two parallel tracks of mission, one to Jews, one to Gentiles, and that Peter had better stick to the one he was appointed to. So from then on Peter refrains from eating with Gentiles.

This made Paul explosively angry because he saw in Peter's behaviour an implication that the Gospel requires *Gentile* Christians to begin to live like Jews. Peter's withdrawal from the

common table was seen by Paul as a serious denial of Gospel truth. For at this early, vulnerable stage in the life of the church, even in Antioch where Gentiles are fully embraced as Christian equals by Jewish believers, *the church is still a predominantly Jewish phenomenon*. So for someone as prominent and influential as Peter to behave like this, was seen by Paul as the act of a powerful majority seeking to compel a weaker minority towards behaviours that are totally irrelevant to living for Jesus Christ in the world.

But what's worse, Peter's behaviour implied that Torah obedience as defined by Judaism rather than the atoning blood of Jesus Christ was God's means of salvation.

So why does Paul relate this painful incident to the Galatians? Because *now*, in the Galatian churches there are these Jewish-Christian teachers roving about and teaching obedience to Torah to the Gentiles and thereby having the same destructive effect as Peter had in Antioch. They are jeopardizing the message of justification *by faith alone*.

So the first historical detail is the battle to keep a common table for the Christians. The second detail of context that is so crucial to understanding, not only Galatians, but all of Paul's writing, is something that is, frankly, widely misunderstood by modern Christianity. That is . .

### **A Lesson in Kosher Cooking**

The other night I was watching the Food Channel, and on a show called Dinner Impossible this chef was given the challenge of cooking a full Passover meal for a synagogue of 100 people, *but one thing*: this chef was not Jewish. He and *never* cooked a kosher meal before. So he was given a crash course by the rabbi before he went off to the grocery store. As it turns out, it's not as hard to cook kosher as one might think because packaged food is marked with a symbol which tells the purchaser that the product is kosher. So this chef had to look for this symbol showing that the food was not only kosher, but *kosher for Passover*. And before he could bring any of the groceries into the synagogue, the rabbi had to inspect them. The chef had bought some *toasted coconut* which was marked on the package as kosher. But the rabbi pulled it out and said no. It was kosher, but not *kosher for Passover*, so, normally it would be fine, but during Passover, it couldn't even be allowed into the building.

Now, I've studied the Bible quite carefully for many years, but I have never once found as much mention of toasted coconut, let alone what to do with it during Passover. But this highlights how profound the difference is between how the Jew sees things and how I as a Christian see things. But it also points to

### **The way Jews understand obedience to Torah**

Over the centuries the popular teaching of church has tended to reduce the complexity of Paul's thought down to one very simple contrast: faith vs works. We typically say there are only two possible ways of salvation: one is salvation by works, the other is salvation by faith. And according to this simple formula, no one ever has, or will ever, gain acceptance with God by doing the works of the Law, therefore, we must conclude, we all are saved by faith – that is by trusting in Jesus Christ and his dying on the cross for our sins.

Now this tidy formula might be helpful to us evangelistically in helping people – especially good religious people – to see their need for salvation, but then *what then what to do with the Law after one becomes a Christian?* Indeed one early heretic, a man named Marcion taught Christians should just *reject* the Old Testament entirely, throw it out! because Christians, he said, are no longer “under the Law.” So we should just forget about the Old Testament entirely,

and just use the New.

That's not what Paul taught.

To understand Paul's thinking *correctly*, we must keep in mind that Jews, to this very day, understand that right from the beginning there were in fact *two Torahs* given to Israel by God – one *written*, the other *oral*. Moses not only received the *written* commandments from the LORD at Mt Sinai, but he also was given the ability to *hold forth teachings for his people*. So *whatever came from Moses' mouth* was, of equal authority to the written Torah. So in Judaism, the written Torah always has operated alongside the *traditions* past on rabbi to rabbi all the way from Moses. But as new situations are encountered, the Jewish community believes new divine instruction comes. That's how the Jewish community can determine that this bottle of Coke is *kosher for Passover*. Now, no one came to Moses on the eve of the Exodus and asked "By the way, is it OK to a Coke with Lamb and the unleavened bread and bitter herbs?"

And Moses said, "Yeah, I guess so."

No. In the Jewish community there always dispute and disagreement, but in the Jewish community *tradition* is essential to what it means to "follow Torah."

Now, we in the Evangelical church are very strong on the authority of *Scripture alone* and are very *suspicious* of religious tradition and men-made creeds. Traditions may be important, we say, but must never to be allowed onto the same footing as Scripture.

Not so with Jews. To the Jew "obedience to Torah" involves much more than simply obeying all 613 commandments found in the Bible. It also involves following the *traditions of the ancestors*. And so by Paul's day, these *traditions* had developed into a fine art especially among the Pharisees. And in Judaism through the centuries, paying heed to traditional practice is a vital part of keeping Torah. For the Jewish world "keeping Torah" means being clear on what one must *do* to be remain *included* in the covenant people.

So when we read Paul the Jew and he speaks about "the works of the Law" he is not referring to just keeping the Ten Commandments or some general moral law common to all humankind, but specifically to the practice of the Jew who is seeking to walk faithfully in the path God has opened for them in Torah. So with Paul, the contrast is NOT primarily between "good works" and "faith". What Paul is driving at in Galatians, and in Romans, and elsewhere, is actually a *calling of his Jewish community to a complete re-interpretation* of Torah in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's why becoming a Christian is such a major step for any Jew, even to this day. So in Galatians 2 he is addressing *Jewish-Christian teachers* and therefore before he can convince them of this radical, complete reinterpretation of Torah he must . . .

### **Seek the common ground**

So he says in verse 15 "we ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners . . . "

A police negotiator approaching a hostage taker will, first off, try and find something in common with hostage taker. "Would you like us to send in a pack of smokes? What's your brand? . . . Player's Light! What a coincidence! That's *my* brand. Look, you and I have something in common."

Paul approaches the people he finds most troubling by binding himself to them in a friendly way. "You and I," he says, "we're Jews, we're *very* special people. . ." He doesn't push them away as much as he disagrees with them. No. He says, "you and I we're not like those Gentile sinners. . . Really, Paul? Are Jews really "by nature" different from Gentiles. Does Paul

really intend to maintain a distinction between the Jew and the “Gentile sinners”? Well, no. But let me tell you a secret about Paul: he’s a bit of a *con man*. And here, he’s simply baiting the trap. But it’s not a harmful trap. It’s a love trap. He wants to trap them *live* and bring them into vital kingdom living relationship with Jesus.

Because, you see, these Jewish-Christian teachers *are* wonderful people! They committed to integrity and truth. They have made a difficult journey to Galatia win people for Christ. There’s no doubt they believed in the forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. But coming from the Jewish community, they simply assumed that pagan Galatians would have to transfer from their pagan existence into Jewish-style Torah obedience. And to let go of that would not be an easy shift for them to make. So how does he persuade them? Well, after establishing a bit of rapport he invites them to . . .

### **Determine what we know *for sure***

16 “yet *we know* that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

He brings them back to the only standard Christian message. Nothing foreign here, nothing new: every man, every woman – including the Gentiles is justified by faith. He uses the word “justified” not in that legal, courtroom sense of acquittal from a crime, nor in the Jewish temple sense of “ritual purity,” but in the plain common ordinary sense:

*God made right what went wrong.* We’re justified.

But those he addresses can plainly see churches springing up throughout the Gentile world. *God is obviously* making things right in the world *apart from* traditional Jewish observance. How is this *possible*? Justification “is *apart from the Law* through, *the faith of Jesus Christ*”. *God’s* faithfulness was shown us on the cross. There are not two different ways to be made right with God: one for Jews, the other for Gentiles. It is not by means of something a human being does – observing the law – that God makes any human being right. But by an act of divine faithfulness – Jesus’ faithfulness. God’s act in Christ makes us right with God. Therefore we place our trust in Christ in order that our trust might be where God intended it to be: in the faithful death of Jesus on the cross: that’s how God made things right.

*What good news that is for the hopeless sinner!* God sets things right without laying down any prior requirement for us. God’s sets things right not as a *response* to *our* faith. Nor is it a response to human observance of the Law. In fact, the one thing we know for sure about the Gospel is that it is *not a response* at all. *God* makes the first move. *We* are the ones who respond.

Jesus’ faithful death does have a tremendous power to draw from us deep faithful trust and obedient living. For who can really grasp the truth of what happened on the cross, the undeserved love shown to us on the cross, and just walk on by and remain unchanged by it?

But what Paul must do is . . .

### **Deal with the false perception of others**

17 But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

In order to get to bottom of the problem in Galatia, Paul must overcome how he *perceived* by these Jewish-Christian teachers. They are just as committed to Jesus Christ as Paul. But remember, they have from birth understood obeying God in terms of certain sacred rituals

and practices that Paul himself knows so well. So they see a guy like Paul becoming indistinguishable from the Gentiles he is living among and preaching to. And they perceive him as one who is turning Christ, their precious saviour into one who condones and even enables sin.

But didn't Jesus do exactly what Paul is now doing? Didn't Jesus himself radically redefine the Sabbath and the food laws and who one should touch or not touch? Did he not die on a cross as condemned criminal, one who, according to Jewish custom was considered *unclean*?

And so it is with us who follow him. We too will be seen by some as defiling ourselves. But to embody God's love in the Gospel will always require that we not be afraid of how others might perceive us. For Paul, there is no turning back. He puts it to his critics this way: If I had gone in the direction you are advocating, returning to Jewish tradition. . .

### **Where would I be now?**

18 But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I *am* a transgressor.”

Think back on that battle Paul had in the Antioch church. What would have happened if Paul had followed Peter in reintroducing food laws which they had both earlier “torn down”? What would have happened if that barrier had been rebuilt?

Can you imagine an old barn in a field. With every windstorm it's rotten timbers creak and a few more boards fly off. The roof leaks and the building inspector has condemned the place – it's a danger even to be *in* that old barn it could collapse any moment. Now, what would you say if some fly-by-night building contractors came around and said to the little old farm couple who own the barn – we can rebuild your barn – we can make it as good as new – all for one low down-payment and a few easy monthly installments. Wouldn't it be great to leave that barn for the grand-kids – they'll thank you for it!”

Well we would call those people *despicable rip-off artists*, wouldn't we? Trying to rebuild what has already been condemned. Well, that's what would have happened if Paul had gone along with Peter.

The radical new view of the Law is there is no longer any barrier of distinction between Jew and Gentile. And to attempt to re-erect that barrier would show Paul up to be a transgressor – a rip-off artist. That would go against everything it means to be *justified by faith*.

No, the Gospel brings Paul to a crossroads – two mutually exclusive statements: Either God makes things right through the Law OR God makes things right through Christ's death. Paul has made his choice – to trust in Christ – and from this he can describe to them what it means to . . .

### **Live the exchanged life.**

“it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

I don't understand microwaves. Do you? I can't see them. I just hit the button the thing hums and the microwaves cook the food. And I also have to confess the same bafflement with the workings of the Law in the cross. So please bear with me here as I wrestle with these words of Paul.

He says, “through the law I *died* to the law.” What does that tell me? Well, when Jesus died on the cross, the Law didn't stand idly by, it pronounced a curse on Christ. The Law took up it's own existence, carried out it's own work, took on a life of it's own. And, somehow,

Paul's *participated* in the cross. He was part of that event in which the Law acted against God's Messiah and he *died*. And when Christ died, so did Paul. Why? "So that I might *live to God* . . ." The purpose of Paul being separated from the realm of the Law by dying with Christ is so that he might exist as one who is *alive* in the realm of God.

Put your own name in the place of Paul's. "I have been crucified with Christ. . ."

The Romans carried out this gruesome practice of crucifixion for their own purpose: to instill public respect for the law *as they defined it*: obey Caesar, or you die. But Paul sees the crucifixion as a creation-altering event. It wasn't simply worldly crucifers at work. In 1 Corinthians 2:8 he identifies those who crucified Christ as "the rulers of this age." In essence, Jesus was crucified by *neither* Jewish authorities, *nor* by a Roman governor and his soldiers, but by the dark powers that rule this age. But because it was a cosmic event the cross exhausted sin's curse on creation.

It was the death of the old creation and the birth of the new.

God made right that which was wrong.

### **Trusting God**

21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

For the teachers in Galatia the grace of God was equated with the Torah: God's grace existed in giving us this Law to follow. But where does grace come from for Paul? From the centre of God's power in Christ's faithful death on the cross.

So what does it mean to be justified by faith? It means that I am not in the grip of a punishing Law which can only condemn me and kill me. I am in the loving hands of God. He will warn me to be careful, guide me in right paths. But it will be by the voice of his Spirit, not the hard, cold letters of a law.

Faith is not an option we can choose versus doing good works. When Paul spoke of placing his trust in Christ he was pointing to a deed which set us free. In Christ, God invaded the human realm and fought a battle for the liberation of the human will itself. So when we can truly pray "Thy will be done. . ."

*that* is an incredible victory, for we have been brought back to life. . .

BY FAITH.