

Paul's Awkward Answer: Hope

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 May 2016

Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to be turning in our Bibles now to our reading this evening. You'll find it in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where Rupert is resuming some studies from a little while ago.

If you have one of our visitors' Bibles, that's page 974, I believe. Page 974, and we're reading Galatians 5, the first 12 verses. For freedom, says the apostle, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law.

You're fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

[1 : 17] You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine. The one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?

In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. Amen.

And may God bless to us this, his very direct word. Well, do please find Galatians chapter 5 again. And while you dig it up, we'll have a word of prayer. Our shepherd, good and true is he, who will at last his Israel free.

[2 : 23] Lord Jesus, our good and faithful shepherd, we pray that as we come to your word together now, you would give us what we need to keep walking with you this week.

Teach us how to wait with patience for the day you come to free us from all our sin and sorrow and to live in glory with you. For we ask it through your merit and to the praise of your name.

Amen. Amen. Well, there are certain things that in any sane and rational world just ought to go without saying. And yet we find ourselves hearing them, sometimes even saying them.

No, thank you, darling. Daddy doesn't need ketchup with his porridge this morning. Or the one I hear at least once a month, commuting from the south side, winner of the Sherlock Holmes prize for deduction.

We apologize for the lack of available seating on this train. This is due to a lack of available rolling stock. Well, that clears things up. Perhaps my favorite was the announcement on Chinese local radio after 501 bags of salt vanished from the side of a road in Zhejiang province.

[3 : 40] Road salt is for the road. If used for cooking, the consequences will be unfathomable. Well, I expect so.

Some things just ought to go without saying. And you'd imagine that chapter 5 verse 1 would be one of those things. Paul's just spent chapters 3 and 4 arguing that believers in Jesus Christ are no longer slaves, but sons of the living God.

These Galatian Christians have been freed not only from guilt and shame, but from all that's crushing about human religion. The constant need for validation and acceptance.

The need to look better than others. More holy, more advanced, more intimate with God. Above all, freedom in this letter means the freedom, like Paul, to serve Jesus Christ without the need for any human approval.

And that should be enough to make anyone sing for joy, shouldn't it? Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night.

[4 : 57] Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. I woke. The dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

All of that was what these Galatians had found in Christ. And yet Paul sees the need to open this final section of the letter with chapter 5 verse 1.

For freedom, Christ has set you free. Stand firm, therefore, and don't go back. Never submit again to the rags and the chains of a slave.

Perhaps some of you remember watching those pictures many years ago now of a frail Nelson Mandela as he made that slow, long walk, hand in hand with his wife, from the gates of the prison. It was a glorious day, wasn't it? People were bursting with relief and joy and expectation. But I bet not one person thought it was worth saying on that day, Mr. Mandela, don't turn around and walk back into prison.

[6 : 05] Don't submit yourself to apartheid again. He wouldn't have dreamed of it, would he? And yet not only does Paul think it's worthwhile, but he seems to have a hard time making his case.

Just notice how stark and solemn his tone is. Look, verse 2, in other words, pay attention. I, Paul, say to you, I testify again, verse 3.

It's as if he knows that his Galatian readers just won't believe that things are as serious as he's making out. They think that they're making progress.

He knows that by taking on dead, tokenistic religion, customs, human traditions, some of them are severing themselves from Christ.

So what is it about your heart and my heart and these Galatians hearts that Paul knows will draw us back to the dungeon?

[7 : 06] Why on earth would we ever be attracted to dead, stuffy, legalistic religion? Well, the answer is that like the Galatians, you and I are still living in what we've been calling the awkward age, the overlap between this world and the next.

When Christ burst open the prison gates, he had a much bigger deliverance in mind than simply freeing us from our guilt. His plan was to free us from this whole age of bondage and death and sin. If you remember back to chapter 1, that's how this letter began. Grace to you from the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age.

And it's the very same thought that closes the book. In chapter 6, verse 15, Nothing we do in this age, counts a jot, says Paul, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, only a new creation.

The gospel is about being freed from this whole corrupt age and released into the next. Now that deliverance began, at least in our own experience, on the day Christ's spirit took possession of our hearts.

[8 : 30] We were joined to Jesus and his death on the cross and his new creation life. We were made sons. But the problem is with what comes next.

Because as every one of us in this room knows all too well, we don't feel very delivered yet, do we? In fact, this present evil age seems to be alive and kicking.

Yes, spiritually, we might already belong to Jesus' new kingdom. But if anything's clear over the rest of this letter, is that there's one thing we're not yet freed from.

And that is our battle with our sinful flesh, with our self-centered human natures. Our bodies still have to catch up, don't they, with that spiritual reality.

And that makes life in this age rather awkward for the Christian. We find ourselves asking, why now I'm saved?

[9 : 32] Don't I seem to be growing faster in godliness? What am I doing wrong when it comes to beating sin? Surely it should look a little better than this.

If you've been a Christian more than about five minutes, I'm betting you've asked those questions at some point. The truth is that living as a Christian in this age can be a very, very discouraging thing. Which is why I think the prison cell begins to look so attractive. We're desperate, aren't we, for an easy answer to how the Christian life is meant to work.

And religion seems to provide that answer. So believers in Galatia, at least, started to answer those sorts of questions in two very different ways.

Not surprisingly, some of the Jewish Christians felt that the solution to their sin was to go back to their roots. So having begun by the Spirit, as Paul put it in chapter 3, all these new Galatian converts could now be perfected with a good dose of religion.

[10 : 44] What they really needed now, these young Gentile Christians, or at least so thought some of them, what they really needed was a decisive sign that they were going to commit themselves to holy living.

A sign like circumcision to prove that they were part of the properly faithful group, that they were serious about God's law. And in our own way, I think that's the sort of answer that many of us are tempted to latch onto.

We want something we can do, something that's practical and tangible, to help us feel like we're winning the fight. Perhaps it's the chance to get baptized again and profess our faith in public. Or maybe it's a symbolic change. We'll start setting the alarm a bit earlier for a better quiet time. Or we'll wear a promise ring. Or we'll out ourselves at work as Christians.

It doesn't really matter what it is, does it? So long as it's big and it costs and it makes us feel a little better about ourselves. Well, that was one side of the argument.

[11 : 54] But on the other side lay the Apostle Paul. And he spent chapters three and four of this letter showing that Christians in Galatia needed more Jewish religion about as much as they needed a bullet in the head.

Because although that sort of thing seems so helpful when we're struggling with sin, he knew that religion puts our confidence in all the wrong things.

It puts the gospel itself at stake. At its heart, the difference between these two approaches was one of misplaced hope. The religious answer is to look inside ourselves, to conjure up the determination and the willpower and the strategy to keep going.

In other words, religion places all our hope for defeating our sinful flesh in our own flesh, in human practices and customs and techniques.

And we're not going to do that. We're not going to do that. We're not going to do that. We're not going to do that. But Paul's answer was to wait patiently for Christ to do something for us. He places our hope in the righteousness God has promised us.

[13 : 09] But although that's a real hope, verse 5, it's not one we get delivered on in this age. It's a hope that we have to wait for with gritted teeth right through our Christian life.

Two opposing answers then to our sinful nature that we're given by this letter. One answer is something practical but imprisoning. But Paul's answer, when it comes, is something rather frustrating but freeing.

The patient life of love and trust in the Lord Jesus. So let's look at those two alternative answers then to how we forgiven Christians can live with our weak, selfish natures.

First, let's look at the answer which the troublemakers were pushing in Galatia. Something practical but imprisoning. And that's got to be the attraction of religion, hasn't it?

We long for something tangible and practical. that makes us feel a little better about ourselves. We know that we're not the people we long to be and more restrictions, more rules makes us feel like we're doing something about it.

[14 : 26] It can be so tempting to look for reassurance that we're doing okay by measuring our own performance. But by putting our confidence in circumcision or any stuff we can do, we're in danger of losing our hope altogether.

That's what was happening, wasn't it, in Galatia? They were putting their confidence in a human thing and they lost their hope as a result. They severed themselves, verse 4, from the one true grounds of confidence, the Lord Jesus.

You see, Christian hope is not grounded in anything we can do or touch or achieve here and now. The problem, though, is that all that stuff we can see for ourselves and do for ourselves, it seems so much more solid, doesn't it?

So reassuring. Splash out on some extravagant giving. Sponsor a few chairs, perhaps. Or confess all our sins in public.

Or say some extra prayers at bedtime. And it feels like we've taken a practical step, doesn't it? It's not really the thing that matters. Circumcision itself, Paul says, was neither good nor bad.

[15 : 40] Let me just say that paying for a chair would be an excellent thing to do. I'd better get that in before I'm crucified at the door. It's the reason we do those things, though, that matters, isn't it?

These Galatians used those things to make them feel more spiritually healthy, a little closer to Jesus.

And so Paul knows how hard this is going to be for them to hear. That's why he has to repeat himself so starkly. If you listen to these legalists, if you even begin to think that it's your Christian activity that makes you something, then your hope in Christ's promise will be of no advantage whatsoever.

Begin to place your confidence in your Christian performance. And verse 4, you've fallen away from grace. And that, I think, is as true whether the thing that makes us feel secure is circumcision or how well you've controlled your use of the internet this week.

Either you know that Christ is all your value or he's of no value to you whatsoever. See, do you see what a terribly cruel trick religion can play on us?

It feels like a real answer, doesn't it, to our ongoing struggle. We use it to convince ourselves that we're making progress and growing in godliness. But if we trust it, we actually end up condemning ourselves.

[17:09] That hope is a false hope. The moment we shift it off the future promise of Christ and onto our own performance, God's law blows up in our face.

It's just a reminder of what Paul said already. Treat God's good law that way. Misuse it as a way to keep his favor. And it does become a covenant of works.

If we want to impress our way to God, well, verse 3, we've got to do it properly. We're obligated to keep the whole thing as perfectly as Jesus himself. And what they were doing really was just tokenism, wasn't it?

A few overblown gestures, circumcision, but who were they kidding? That's not a heart which takes God's law seriously, is it? That's not real faith.

That legalizing answer to sin was sheer poison. It sounded practical, but actually it was robbing them of their only real grounds for hope, putting them back in chains.

[18:13] And that's why Paul's language is so strong. He's right to be angry, isn't he? Why stop? Why stop at circumcision? I think that's what he's saying. I wish those troublemakers would let the life slip a little.

I think he's probably comparing their Christianity to paganism again. That's been a running theme in this letter. It wasn't uncommon, you see, for a pagan priest to mutilate his body like that.

And of course, the irony was that under the Old Testament rituals that this circumcision lot cherished, castration would cut you off from God altogether.

And I think Paul's point is that legalism is no different. So why stop at circumcision? Why not go the whole hog, you lot, if you think so little of Christ? And of course, what's really coming through there is his anger born out of protective love for these young Christians.

Paul's little Galatian church had once been running the race so well, but now that infection was spreading like gangrene, verse 9, and all he can do is hand the troublemakers over to God's judgment.

[19:29] So what is the answer then? If there's nothing we can do to fix ourselves, where do we put our hope? Well, the truth, according to Paul, is something frustrating but freeing.

And that is the patient life of loving trust in the Lord Jesus. You see, the cross does give us real solid hope.

One day we will defeat that depressingly constant reality that is our own nasty, self-centered natures. And if you live in the same world I do, and you've struggled for just one day to live a better kind of life, then I expect that's something you really do long for.

But there's something we need to know about the sort of hope that Paul is talking about. It's a hope we have right here and right now for something that is not on offer in this life.

For through the Spirit, by faith, verse 5, we eagerly await the hope of righteousness. Deliverance from this age and its hold on our hearts is something that you and I play no part in.

[20:48] It's something Jesus does for us. And the life we now live, Paul has said, we live by faith in him. We live like a son waiting to inherit the thing God's promised.

That's the picture Paul used in chapter 4. There's a home waiting for us in heaven, he's told us. There's a seat left empty around the Father's table.

And the moment we get through the door we'll be bathed and clothed and all the filth will be gone for good. But not until then, not until we finally fall into the Father's arms.

And the frustrating thing about that is that it means that some of our problems can never be fixed in this age. Some things are just so broken that we have to live with them patiently until Jesus calls us

home.

But here's the big question. Does waiting for Jesus righteousness imply that in the meantime, we just give in to our sinful natures?

[22 : 01] You can bet that's what the religious bunch would accuse Paul of saying, can't you? Of course, Brother Paul didn't mean for you to live like pagans, verse 11.

I'm sure he meant to preach the law properly. He might have got round to circumcision one day. He just got a little carried away with himself. But of course, giving up on the struggle could not be further away from how Paul describes the Christian life in the tail end of this letter.

Even that wait for righteousness, verse 5, is something we do through the Spirit. So what on earth does that mean? Well, Paul talks a lot about the Holy Spirit in this letter, and I think there are two key things the Spirit does for us.

Firstly, as we've seen so far, it's the Spirit who joins us to Jesus so that we, like him, become sons of God. We're joined right now to the one who's already righteous, so that we can trust that one day we will actually be just like him, righteous and perfect, only not quite yet in ourselves.

In the meantime, though, by joining us to Jesus, his Spirit does something else, and that is to pour petrol on our fight with the flesh.

[23 : 32] Christ's Spirit, as we'll see next week, makes us long all the more to be what Jesus already is. And so patiently and painfully, we live dependent on God's grace, trusting that one day he will bring us to perfection.

A day which, as Paul puts it in chapter 6, will come in due season if we don't give up. The surprising truth, I think, is that life under grace is not any easier than the life of a legalist.

Paul calls it faith working through love, verse 6, or obeying the truth, verse 7. That's the sort of faith that comes from the heart, isn't it? not tokenism and ritual, but real costly love.

That's what was missing in Galatia. For all they talked about following God's ways and submitting to the Bible, their religion was all in their heads and not in their hearts.

But real faith isn't just submitting to a set of rules and a set of beliefs. It's submitting to a father. It's submitting to his loves and his character and his purposes.

[24 : 53] So real faith does battle hard to live his way. But what makes it a world apart from the chains of religion is that our hope is in him and not his rules.

We look to Jesus, don't we, to make us acceptable, not just at the start, but when even as mature Christians we know that we've stuffed up badly. Now you and I could lay our hands on 101 other things to make us feel like we're getting ourselves sorted.

Bible reading notes, new routines and prayer and discipline and resolutions, computer software and accountability partners, belonging to a solid church that does the Bible right, and all of that can be helpful, can't it?

but all of it can be deadly as well. The moment we forget that none of it counts for a jot, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, only real patient faith working out from our hearts in real patient love for God and his people.

people. My little girls come to me at least once a week, I think, with a broken toy expecting me to fix it. And when they're young, they think you can work miracles, don't they?

[26 : 21] A splash of super glue, and to them it's good as new. But as they get older, the toys get more complicated and the breaks get more serious.

And eventually they have to learn there are some things I can't mend. And so instead they learn to wait, don't they? They learn that if their dad promises to replace it, then one day he will.

So right now Evelyn is clinging on rather sadly to an old dinosaur whose legs don't move and whose roar has worn out, and she looks pretty miserable. But come Christmas time that'll be forgotten, because she knows that what's promised is something brand new.

And I wish I could wait as patiently and as trustingly. For the last few years a good friend of mine has been facing up rather painfully to his broken sexuality.

And I suppose he's been realizing that this is going to be the struggle of his life. Fighting this fight is what taking up his cross is going to mean for him.

[27 : 34] And of course he wishes that his desires and attraction were different, but they just aren't. And wouldn't it be tempting for him to look for a quick fix?

He could lock himself in a cloister, he could cut off his internet, or give his money to a crackpot promising a cure, he could read the Bible more every day, and sit through more and more sermons

when he's feeling guilty.

But I think what frustrates my friend the most is that none of those things deal with the hearts of his struggle. And he's realizing with time that the only thing which will, or rather the only person who will, is the Lord Jesus when he comes to make all things new.

It's a hope he's going to have to wait for with tears, and trust, and a great deal of patience. But thank God my friend is fighting that fight well.

And no doubt there'll be times when he falls and he has to pick himself up out of the dust, and thank God for his grace. But that battle is faith working through love, isn't it?

[28 : 51] The sinner who struggles on because they love the Lord, that's the Christian response to this present evil age. Friends, waiting and trusting Christ while his spirit works within us is not an easy answer.

There is no secret trick to holiness, but in God's grace, it's something he has promised to us. And that means that the Christian life, the life of true freedom, is a life of true hope.

hope placed in the one who really can deliver on all that we long for. We wait and we trust him.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for what you've promised to make of us in your grace, by your Son.

Son. We're sorry for all that we continue to be, and for our addiction to quick fixes and human solutions.

[30 : 02] And so help us, Lord, through your Holy Spirit to trust your Son and wait with loving patience for his righteousness. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.