

How could you be so foolish?!

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now, and this week we've reached Galatians chapter 3 on page 973 in the Blue Church Bibles. Really the heart of the argument in this book, Galatians chapter 3, verses 1 to 18.

And yes, it's a meaty theological argument, but it's also a cry from the heart from the Apostle Paul to his troubled children in the face.

So let's read, shall we? Galatians chapter 3 from verse 1. Oh foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.

Let me ask you only this. Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish having begun by the Spirit? Are you now being perfected by the flesh?

Did you suffer so many things in vain, if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law?

[1 : 1 8] Or by hearing with faith, just as Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness? Know then that it is those of faith who are sons of Abraham.

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles, the nations, by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, In you shall all the nations be blessed.

So then those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. For all who rely on works of the law, literally all who are of the law, are under a curse.

For it is written, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the law, and do them. Now it's evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for the righteous shall live by faith.

But the law is not of faith, rather, the one who does them shall live by them. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

[2 : 3 3] For it's written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree, so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

To give a human example, brothers, even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it's been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.

It doesn't say, and to his offsprings, referring to many, but to one and to your offspring, which is Christ. This is what I mean.

The law, which came 430 years afterwards, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.

For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise. But God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

[3 : 3 6] Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Subject. Very urgent.

From Sister Emanuel at webmail.co.za. Dear Pastor Taylor, I am Sister Mercy Emanuel, widow of the late and godly Dr. George Emanuel.

Before his death, we both born again Christians. I did not remarry, so as to give my life to the blood of the lamb. Recently, my doctor told me that I would not last for seven months due to cancer, though what disturbs me most is my stroke.

And here we go. When my late husband was alive, he deposited a sum of \$2.6 million in my name with a finance company in Europe. I don't want this money to be used by ungodly people, hence I take this bold decision to give it to your church.

I don't need any telephone communication in this regard, or my unbelieving relatives may hear. As soon as I receive your reply, I shall issue a letter of authority through my attorney for you to access the funds.

[4 : 48] Please reply swiftly to grant me peace. Your beloved one, Sister Mercy Emanuel. Now, if you've never received an email like that, I suggest you look in the spam folder of your account.

It's a hoax. So blindingly obvious that even our computers can spot it. So as we read it, we chuckle and say to ourselves, not in a million years would I fall for something so stupid.

And yet, of course, people do. Why? Because it promises something they're desperate for, something they've lost hope of getting any other way.

And wasn't that just the problem in Galatia? Please do have chapter 3 open in front of you, page 973, and listen to the agony in Paul's voice.

I love you, Galatians, but it is so obvious. How could you fall for something so stupid? Well, the answer, of course, is that the Galatians wanted something very badly, something all Christians want.

[5 : 57] They wanted to make it to the finish line. They knew they'd become Christians, but just like you and me, they saw plenty of things in their lives that worried them.

And they saw godly Jewish Christians who seemed to be making much better progress. And as soon as we lose confidence in God's promise to keep us through the cross of his son, we'll start looking for other ways to shore up our faith.

Things we can do for ourselves. More Bible, more books, more rules, more prayer. Less drink, less Facebook, less TV. And so Paul writes to say, don't be so foolish.

Can't you see what danger you're in? Now, if you know anyone who's fallen for a scam, you'll know that the answer isn't to shout at them. I think people reading Paul like that get him very wrong.

Paul's answer is to give these troubled Galatians confidence in Jesus' cross. And that is what every step of this argument does tonight.

[7 : 05] In chapter 3, Paul takes the fight to the troublemakers, the ones who push Jewish religion as a way to supplement Jesus. So in line after line, Paul turns back to the Jewish Bible and shows from Israel's own history, the Old Testament, how the cross can be the only answer.

Jesus Christ is who real Judaism was all about. The age of the cross is what Israel were longing for.

And that's why going backwards to Jewish rules would be such a stupid thing to do. Now, in some ways, this is a tricky passage with a few verses here and there that I, for one, have flustered over for years.

All of us have to reconcile what Paul says with the way we join up our Bibles. And that can be a painful job. But actually, the argument itself is as clear as you'll find.

I think our ESV Bibles break it up quite helpfully into four little paragraphs. So before we get into our points for tonight, let me try and sum up each step with a short sentence.

[8 : 17] Remember, the whole argument is about confidence in Jesus. And so in paragraph one, verses one to six, Paul says to these worried Galatians, you know that Jesus started working you simply because you trusted his cross.

Paragraph two, verses seven to nine, trusting him is always what made people acceptable. Paragraph three, verses 10 to 14, it's never been about trying hard to be good.

And so verses 15 to 18, don't lose confidence in him now. Do you see how simple it is? Jesus started working you simply because you trusted his cross.

It's always been about trusting him. It's never been about trying hard to be good. So don't lose confidence in him now. Well, let's get into it, shall we? And we'll take each of those paragraphs in turn with four points about the cross of Jesus Christ, the moment which lies at the heart of history.

And it starts in verses one to six. Here's Paul's first point. Jesus' cross was at the heart of God's work in you. How did you Galatians come to faith?

[9 : 38] Well, Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. I told you the story of a savior who's done everything that needs to be done to make sinful people right with God.

And you heard that message and you accepted it with enormous joy. And the moment you received that message with faith, verse two, you received Jesus' spirit.

That's what it means to be a Christian, isn't it? We've seen that already. It's to be tied to Jesus through his spirit. And it didn't happen because you did anything. It happened because Jesus Christ reached down into your mess to grab hold of you.

And in faith, all you did was hold out a hand for him to take hold of. Now, I'll bet that is the story for every single Christian in this room, just as it was for every single Galatian.

If someone asked you how you became a Christian, not one of us would say, well, I tried and tried to be good. And one day I realized I'd made it. No, we became Christians when we cried out for help.

[10 : 52] And Jesus Christ grabbed hold of us through his spirit. Do you see that? If you're someone who's heard and believed the gospel, you're someone who has the spirit.

You're for real, full stop. Now, of course, the Galatians knew that too, didn't they? It's a question they don't even need to answer. We didn't do it for ourselves. It was God.

It's the spirit, verse five, who worked these miracles of new life and answered prayer and costly witness here in our church. We know all that.

The problem wasn't becoming a Christian, was it? Their worry was how to keep up God's work in their lives. What do you need to do if you want the spirit to keep changing you?

And I'd be very surprised if some of us don't worry about that from time to time, especially on those days when our old habits get the better of us.

[11 : 51] Our heads crash to the pillow at night. And once again, we know we've got to say sorry for the same things as yesterday. What's to stop Christ's spirit finally giving up on me?

That's what I ask. Well, that's when we're likely to fall for the same foolish contract as the Galatians. And that's when confidence in Jesus' cross means everything.

You see, they knew they'd begun by the spirit, verse three. But they had to keep going, they thought, through their own resources, their own flesh. They had to keep doing enough to get over the finish line.

I guess they were thinking of the spirit a bit like a phone contract. Yes, of course, you get the phone chucked in for free right at the start. But if you want to keep up the connection, you've got to keep buying credit, keep paying the bill.

A church service here, an evangelistic conversation there, but of course, that isn't how God works, is it? We keep him, or rather he keeps us, the way he started with us.

[13 : 03] We receive the spirit through hearing about the cross and trusting it. And we keep going in the Christian life by hearing God's promises in the Bible and trusting that Jesus did enough.

If you came to faith, you did it by trusting the cross. And every good thing God has done for you since, and for us as a church family, he's done out of that same undeserved grace.

Jesus' cross was at the heart of God's work in them, as it is in all of us. And then verse six introduces us to the next paragraph and our next point.

Jesus' cross was at the heart of Abraham's faith. And I doubt there is anything in this world more encouraging that Paul could have said to these troubled Christians than what he says there in verse six.

your acceptance with God is just like the most authentically Israelite person who ever lived.

[14 : 15] Just as you heard about the cross and trusted it, just as that, verse six, Abraham was counted acceptable simply through hearing God's promise and trusting it.

You're just like him. So who are the true kosher Israelites, the sons of Abraham? Well, not those who perfect themselves through their own religious activity, not those who go back to Judaism.

It's those of faith, verse seven, those who trust God to reckon them righteous. These Gentile Galatians with all their struggles and their lack of impressive appearance and their pressure to fit in with a Jewish way of life.

Well, already, they are just as Israelite as Abraham. And the gospel which accepts them right alongside the post-Jewish Christians is as old as Abraham himself.

That's what God promised Abraham, isn't it, verse eight? Right back in the beginning. The troublemakers would play on a Christian's lack of confidence by saying, if you want to get over the finish line, you need to become like us because God's blessing is for Abraham's family, for the Jews.

[15 : 38] But Paul says, too right, you need to join Abraham's family. God's blessing does only come to them. It was in you, in Abraham, verse eight, that God's blessing comes.

But what makes you part of Abraham's family is trusting the God Abraham trusted. So the next time you hear someone on the radio saying, we're all the same, Muslims and Christians and Jews, we're all sons of Abraham.

Well, I'm afraid we have to politely disagree. Your Muslim friend is not a son of Abraham because it's not genetics which counts, is it?

It's trusting the God who made these promises. The churchgoer whose confidence is all in belonging to the right sort of church or experiencing the right worship, he's not a son of Abraham because it's not the cross at the heart of his faith.

And even the devout Jew with his circumcision and his family history, unless he's accepted on the basis of Jesus Christ, then Paul would say, I'm sorry, but you aren't really one of Abraham's sons either.

[16 : 53] It's these Gentiles who have what you need, not the other way around. The promise of Jesus' cross was at the heart of Abraham's faith. And thirdly, verses 10 to 14, Jesus' cross was at the heart of Israel's law.

It's always been about faith. And even during the age of the law, belonging to God's people was never about impressing him enough through keeping the rules.

But there's a problem, isn't there? Because just as Paul's gospel is as old as Abraham, the human approach of setting our own moral standards and trying to meet them, that is as old as Adam.

Which means that there will always be people who try to use God's law as a way to win acceptance. There are now, there were back then. Here are some rules.

All I need to do is follow them and I'll be good enough. That's trying to be perfected by the flesh, isn't it? It's just the standard human approach to the problem that we all see inside ourselves.

[18 : 06] And so when God gave the law to Israel, he made it very clear that that wasn't on the table. Built right into the law was God's curse.

The curse was God's way of saying this law represents me. It shows you my character, my holiness and the standards you'll have to meet if you want to make yourself acceptable.

That's what it means to rely on works of the law, verse 10. It's the same as relying on the flesh, isn't it? To be of the law is to abuse it instead of being of faith, relying on God.

And God says, if you want to abuse my law like that, be very careful because my standards never change. You can't pick and choose a bit of circumcision, a bit of church.

No, you need to be just like me. You need to keep it to the very last word until your very last breath. Otherwise, what you'll get is my curse, my disgust.

[19 : 14] Think of the old spy films full of self-destructing letters and booby-trapped briefcases. Well, that's God's curse, isn't it? It's the detonator which stops his law getting into the wrong hands.

The moment you abuse it, it blows up in your face. Even back then, a life based on performance only brought death.

And of course, it's obvious that isn't how God wanted a relationship. It's evident, says verse 11. You can't be put right on your own. No one ever is and no one ever was.

No, the righteous will live by faith. And he's quoting there from Habakkuk, a passage all about looking forward to the day of the Messiah. The prophet sees the enemy approaching and no hope, no hope of rescue on the horizon.

And what does he say? Yet I will wait quietly. Even though the fig tree doesn't blossom and in this age, I see no prospect of blessing at all.

[20 : 22] I will wait. I'll take joy in the God of my salvation. That's how rescue has always come by waiting for God to keep his promises.

So even back then in the shadow times under the law, God's true children belongs to this age. Not the present evil age, but the age of Jesus.

Now, of course, the religious person says they trust God too, don't they? They trust his promises. The law is just a supplement. It's something you do on top of faith to keep God on side.

It's based on faith, they'd say. But of course, verse 12, you can't treat the law that way. The law as you understand it doesn't mix with faith at all.

You can't trust a cross mostly and your performance a little bit. It can't be 60-40 or even 99% Jesus and 1% you.

[21 : 25] And so he quotes again. This time, it's one of God's gracious promises from the book of Leviticus. The one who does them shall live by them. It was a promise that everyone who loved the Lord, who lived in relationship with him and kept covenant, would live by God's grace.

That's what it meant in context. But you see what Paul does here? He quotes that verse out of context the way a religious person would understand it.

If you see the law as a supplement to Jesus, then it's true. You have to live by doing. The one who does them shall live by them.

And so God's gracious promise is twisted into something terrifying. Turn the law into a covenant of works, a way to win God around.

And like every human being since Adam, you have to face God's perfect standard on your own. And so that is why Jesus, the Messiah, came and lived a spotless life and died a dreadful death.

[22 : 40] It's because God never intended his people to earn their own mercy. At the heart of Israel's law was Jesus' cross.

It's why these words he quotes could be a gracious promise in context and not a threat. Because God's people, even though they lived in the age of shadows, could look forward to the coming Christ.

The law said you're not perfect, but one day Jesus will take your curse. And for now here's a sacrifice, a promise. Do this and you take part in what's to come.

And so even in the old age, that age of shadows, God's children were new creation people. They hoped forwards for the day when his death would open this new age.

age. And the ultimate sign of this new age, of course, was the very thing the Galatians received the moment they trusted Jesus, his spirit.

[23 : 45] The new age began, verse 14, the day Jesus Christ was raised from the dead so that all people, no matter where they come from, could receive the spirit of a new creation man, a tie to his perfect world.

You see, Jesus' cross was at the heart of everything Israel hoped for, everything they were longing for, even back then in the age of the law.

Well, one day, verse 13, the body of a perfect man was left hanging in disgrace on a wooden cross, a glaring, gruesome depiction that this man had come to be their curse, and in exchange, verse 14, we receive his blessing, the greatest exchange that ever took place.

Listen to Martin Luther. Thou, Christ, art my sin and my curse, or rather, I am thy sin, thy curse, thy death, thy wrath of God, thy hell, and contrary wise, thou art my righteousness, my blessing, my life, my grace of God, my heaven.

Isn't that a wonderful exchange? If you are guilty and stumbling, and night after night your head hits the pillow crushed by the things you haven't done right and the things you have done wrong, but you can say those words, then you're a Christian.

[25 : 28] And if you can't, then you're not yet what Paul means by an of faith person. And until you're willing to say something similar, however simple it is, then the reality of God's anger at your way of life, which I'm sure you feel just like the rest of us, that's a reality you face on your own.

Why all the insecurity in this church in Galatia? Why all that need to impress? Why did their teachers need people to make much of them and put on a show?

Well, it's because they couldn't really say those words. They knew God's curse was real and that they didn't make the grades, but because they were counting at least in part on their own religious performance, they couldn't say that Jesus was their life and that they were his curse.

If you think the cross is just the start of your new life, rather than its very heart, you will never really be free from that need to impress and perform.

Only the cross means that for better or for worse, when I'm up or when I'm down, it's Jesus who matters. And any other attitude damages me and as in this church, it damages those around me.

[26 : 59] So Paul makes it so plain, doesn't he? Have confidence in Jesus. His cross was the heart of God's work in you. His cross was the heart of Abraham's faith. His cross was the heart of Israel's law.

So lastly, verses 15 to 18, don't rip the heart out of God's promise today. It's so obvious now what he's saying, isn't it?

It shouldn't take us long. Right from the beginning, God's love has come one way and only one way. If I'm playing a game of hide-and-seek with my little girls and halfway through the game, I change the rules by going up to hide in the attic, well, then I'm a bully and my girls will end up in tears.

But God is not like that. He doesn't change his conditions, verse 15. Even us humans don't do that, do we? Once I've signed a contract, I don't get to go back and add to it.

So right from the beginning, God's terms have been grace and nothing more. And right from the beginning, verse 16, that promise has been for one kind of person, one kind of offspring from Abraham.

[28 : 13] Now that seems like an odd thing to say at first, doesn't it? Because when you go back and look at God's promises to Abraham, it's obvious that God has countless descendants in mind, more than Abraham could number.

But every time he makes those promises, he makes it clear that his blessing is for one line of people, and only one, to Israelites and not to Canaanites, to Isaac and not to Ishmael.

people. And the point, time after time, when you read those promises, is that there's only one kind of offspring. And it's been the same kind right from the beginning, hasn't it?

Those who trust God's gospel promises to make them right and keep them right. And that is why Paul can say here that the one kind of offspring is Christ.

It's those who belong to him, those tied to him by his spirit. Right from the beginning, God's love has come one way.

[29 : 20] It's not as if one day he added the law like an extra condition for keeping up the relationship halfway through the game. No, verse 18, he made a promise. And so there is the ultimate reason why these poor, worried Galatians can have confidence in Jesus cross.

Because if God never demanded anything more even back then in the shadow age, how stupid would we be to try adding something now? A few weeks ago I walked right out of the church here into two young Mormon men and they told me that they trusted Jesus just like we do, that they were just the same, except that their Bible had replaced a few bits that had gone missing from ours.

Well, I'd had Galatians in my head all day and so I asked him a very simple question. If I trust in Jesus on my deathbed and ask him to forgive me, will I be okay?

Well, the older one shuffled his feet a little and said, well, yes, I guess as long as someone lays his hands on you before you die, oh, and as long as there's time to be baptized by a proper priest, then you'll be okay.

And so I had to say to these very nice, confident young guys that they were in more danger than they could possibly imagine. Because like these Galatian teachers, they had ripped the heart out of God's gospel promise.

[30 : 56] Jesus' cross wasn't quite enough. Friends, we are the most privileged generation of God's people ever to live, are we not?

We belong to the age Israel longed to see. Her Messiah has died and been raised and already we're united to his perfect world.

But just as back then God's true people belonged to this age by faith, so it's possible to live now after God has kept his promise but belong back in the age of the flesh.

These Galatians thought that they were getting more Jewish, more real, but actually they'd walked away from the Savior who Israel's story was all about.

That wasn't more Jewish, that was sub-Christian. Unless the cross of the Lord Jesus is right at the heart of our confidence before God and our security before each other, then we have ripped the heart out of God's promise.

[32 : 02] God's so yes, friend, your Christian life probably does go up and down, just like mine. You struggle and you stumble, and sometimes you worry that something about you just isn't quite Christian enough.

Maybe there's something more you should be doing to look the part, but on the day you came to know the Lord, he was portrayed before your very eyes as crucified, broken for you.

And what better hope could you have of making it to the end than the grace of a God who promised his only son and then delivered.

Let's pray. I, Lord Jesus, am your sin, your curse, your death, your wrath of God, your well-deserved hell, but you are my righteousness, my blessing, my life, my grace of God, my well-deserved heaven.

Lord, we are so thankful that you accept us today for the same reason you welcomed us at the start. So help us live with the only sort of confidence that keeps us from insecurity and pride and the constant need for approval.

[33 : 40] Help us, Lord, to trust your cross. We ask it for your own name's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.