

THE CROSS AND THE SPIRIT

SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS

By Steve Zeisler

We've come to the third section of the book of Galatians in which we find Paul issuing a bold challenge. His first outburst, in chapter 1, was against those who were telling lies about God, distorting the gospel: "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8).

In chapter 2, he challenged his friends Barnabas and Peter, calling them cowards and hypocrites, publicly denouncing their refusal to honor Gentile believers whom God had embraced. Paul confronted their subtle withdrawal from fellowship because it had the effect of bringing division in the church and undermining the gospel.

Now in chapter 3 he confronts a third group: "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" Those who would allow someone to take away what God has given them and to give them nothing in return are foolish, bordering on insane!

Before we consider this passage in Galatians, I want to call to mind another story.

"I was blind but now I see"

In John 9, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?"

Now, most of us know what it's like to have a sense of guilt and failure. We often feel responsible for the bad things that happen to us. But this was catastrophic. These parents, especially in the culture of the day, would have asked themselves, "What was it we did that caused God to do such a terrible thing to us?" As the boy became old enough he would have wondered, "Was it I, before my birth, who did something so dire that God would punish me this way?"

Jesus put clay on his eyes, washed the clay off, and gave him his sight! Because these events occurred on the Sabbath, some observers reacted negatively, denying the possibility of a miracle from God. Investigations were undertaken: Was the man really blind? What really happened? Some of the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, announced, "This man [Jesus] is not from God, because he does not keep the Sabbath." Eventually they sent for the parents and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" The parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he shall speak for himself." John continues, "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed, that if anyone should confess Him to be Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. For this reason his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.' So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, 'Give glory to God; we know that this man [Jesus] is a sinner.'"

The blind man was standing alone, his parents having recoiled and abandoned him. The entire town had backed away from him because it had been announced that anyone who held positive regard for Jesus would be punished. "He therefore answered, 'Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.'" His courageous word of truth sounded louder than the chorus of religious posturing.

The dynamics of this drama are similar to those we've been considering in Galatians. In each case there are religious spokespersons, leaders of thought who assume they know God so well that if something is not done in the proper way on the proper day of the week or through proper channels, they can dismiss it. Pharisees are experts at fine distinctions, the grading of appearance, the notations of style, and the commitment to routines. So are the deceivers against whom Paul is speaking so passionately. They major in things that don't matter and destroy the gospel in the process.

The parents in the John 9 story are like Peter and Barnabas. Under pressure they are cowards.

The third character in John 9, the blind man himself, is similar to the vulnerable new believers in Galatians who have found for the first time that God has sought them out, brought light into their darkness, and given them hope. In their case as well, religious authorities are challenging the intervention of God.

Galatians 3:1-14:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing--if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?

Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." 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 tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

This section begins and ends by referring to the cross of Christ and the work of the Spirit. The message of the cross is a word from history. The crucifixion of Christ happened on a hill outside Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus bled and died a real death, was taken from the cross, and was buried in a tomb: the sin-bearer executed, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The ministry of the Spirit is a lasting, everyday reality. God's life-giving presence grants us strength, direction, and hope. The message of the cross and the message of the Spirit are mutually reinforcing.

Let's consider the message of the cross.

Hearing with faith

Paul had known the story of Jesus' execution before he believed it. He had persecuted Christians. He had heard believers testifying of Jesus and his death on the cross. He knew all the facts, but faith was missing. He speaks here of "believing what you heard," or "hearing with faith" (NASB). Information needs to be coupled with the work of God in opening a heart to faith.

I remember my first Christmas after becoming a believer. I was really hearing Christmas carols for the first time. All the words were familiar, but suddenly they were filled with power and beauty.

*Joy to the world!
the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King... (1)*

I cried a number of times throughout the Christmas season as I heard these songs, for the first time believing the wonderful message.

Paul declared in Galatians 2:20 what he learned about the cross of Christ: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me...” Do you know what the cross is about? It’s about being given life because of the death of Jesus! It is about the love of Christ for you and me. He says in verse 13 that Jesus was cursed: “Christ redeemed us from the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” He was rejected by God, cursed, because I deserved to be cursed. I died with Christ, and he died for me. Paul’s insight into the cross is profound and passionate.

Eugene Peterson has written these words about the cross:

The single overwhelming fact of history is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There is no military battle, no geographical exploration, no scientific discovery, no literary creation, no artistic achievement, no moral heroism that compares with it. It is unique. It is massive. It is monumental, unprecedented, and unparalleled. The cross of Christ is not a small secret that may or may not get out. The cross of Christ is not a minor incident in the political history of the first century that is a nice illustration of courage. It is the center. (2)

There are people who will declare the cross to be only a minor incident in the political history of the first century, or just an example of courage. Or they will say Jesus was only one Jew among so many who were killed. They will argue that there is no importance attached to Jesus’ experience.

To those of us who have heard with faith, the story of Jesus is the center. Jesus’ willingness to die an undeserved death for us means God loves us. We used to be blind, but now we can see, and no one can take that away from us. Why would we think our little contributions of cleaning up our act, making ourselves look better, trying to impress the people around us, are worth anything? Why would the threat of being put out of the synagogue make any difference? What we’ve been given--the love of God in his death for us--is far more important.

Now let’s consider the ministry of the Spirit.

Ongoing faith

Paul asks the Galatians a series of penetrating questions: “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Did the Spirit of God take up residence in your life because you started looking better, changing the way you talked, getting educated, hanging around with the right people, reading the right books, getting rid of the bad stuff?” No--the invasion came first, before we did anything! The beginning point is the gift of the Spirit. The blind man was unable to do anything about being blind, and Jesus invaded his life and gave him sight--for nothing.

Paul asks further, “God accomplished miracles by the Spirit--which of those did you contribute to? All the good things you ever received from God--which one of those was a response to your best efforts?” None! In view of this, it is foolish to give religious conformity such significance.

Paul's passion is well founded. To say no to the great goodness of God in order to have small sensibilities salvaged for the moment, or to meet the expectations of someone else, is to lose a great treasure and get something worthless in its place.

Paul's argument continues. There are people who will make claims that they understand spiritual things, and they will be off base. They make claims for a reality that they alone can see. He goes on to ask, "What does the Bible teach when we thoughtfully examine it?" He notes the experience of Abraham. Now, the argument of the Pharisees in John 9 and of those who distorted the gospel in Galatians was this: "In order to be qualified, to be one of the children of Abraham, to be a member in good standing of the circle of God's preferred folks, you must do certain things, not do others, and observe all our rules to our satisfaction." But Paul says, "You are already a child of Abraham! The things you do don't contribute anything. The way you become a child of Abraham is to believe what Abraham believed. It's not an issue of action, it's one of having the same faith that Abraham had. You already have what they are promising you can get at the end of your efforts."

Remember the story of the ugly duckling. The swan egg is put in the wrong nest. When it hatches, the poor little bird tries hard to be a good duckling, but can never quite succeed. But as it turns out he's really growing into a beautiful swan! The gift of beauty that he really wanted to experience was already genetically his.

In the next few messages we're going to consider the law. If you think that your actions, your sincerity, your efforts, your pleasing people or even yourself are going to make you what you long to be, then consider the requirement: Don't ever fail once! Because that's the way the law works. If you succeed one hundred times in a row but stub your toe one time, you lose everything. It's much like a couple of children's games I used to hate. You're moving your playing piece along the board, and then you draw a card that tells you to go back to START. No matter how well you did until then, if you get that card it was all for nothing.

That's why the law can never give life. It only brings curses. Paul has argued that the Spirit is present in our lives. He does miracles, brings health where there was sickness. Relationships are healed, depressions relieved, hope restored. Love springs up where it didn't exist. You can wake up in the morning and find yourself filled with hope and song for no good reason except that God loves you. The Spirit is present everywhere, doing good. The alternative to this miraculous, thrilling encouragement of the Spirit is the curse of the law. If you want to play by those rules, eventually all you end up with is condemnation. "So why listen to those arguments?" Paul demands. "Why do you want the approval of people who are bent on condemning you?"

The voice of the enemy is often inside. We are too ready to speak the condemnations. We tell ourselves, "Act this way! Look this way! Lie about this! Fool yourself!" We need instead to run to our Lord in gratitude for what he has already done. The great miracle is believing the good news rather than observing the law.

The Pharisees were trying to destroy a family in John 9. There was only one sane voice in the whole town who said, "I can't answer all your questions. I'm confused about some things. You have all the credentials. You can quote authorities. But I know one thing: Jesus did something for me that changed everything. Jesus gave me sight." In the same way we can say, "I've seen the cross of Christ and I've been changed by it. I've been invaded by the Spirit of God and I've been changed by that. And I'm not going to let anybody take that from me."

Notes

1. Isaac Watts, *Joy to the World*.
2. Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, © 1982, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. P. 86.

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