

Defending the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Friends, I was going to preach on all of that passage, but you may be relieved to know that I've decided not to, but just to preach on the first nine verses of chapter three.

I think that's probably more able to be bitten off by us tonight. And this is the last in this series in Galatians. We will come back to it during next year.

And so just nine verses tonight. But look, you've been sitting for a long time and I don't want to start with you being a bit drowsy. So why don't we all stand and pray?

OK. Let's pray together. Our Lord, open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from your word.

Soften our hearts that we might receive that word. Transform our wills that we might be doers of it. Loosen our tongues that we might proclaim it. And we ask this for the glory of your son, your living word, in whose name we pray.

[1 : 0 5] Amen. Please sit down. Friends, tonight I'm going to begin with a story and end with a story. Both are from the book of Acts. You could follow if you wanted.

The first one comes from Acts 10. But let me just tell you what happens. The story, this first story is a story about the Apostle Peter. Now, in order to understand the story, I need to remind you that who Peter is.

Peter is a Jew. And God-loving Jews of his day worked hard at keeping themselves from inappropriate contact with Gentiles. Often, you see, a Jew would avoid them and not eat with them.

Peter was a Jew who had some sympathies with this particular perspective. So that's one part of the equation. But I want to give the other side as well. You see, many Gentiles hated Jews.

However, there were some who didn't. Some Gentiles found Jewish beliefs quite attractive in the first century world. Some Gentiles looked upon Jews with favor, if not even a little bit of a tinge of jealousy.

[2 : 0 7] Some Gentiles, you see, were sick of paganism and its excesses and were attracted to the idea that there might only be one God in the world. But they were impressed also by the moral standards of the Jews that they met.

And they looked upon them with favor because of their virtue, their consistency, their devotion. However, the demands of becoming a Jewish convert were too severe, particularly if you were male.

And so groups of Gentiles simply chose to be Jewish sympathizers, as it were, and even to protect them. They chose to worship the Jewish God as they were able.

They weren't, of course, allowed into the synagogue and all those sorts of things. But what they longed for was full status, full participation with the God of Israel.

Now, a man called Cornelius in Acts chapter 10 is one such man. So there's the cultural background to our story. And many of you will know the story, but it's good to reflect on it again.

[3 : 07] Let me tell you what happens. The story begins in Acts chapter 10. And God speaks to Cornelius. He gets him to arrange a meeting with the apostle Peter. On the other end of the equation, God gives a vision to Peter.

And as a result of that vision, God is at work to make sure that Peter has these words reverberating in his mind as the events unfold of this chapter.

Peter, do not call anything impure that God has made clean. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. And as a result, Peter does the remarkable thing and invites an unclean Gentile into the house as a guest.

An invitation is accepted to visit the household of Cornelius. And Peter goes and he asks why he was sent for. And when Cornelius explains, Peter responds with a short sermon, as you do, I guess.

Peter's sermon has a number of key points to it. God has revealed himself in Jesus, Acts 10, 39 to 41. This message is firstly for the Jews, verses 36 to 37.

[4 : 16] But Christ is Lord of all. And so the message is also for Gentiles, verse 34 to 35 and 42. And the conclusion to his sermon is very strong and comes in verse 43.

Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins. Now, that point strikes home and is revolutionary. Access to God, you see, now is possible for everyone, whether they are Jew or Gentile.

And then God acts in this particular situation to make the point clear in the most profound way. You see, what happens is he makes sure that everyone knows that he's behind it all by giving the great promise of the Holy Spirit promised in the Old Testament.

He pours out his Holy Spirit on Gentiles, not just Jews, but on Gentiles. So what God does is demonstrate their inner as well. That great promise is theirs as well.

What happens to Jews in Acts 2 now happens to Gentiles in Acts 10. What was evident about God from Genesis 1 is now a reality. There is no distinction now between Jew and Gentiles.

[5 : 33] God has, as it were, no favorites. Acts 10.34, that's actually said. And Peter is convinced by everything that has happened. God has accepted Gentiles without any further requirement except that they believe in Jesus.

He therefore turns to his Jewish friends and asks them to accept God's work by baptizing these new converts. And in chapter 11, the Jews of Jerusalem hear the report that comes back from Peter and they concur with him.

In chapter 11, verse 18, the Jews of Jerusalem praise God and they say these words. So then, even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Later, Peter will reflect on these events. And in Acts 15.8 and 9, verses we read a couple of weeks ago, he will say, God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us.

He didn't discriminate between us and them for he purified their hearts by faith. Friends, you need to hear this story and soak it in in order to understand the passage we are looking at today.

[6 : 47] So keep it in your minds. Keep in mind the drama of this. We're so used to it, we don't realize how dramatic it is. But I want you to now turn in your Bibles to Galatians chapter 3 to remind you of the page number.

It's 1169. Let me just give you a quick run through what we've done so far and it will be very quick. Look at Galatians 1 and let me just show you what's happened.

See if I can summarize the story. First, we notice that from the very beginning, Paul is very worried about what's going on in this particular congregation. He's worried about the Galatian Christians because he thinks they are at risk of deserting the true gospel.

So he tells them how God has called him the apostle and delivered to him, Paul, the true gospel. Then he tells them that he went up to Jerusalem and laid that gospel out before the apostles and told them this is the gospel he preached.

Not because he needed them to authorize it, but so that they might know what's going on. And they recognize that his ministry was God given. The third thing that happens is he tells us the trouble that he had when Peter appeared to be denying the gospel by his actions.

[7 : 57] That is, Peter came from Jerusalem and at first he met with all the Gentiles and the Jews together and he ate with them. But then some people from Jerusalem came up to Antioch, which is where this group of mixed Christians were meeting.

And when the Jews came up, Peter began to withdraw. Remember I explained it to you a couple of weeks ago where, you know, you'd sort of have half the...

Well, imagine chicken and chips except it's... Well, chicken and chips would be Gentile food. So we have chicken and chips in here, right? And in the next room there, the Jews disappear and they have their kosher food or whatever.

Okay? And you segregate people on the basis of food. And Paul thought that was a denial of the gospel, a non-verbal denial of the gospel. And so he publicly rebukes Peter.

And verses 15 to 21 give us a snapshot of his, in chapter 2, his theological reflection. First, have a look at it. Chapter 2, verse 15. He acknowledged that he and Peter and the others were Jews by birth.

[9 : 04] We Jews, he says. Then he confessed that as Jews, they had come to the conclusion that a person is not justified by keeping the law, but through faith in Christ Jesus. They have believed in Jesus.

They have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ. That is, they have been declared to be in right relationship with God by humbly accepting what God has done in Jesus. They've accepted there's no other way to be justified before God but through this mechanism.

And their whole way of life has been overturned. Now, they have died, says Paul, to a previous way of living, just as he had done. And now, they live by faith.

And that's where we were a couple of weeks ago. By faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us. We now live by faith. Live by faith in him.

Our identity, you see, as Christians, is found exclusively and bound exclusively to Jesus. Jesus crucified.

[10 : 08] Jesus risen. Now look at verse 21. Paul makes it crystal clear. There's no backing off. This is now the only way of living before God, whether you are Jew or Gentile.

It is by faith in Christ Jesus. This justification, that is a right standing with God, comes only through faith in Christ.

If it comes any other way, then Jesus died for nothing. That's a very powerful statement, isn't it? If it comes any other way, then Jesus need not have died because you could have got there easier than Jesus having to come from heaven and die.

If it comes any other way, then the very core of the gospel is denied. Okay, that's the background to Galatians 3. Let's have a look at Galatians 3 together. It's clear that the sort of thinking and action we've just heard about in Galatians 2 has filtered into these churches that Paul has planted.

And one of those churches is this one here. The church or the churches in Galatia. And Paul thought that this touched at the very core of the gospel. And it would cause him to be stirred up enough to confront Jesus.

[11 : 17] So we enter this chapter with Paul being very frustrated. I suspect very angry. And he's concerned for his converts and he speaks to them forcefully.

And look at verse 1. You can see it. You can hear the emotion in it, can't you? You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

You see, he's saying, you people look as though you're under a spell somehow. A spell that blinds you to the significance of the cross that you once understood. Your infatuation with circumcision and the law has deprived the crucifixion of its significance.

You see, Paul knows that their entrancement will not easily be moved. They've been sucked in there as though they're under a spell. And so he hits them with a series of rhetorical questions.

He hopes, I think, that by them they might be shocked out of their state of bewitchment and sort of return back to reality. After all, you see, they are on the edge of forsaking the gospel.

[12 : 24] Question 1 is clear. And the implied answer is clear as well. Did they receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what they heard about Jesus and the cross?

The answer is clear, isn't it? They didn't receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law. Now, the Jews hadn't received the Spirit that way. And they haven't either. They received the Spirit by believing in Jesus.

That happened back in Acts 10 when those first Gentile converts had believed. They got the same blessing as the Jews had back in Acts 10. They received the Spirit by believing in Jesus.

Just like everyone in the book of Acts, they believed and the Spirit was given. Reception of the Spirit, you see, Paul knows. And all its benefits are a sign that you have come to know God.

You don't need to keep laws. You simply humbly accept and trust the great news about Jesus. Believing, you see, Paul is saying, not doing is the mechanism by which you receive the Spirit.

[13 : 28] Believing not doing was the way by which you become incorporated into God's Spirit-filled community. God's Spirit-empowered age. So having begun this way, are they now going to say, all right, well, I had enough of that.

That was pleasant while it lasted. But now I'm going back to this other way of living. Which Jewish history proved is totally unfruitful. They're at risk now of reverting to a more backward, ineffective way.

And that's what's behind the next two questions. Verse 3. Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

I wonder if you can see what's going on here. He's making clear that the Galatian Christians became Christians by believing what they heard about Jesus. The evidence was the gift of the Spirit.

He was given to all those who believed. Jews or Gentiles alike. They became Christians by believing. And they go on in exactly the same way. Please understand this.

[14 : 31] You see, it is a critical point often missed by Christians. When you come to Christ, you come simply because of what God has done in Jesus. Simply because of that.

I remember the day it happened to me. It was the day before my 18th birthday. I came home from a Sunday school picnic. And I knew I needed to become Christian.

And I said to God, forgive me. And I trust in the Lord Jesus. And the next day, I woke up a man filled with the Spirit on his birthday.

I knew things had changed. It was a dramatic conversion. Things had changed overnight, as it were. God had forgiven me. God had given me his Spirit.

I was a different man. Well, when I came to Christ simply because of what God had done in Jesus, that was the work of his Spirit and was testified to by the Spirit.

[15 : 33] And you go on in Christ in exactly the same way. You don't say, well, I became God's person by believing and now I maintain my status with God by keeping laws.

Nor do you say, well, I became a member of God's people by believing in Jesus, but I grow in sanctification, in holiness, by my obedience and my deeds. No.

To do that is to revert to the flesh. It is to go backwards. It is to say, well, I started with Jesus, but now that I go on, I don't need him any longer. I'll be all right on my own now.

Thanks for getting me over the hurdle, but, you know, it's okay now. No, the Christian life is by faith alone and through the Spirit alone. It is an ongoing life of living by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

You start that way, you finish that way. But let's press on. I don't have time to go into the details of verses 4 and 5, but let's have a look at verses 6 to 9.

[16 : 35] Now, here we come to familiar ground. Because Paul sets out in these verses to establish his case from the Old Testament. He goes to the verse we've been kept returning to, or you ought to keep returning to.

It's Genesis 15, verse 6. I wonder if you remember the story of Genesis 15, verse 6. Let's see what Paul has to say. Paul cites Genesis 15, verse 6.

And he notes that Abraham believed God and, as a consequence, was declared to be right with God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now, I'll tell you the story, just so you have a feel for what actually happened.

Abraham, remember he was living in Palestine. There were no cities in Palestine in those days. And so it was like living in the outback. You could stare up on an ordinary night, and you could look up into the sky and you could see everything.

You could see all the stars, because there were no city lights to dull them out. And Abraham was doubting that God was really for him.

[17 : 44] And so God said to him, Abraham, come outside. And he took him outside, and he showed him the stars of the sky. And he said, Your descendants will be like that.

And the text says, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him or credited to him as righteousness. That's the background to the text. Now, look at verse 7, and verse 7 flows on logically from verse 6.

In verse 7, Paul says, On the basis of verse 6, we should know or understand that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Abraham was justified by faith.

He believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, those who believe and those who have faith are members of his family. They're his descendants, spiritual descendants, if you like.

That is, if you friends have believed in Jesus, then you are a child of Abraham. You are the spiritual descendants, the inheritors of Abraham. Now, look at verse 8.

[18 : 47] Here, Paul quotes the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12, verse 3. Actually, what he does is, it's a little bit of a trick here. He combines Genesis 12, verse 3, with Genesis 18, verse 18.

And he notes that God had promised Abraham that all people groups would be blessed through him. Now, what Paul is saying is profound. He says that in some sense, Genesis 15, verse 6, and Genesis 12 are meant to be read together.

The promise that all people will be blessed through Abraham does not flow so much through his body, his loins, and on to Isaac, but through his faith, to those who have the same faith.

Does that make sense? So it's not the physical descendants, but it's those who do spiritually what he did. Now, what Paul is saying is profound when you think about it.

He says, those things have to be read together. And God knew this when he gave those promises. And so, when he made the promise of descendants and of a blessing to the nations in Genesis 12, he proclaimed the gospel to Abraham in advance.

[20 : 00] All nations will be blessed through you. In other words, God will declare all nations, i.e. Israel and Gentiles, to be right in his sight through faith in the descendant of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

Can you see what's being said? See, it's not those who keep the law that are foreseen by God in Genesis 15. It is not those who are descended from Abraham's loins that are foreseen here.

No, it is through the lens of Genesis 15, verse 6, it is those who believe that are foreseen in Genesis 12. That's what verse 9 says.

Can you see it there? So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. Friends, this is the gospel. And this is profound.

And this is the grounds on which you are Christian. You see, the genuine children of Abraham are not Jews, but those who are justified by faith, even as he was.

[21 : 17] Right standing with God comes from receiving God's great gift in Christ. This is the greatest news of all. Thankfully, you see, our righteousness before God does not rest with us.

It resides in Jesus Christ, risen and crucified. Friends, in Paul's day, there was a struggle in Christian faith.

You can see this in Galatia. And this is going on, it was very deep and very tough. And its focus was Gentile Christians. It was a struggle to understand exactly who and what true children of Abraham were.

It was a struggle to understand exactly what place Old Testament law had in the life of the Christian. And within this debate, Paul is categorical. We've seen it here. The centre of Christian faith cannot be the law.

Cannot be keeping laws. The life of the Christian cannot be oriented around law. The right standing of God, of the Christian, does not come through the law.

[22 : 25] No, the centre of Christian faith is first and last Jesus. The centre of belonging to God is found in Jesus. The centre of being Christian is Jesus.

The life of the Christian is oriented around, you guessed it, Jesus. Who he is and what he has done. And the justification, the right standing of the Christian comes through faith in Jesus.

Christian faith is thoroughly, thoroughly, thoroughly Christocentric. It is focused on Jesus. Not on morality, on the person of Jesus.

Christian faith starts with Jesus and never leaves him. The inheritance of the promises to Abraham are therefore those centred on Jesus and who believe in him. And those who think that righteousness can be established or maintained outside of faith in Jesus are simply incorrect.

The Christian life, remember, begins by believing in Jesus and what God has done through him and it ends with that. And any attempt to go beyond it is unwarranted and will be unsuccessful.

[23 : 35] So, when I turn up before God on the last day and he says, why should I let you into my heaven? There's only one response that he'll be happy with. Because I believed in your son and he represents me before you.

Friends, that was a struggle in Paul's day and I think it's still a struggle in our day. You see, the disposition of the human heart is away from God. It is towards self-justification before God.

A human heart will use anything and everything to feed this inclination. And this is the centre of the struggle to be Christian. See, the Christian life is a struggle.

It's a struggle to obey, yes. It's a struggle to bring forth the fruit of righteousness in our daily lives. but at the heart of the Christian life is the struggle to believe.

It's a struggle to flee from our own achievements and our own efforts. A struggle not to rely on our own ability. It's a struggle to cast aside our independence and to trust in the gospel of the Lord Jesus which announces we're justified by faith alone in Christ alone.

[24 : 53] For that reason, our eyes must daily be fixed firmly on Jesus and on the cross. And the minute our focus shifts we drift away from Christian faith and the Christian gospel.

The Christian life is one of struggling to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. The writer of Hebrews says, work hard. It's a strange way of putting things, isn't it? Work hard at believing.

That's the focus of the Christian life, believing in Jesus. Only that disposition will exalt God. and the grace of God. And in this we must stand firm.

This I think is the first and greatest threat to the New Testament doctrine of justification. But there's another threat, it's a new threat. And this new threat has been dubbed the new perspective.

Now I don't have time to go into it in great depth but I'll tell you just a little bit about it. because you will encounter it if you read it all as a Christian. I do have time to say that underneath it all those who advocate what's called the new perspective say that Christians of many centuries have actually misunderstood Paul.

[26 : 06] They've thought Paul was talking about sin and salvation when he used this language of justification. These, but actually say these people, Paul's not talking about sin and salvation, no, he's talking about being the people of God.

And when Paul talks about justification he's actually saying whoever believes in the gospel of Jesus belongs to the people of God. Wherever and whenever people believe in the gospel they're truly members of God's family.

Paul, they say, is not saying that people are declared righteous before God angry at sin. So believing in Jesus is the mark of someone who belongs to God's family. Now in one sense that's entirely true, isn't it?

Whoever you are, if you are a believer in Jesus then you are truly a member of God's new family in Jesus. You'll therefore be an inheritor of eternal life.

But there's much more to say, isn't there? Jesus is clear in the gospels, Paul is clear in the epistles, the New Testament is clear in all of its parts. Salvation is taken on, appropriated, through faith in Christ and trust in his promises.

[27 : 18] As Paul says in verse 1 of this chapter, you foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

I'd just like to learn one thing from you. Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

Friends, I've laboured hard today and I've done it deliberately. You see, I want you to understand that this new perspective on Jesus in the end is an inaccurate presentation of what the New Testament says.

Jesus Christ says, the gospel is the power of God to bring salvation to everyone who believes. The gospel is the justification of the sinner and that is at its heart.

The gospel defines Paul's calling, determines God's ministry and shapes it. He will proclaim it at every opportunity and defend it with everything he has. He suffered for it, he'll be willing to die for it and so must we.

[28 : 26] So, I'm sorry, that's a little sideline but I needed to give it tonight because it's a very, it's a very common thing. If you haven't encountered yet, you will encounter it at some point. But I began with a story from Acts and so I want to end with another story.

Okay? This is one of my favourite stories in Acts but it is one of the most neglected ones in Acts. And I've told it to you before, some of you, but that doesn't matter, such a good story, I'll tell it again.

It comes from Acts 8, don't look it up, just let me tell you the story and you can look it up later on. Philip is an evangelist. He's sent by God to a wilderness road and he comes upon an Ethiopian Now that means he's from a very distant country from Israel.

It probably means he's a black man. The text of scripture also tells us that he was a eunuch. In other words, he's been castrated and probably dismembered.

However, he's very interested in biblical faith. He's just been to Jerusalem to worship. And now, so he's been up to Jerusalem to worship. Wouldn't be allowed in the temple for all sorts of reasons.

[29 : 41] But anyway, he's been to Jerusalem to worship, probably, you know, way up in the fringes somewhere. And he's on his way home now and he's reading through the prophet Isaiah. In fact, he's reading a very important passage in Isaiah that talks about God's servant.

It's a passage that Christians throughout history have seen as one which points strongly to Jesus. But this man's in trouble. After all, you see, the law contained in these very scriptures says that no one who has testicles that are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

But he's interested in Jewish faith. He's in a difficult place, isn't he? He will be ever excluded from the very faith that he's interested in.

Anyway, Philip comes across him and it's one of those ideal evangelistic opportunities really because, you know, the man's just reading the very text that is probably the best Old Testament text you could be reading in order to evangelize someone and anyway, Philip does his job and explains the gospel to him.

And this nameless eunuch embraces Christian faith. Let me tell you something marvellous. You see, if the eunuch had kept reading on, he would have come on from Isaiah 52 and 53 which speaks about the servant.

[31 : 13] He would have read that and thought, oh, there are great benefits gained by God's servant. But then as he read on, he would have come to Isaiah 56. And in Isaiah 56, God speaks to outsiders, outside of Israel and he promises the most grand things.

The Lord who announced the gospel in advance to Abraham back in Genesis speaks of those who are not descendants of Abraham and says these words. Listen to them carefully. Let not the foreigner joined to the Lord say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people.

And listen to this. And do not let the eunuch say, I'm just a dry tree. For thus says the Lord to eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the right things that please me and hold fast my covenant.

The equivalent in the New Testament would be who grasp hold of my son. I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name that is better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. Notice the language. That shall not be cut off. Friends, here's this black Ethiopian eunuch from a distant land being told that because of Jesus he has a home with God.

[32 : 37] He's acceptable to God. And people must ask, surely God can't accept such as these. But you know, the gospel just shouts back so clearly and loudly, yes, in Jesus he can.

Yes, in Jesus he does. And he does so by what? Justifying them, declaring them right by faith in Jesus Christ.

Friends, this is the gospel of justification. justification. This is what the death of Jesus achieves. No barriers, no outsiders, all who believe in Jesus are justified, all who believe in Jesus are God's friends just as Abraham was, and all who believe in Jesus are justified sons and daughters of Abraham.

Friends, what an incredible wonder this is. What an amazing gospel. When I go to our baptisms in our Chinese congregations and every year, or two or three times a year, and I see these massive Christ people being baptized, it brings me to tears.

What a gospel this is. And when anyone here, my wife's an evangelist, as you know, and she comes and tells me stories about this one becoming Christian and that one.

[34 : 07] Friends, this is an amazing thing. They come from every corner of the globe. This morning, we had some people here who are our link missionaries in Switzerland telling us stories about people, you know, being exposed to the gospel in Switzerland who come from every corner of this earth.

What an amazing thing it is that God accepts them. Friends, this is, this doctrine, this teaching of being made right with God on the basis of the death of Christ and that all you have to do is believe it is so amazing.

Don't forget it and don't let it be corrupted by anything or anyone. Paul didn't in his day. We must not in ours. Let's pray.

Father, we are just overwhelmed again by the story of this eunuch who on all grounds as far as we could see could not be accepted but because of your son he could.

thank you that you have not only justified you not only justified him through faith in Jesus but you justify us.

[35 : 36] Father, please help us to be faithful in bringing this gospel to others. This gospel of being right with you with no barriers that says there are no outsiders that says all who believe in Jesus are justified.

And Father, please help us here at Holy Trinity to maintain the faith of this gospel and please help us to proclaim it and please by your mercy be at work by your spirit to bring more and more people to come and know the wonderful Lord Jesus through and through him to come to know you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.