

The Gospel for Sceptics

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Date: 06 February 2022

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[0 : 00] It's page 1169, Galatians chapter 3, and reading from verse 1.

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 the 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? Have you experienced so much in vain, if it really was in vain?

So again I ask, does God give you His Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law or by your believing what you heard? So also Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

[1 : 18] Understand then that those who have faith are children of Abraham. 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 rely on faith are blessed, along with Abraham, the man of faith. Amen.

All right, good evening St. Silas. What a great joy to see you there. Thanks Graham for reading, Ali for leading.

And my name's James, I'm on staff team here at St. Silas. I'm just going to do this very quickly. Any tens on the skepticism scale? Any tens there? Raise your hands. A couple of tens there.

My, there's some folk a bit higher. Great. I don't want to do the whole number thing, but that's interesting. Great. Let me pray for us as we begin. Hopefully you enjoyed that chat. Lord, we thank you that you love skeptics, that you love people to ask questions, that you love for us to bring our questions to you, and that you're confident that you've answered those questions fully and perfectly in your son, Jesus.

[2 : 40] Amen. Amen. Well, we live in a skeptical age, and by skeptic here, I mean someone who asks questions, someone who tries to see things differently, different perspectives, someone who sees life in shades of gray rather than black or white.

And a skeptic might hear the good news of Jesus, might hear the gospel, and think, well, why should I believe that? Who are you to tell me what the truth is?

That's your truth. That's not necessarily my truth, and certainly not the truth. But being skeptical can be a really good thing.

I'm grateful for skeptics. So skeptics ask healthy questions of power and authority of governments. Skeptics stop us seeing life simplistically.

They stop us thinking, I can only believe what I can touch and see. They ask questions like, well, what about love? What about art? What about beauty?

[3 : 44] Where does seeing and touching fit into those things? They help us to see things differently and in different ways that aren't mutually exclusive.

They help us to see that things are relative. So let me illustrate how skepticism might work. We've got a couple of slides up.

What do you see? Rabbits or duck? Anyone? Duck. Duck first. Rabbits. Any rabbits? Yes, brilliant. Here's another one. Is the floor flat or is there dip?

Dip. Not quite convinced. One more. It's not the cover on how to make faith magnetic. What color are the balls there? Who knows? Right, there we go.

So perception, reason, logic are all relative. How we see things are relative. And skeptics will happily hold all those relative things together in their minds quite happily.

[4 : 45] Even if they mutually are opposite views, they'll happily hold those together. But what I'm going to try and argue is that the gospel, the good news of Jesus is for skeptics.

And we see that very clearly from this passage. So the context in Galatians is that Paul is writing to a church who are attempting to add rules. And he calls them the Galatians because they live in an area called Galatia.

And the rules that they're adding are the Jewish rules on how to live, the works of the law in the language of our passage. And by works of the law, you could mean the religious stuff that you do, like go to church on Sundays.

You could mean the stuff that you add on to that religious stuff that is generally accepted by your group of peers, like attitudes to drinking or dress or that kind of stuff.

Or you could simply mean the things that you think you should do to be right with God, to be a good person. The kind of things that you might read in a self-help book or something like that.

[5 : 54] So you think of Atomic Habits by James Clear and all the things that he says you must do. Or something that Simon Sinek could say. Or Twelve Rules for Living by Jordan Peterson.

Those kind of rules that you must do to be right and succeed in life. And so the Galatians, the Galatians, they were saying, yes, we're right with God by Jesus' death.

But we are only really right if we add on to that works of the law. If we do all the things, all the religious things that Moses told us to do.

So they're saying Jesus plus the things we do, plus our works make us right with God. But Paul says, no, it's Jesus' death alone that makes you right with God.

So if the gospel was a juice, it would be just juice. If you add anything to it, you don't get a better juice, you get no juice. If you add anything to the gospel, you don't get a better gospel, you get no gospel.

[7 : 00] You don't get a gospel 2.0, as it were. But the danger that the Galatians were doing, why they were in danger, is that they were in danger of disqualifying themselves from being right with God.

They were getting no gospel. But they were also in danger of stopping other people, by adding on works of the law, from hearing the good news of Jesus, by making it hard for people to become Christians and accept the good news about Jesus.

They were saying you needed to do Jewish stuff in order to be a Christian. And so in chapters 1 and 2, what we've seen in Galatians is that Paul has defended his authority and the origins of the gospel.

And what we're going to see in 3 and 4 is he is going to explain what that gospel is exactly and the implications of it for how we live as a church and as a people.

And what we're going to see tonight, and you should find these points on the inside of a white handout that you handed on the way, and we're going to see firstly that the gospel is for skeptics and that it's personal.

[8 : 16] So by faith, we see Jesus crucified. That's verse 1. Then we're going to see that it's direct, that by faith, we have God's Holy Spirit.

In the gospel, we have direct access to God through His Holy Spirit. And then we're going to see that it's for everyone. By faith, God promises to bless all nations.

Verse 6 to 9 there. The gospel is for everyone. There are not many roads to God, but one road that is open to everyone. So firstly, it's personal.

The gospel is personal. By faith, we see Jesus Christ crucified. So I grew up as a surfer in Durban, and I went surfing the one day, and I met this Welshman in the water.

I'm in South Africa, and he's from Wales. I asked him, what are you doing here? And he said, I went surfing once while I was on holiday, and I sold everything I had, and I moved to South Africa to take up surfing full time.

[9 : 18] He had been there 40 years. It was an encounter, an event, that had changed his life completely. It had transformed everything.

He had shaped his whole life around beginning to surf. And so the gospel is based on a fact of history. Jesus died on the cross for the sins, for our sins.

But it is profoundly personal. Just look back at the end of chapter 2, verse 20, of how Paul describes and understands the gospel.

I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The Galatians, they were saying that you needed to obey the rules. You needed to do stuff to be right with God. And that sounds very holy, doesn't it? But Paul says, I don't know what planets you're on.

[10:25] I don't know what you're talking about. Have you even met Jesus? Have you seen that he was crucified and died for you? It's not about a set of rules.

It's about meeting a Savior, the Son of God who died for you. You foolish Galatians. Doesn't Jesus' death mean anything to you whatsoever?

It's profoundly personal. So if you're a skeptic, the gospel is not about a set of rules. It's about the story of one man that becomes our story.

So just look down at verse 1 in our Bibles. You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

Before your very eyes, this is something they've seen that he's shown them. It's profoundly personal. So you might have been camping and someone's told a scary story while you're camping.

[11:27] And you get sucked into it. And you kind of get involved in the story. And it ends up being really gripping. And it might be quite scary at the same time.

But it's as if when Paul has told them the gospel, he's told them the story about Jesus. And it's as if he's taken them from where they were in Galatia to the foot of the cross in Jerusalem.

And he showed them how Jesus died for them. What that meant for them. What it meant for Jesus to go through that. Of how Jesus died for them.

For their rejection. For how they said, crucify, crucify. And they saw Jesus. Someone who was completely innocent. Someone who had done no wrong.

Who cared for his mother. Who laughed with his friend. But who was the son of God. God in person. He was supremely powerful. Everything belonged to him.

[12:25] But how did he use his power? He laid it down. Skeptics are skeptical of power. Jesus laid his power down. And he let himself be crucified by his creation.

In Mark's gospel, we read of a centurion who witnessed Jesus dying on the cross. And he had no business recognizing that Jesus died for him. That who Jesus was.

But when he sees how Jesus dies, he says, surely this man was the son of God. It was one man's story that had become his story. And so we've already asked this question in Galatians.

But what does it mean that God would die for us? Why did God have to die if we could just add on our works and just do stuff to be right with God?

That just makes no sense whatsoever. So how could anything that I do ever add on to that gospel? You foolish Galatians.

[13:30] What do you think you're doing? So just thinking this through for ourselves. If we're at someone here tonight who is skeptical. The Christian faith is not about a system.

It's not about a set of rules. But it's about meeting a savior. It's about one man's story who becomes your story. It's all about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

You cannot get past him. He's there front and center in your face. You can't miss him. If you miss him, you miss the gospel. So let me tell you about a friend of mine, Nev.

Nev, he was a Marine. And he tells me the story about how his section was on patrol. And they'd advanced to contact. And they'd given the instruction to retreat back if they came under fire to a bund line that was behind them.

And sure enough, they got contacted. And the one person in the section that he really, really hated, absolutely despised, didn't do what they were instructed to.

[14:35] And so he was stuck in open ground. And he took a bullet in the knee and he fell down. And Nev was suitably upset about this. But he thought, I'm going to do the right thing anyway.

And he got up from behind protection. And he went out and he dragged this man, who was his complete enemy, back into the protection of the cover. And it's the story that changed their relationship completely.

Can you imagine the experience of that person, knowing they'd been rescued by someone who they'd made life so difficult for? Can you imagine what that would have been like?

It would have been something that changed their life completely. Maybe we've got a skeptical friend who we're trying to speak to about the gospel. Have you taken them to the cross?

Have you told them about Jesus? Have you told them about what that story has meant for your story? How meeting Jesus has changed you as a person.

[15 : 33] It's profoundly personal. So, well, the second thing, how we see that the gospel is for skeptics, is that it's direct. And that by faith, we have God's Holy Spirit.

And the thing that originally impressed the Galatians about the gospel, and why Paul goes on in this section, is that they had received God's Spirit. God had come and lived within them.

But having received God's Spirit, they were now going to move on from God's Spirit, and wanting to be right with God by the things that they do. And what Paul is going to say in chapters 3 and 4 is that we do not become right with God on the basis of the works of the law, of the things we do, that checklist, but through God's Spirit, by faith.

And because being right with God depends on having the Spirit by faith, it's open to all people. All you need is ears to hear and a heart to trust.

So, just turn over the page to chapter 5, verse 5, very quickly. And we'll look at verse there, and we read there. For through the Spirit, we eagerly await by faith the righteousness, the way that we are right with God, for which we hope.

[16 : 52] It's through the Spirit, by faith, that we're right with God. That's where Paul is going in his argument. And so, Paul asks them, in chapter 3, back in verse 2, where he comments on how they received God's Spirit.

I'd like to learn just one thing from you. If that's how you're right with God, did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, by the things you do, or by believing what you heard?

And again, he says it again in verse 5, where he comments on how God gave them the Spirit. So, they receive the Spirit, and then God gives them the Spirit. He says, so again, I ask you, verse 5, does God give you his Holy Spirit and work miracles among you by works of the law, or by believing what you heard?

And just notice the Spirit there, it was received by us, and it is given by God, not on the basis of the things we do. Nothing we can do can help that, but simply through faith in Jesus.

That comes from hearing. And it's this gift of the Spirit that makes us right with God. And the point is that we have direct access to God by the Spirit.

[18 : 12] God declares us right with Him through the gift of His Spirit. God makes us righteous through the work of the Spirit in our lives.

So, in chapter 1, we saw that God gave the gospel, the Word of God. That cannot be corrected.

And then in chapter 3, we see that God gives the Spirit who makes the Word live to us.

The Father both gives the Bible and explains the Bible to us. And so that if you're skeptic in a world that's ever-changing, when you can't know things for sure, you can know God.

And you can know that you're right with God with absolute certainty. God gives you His Spirit. God from outside our world comes in and lives within you.

So you can know with 100% certainty who God is and that you are right with Him. And He gives you His eternal Word. It's unchangeable.

[19 : 10] And it becomes a rock that's under your life that you can build your life on with absolute certainty. You don't need any self-help whatsoever.

And the Galatians recognize the importance of the Spirit. That's why Paul speaks about it so much here. You know, it's not simply that they were saying that having the Spirit by faith in Jesus is the way into the Christian life.

But Paul is saying it's also the way on in the Christian life. You receive the Spirit and you continue living the Christian life in the Spirit. So he asked him incredulously in verse 3, just look down at verse 3 there.

After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? And by means of the flesh there, he simply means how the things are done in the world about us.

And as students, you know this. You've got to put in the effort to earn the grade. As you've got to do eight hours work to earn your wage. You've got to do stuff to get stuff.

[20 : 17] The ways of the flesh says do. But the means of the Spirit says everything is absolutely done, completed in Jesus.

There's nothing more that you can do. So having the Holy Spirit is a bit like moving into a house. You buy the house and it's yours. You receive and are given the Holy Spirit and God declares you

right from that day.

You're completely right with him. But then as you move into the house and you start decorating it and you're changing it and you put your collection of bobbleheads there and you put your heart all over this room.

You start making the house look a bit more like your place. And likewise the Spirit moves in your life and he changes your life to look like Jesus.

He moves into the garage and maybe that's the finance room. That's where all the cars are and all the safes are. And he starts helping you to think through how do I think through those things?

[21 : 18] How Jesus wants me to think through. He moves into the lounge. Maybe that's the ambitions room where all the trophies are. He says how do I measure up my ambitions with what Jesus wants for my life?

But the Galatians having started with the Spirit are now going back to a rule book. And Paul says to them you foolish Galatians what are you doing?

So let's just think through some application. If we're a Christian are we keeping in step with the Spirit as it changes us to be like Jesus? Or are we like that reluctant kid being dragged along? Are we constantly kicking against the direction that God wants us to go? That he wants us to be like his Son who died for us day by day?

Or having been given God's perfect word in the Bible, are we reading it spiritually? Are we listening to it? Are we reading it with confidence that God has given us his perfect word?

[22 : 19] But also his perfect spirit who makes the word understandable to us? Or are we standing over it? Trying to think we know better than it. If we are a skeptic here, someone who's skeptical, can we see that we can know God with absolute certainty and clarity?

Because of his Holy Spirit. That you don't have to be skeptical when you come to the gospel. You can be absolutely sure. So the gospel is for skeptics.

It's personal. Christ has died for you. It's direct. God gives you his spirit. And thirdly, it's for everyone. By faith, God promised to bless all nations.

I've got this friend, Greg, who went to Kenya. And he tells a story about how he was trying to hitchhike across Kenya. I did not know this. We all know how to hitchhike. You put out your thumb, go like that.

And you hopefully get to the place you want to go to. But when he started doing this, people started shaking their heads at him in Kenya. Not great. Not great. And eventually, when he had gone 1,000 kilometers across the country, he got to his destination.

[23 : 26] He sat down. He's speaking to the owner of the place where he was saying, everyone shook their heads at me. I couldn't understand it. And they said, yes, that's because in Kenya, that's a very bad sign. You don't do that here.

You absolutely do not do that here. That's the one sign you don't do here. But he had done it across the whole country. And so the Galatians were saying that being right with God was limited to those who were circumcised.

And they were stopping. They were adding on cultural things that they thought were important onto the gospel. And they were stopping people from coming to know Jesus by doing that.

They weren't reading the signs. But Paul says, no, you are right with God through the Spirit by faith. And it's open to all people. If you've got ears to hear and a heart to trust, you can become a Christian.

The gospel is for everyone. And Paul, he explains this in a number of ways in this passage. So very quickly, we'll just look. The big role model that the Galatians had been lifting up was Moses.

[24 : 34] And you've got a diagram on your pamphlet there. And Moses was the one that gave them the law that they were trying to keep. Just after Exodus at Mount Sinai. But Paul, he trumps Moses.

He pulls out his Abraham to their Moses. So Moses was big. But Abraham is a lot bigger. He was the top dog in the Jewish pile of top dogs.

And Paul, to make his argument, he goes back further to Abraham 500 years before Moses. To the very father of Judaism. To whom God gave circumcision as a sign of his promises to make his point.

And so God met with Abraham and gave him great promises. Including that through him, all nations of the whole world would be blessed. And how was Abraham going to get these promises?

Through works of the law? No. The law hadn't been given yet. But simply by believing and hearing. Simply by taking God at his word.

[25 : 40] So look down at verse 6 in our passage. Where Paul quotes from Genesis 15. That speaks of Abraham. So also Abraham believed God.

And it was credited. That is, he was given righteousness. He was declared to be right. It was credited to him as righteousness.

So Abraham's declared right with God in chapter 15. But he's only given circumcision as a sign. Many, many, many years later. In chapter 17 of Genesis.

See, the Galatians, they wanted to limit those who were right with God. Simply to those who were Jewish. But Paul says, to do that. Is to miss the big thing that God's doing in the world.

Is to completely miss the point of the gospel. The reason that we are right with God. Simply by taking God at his word. Is so that there would be nothing to stop people coming to God.

[26 : 41] That we wouldn't be doing the wrong hand signal. That would stop be annoying people. And would stop them coming to believe the gospel. So you simply come by faith.

By hearing. There's nothing to do that you might get wrong. The gospel is for everyone. So just look at how emphatic Paul is about this point in this section. Verse 7.

Understand then. Those, all those, who have faith are children of Abraham. Verse 8. Scripture foresaw that God would justify.

That he would call right. He would make right. The Gentiles. That is everyone in the whole world who wasn't Jewish. Verse 8 again. Scripture announced the gospel. The good news in advance to Abraham.

And then he quotes even further back from Genesis 12. And he says, All nations. Everyone in the whole world. Wherever they've come from. Will be blessed through Abraham.

[27 : 39] Through him. The gospel is for everyone. So if you are skeptical here tonight. You might helpfully want to see an equality between all people.

You're skeptical of power. Because you think that disrupts the equality. And so you might say that all roads lead to God. It doesn't matter what you believe. But the gospel says there's only one road to God.

That's open and available to all people. And it unites everyone. The gospel is for everyone. There's nothing. There are no cultural baggage that's going to stop people coming to the gospel.

All you need is ears to hear. And a heart to trust. And you can be saved. And you can know God. And you can be right with God.

Absolutely. And so the big thing that Paul is writing Galatians. And explains that God is doing in the world today. Is that he's taking people out from the present evil age.

[28 : 39] Out from under rules and customs. And practices that people say you have to do to be right with God. That drives people apart. That separates them. And he's making a united new people.

A new creation. Where there is neither Jew nor Gentiles. Neither slave nor free. Nor any male or female. For you are all one in Christ.

Galatians 3.28 All you need is ears to hear. And a heart to trust. So what might that look like for us in a multicultural city like Glasgow?

Well, how do we make a church a place for all people? All nations? Well, what does it mean for what we do on Sundays? What does it mean for what our teams look like at church?

All the different teams and stuff that we do here. What does it mean for you and I personally? For who we speak to on Sunday? Who we eat with? Who we invite over for a meal?

[29 : 39] And how can we do this stuff more and more and more and more? Not simply just get over the bar and tick the boxes. But do this more and more.

Make the gospel open to everyone. Free from baggage that might stop people hearing the gospel. Well, as we come into land, the gospel is for skeptics.

It's personal. It's all about Jesus. His story becomes my story. It's direct. God lives in you by his spirit. So you can know with absolute certainty that you're right with God.

And how to be right with God. It's for everyone. All you need is ears to hear and a heart to trust.

There is one road to God where all people are united on.

And the gospel is about the son of God who gave up everything to become nothing. Who laid down his power and died for his enemies.

[30 : 38] For those who hated him. Who spoke clearly to us in the Bible. And gave us his spirit. And gives us his spirit that we might know him better. And understand what he has said to us more clearly.

Who gives us a perfect life. Who makes us right with God through his spirit. By faith. And who works within us daily to make us more like him.

To make us more like Jesus. Perfect. Who from the beginning has preached through the scriptures. That the gospel is for everyone.

Who wants all people to be saved. All people to come to the cross. And see the glory and brilliance of Jesus. That they might worship and adore him.

Not as slaves. Not as people trying to tick off a list. But as people who love him and adore him. Who are his children. And have God's spirit living with him.

[31 : 39] And it's hard to be skeptical over the gospel. With a gospel like that. So let me pray for us as we close. Father we thank you that the gospel is for skeptics.

We thank you that you want all people all over the world to be saved. Help us to see Jesus clearly. Help him to be first and foremost in our minds and our hearts.

And in our ears. Help us to long to know him more dearly. Help us to delight in the Holy Spirit. Help us to keep in step with the Spirit.

To see how the Spirit is moving and working in our hearts and lives. For us to be like Jesus more and more. Help us to bring our questions to Jesus.

Help us to ask God when we're not sure and when we don't know. Help us to trust him more and more each day. In Jesus name. Amen.