

“God’s Promise, Our Faith”

Galatians 3:1-9

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Third in Series on God’s Promises

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“Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned him as righteousness.”

- Galatians 3:6

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to claim the promises of your Son and to receive your Spirit; remind us again of how we all are children of Abraham and Sarah. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Message Sermon

There are famous stories about the tight-rope walker Charles Blondin, who set up ropes across Niagara Falls. On many occasions, Blondin would spellbound his audiences with all kinds of feats. Blondin was so confident in his abilities that he would walk backwards as well as forwards, as well as perform various tricks along the way, like sitting on a stool or eating a meal.

One of the most famous tricks Blondin did, however, was when he asked a volunteer to get on his back to be carried over the falls; and in what must have been one of the most supreme acts of trust ever placed by one human being in another, a brave, and perhaps foolish, man stepped forward and got on Blondin’s back. It was quite a scene! Who would do such a thing? (Well, obviously that man did!)

And yet, the question I would to ask is – suppose that halfway across the falls the person who had gotten on Blondin’s back said, “I don’t want to go on anymore! Let me climb down, and I will walk back from here without you.”

One can only imagine the response! Had the person who had gotten on Blondin’s back suddenly take a leave of his senses? How did he suppose that he

would get off and go back? It was too late for that! The proverbial train had left the station. Was the person mad?!¹

Paul's Response to the Galatians

Well, that's exactly the reaction the apostle Paul is having in our passage today: For some reason, many of the Galatians whom Paul had previously taught and welcomed into the faith are now wanting to go back on that faith (3:1). They want hop off and go back on the gospel Paul had proclaimed to them (3:2).

And Paul is upset. Who has cast a spell on these Galatians? Are they out of their minds? Had they lost their senses? Twice in our passage Paul says "You foolish Galatians" (3:1, 3:3)! Other translations say, "witless," "mindless," "irrational." The Galatians seem to have lost the capacity to think straight.

Having begun the journey of faith in Christ, having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, having become members of the church – they turn their back on what Paul had shared and adopt what Paul says are attitudes of the flesh: that is, they revert back to the Torah observance of circumcision, a sign of the physical family of Israel.

It's as if they had forgotten, if not disregarded, everything Paul had passed on to them!² It is as if they have made up a new set of rules to follow, and instead of trusting what God had done through Christ's death and resurrection to make them a part of a new family of faith, they jettisoned *the promises God had made to Abraham and Sarah altogether* (3:6).

That is not what Paul had taught them. What Paul had communicated was that once Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins they no longer needed to go back to the physical sign of the covenant, to circumcision (3:6-9). What mattered was not a physical sign, but a spiritual marking, a life demonstrating the power and presence of the Spirit, a life bearing fruit (Galatians 5:22-23).

It is why in Paul's mind "going back" was not even an option! That is to say, once Paul had *portrayed or exhibited* Jesus as crucified, how could the Galatians think what they are thinking?³

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), 28.

² Ibid., 29.

³ Ibid., 30.

Do You Need a Diagram?

I use the words “portray” and “exhibit” here in the sense of drawing a diagram or in the artistic sense of sketching a picture: on earlier occasions, Paul had literally drawn a picture, or a diagram, of the cross, to show the Galatians what had happened to Jesus.⁴

Now, remember, most people in the ancient world would have known all too well what a cross was about. They would have known what Paul was saying when he spoke of crucifixion. Indeed, just a few verses earlier Paul had reminded the Galatians of how he had been crucified with Christ (2:19), and of how it was no longer he who was living, but Christ who was living in him (2:20).

How much more graphic does Paul need to be?

It reminds me of those many times when I was in high school and the coach of our team would draw up a play at a timeout, only for us to mess it up and fail to follow the instructions! The coach would literally draw us a picture! And then, we would forget it! It was as if we would go back to our old habits!

But let me ask you: Have you ever been in a situation where you just don’t get something, or you have a difficult time understanding? And someone will say to you, “Do you need me to draw a diagram for you?” And you feel about so big!

Well, to bring the point closer to home, it would be like hearing someone saying, “How many diagrams will it take for Christians to understand that Jesus was crucified like a common criminal, and that he died such a death to liberate us from sin and evil? How many pictures does it take for Christians to understand what Jesus did on the cross to forgive them and reconcile them, to God and one another?”

Maybe this is why Martin Luther, the German Protestant Reformer, had the artist Mathias Grunewald paint the picture of Christ crucified, with Luther pointing to it, reminding the church of the gospel.

Maybe the church always stands in the need of such a reminder, a reminder that Paul had been saying all along: that “We preach Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

⁴ Ibid., 30.

How big does the diagram have to be?

How Big a Promise?

Think of the prophets in ancient Israel: again and again, the prophets showed the picture of what God had done in the Exodus, on Sinai, and in the Land. They warned the people of what would happen if they did not turn to God and act accordingly (II Chronicles 7:14). The prophets reminded the people of how God had taken them by the hand out of bondage in Egypt and walked them through the sea, only to watch them go back on God (Numbers 14).

Similar with the Galatians: Jesus had literally taken them on his back on the cross and led them to the other side of death into life! But they fell away and followed a different gospel (Galatians 1:6).

How big does the picture of the promise need to be? Because if we are honest, if we understand scripture and church history, we might answer that question by saying: Pretty big!

Because like the Galatians, it seems we keep forgetting! We keep forgetting that we are Christians not by our own efforts, but by the grace of God, and that we all are children of Abraham and Sarah not by what we have accomplished or done, but by what God has promised (Genesis 12:1-3).

Remember: God reckons Abraham and Sarah as righteous not because of the law (Galatians 3:6). God had not given the law. Rather, God makes them righteous by the trust they have and the obedience they display. They trust God to take to take them to the other side, and God does (Genesis 15).

Faithful Promises

Just as God will with us!

By trusting, yes, but also by acting righteously toward others, in our giving, in our serving, in our sharing – in our families, or in our communities, during our challenges, in this pandemic. God promises to take us to other side. The work that God began in us God will complete (Philippians 1:6), for God is faithful to God's promises (Psalm 71:22).

Despite all the evidence to the contrary! Despite our broken government, despite the quagmires of violence and conflict on the streets of our cities, despite

hurricanes and wildfires, despite the lack of trust in our institutions, despite the ways we find to cancel out each other – God is faithful to God’s promises. The question is, will we?

For surely, *God* will take us to the other side! Surely, our *crucified Savior* is ready to put us on his back and take us from despair to hope, from darkness to light. Surely, God is ready – more than ready – to fulfill in us what he began when we first believed (Philippians 1:6).

That’s what Faith Promise is about – letting Christ carry us to the other side and not getting off half-way, but rather trusting God all the way, with what we have, with who we are. Letting the Spirit finish in us the promise of life abundant – not just for us, but for EVERYONE, for all God’s children!

So don’t look down, Grace Church! Don’t look back!

Look up! Look ahead! And let God take us to the other side! Amen.