

Retrace Your Steps

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[0:00] If you were to spend a day in our house, there is one question you would almost definitely! Where is the car key? There is a box next to the front door where it is supposed to live.! It is never there. And so we are constantly asking one another, where is the car key? The reason there is not another key to fall back on is because we have permanently lost the other car key. Maybe you are not quite as careless as we are, but I am sure we are all familiar with losing things from time to time. Or perhaps getting lost ourselves, walking through a forest or in the hills, navigating a new city. We take a wrong turn and find ourselves somewhere we know we are not meant to be. When you have lost something or lost yourself, how might you find what you need? How can you get yourself back on track? Maybe in a new city you break out Google Maps. Sadly, that does not work with our car key at home.

What does work is retracing our steps. We go back to the start, back to the last point where we know we definitely have the car key and retrace our steps from there so that sooner or later we do find it that we can get on with our day 15 minutes behind schedule. The churches in Galatia had lost something.

They had lost a right understanding of the gospel which they once had, but at some point had left behind. And the result is that they themselves had gone off track. They were lost. They were very lost.

To the point of wandering into some extremely dangerous territory. But Paul's opening words in chapter 3 are to the point, aren't they?

[2:21] Oh foolish Galatians! It's to the point, but hear the cry of a loving parent who is watching their child edge closer and closer to the edge of a cliff.

Having wandered very far off track. It's a shout that grabs the attention. That grabs our attention. And it would have grabbed their attention too.

And that is no doubt part of Paul's purpose as he turns his attention to the Galatians. But the way that Paul shouts out to them, doesn't it?

It tells us something as well of who is responsible for the Galatians going so far off course. Paul does ask, doesn't he, straight after, who has bewitched them?

There is something sinister happening in Galatia. That there are forces of evil trying to undermine the message of the one true gospel. That there are malicious messengers here, but there are also, aren't there, foolish Galatians.

[3:33] The reason they have become so lost is not only because people have come preaching a false gospel, but because they have chosen to listen. That there will always be malicious messengers of false gospels.

Not those who appear wise and winsome, but preach a different gospel to salvation through faith alone in Christ alone. Those messengers will always be there.

But the church bears responsibility for who we choose to listen to. The Galatians had been led astray, but they had also foolishly chosen to go astray.

They are lost. So now, Paul, here in chapter 3, to a lost church, having established his own God-given authority and authenticated the gospel he preached in the opening chapters, he now cries out to the Galatians to get them back on track.

And how can we help people find their way when they are lost? Get them to retrace their steps. That is what Paul does in this passage before us this evening.

[4:49] He brings them back to where they began. And he works forward from there to reestablish them on the right path. He does that in two ways.

First, he brings them back to the beginning of their own salvation. And then secondly, he brings them back to the beginning of Scripture, the Bible. And from both those points, he takes them forward so they can see where they have gone wrong in order to get them back on track. Now, I trust that for most of us here this evening, unlike the Galatians, we have not strayed so far off course to the point of putting ourselves in mortal danger.

I don't think I have to stand here this evening and shout, oh foolish Aberdonians. But maybe a few of us have begun to stray just even just a little off track.

And even for those of us who are still firmly on the right path, we need these words. Either just to correct our course a little, or remind and assure us that the path we are on is the right one so that we would not be foolish.

[6:03] So that we would not give an audience to people who come with a different gospel, but instead wisely stick to the one true gospel. Two points then this evening, or two questions that Paul wants his readers to be kind of asking and answering for themselves.

First of all, what gospel has your salvation always depended on? And then secondly, what gospel has Scripture always preached? Now, let's take the first of those as we get stuck into this passage. What gospel has your salvation always depended on? There were false teachers in Galatia who were preaching, we've seen this haven't we, over the last few weeks, they were preaching a works-based salvation.

If you want to be saved, if you want to be righteous before God on the last day and get into heaven, then here's what you need to do, right? Jesus, yes, but also something more.

In this particular situation in Galatia, that something more was circumcision, but Paul here pushes back on a broader point, speaking against anything, anything that says faith in Jesus alone is not enough for salvation because faith in Jesus equals salvation.

[7:22] Think of it like a math equation, right? Faith in Jesus equals salvation. What happens if you add something else onto faith in Jesus? Well, it's not going to equal salvation anymore, is it?

It's going to equal something very different. But that is a fact the Galatians once knew but had forgotten, so Paul helps them to retrace their own steps, their own story, refreshing their memory with a series of questions.

Just look with me there at verse 2. Paul writes, let me ask you only this. First question, did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and work miracles among you do so by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

I wonder if you noticed there, who appears again and again through those questions? The Spirit, right?

[8:34] But Paul, I think, is being really clever here, not in a sneaky way, but a helpful way. Because there are certain ways, aren't there, of asking a question that makes the answer more obvious.

If I asked you to provide the methodology to thermally induce the denaturation of the ova, of a gallus gallus domesticus, some of you might hesitate to give me an answer.

If I asked you how to boil an egg, I'm trusting most of you would not hesitate to give me an answer. But they're both exactly the same question.

The way we phrase a question can make an answer, can't it, much more obvious. What makes you righteous before God?

But there was a question that was causing confusion amongst the Galatians. They weren't sure how to answer it. So Paul rewords the question.

[9:42] How did you receive the Spirit? Really, it's the same question at the heart, and it's definitely the same answer. But it's put in such a way that makes the answer so much clearer to the confused Galatians.

Because here is what happened, right, in Acts. The book of Acts, when Paul went to Galatia with the gospel, a couple of verses here from Acts 13, when they, that is the people who lived in the Roman province of Galatia, when they heard the gospel, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. That is what happened in Galatia.

Paul, right, he begins by bringing them back to the beginning of their own salvation. And then working forward from there, they received the Spirit by hearing with faith. They know that. And with this question, they no doubt remember that that is back to where they started. So Paul, with his second question, brings them on a step further.

[11:01] Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? It's another way of asking, are we justified by faith only to carry on in our own works?

But the answer is, again, made a little more obvious, isn't it? You don't start with the Spirit and then kind of leave him behind to carry on the rest of the way yourself.

Right? That would be like jumping on a transatlantic flight and then moments after takeoff thinking, thank you very much, plane, I've got this from here. Jumping out and flapping your arms.

That's ridiculous, isn't it? But that is what we would be saying if we thought we started by the Spirit received through faith and then continued by works.

Jumping out of plane, flapping our arms and thinking, I've got this. But we can only start by faith and we can only continue by faith.

[12:12] And we will only reach the finish in that same faith. We've been going through, haven't we, the Westminster Shorter Catechism in the morning services. It's a long time ago now, but a while back we covered these two questions.

What is justification? Answer, justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight only because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone.

That is where we begin. That is the definitive moment of the beginning of the Christian life. But how do we keep going? Next question, what is sanctification? sanctification is the work of God, the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and enabled more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness.

Who justifies us? God. Who sanctifies us? God. God. We start by faith in what God has done. We continue by faith in what God is doing.

Now, that is the point Paul is kind of pressing home in verse 5. How does God work in us? Not as a response to our work for him, but through our faith. A faith that is always leaning on God to do what we cannot in our own strength.

[13:48] know that our salvation is all about faith from start to finish, and we will wisely depend on God and his spirit working in us from beginning to end.

And that, I think, is maybe the point where we can most helpfully kind of press these verses into our own lives. As I said earlier, I trust most of us know, if for no other reason than we've been in Galatians for four weeks already, that we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone.

I hope none of us here this evening are kind of right at the edge of the cliff. But maybe here is a point where we are in danger of drifting just a little off course. We know we have been saved by faith, don't we?

But do you live by faith now? Knowing that you continue every day in that very same faith which you began with.

Even this week, whose strength have you depended on to live out the Christian life? Day to day, are you depending on the spirit?

[15:07] Or maybe from time to time on the works of the flesh? Faith or works? It's so easy, isn't it?

To know that we start by faith and yet then be tempted to try and persevere by our own strength. faith. Now if we have been relying on our own strength over God's spirit, that does not mean our souls are in the same peril as the Galatians who are relying on their works for their righteousness. But it is a step off course and one we want to be quick to correct. We receive the spirit by faith. We are being perfected by that same spirit through the same faith. Because we do not work to get something from God, he works in us as he freely gives us all that he has.

That is the gospel our salvation has always depended on. So Paul begins by bringing the Galatians back to the beginning of their own salvation.

[16:22] Next, he brings them back to the beginning of Scripture. Second point this evening, what gospel has Scripture always preached? The false teachers in Galatia no doubt would have been kind of leaning heavily on the Old Testament thinking it was proof of their point.

Abraham was circumcised, God commanded Abraham's descendants to be circumcised. If you want to be a child of Abraham and receive the blessing his offspring were promised, you need to be circumcised too.

Case closed, right? Well, Paul thinks otherwise because the Bible says otherwise. Verses 6 to 14 of Galatians 3 are laden with Old Testament references, including six direct Old Testament quotations.

By using the Scriptures the false teachers would have so heavily lent on, Paul takes the Galatians right back to the beginning and shows that the Old Testament has always preached the very same gospel that he has been preaching.

one way to salvation. One way to salvation. One path to righteousness before God. Never works. Always faith.

[17 : 50] Paul kind of makes three points within these verses to drive that home. The first of which is that righteousness has always come by faith. But Paul's first Old Testament quotation there in verse 6 comes from Genesis 15 where two chapters before circumcision is first mentioned in the Bible.

And what do we find there? Judy read for this from Romans 4 earlier which kind of spoke about this a little more fully. What do we find there? Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

God declared Abraham righteous. Not because of circumcision. That was more than a decade down the line. Not because of anything he had done but simply because he believed God.

That is what justified Abraham. Before the law had been given there was justification through faith in God's promise and that gospel has never changed.

The promise has been revealed to be a person Jesus Christ the one in whom all the promises of God find their yes and amen. The promise has been unveiled but the faith is the same and the object of that faith is the same.

[19 : 20] Think of a groom on his wedding day. When the bride is walked down the aisle and arrives beside him and he lifts her veil the object of his love does not change in that moment does it?

I don't know. It's the same love for the same person who has been revealed more fully in that moment. That is faith in Christ through history.

through the Old Testament it is faith in a veiled promise. In the gospels the veil is lifted and we have the privilege of beholding the Son of God in all his glory but from Genesis to Revelation the faith is the same and the object of that faith is the same and it is through that faith and it has always been through that faith that righteousness has come.

The conclusion in verse 7 it is those of faith who are sons of Abraham and to show who that faith is for Paul goes back even earlier in Genesis in verse 8 we're in Genesis 12 now the scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith preached the gospel the same gospel we preach today the scriptures preached this gospel beforehand to Abraham saying in you shall all nations be blessed when Paul takes us back to the beginning of scripture we see someone declared righteous by faith and we see that blessing promised not only to Abraham's descendants but to all nations justification through faith alone what was never kind of

God's plan B of salvation once the law didn't work it was never option 2 for those who failed at option 1 it has always been the only means of salvation for sinners faith in the promise of God who we now know is the person of Jesus Christ to have that faith is to be a son of Abraham and with that faith we have all the blessing that was promised through Abraham now again I hope we are not as kind of lost on this point as the Galatians were but we still need to take on board the point here what is it that makes us who we are what defines us as Christians Christians over the last few weeks we have run a membership course which we invited a few people along to as guinea pigs the first time we have done it it was based off the one body conference that we held a little while ago where we thought about the church and what it means to be a member of the church as part of that course we did spend some time thinking about the distinctives of Bon Accords what makes us different from

[22 : 35] Catalyst or Hebron across the roads we're a reformed church aren't we we're a Presbyterian church we baptize the children of believers there are things that are different about Bon Accord compared with some other churches in Aberdeen and it is good to be aware of those things it is good to talk about those things but those distinctives do not define us and they must never define us what defines us is our faith in Jesus that is what makes us Christians before we are

reformed before we are free church people before we are Presbyterians or Sabbatarians we are those who have our faith in Jesus those who together with believers in gospel churches across Aberdeen and across the world have put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for our salvation and if we ever get to the point of putting our trust even slightly in any other of those things thinking we're okay because we're in the right church or because we've grown up in the free church or we have

Christian parents if we find ourselves leaning on anything like that then we like the Galatians I think we are strained powerlessly close to the edge of the cliff faith alone in Christ alone that is all that matters for our standing before God that is all that makes us righteous and if we for a moment add anything else into the equation we're in danger of a different outcome that is the gospel that scripture has preached right from the beginning it has always and only ever been through faith and faith alone that God has declared his people righteous that is the path scripture set off on and that is the path that scripture has never departed from because the second point Paul makes here is that the law never came to offer another way to salvation apart from faith second point Paul makes righteousness has never come through the law verses 10 to 12 just look there with me at verse 10 for all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse for it is written cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them the law was never given as a means of sinners making themselves right before God's purpose that was never its purpose and the law itself says that it presents itself as an absolute perfect standard so that should anyone fail in the slightest way to keep a single command for even a second the law pronounces them not righteous but cursed the law does not say do more good than bad and you'll probably be fine no it says absolute perfection anything else and you are under a curse but where does that leave us but where does that leave us who cannot even live up to our own moral standards never mind

God's the answer is obvious isn't it so why are we given the law why does the law come as we've seen over the last couple of Sunday mornings that there are a few right answers to that question but specifically on the point of righteousness the law is given to show us that we cannot be righteous before God by works of the law it's given in its fullness to be like a mirror which we look into and see our many shortcomings to see that we fall very very far short of perfection and so know that we are under a curse whether we rely on works of the law or not whether we know the law or not we are under its curse you don't need to know the speed limit do you to be found justly guilty of breaking the speed limit but the law is given in its fullness to help us see our guilt that is what it does not in order to drive us to despair but to drive us to the means of salvation that God has provided to see our guilt to know our need of salvation and so then come and put faith in his promise not our works because only those who have put their faith in Jesus are redeemed from that curse that is the third and final point

Paul makes in the passage righteousness comes only through Christ crucified verse 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it is written cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree Christ who alone being the son of God born by the spirit had no sin in him the only one who was not under the curse of the law died a death that proclaimed him cursed cursed because he took our sin our curse upon his shoulders just come back to verse 1 of Galatians 3 with me what does Paul say there it was before your eyes that Christ was publicly proclaimed as crucified curse bearing if

[29:13] Christ bore the curse on the tree and we try and add some of our own works to his what does that say about what we understand to have happened on the cross it says doesn't it we don't think it achieved its purpose but if Christ really bore our curse and it was crucified with him then that curse is gone there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus can you see what the Galatians are flirting with here if we think we still have work to do we are saying aren't we that there is some curse that remains over us that Christ's crucifixion did not remove our curse that is not a slightly different version of the gospel it was a completely discarded gospel to the point of being no gospel at all but praise

God that is not the true gospel because on the cross Christ did fully and wholly redeem us so that when we put our faith in him we are declared not cursed but justified completely and utterly justified so that in Jesus the blessing of Abraham comes to all people the lifting of the veil has made unmistakably clear what has always been true that the sons of Abraham are not those with a circumcision like him but with a faith like him in the promise of God in the person of Jesus and

through that same faith we not only the Galatians but we here this evening in Bonacord Free Church with our faith in Jesus receive the promised spirit the spirit we receive by hearing with faith the spirit we are being perfected by through that very same faith the spirit supplied by the one who became a curse for us that is the gospel that scripture has always preached righteousness always by faith never through works only through

Jesus the Galatians had departed dangerously far from this gospel but it was still there it was still there for them to come back to and stand firm upon whoever you are here this evening whether you have wondered far or only a little but whether you are firmly on this path or have never set foot on it before Paul writes these words in the hope that you would plant your feet firmly!

on it and wisely ignore any invitation to step off it even for a second so let me encourage you to retrace the steps remind yourself of the story of your own salvation remembering that the faith that saved you the faith by which you received the spirit is the same faith with which you carry on today look at the gospel that scripture has always preached see how the spirit comes and know that we are justified never by works but only by faith and only because of Jesus let that be your gospel and you will never get lost but will instead be found righteous in Christ both today and forever more let us pray that that would be the gospel every one of us would hold fast to and never depart from father we do thank you the one true gospel of our lord

Jesus Christ lord we know that our works are insufficient to save us for when we look at your law we see not our righteousness but our unrighteousness and recognize that we are cursed or we would be cursed except that you have made the way to salvation salvation you have prepared have prepared the path for us so that should we come to Jesus Christ in faith alone we would be redeemed from that curse and be declared righteous in your sight not because of anything we have done but only because of what you have done for us in him lord help us to know that gospel to remember that gospel to never depart from that gospel if we find ourselves wondering or straying lord bring us back on the right path that we would be found righteous in

[35 : 05] Christ forever in Jesus name we pray amen