

Ten minutes a day through Lent

A reading from *Galatians*
a short reflection
ideas how to pray
for each day

**First week
26-29 February**

Some Background to Galatians

We live in a world of divisions, where insiders decide who is to be accepted.

It was ever thus. Many in the Jewish community felt cut off from God. When Jesus set about bringing them in, he was opposed and crucified. But his disciples became convinced that, in Jesus, God was unilaterally ending division, by putting himself where they were.

This challenged many Jews. But Saul, a zealous Jew, dramatically changed his mind and joined the Jewish Jesus-followers at Antioch. When they sent him to share the gospel around the Jewish communities in Asia Minor, he quickly discovered that Gentiles welcomed the gospel.

But to become Christians, should they not become Jews... with all that implied?

For several years, the issue was kept below the radar. That could not go on. Saul had been commissioned by Antioch, who followed Jerusalem. The insiders told him to get back in line. Christians were Jews.

Saul, now calling himself by the Gentile name Paul, upped sticks to Corinth and then Ephesus. In a sort of truce, he would preach to Gentiles, leaving the Jews to others.

The truce broke down when some Jewish Christians tried to bring into line Paul's Gentile converts in Galatia, which was quite close to Antioch.

Paul erupted. If Gentile men were obliged to be circumcised, along with other Jewish 'works of the law', such as food laws, they would never join.

His letter to the Galatian churches went to the heart of the crisis. He developed powerful and creative arguments. He could be shocking, some of his reasoning could be bumpy. But, convinced that he was right, he took the argument all the way, memorably declaring that in Jesus, all divisions were brought to an end.

The battle for the direction of Christianity was not won quickly. Happily, Paul persisted. His view eventually prevailed that the gospel of God's love and blessing is for Gentiles as well as for Jews.

For two thousand years, Christians have led the battle to break down the barriers that shut people out from enjoying God's blessing. Yet divisions remain.

Paul's arguments, how he used them and his sheer determination still inspire us to challenge injustice and exclusion. That is the work of the gospel. It is why Galatians is worth studying.

Ash Wednesday

Paul's commission to preach was from God, not from the church
Galatians 1:1-2:10 (parts) *Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead... To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...*

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ... God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles...

When James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

The Judaisers seem to have reckoned that Paul owed obedience to those who had commissioned him. Paul will have none of it. He was commissioned by the God who has launched a new era in Jesus Christ. He will only obey God and the good news made known in Jesus Christ.

His greeting, which will become familiar, is clever: it combines something like the everyday Gentile greeting with the Jewish greeting, to give Grace, a word that he will make central to his teaching, with Peace, the word that speaks of a full relationship with God.

More, he insists that the leadership in Jerusalem agreed that Paul should handle the Gentiles. (Cephas is the Aramaic form of Peter.) The Judaisers should mind their own business.

We often treat people who claim the authority of God as crazy. But it was the claim historically made by the charismatic Old Testament prophets. Paul is putting himself right at the heart of Jewish tradition.

Thursday

A row between Paul and Peter (Cephas)

Galatians 2:11-21 *But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"*

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Paul first line of defence against the Judaisers is that Peter had previously accepted Gentiles. Only when more traditional Jews came along did he start making difficulties for them. Paul scents hypocrisy.

The basic issue is this: what is needed to have access to God's blessings? Only faith in Jesus Christ, says Paul: to trust him that we are forgiven. We can all do this. But Paul's opponents insist that Jewish 'works of the law', in particular circumcision, are needed. That would shut out any Gentiles who are unwilling to undergo circumcision.

To be justified is to be put in a right relation with God. Jews might have agreed that their justification was a gracious gift of God, but insisted that the 'works of the law' were a necessary response to it. That, says Paul, imposes those works on Gentiles as a price. They undermine grace. We need only trust Jesus, who has made God's grace available to us.

Paul tries some pictures. When we become a Christian, it is as if the old sinful me has been crucified with Jesus; as God raised Jesus, so he raises me as a new and justified person. His work, not mine.

Friday

Justification, being made righteous in God's eyes, has always come through faith, not through the "works of the law"

Galatians 3:1-14 *You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing?-- if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?*

Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law."

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law 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 hangs on a tree"-- in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul's second line of defence against the Judaisers is to remind the Galatians that their life-changing experience of God's Spirit came not from 'works of the law', but when Paul's presentation of the cross led them to place their trust in Jesus.

His third line uses the Hebrew scriptures. It was for believing that God counted Abraham as righteous. Abraham was promised that, through him, blessing would come to the Gentiles. That could only be through faith, as Abraham himself was blessed because of his faith.

Paul goes farther. He points out that in the scriptures the works of the law can bring either blessing, or curse - if someone does not fulfil them

all. To fail is, however, inevitable. What then is the hope of justification? It is that Christ took on himself the curse of mankind.

The conclusion must be that it is Christ who enables us, through the cross, to come into right relationship with God. 'Works of the law' will lead to a false track. They are unnecessary, even damaging to the Galatians.

It is hard to disagree with Paul that anything we treat as a requirement will quickly become the price for a lasting secure relationship with God. But when we realise that Jesus has done everything necessary, we become free. All we have to do is trust him and draw down on the account that he has opened for us.

Saturday

The blessing promised through Abraham is received through faith in Jesus Christ

Galatians 3:15-22 *Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, "And to offsprings," as of many; but it says, "And to your offspring," that is, to one person, who is Christ. My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.*

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Paul sees God's promise to Abraham as being like a will. Once made, it stands. The law, given to Israel long after the time of Abraham, did not cancel God's promise to Abraham and his seed.

His next point is curious. God's promises are for Abraham's "offspring" (singular). This can only point to one person – the Messiah. Although "offspring" is a collective noun, Paul's point is that, since the promises are for the Messiah, they must also pass to all those who are "in Christ" by faith, including Gentile Christians.

Is the law then without value? Paul seems to be referring to the sacrificial system which, he says, served to give people the assurance of sins forgiven in the period up to the time of Christ. It is important, but temporary. Not every Jew would be convinced.

Paul's arguments may be imperfect. He is responding to a crisis on the go, not expounding theology to a classroom. Some of his arguments do not reappear in his later letters, while others are slightly different next time around. Paul could look critically at his own position.

One Prayer

Pick up one thought from the reading and bring it before God as a short prayer.

It need not be complicated. God understands what we try to say to him.

One Thought

Think about the issues raised by the reading. What could it mean for me? Is this the way the world is, or the way the world might be? Carry the thought with you through the day and try to remember it before you go to sleep.

One Thank-you

Find something in the reading that you can thank God for. Try to be explicit, however little it may seem. Then thank God for it, just as you would thank someone who gave you a gift.

Sum it up

*Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have
made
and forgive the sins of all those
that are penitent:
create and make in us new and
contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our
sins
and acknowledging our
wretchedness, may receive from
you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and
forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son
our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,*

*in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.*

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name;
your kingdom come;
your will be done
on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.*

*Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin
against us.*

*Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

*For yours is the kingdom and the
power and the glory forever*

DMW

23 February 2020