You stupid Galatians! Galatians 3:1-6

Paul is quite brutal here; he does not spare his readers’ feelings at all. Nobody likes to be called ‘stupid:’ it is a serious insult. Paul’s intention was to bring them up short, and his question to them was also no doubt intended to shock: ‘Has someone now put an evil spell on you?’ When he had been with them, he had vividly portrayed how Jesus Christ had been nailed to a cross for them, and now they were turning their back on the very message that had saved them. Paul was incredulous.

Do you think Paul oversteps the mark here (see Matthew 5:21-22) or is his outburst justified in the circumstances? How do you think he felt and why did he feel that way? What was at stake? Are there any circumstances in which it might be appropriate for us to talk to each other this way? How do you think the Galatians felt on hearing this?

Paul’s next question (3:2) suggests that the Galatians would have experienced something when they received the Spirit; they would have known that something had happened. For Paul, receiving the Spirit was much more significant than any charismatic ‘second blessing’ (Romans 8:9). Sometimes these days people are advised that they should not expect to feel anything when they become Christians. Why do you think we say that, and are we right to do so? What kind of experiences do you so suppose the Galatians had when they received the Spirit? What kind of experiences have you had, and how important have they been to you? If you have not had any experiences, how do you feel about that? Be assured that this in no way invalidates your faith!

Paul’s point is that they responded to Christ and received the Spirit when they heard the good news and responded with faith (3:2-3). Having made a start with the Sprit of God, he scornfully asks whether they are now trying to finish the job by relying on the flesh, or human effort, as some translations put it. Faith is what matters! We are saved in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. But faith has to have an object: we have to believe in something. Paul makes it clear that the Galatians responded in faith when they heard the message of Christ crucified (3:1-3). Why is faith the appropriate response to that message? Why and how does such faith save us?

It looks like the Galatians suffered quite a bit as a result of their faith (3:4); Paul does not spell out what they went through. Has putting your faith in Christ cost you in any way? Have people given you a hard time because of your loyalty to Christ? In what kind of way? How did you cope, and what made your faith worth it? The readers of Paul’s letter were based in the area we know as Turkey, which just makes it into the top 50 places in the world where Christians are persecuted ([World Watch List - Open Doors UK & Ireland - Serving Persecuted Christians Worldwide](https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/)). In Turkey, a Muslim woman who becomes a Christian, or marries a Christian can face house arrest, rejection, verbal abuse, harassment and sexual violence. Female converts in rural areas are most at risk. Men who become Christians can encounter threats, arrest, imprisonment, job loss, disinheritance or expulsion from the family. Pray for your fellow believers there and in other parts of the world where they suffer persecution. How would you cope in their situation?

Paul continues to hammer his message home in 3:5 – God gives people the Spirit and works miracles among them because they believe the message, not because they keep the law, and Paul cites Abraham as an example, quoting Genesis 15:6 to make his point. We may take Abraham as an example of great faith, trusting in God’s promise against all odds (Genesis 15:1-6; 21:5), but that is not why Paul refers to Abraham here. In all likelihood, the teachers who had come to Galatia were saying that circumcision was the true sign of God’s covenant people (Genesis 17:7-14), and that was why the Galatians had to be circumcised. Paul, however, insists that Abraham’s faith was counted to him as righteousness, and maintains that the same was true of the believers in Galatia. Paul was completely overturning the accepted way of understanding and interpreting the story of Abraham here. How do you feel when someone reads and understands the Bible very differently to you? How should you respond, especially is you disagree profoundly with what they are saying? To repeat a question posed earlier in these notes, how much is at stake?

When I survey the wondrous cross

On which the Prince of glory died,

My richest gain I count but loss,

And pour contempt on all my pride.

(Isaac Watts)