

The Gospel according to Abraham

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[0 : 00] The reading today is from Galatians 3, verse 1 to 14, and this can be found on page 1170 of the page of the Church Bibles.

O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this.

Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

Did you suffer so many things in vain, if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the laws or by hearing with faith?

Just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham, and the Scripture foreseeing that God who justified the Gentiles by faith preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.

[1 : 32] For it is written, Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for the righteousness shall live by faith.

But the law is not of faith. Rather, the one who does them shall live by them. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

For it is written, Cursed it is everyone who is hanged on a tree. So that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Great. Thanks very much for reading for us. Please keep that passage open. We're actually really just going to be looking at verses 6 to 9 this morning, but we wanted a slightly longer reading.

It's really good to be with you this morning. Thank you so much for having me. I think it's incredible that you all went on a church family day yesterday, and you're all here at church this morning.

[2 : 39] I did a bit of gardening and DIY yesterday, and I'm exhausted. Well, it's my job, so I have to be here. But thank you for coming. And the second thing just to reassure you with is I didn't apply for the job to be your lead pastor.

I haven't been shortlisted. So you don't need to sit there this morning thinking, can this guy preach? Is he any good? But be assured of our prayers at Crosslinks for you as you appoint your new lead pastor.

Let me say a brief prayer, and then we'll begin. Our Father, thank you so much for the joy of being able to meet together this morning as your people. And thank you for those words from Psalm 46, where you declare that you will be exalted amongst the nations.

Thank you that the gospel has come to our nation, and thank you that you promised the gospel will go to all nations. We pray that you would help us to appreciate that more and see how we can play our most fullest part possible in ensuring that that happens.

For your glory we pray. Amen. There's a little handout on the back of the service sheet. I want us to begin by thinking about the two Gs of how we might be feeling this morning.

[4 : 00] The first is under the sort of grand title of globalization. Globalization. Globalization. It's a word. It first appeared in the 20th century, but it's really come to prominence 20 or 30 years or so ago.

And it speaks of the unprecedented connectivity that has been brought about since the end of the Cold War. Globalization is that interaction and integration of people and businesses and companies and cultures that draws us together from all across the world.

And it's the reality of everyday life for each one of us in this room this morning. And it's brought with it many, many benefits. There's an increase in cultural awareness and appreciation.

We have access to goods and services and TV programs and films from other countries. It's enabled travel and work in far-off places.

And yet, globalization might just have sown a seed of doubt in your mind or confusion, if you're a follower of the Lord Jesus here today. Let me explain.

[5 : 13] It might just be that on a Sunday, when we're particularly thinking about world mission and God's global mission, we feel a little bit uncomfortable with talk about taking the good news of Jesus Christ overseas or partnering with those who do or equipping those who already are.

We might consider it arrogant or imperialistic or dangerously colonial. But if it's not the globalized world that leaves you feeling a bit concerned this morning, it might be the second G.

It might be a sense of guilt that you feel this morning. You see, you've sat on one of these world mission Sundays before in the seats where you're now sitting and you heard a rather good talk, quite a much better talk than you might hear today, from somebody else.

And in fact, you were there two years ago. And in fact, you remember back to Word Alive when you heard an evening talk on world mission. And actually, you're sitting here this morning just feeling rather weary and worn out and rather guilty when it comes to playing your part in global mission.

You see, life just gets busier. The demands on your time and your wallet are more, not less. And if you're honest with yourself as you sit there this morning, you do not have the energy or the inclination to properly engage.

[6 : 40] And no matter how many well-meaning mission organisations tell you how many millions are starving, either starving of physical food or starving spiritually through a famine of the Word of God, it possibly leaves you feeling just a little bit numb.

The two Gs of how we might be feeling this morning, globalisation or guilt. Well, come with me this morning to Galatians chapter 3 and to Western Turkey in the first century.

Let me read from verse 6 to 9 again. Let's see if this stirs us up. Just as Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Know then that it is those of faith or those who believe who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture for seeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, Paul is writing to followers of Jesus who amongst other places lived in this area of Western Turkey called Galatia.

And he's met these Christians on his first missionary journey. You can read about that in Acts 13 and 14. And it's not totally clear why Paul is writing this letter when he does.

[8 : 10] But the common view is he's writing this letter because of a crisis. It's a crisis, not a financial one caused by a cost of living crisis, but a theological one as we read of in Acts 15 verse 1.

And this church, these group of small churches, similar to Grace Church Dulwich in nature, they had been infiltrated by false teachers. The result being that followers of Jesus were beginning to get themselves into serious spiritual trouble.

And at the start of chapter 3, he addresses the Galatians directly. Have a look at verse 1. He says, O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Start of verse 3. Are you so foolish?

Paul is not tiptoeing around here. As one commentator writes, as if Paul is writing, you idiots, verse 1, how can you be so idiotic? Now that is a very strong reaction from anyone, not least the Apostle Paul.

And he's making this strong reaction, we see, have a look at verse 1, for having come to faith in God through trust in a crucified Saviour, these Christians are now turning to a fake, powerless message, which was no gospel at all.

[9 : 30] It was a message that appeared quite religious and therefore quite spiritual. These people would be very interested in the guest service next Sunday. And yet, the gospel they were following was no gospel at all.

It had no power to save people from their sins or transform their lives. Having begun in the spirit, verses 2 to 5, they've defaulted to this works-based religion.

Having believed from their hearts, at one point, they now trusted in the performance of their hands. And I suppose, for many of us who come regularly to church in 2023, in the quiet of our own hearts, we too, all too often, can think that it's in practice our relationship with God comes down to our Christian performance rather than God's grace towards us in Christ.

And when it comes to our part in God's global mission, we think it's all about what we can do for God rather than what God is already doing and has promised to do.

The American writer, Tim Dearborn, writes in his book on missions beyond duty, these words, we do not have a mission for God in the world, rather the God of mission has us in the world.

[10 : 54] Our mission, friends, according to the Bible, is our privileged participation by the Spirit in taking God's word to God's world.

So do you see, mission isn't simply a set of tasks to do or mission partners to support, but it's a consequence of a life of love. God first loved us in Christ, so we love others.

God first loved us and others. Tim Chester illustrates this really well in his excellent book, Mission Matters. He speaks of Chatsworth House, which is one of the finest, grandest houses in all of Britain.

It was used as the location for the film adaptation of Pride and Prejudice in 2005. And if you've been to Chatsworth House, you'll know in the garden there's this huge cascading fountain which runs all the way down a hillside in a series of steps.

The water flows from one step to another step to another step. And Tim Chester says that that is a really good image of God's love. The Father is the fountain of life and love and his life and his love fill the sun and overflow the sun to the world by the Spirit.

[12 : 12] And that love overflows to his people and then through his people it keeps flowing to a needy world. It is the love of God revealed in the good news of the Lord Jesus which is to be the focus of our devotion and so the fuel for our missions.

And that love was revealed to Abraham through this gift of God that God gives of righteousness as he reminds us here in verses 6 to 9.

And it's this true story of God's dealings with this one man Abraham thousands of years ago which plays a crucial part in helping us to understand and respond to God's love which is to be the focus of our devotion and the fuel for our missions.

Three very brief things I want us to consider as we consider the gospel according to Abraham. And the first is Abraham's righteousness. Have a look back if you would to verse 6.

Just as Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now Judaizers were the group who were causing so much trouble in Grace Church Galatia and I suppose one of their arguments why their arguments sounded so compelling is that they used their Old Testaments really well and they referenced Moses as their teacher.

[13 : 48] Well Paul plays a master stroke here and he goes further back than Moses and holds up Abraham as the ultimate example of faith. And Abraham Paul uses sorry two quotes from Genesis to do this.

So the first in verse 6 is from Genesis 15 your Bible footnotes might tell you that. Let me just remind us of the circumstances. Do you remember Abraham was childless he was very old but God promised him a son and he even one day took Abraham outside and he took him up to the night sky in order to count all the stars and he told him so shall your offspring be.

And what did Abraham do with that? Well he believed in God and he believed in what God promised. As imperfectly as he would have done that he still believed.

And what did God do? He reckoned to him righteousness. Which if you're visiting here this morning or new to the things of the Christian faith simply means being in the right with God. Let's slow down.

Let's unpack it a little bit more. What has Abraham done in verse 6? How his faith and his standing before God is relevant to us this morning. Well first God made Abraham a promise.

[15 : 01] It was God's divine initiative. Second Abraham believed God. he heard and he trusted. Third God reckoned that belief or faith or trust of Abraham as righteousness.

God promises Abraham believes God gives the gift. So God didn't accept Abraham or credit to Abraham righteousness on account of anything that he'd done or because he'd been circumcised or because he had kept the law.

Of course not because neither circumcision nor the law had been given at this point but simply because Abraham believed in what God said. God promises Abraham believes God gifts.

And this example of faith given by Abraham is here in the Bible as the blueprint that Jesus asks of us.

God promises we believe God gifts. Now this justification by faith this declaration of objective righteousness as those who are declared not only not guilty for their sins but at the same time perfectly righteous and obedient in God's sight that can often seem like quite an abstract idea but you see the masterstroke that God does by using Abraham and Sarah because they are the illustration for the truth.

[16 : 31] The promised child Isaac came when Abraham get this was a hundred years old and his wife Sarah was a mere ninety years old. Do you see the point could not be clearer.

That son Isaac was not achieved by natural endeavours any more than Abraham's righteousness was. and as for Abraham so for any of us and anyone out there this morning you and I we can enjoy this status of being in the right with God sins forgiven Jesus' perfect record of obedience credited to us no matter who we are or what we've done or what country we were born in God can and God does pardon us and make us perfect in his sight when we turn and trust in him.

It's why those who believe are Abraham's children. Have a look at verse 7 know then that it is those of faith or as the NIV puts it those who believe who are the sons of Abraham.

God promises righteousness we believe in Jesus God gifts righteousness. righteousness. Now we've just tipped into the stage of life where sadly we're attending more funerals than weddings maybe when our children are a bit older the scales will tip back in its favour but at the moment sadly it's more funerals than weddings and we were at one on Friday and I was struck again as we sang that hymn in Christ alone by the line no guilt in life no fear in death this is the power of Christ in me.

How many people in this world who live on your street or who appear on your computer screen at work tomorrow morning carry the weight of guilt around with them or live in the fear of death?

[18 : 41] My wife is a Macmillan nurse a palliative care nurse and she tells me how remarkably different the last days of the Christians are compared to those who have no hope for the future those who live in the fear of death but God through Abraham says this does not need to be the case for any of us in here or any of us out there for Abraham's righteousness that right standing before God can be our righteousness no guilt in life no fear in death this is the power of Christ in me Abraham's righteousness second let's consider the gospel according to Abraham let's notice its reach or its remit because this is vast let me read from verse 8 and the scripture for seeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying in you shall all the nations be blessed now in verse 8

Paul goes even further back from Genesis 15 he now goes to Genesis 12 and you'll remember because you're a well taught church that there God gave to Abraham this promised that he would have a people who would live in a place under the blessing of his rule the quad promise and underpinning that promise would be that the Gentiles or what we could understand is all those from other nations that were not ethnic Israel they too could enjoy the blessings through the seed or the offspring of the promise just glance down the page whilst you're listening to me verse 16 makes it really clear that the seed of the offspring is one man Jesus Christ so the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12 verse 3 reaches its fulfillment in Christ who is offered now to all without exception in you end of verse 8 shall all the nations be blessed so as we marvel at the fact that the gospel was foretold in Genesis 12 and as we think how incredible it is that the mechanism for its reception is made clear in Genesis 15 by faith alone the most marvellous thing I want to present to you this morning is its inclusivity that the good news of Jesus is for all people please have a look again at the end of verse 8 and in you shall all the nations be blessed or as Psalm 46 declares

I will be exalted among all the nations think of it like this a friend of yours who you haven't seen for many many years is getting married and as you arrive you're invited to the wedding and as you arrive at the entrance of the church on her wedding day you tell the ushers at the back you're a friend but you haven't seen her for many years so you're just going to sit at the back you don't want to get too involved you'll be at the back but just as you're making your way to your seat the groom at the front spots you and looks at you and says in front of all the other guests come to the front your family I want you to sit on the front row your family you're part of us we love you now that is the blessing isn't it of inclusion it's the blessing of being part of a family you don't deserve to sit at the front but because of their love for you you've been drawn to the front enjoying all the rights and the benefits of that status so too the family blessing that comes to Abraham is extended to all families or all nations of the world through a faith friendship with the groom

Jesus Christ friends who was the real family of God in Galatia not those who get circumcised not those who follow the kosher food laws who are the real family of God in West Dulwich in this part of South West London I drove past a very smart church building earlier is it them well it might be them but it's only those who believe and trust in what God has promised who are children of Abraham and that has massive implications for us as individuals and you as a church and Tim Chester makes this clear listen to these words all people on earth will be blessed through you said God to Abraham in Genesis 12 this was the vision that propelled Paul to proclaim the gospel throughout the known world and today the promise of blessing to all nations first given to Abraham anticipated in the life of the church and fulfilled around the throne of the Lamb is still the vision that propels us to the ends of the earth if you do not grasp the inclusivity of the gospel you will not engage in global mission when you realise the gospel is for all people especially people who don't look like you and don't have a background like you then you'll start playing your part all nations will be blessed

God is a globalised God he got to globalisation before anyone else did his people are always to have a global perspective so it's not arrogant to share the hope that we have in the Lord Jesus and some here this morning friends need to seriously consider again what part they're playing in taking this inclusive gospel overseas we have about 100 mission partners at Crosslink do you know Helen and Mark and Jane and the guys at Christ Church Central in Soweto they're just ordinary Christians they're not superheroes but they are obedient Christians who are doing what they can to share the love of the Lord Jesus don't kid yourself because you can watch Netflix this evening that the world has been reached by Christ it has not I had the privilege of going to GAFCON back in April with

[25 : 10] John McClurnan our mission director an amazingly encouraging gathering of 1500 Christians from all across the world we were asked Crosslinks because we've been around 100 years can we go and help in nine dioceses to help train clergy the gospel is growing hugely in Africa and yet they want training they want help in their bible handling I'm going to go to Kenya at the end of the month Richard my colleague is going to go to Nigeria at the start of next year but who will go to southern Sudan to Tanzania to Congo to Zimbabwe to Burundi to Uganda to Myanmar the church there is asking us to help them who will go will you pray will you give will you go yourself if you go and do the Cornhill training course over the next three years you will be far more equipped than the majority of the world is to teach the bible we need people ordinary

Christians who will just be obedient and will go but as we draw to a close some of you are avoiding my eye contact and that's fine because you're thinking why would I want to inconvenience myself in this way Rupert we've only just met well finally let's have a look at Abraham's reason and we can all cheer up with this verse 9 so then those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham the man of faith now the language of blessing is rather hit and miss these days whether it's the colleague who lets out a sneeze and you say bless you or you might hear people of a certain generation saying they're living their best life or their blessed life things have fallen into place and Abraham could certainly have said that himself he was extraordinarily wealthy he really would have lived in Dulwich village rather than West Dulwich probably he really was the Jeff Bezos of his day but his material wealth his circumstances was not the promised blessing of

God that was just the byproduct no the blessing that he speaks of was this blessing of righteousness not wealth that he's received by faith and friends the reason why we engage in God's mission is that we long for that blessing of righteousness to be experienced by others for his glory yes but also for their good just look down the page to verse 13 because speaking of Jesus Paul writes this he puts it in a different way he says look Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it's written cursed is everyone who's hanged on a tree so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith what is the blessing that Abraham received yes it's righteousness or justification verse 8 what accompanies that status of being in the right with God it is the presence of

God in your life by his spirit that's what he's teaching in verse 14 John John Stott puts it like this on the ground of Christ's cross the gospel offers a great blessing what is this it is in fact a double blessing the first part is justification and the second is the gift of the spirit it is with these twin gifts that God blesses all who are in Christ he both justifies us accepting us as righteous in his sight and he puts his spirit within us friends I hope you're rejoicing in that double blessing of the gospel today I don't know many of you in this room this morning but I'm sure like me you thought last year was a pretty grim year not least with the war in Ukraine and Christians we're not immune from life's challenges Christians they lose their jobs they get cancer they make massive mistakes they grieve loved ones we're not immune from life's challenges but the

Ukrainian war has really brought it home to me I was reading of the pastor Anatoly Prabuhek and his 19 year old son Alexander who were tortured and shot by Russian troops just 10 months ago in November and that's so awful isn't it and yet what is the consistent request that we're hearing from the church and Christian leaders in Ukraine send more Bibles because we need to keep speaking of the reason for the hope that we have the blessing that we have in Christ last week I spent time with our mission partners Graham and Becky Innes who are serving the Lord in Moldova the poorest country in Europe which borders the Ukraine who woke up when the war started with the sound of artillery fire landing just a few miles from where they lived with their three small children now Graham has made regular visits into Ukraine some he's told us about most he hasn't and he has told us of the gospel growth that is taking place in that country since the war to the extent that the church in Odessa

[30 : 39] Odessa which is a city that has been completely decimated people just left has had to plant three times friends this world is a desperately broken and needy world and the war in Ukraine has brought that home to us and yet when people are desperate they look to the Lord and we need to speak of the Lord Jesus there are 8 million people in this country currently taking medication for depression there's over a million people in this country who are using food banks the rates of teenage suicide are higher than ever before and that is in a western developed country the needs here are great the needs out there overseas dare I say it are even greater and whilst the circumstances of our lives will vary the hope that Jesus offers is steadfast and certain the reason each one of us is to play our part in God's global mission is that he is the only means for which people can receive God's blessing will you pray will you give might you go let me lead us in a short prayer and we'll finish those words again so then those who are of faith are blessed along with

Abraham the man of faith heavenly father forgive us when we take for granted the blessings that you've showered upon us through your son the Lord Jesus thank you for that righteousness that is ours and thank you for the gift of your spirit who is your presence with us throughout our days please would you stir our hearts so we might share the hope that we have in Christ with our friends and neighbours with also those who we don't know in this country and overseas and we pray that for our good but ultimately for your glory Amen