

The Spirit of Grace

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[0 : 00] If you'd take out your Bibles and open to Galatians chapter 3, that would be helpful, page 177. Here are some questions written to God by children.

Dear God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you have now? That's from Jane.

Again, dear God, who draws the lines around the countries? I think it's a very good question actually. Dear God, I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church, is that okay?

And just in case you want to know the answer to that, I'm happy to tell you afterwards. And here is another one. Dear God, did you really mean do unto others as they do unto you?

Because if you did, I'm going to fix my brother. I have a friend who's built a career on asking questions. Very successful career.

[1 : 00] He goes into companies and it's his belief that most people never ask the right questions. And he's written 35 books and consulted all over the world on the basis of asking life-changing questions.

You've ever noticed that questions guide conversations? You can direct a conversation with questions. And if you ever want to uncover what's really going on, you need to ask questions. It's something Jesus did over and over and over throughout his ministry. For example, is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Why are you anxious about what you shall eat and what you shall wear?

Do you think any one of us, by being anxious, can add a moment to our lives? It's a good question, isn't it? Well, how about this one? Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?

Don't like that one. How about this one? What will it profit you to gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Very searching questions. And when the enemies of Jesus gathered around him and wanted to put him down, they would often try to trap him with tricky questions and usually Jesus would answer with another question.

[2 : 17] One of my favourites is when the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem in the temple came to Jesus and said, By what authority do you do these things? And Jesus said, I will answer you if you answer me this question.

Was John's baptism from heaven or from men? And you see, the Pharisees realised that if they said from heaven, Jesus is going to say, Why didn't you follow him? And if they said from men, then the crowd would be against them.

And so they did what every intelligent person does at that moment. They ran and hide. They said, We don't know. Jesus says, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

And Jesus' questions, like all the questions in the Bible, show us something of who we are and who God really is. And today's passage is full of questions.

Six, to be exact. And those six really boil down to two questions and they are brilliant and loving questions that expose how easy it is and how foolish it is for us to wander away from the grace of God.

[3 : 26] The Galatians are like so many people who heard the gospel and turned to the Lord Jesus Christ with joy and delight and abandon. And the early days of their Christian faith were full of adventure and risk.

They had even faced terrible opposition and they had dealt with that wonderfully, all for the joy of knowing the gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ. But it didn't take very long.

Soon their gaze shifted to other things. And a group of teachers came into Galatia saying you need a more sophisticated gospel. And the Christians in Galatia had their ears filled with things that they

had to do.

And the focus of their spiritual vision moved from Jesus Christ, from Him being the centre and circumference of all their Christian faith, life, experience, work and doing onto themselves. And Jesus gradually became one of a number of priorities and they moved from light into darkness. And here in Galatians 3, Paul puts two questions to the Galatians and if they answer them honestly, he will call them back.

[4 : 40] I must say in my own life, I am very grateful to people who have asked me the hard questions. The turning points in my own life have come when people, friends, have been good enough to ask that difficult and penetrating question which isn't always comfortable at the time but cuts through the fog and opens a path to the new way.

So here are two questions. And the first question is in verse 1 and the second question is in verses 2 to 5. I'm going to spend most of the time on verse 1 and Sean told me between the services that everyone was gasping for air by the end of the last sermon wondering when I'd get to the other six questions.

Two questions. The first one is in verse 1. Are you with me so far? Good. Thank you. The first question in verse 1 has to do with seeing.

O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

It's a very good question, isn't it? Something has happened which has acted like a magic charm to take their spiritual eyes, their spiritual focus off Jesus Christ.

[5 : 55] And the question is, who has done this? Who has the power to cast that kind of spell? Paul describes his preaching of the gospel like a painter.

He said, I painted this great big canvas with the brightest colours that I could possibly use. And at the centre and at the focus of that canvas, so that your eyes, your spiritual eyes could see it, was Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

It's not just a vague painting about Jesus. It's a painting about Jesus who was crucified and who remains crucified. His character, ongoingly, is the crucified one.

Because at the centre of the Christian message and at the centre of our life and faith together is Jesus Christ, who remains, in the ongoing sense, of the forgiving crucified one.

That's where our spiritual vision comes from. And the reason for that is that the death of Jesus is the decisive event in history and the decisive event in your life and in my life.

[6 : 56] This is what it means to be Christian. It's not about laws and rules and morality and our performance. It is about the Son of God dying in our place to deliver us from this present evil age.

And the Apostle wants to fill their vision with this picture of Jesus. It is the only place where we see things as they truly are. We see the desperate wickedness and the result of our own sins as the Son of God dies.

And we see the devastating love of God and kindness of God and grace of God towards us. But there is a force at work in my heart and your heart which wants to bewitch us.

It wants to shift our focus away from the cross of Jesus Christ so that we may begin, this is how it works, we may begin to think that God loves me because I'm good and He accepts me because I demonstrate how genuine I am.

This week I received a mock Christmas form letter. I don't know if you get these anymore. We get letters from friends who write to us at the end of the year telling how brilliant their children are and we've stopped writing them.

[8 : 11] This one, this is a mock form letter and it came to me from Texas and I just wanted to read you this paragraph. Daughter Chloe was made senior partner at Ropes and Grey last spring while finishing her dissertation on Velasque.

She took time from her hang gliding and glass blowing grand prize in the Leipziger Festival to vacation on the Cote d'Abige and the Lox Sneg where she redesigned the Pratt and Whitney fan jet engine, wrote her third novel and met lots of new friends.

In July she was named Archbishop of Canterbury but turned it down, she turned it down in favour of conducting the Vienna Philharmonic. Where does she get the time?

As soon as she will finish Passover for the Deutsche Grammophone by the end of March although it may mean missing out on the Masters Golf Championship and dropping her yoga. Now here is the problem that if you've been a Christian for a while you begin to think that your whole life is writing

one of these letters to God charting your achievement and spiritual success and as soon as we start playing that game our eyes get cloudy and Jesus becomes increasingly peripheral to what's really going on in me.

But the Apostle says the cross of Jesus Christ is where the real action is. And the more we focus our lives on Him and on the cross the more our lives are filled with light and transparency the more we understand His grace and the more we're free to live for Him.

[9 : 52] The problem is we are so easily charmed and enchanted by our own moral righteousness. And we keep writing these letters and we keep getting hazy and smoking and losing sight of Christ and we fall under the enchantment of our own moral superiority.

And who is it that's bewitching us? It is the one who wants us to embrace lies and darkness. And one of the ways to see if you are falling under this spell is to ask yourself whether you love His Word.

Whether you have actually allowed your opinions to be changed to be changed by what His Word says. This year for example. Most of us believe what we want to believe what's convenient to believe.

We are so convinced of our own spiritual wisdom and insight we prefer our opinions to the Word of God. But the mark of the person who has the cross of Jesus Christ in focus is someone who doubts their own opinion, who feels that their own heart continues to be full of pride, wonders how it's possible that God can constantly forgive him or her, goes back to that word as a person dying of thirst to the living water and who feels over and over and constantly and consistently we've only just begun.

That's the mark of a growing Christian that we realise how little we know, that we hardly understand the first lesson. That's why Paul uses this word in verse 1 when he says foolish, oh foolish Galatians.

[11 : 29] It's not the usual New Testament word for foolish. It basically means you put your brains on hold. You know, there's no idea in Bible faith, there's no idea in the Bible of faith being blind faith.

You sometimes hear people talk about faith being a leap in the dark. That is not the Bible picture. As Christians have said for centuries, faith, life, the Christian life is faith, seeking, understanding. And to love God with all your mind as we heard this morning from Jesus means using all the power of your thought and intellect and creativity to search out the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ. It has nothing to do with your IQ, everything to do with your spiritual hunger. There ought to be nothing in your life and my life that we give ourselves to more than the understanding and knowledge of God and of his son Jesus Christ.

At the end of your life is that something that people will say of you? That their major creative effort was given to loving God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength.

[12 : 40] That our best engagement is with it. I mean this is what it means to be a disciple. We are life long learners from the time we come to learn about Jesus to the day that we die.

That's what it is to be a disciple. It combines a passionate allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ with an insatiable curiosity. And I hope you do not feel if you've been a Christian for 10 years or 20 years or 30 years or even 50 years that you've got nothing left to learn.

Because our growth in effectiveness and our growth in the spirit largely depends on our humble and all-consuming pursuit of the knowledge of Jesus Christ so that our vision will be filled with him crucified.

That's the first question and it has to do with our vision. Where's your vision? And the second question has to do with hearing. And here we move from verses 2 to 5 as the apostle asks these five questions which are actually one question.

You see in verse 2 if you look at what he says let me ask you only this it's very worrying when someone says let me ask you one question then asks five.

[13 : 50] Actually they are all going the same direction. Did you receive the spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Look at verse 5 does he who supplies you the spirit and works miracles among you do so by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Well listen to it more pointedly in verse 3 are you so foolish having begun with the spirit are you now ending with the flesh?

Here is the first of 20 references in the book of Galatians to the spirit. Later Paul says walk by the spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh because the desires of the flesh are against the spirit

and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh.

You if you're a Christian if you're a follower of Jesus Christ you have two competing principles at work in you two natures at work in your heart locked in mortal conflict which helps explain why if you're a Christian your inner life is marked by conflict.

And it's very interesting that the flesh uses two tactics to lure us away from living by the spirit. You'll need to you'll need to get this the first tactic is by enticing us by immorality and the other tactic is by enticing us by religion.

[15 : 24] The flesh loves religion and that's why that's what Paul is speaking about here in chapter 3. Religion is the default mode of the flesh.

It operates on the principle that I am accepted because I obey rather than I obey because I am accepted. And this is something that you and I are going to struggle with every day until we die that we are tempted always to base our confidence before God and our confidence before others on my spiritual performance and my moral record and my accomplishment rather than on what Jesus has done for me in his death and resurrection.

And as soon as we start playing that game spiritual death takes over. The Christian life is the reverse of this. The Christian life begins Paul says in chapter 3 with receiving the Spirit.

It goes on as God continually daily hourly minute by minute supplies us and constantly gives us the Holy Spirit. The devastating question that the Apostle Paul has for us is this.

Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you began by works of the law or by the hearing of faith? Do you continue the Christian life today by the performance of religion or by hearing with faith?

[16 : 48] Do you grow in the Holy Spirit? Do you get more of the Holy Spirit by spiritual performance, by religion or by hearing with faith? It is either the hearing of faith or religion.

It can't be both. And what the Apostle does here is so helpful to us. He draws a great line down the room and he says on the one side is the preaching of Christ crucified and the hearing of faith and on the other is the works of the law and our religious performance.

Then he says the Holy Spirit comes from this and not from this. Do you remember back in Acts chapter 10 when the Apostle Peter much against his better judgment has been brought by God into the house of Cornelius the Gentile and all the household are gathered round and the Apostle Peter preaches the gospel to the household of Cornelius.

And Cornelius we read in verse 44 this while Peter was saying these words the Holy Spirit fell on all who were listening to these words.

No one is speaking but Peter. No one is pulling strings and manipulating. The people who are listening are doing nothing but listen with open hearts and believing hearts and the Holy Spirit enters their hearts.

[18 : 19] and that is not just how we begin the Christian life that is how we continue. That is how we go deep. That is how we go broad. That is how we go long in the Christian life. Until we are taken to heaven it is by the hearing of faith.

And the reason is because the Spirit of the living God draws our hearts and minds to the Lord Jesus Christ and Him crucified. There is nothing the Spirit loves to do more than to bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.

and He continually draws us away from our religious observances and from our self-absorption and from our immorality and from our religion to Jesus Christ. He takes the word He bears witness to Jesus so that we might be children of God.

It is very important for us you see the Holy Spirit is not someone you can manipulate. He is not someone God gives to those who are specially surrendered or totally devoted or completely open. the Holy Spirit came and comes today by the hearing of faith. There are two kinds of hearing. Most of you can hear my voice if you are in a place where the sound system is working today.

[19 : 32] But there is a different kind of hearing. There is a hearing with faith. Whereas you listen to the Bible being taught you stop hearing my voice and you hear God's voice speaking God's words and as those words enter your heart they only enter your heart and my heart by the Holy Spirit as you trust Christ.

And it explains I think why we feel in our flesh such a magnificent resistance to the word of God. Because with the word of God God supplies the Holy Spirit and when the Spirit comes into our life He brings all the fullness of God into our hearts.

Repentance, hatred for sin, a desire for what is holy and it humbles me from my pride and it affirms me out of my fears. But even after you've been a Christian for many years and even after we've known His steadfast love we still find it hard to accept that God accepts me utterly in the death of Jesus Christ.

It's very difficult for us to accept this. That I don't grow by my performance and by my spiritual greatness and effort and achievement. You know we're suspicious of God.

It can't be that easy. There's got to be something I have to do here. And I think that's one of the reasons we've chopped the word holy. You know Holy Spirit we've chopped holy off and we just today talk about spirit.

[20 : 59] School has spirit. Churches have spirit. We are a community of spirit. As you see spirit is something that we can control. but the Holy Spirit we cannot.

And ever since the day of Pentecost the temptation for all of us who follow Jesus has been somehow to try and separate the Holy Spirit from the word of God to insert ourselves in there and say look the hearing of faith it's not enough.

I've got to satisfy my own expectations at the very least. And I finish with this. I think that's why verse 3 comes to us such a wonderful warning and encouragement this morning.

Having begun with the spirit are you now ending with the flesh? It is possible to begin the Christian life well to begin with the Holy Spirit and then to throw it all away.

It's possible to make a stand for Jesus Christ and endure suffering for your faith to taste his grace and the life of the world to come and to gradually shift from hearing of faith to building your own righteousness again.

[22 : 12] And here is the promise of the passage to us that the same God who gave his son to us will give constantly on goingly will give his Holy Spirit to us he will supply it to us today even as we are sitting here as we hear his word and believe and that each step of our Christian life he will constantly supply his spirit as we continue with the hearing of faith.

It doesn't matter where you are it doesn't matter what you've done true growing and true increasing does not come from leaving the gospel behind but humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God.

Is this not what Jesus said abide in me and you'll bear much fruit? This is what we do we look to him for the spirit and we fill our ears with his words and we fill our eyes with the vision of the Lord Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That's it. Amen. Amen.