



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Children of Abraham

Galatians 3:1-14

Fr. William Klock

October 13, 2024

Have you ever heard of Charles Blondin? He was a French acrobat, daredevil, and tight-rope walker in the middle of the Nineteenth Century. He is most famous for crossing the Niagara Gorge, just above the falls, walking a tight-rope in 1859. He was the first person to do so. And it drew a crowd, so he did it again and again and again. But to keep the crowds coming back he had to keep finding new and more impressive ways to walk the tight-rope across the gorge. He crossed walking backwards. He crossed while blindfolded. He crossed pushing a loaded wheelbarrow. He crossed while walking the tight-rope on stilts. He once carried a chair with him, balanced the chair on a single leg on the rope, then stood on the chair. Another time he stopped mid-rope, cooked himself an omelet (Yes, I'm also struggling to figure out how he did that), ate the omelet, and then continued to the other side. But, I think, his most impressive feat was crossing Niagara Gorge on a tight-rope while carrying his manager. I mean, in terms of physical challenges, that was probably one of the easier things Blondin did. The impressive bit is that his manager trusted him enough to be part of the stunt.

So picture Charles Blondin on a tight-rope, crossing Niagara Gorge with his manager—his name was Harry Colcord—on his back. But then imagine, Harry, halfway across, telling Blondin to stop and put him down. “This has been nice, and I know you told me not to look down, but I did. And the water is churning away way down there as it gets ready to go over the falls and, well, I think I'd feel better if I got off your back and got myself across the tight-rope alone.” Imagine what Blondin would have said to him. “You witless fool!”

Well, that's what Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, having heard that they're talking about getting circumcised. Look at Galatians 3:1-5.

You witless Galatians! Who as bewitched you? Messiah Jesus was portrayed on the cross before your very eyes! There's just one thing I want to know from you. Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of *torah*, or by hearing and believing? You are so witless! You began with the Spirit, and now you're ending with the flesh? Did you really suffer so much for nothing—if indeed it is going to be for nothing? The one who gives you the Spirit and performs powerful deeds among you—does he do this through your performance of *torah*, or through hearing and believing?

So chapter 2 ended with Paul writing about the faithful son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. He's reminded them of the cross and now Paul launches into his main argument with that violent image of the cross at the forefront. “Messiah Jesus was portrayed on the cross before your very eyes!” It's hard to say exactly what Paul means by that. When he was there, did he give them a graphic description of Jesus' crucifixion? Maybe. But everyone in the Roman world knew about crucifixion. I think it's safe to say that pretty much everyone had seen a crucifixion at some point. They knew how awful it was. Whatever it means that the cross was displayed to them, Paul's point is that the Galatians knew all about Jesus and the cross and they should have understood how it had changed everything. They should have understood how it turned everything Jews thought about their identity and everything about the rule of *torah* upside-down. Jesus' death changed everything. Paul had taught them that. When he'd left them, they understood all of this—or so he thought. But now—they're talking about getting circumcised. He's utterly flabbergasted. How could this be, so he practically shouts at them, “You witless Galatians!” I thought I knew you, but now this? Has someone cast a stupid spell on you? Jesus and the Spirit got them halfway

across the tightrope, but now they're looking down at the long drop and the churning waters and thinking that maybe they should play it safe and go the rest of the way with *torah* instead. And Paul's point: *Torah* never would have got you this far. Don't be stupid. Let Jesus and the Spirit take you all the way.

He's got one question for them, but it spills out as six. Who has bewitched you? Did you receive the Spirit through the *torah* or through hearing and believing the gospel? Again, are you really this dumb? Having begun in the Spirit, are you going to end in the flesh? Have you suffered so much for nothing? And, did God give you his Spirit and has he done powerful things amongst you because you obeyed *torah* or because you heard and believed? It all boils down to one question. Paul asks them to consider everything that's happened to them since he first visited them and proclaimed the good news about Jesus the Messiah. He asks them: “Did all that happen because you were keeping the Jewish law?” Of course, the answer is a resounding “No!” Everything that had happened to them had happened through the power of the gospel and the giving of the Spirit as they listened and believed.

And when Paul says that, he makes sure to put *all* the stress on the gospel and on the Spirit and none on them. The gospel was proclaimed, they believed—and then they discovered that it was actually all along the Spirit already at work amongst them. That's the point here. Their lives had been transformed by the Spirit and the Spirit was doing amazing things in their churches, not because of anything they had done—and certainly not because they'd decided to start living according to the Jewish law. Up til now, they hadn't even considered doing that. So, no, none of this had happened because of their works. Just the opposite, their works were actually the work of God's Spirit in them—a gift they'd received, a new life into which they'd been plunged when they believed the good news and were baptised in the Messiah. Their new life had begun with the Spirit. So why, O why, Paul wants to know, are they now turning back to the flesh?

Now, we should pause here and ask what Paul means when he writes about *Spirit* and *flesh*. The Spirit is God's Spirit, but for Paul it sort of becomes a shorthand for new life and new creation. The Spirit is the down payment on the resurrection life of the new world that God has promised. The life of the Spirit is a preview of what life will one day be like when God finally sets his creation (and us!) fully to rights. The Spirit is a preview in the sense that we now have a taste of that life, but the Spirit, through his work in us, also gives the world a preview of what God's new world will be like. Think about that. The Church is—or it should be—a preview of the age to come, of God's new creation. On the other hand, the “flesh” for Paul is shorthand for the corruption, decay, and death of the old age—it's shorthand for life without the redeeming work of Jesus and the renewing work of the Spirit. But, too, Paul also writes about the Jewish people “according to the flesh”—Abraham's biological descendants marked out with the sign of circumcision in their flesh. To be clear, though, when Paul talks about flesh and Spirit, he is absolutely not using these works in the sense of the Greek philosophers—whose ideas persist today—who thought the physical word or the physical body (the flesh) was some bad thing and that the spirit was some good, non-material essence—the real us—that needs to be set free. For Paul, we can think of “flesh” as representing the old age dominated by sin and death and “Spirit” as representing the life of god's new creation.

So obviously the Spirit is important. The Spirit shows that the promises made to Abraham have finally come true through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Spirit is the evidence of the gospel doing its work. This is why, for example, the Pentecostal and Charismatic idea that separated the gift of the Spirit from belief in the gospel is such a problem. (If Paul had been alive in the early Twentieth Century he would, I expect, have written an equally sternly worded epistle to them.) The Spirit is not an add-on to life in Jesus—as if you can believe in Jesus now and

receive the Spirit at some later time—or even not at all. To believe the gospel is to trust in Jesus the Messiah, not just for the forgiveness of sins—as if that's all there is to gospel. To believe in the gospel is to become part of God's promised new creation, to be plunged into the Spirit so that the very life of God himself makes us new. To be in the Messiah is to have the Spirit in you. You cannot separate the two. Anything less than that is, as Paul would put it, “flesh” and, Brothers and Sisters, the gospel which begins with the Spirit ends in the Spirit. It will never leave us stuck in the flesh. The Lord does not deliver you from bondage in Egypt only to leave you stuck in Egypt. He leads you through the Red Sea and into the promised land.

So, to sum up so far: We live the life of the Spirit not because of anything we've done, but because we have heard and believed the good news about Jesus, crucified and risen. Even then, the fact that we have “heard” it, is because the Spirit was *already* at work in us. Now, lets move on to verse 6. Paul writes:

It's like Abraham. “He believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.” So you know that it's people of faith who are children of Abraham.

Remember what I talked about last week. Why was Abraham so important to Paul? Because the story of redemption begins with him. He's the model for all of God's people thereafter. The Lord spoke into a world completely lost in the darkness of paganism and he called Abraham: “Go to the land I will show you and I will give you a family and an inheritance.” It was a crazy promise made by a strange God, but Abraham believed—he *trusted*—and the Lord established a *covenant* with him and with his children. Through them, the Lord would, one day, drive away the darkness and set the world to rights. I said last week, that's what “righteousness” is about for Paul. It's about membership in this covenant family of God. For the Jews in Paul's day the human race was divided into two groups: the Jews were the

“righteous”, the “sinners” were everyone else. It began with Abraham—long before there was ever a *torah* or, for that matter, even before circumcision. The Lord established a covenant with Abraham because of faith and—here's the key point for Paul here that stands like a mountain over this whole passage—*it is this faith, this trust in the Lord that marks out Abraham's family*. It's the faith people, not the circumcision people who will inherit God's promises. Imagine Paul pointing his finger at the Galatians—most of whom were gentiles—as he says this. He's saying, “This means *you*.” They—gentile believers renewed by God's Spirit—they were the sign that God's promises to Abraham were finally coming true. He goes on in verse 8:

The scriptures foresaw that God would justify the nations by faith, so it announced the gospel to Abraham in advance, when it declared that ‘the nations will be blessed in you.’ So you see, the people of faith are blessed along with faithful Abraham.

God's promises were a lot bigger than Abraham. Again, God began a project with Abraham, through which he intended to bring the *whole* world—the nations—out of the darkness of sin and death. And Paul could point to these gentile believers in Galatia and say, “See! You are living proof of the faithfulness of the God of Israel. In you, the blessing promised to Abraham has begun to reach the nations. Brothers and Sisters, the same goes for us. Some of my ancestors were Jews, but most of them were pagans who worshipped oak trees. They heard the good news about Jesus, the Spirit got hold of them, they believed, and the Spirit led them out of the darkness and made them sons and daughters of Abraham and inheritors of his promise. You and I are proof that God is faithful to do what he promised.

And that's Paul's next point. It's *God* who is faithful. The promises weren't fulfilled because Abraham's family was faithful. Some of them were, but on the whole, Israel failed miserably. Look at verses 10-12:

Because, you see, those who belong to the “works-of-the-law” camp are under a curse. For it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not stick fast by everything written in the book of the law, to perform it.” But because nobody is justified before God in the law, it’s clear that “the righteous shall live by faith.” The law, however, is not by faith; rather “the one who does them shall live by them.”

We know that the “faith people” are justified—that means they’re the ones counted as “righteous”, as God’s people—*because* those who put their stock in doing the Jewish law, well, they’re under a curse. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26, “Cursed is everyone who does not stick fast by everything written in the book of the law, to perform it.” Now, Paul’s point isn’t that it’s impossible to keep the law, so don’t bother trying. What he’s saying is that if—like the agitators in Galatia or the people from James in Antioch—if you decide to go down the road of circumcision, well, that’s just the first step. There are 612 other commandments you’ll have to follow and not even the agitators, not even these “circumcision people” were doing all of that. *Torah* is all or nothing.

Here's where Paul is going with this. He's telling the story again. I think we miss that because we've been trained to think in terms of abstract doctrinal propositions, but for Paul it was all about the story of God and his people. It began with Abraham and the family that the Lord miraculously gave him to carry forward his promises to the nations, but along the way the story shows that Abraham's family was infected with the same sin problem as the rest of the human race—the very same problem God's promises were meant to heal.

This is the lens through which the Jews of Paul's day saw themselves. The Essenes at Qumran—the people responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls—they're a great example of this. They saw that Israel was broken and fallen, disloyal and incapable of carrying

forward the Lord's promises. They believed that the Lord was, secretly through them, launching his new covenant to set everything right. Their scroll on *torah* (4QMMT) sums it all up. First there was a time of blessing under David and Solomon, but King Jeroboam sinned and his successors down the line through Zedekiah kept sinning and that brought the curse of Deuteronomy 27 on the nation. Deuteronomy—Moses reiteration of the law before the Israelites crossed into the promised land, it promised blessing if the people trusted the Lord and a curse if they were unfaithful. So the Lord did what he promised. He caused them to be carried way into exile and, even though the people had returned from exile to the promised land, the curse continued—for another five hundred years. Being ruled over by godless gentiles like the Romans was the proof. What Israel needed was a new covenant. Now, the Qumran community was unique in thinking that they were the people of that new covenant, but most other Jews would have agreed with the basic outline of the story. The angry Pharisees who wrote the Palms of Solomon and the Maccabean martyrs would have agreed. Ezra and Nehemiah and Daniel said the same thing: God's people, even after some of them had returned to Jerusalem, they were still sinful, still in “exile”, still “slaves in our own land”. The promises of Deuteronomy 30, the promises that would come true if Israel were faithful, they had never happened. Isaiah's promises of everything set to rights was only a dream. Deuteronomy warned of that if Israel was unfaithful she would fall under a curse and Paul and his fellow Jews saw that curse happening in their own day. Oppression by the pagan Romans was the current iteration in a long line back to Babylon.

So Paul sums up the problem in verse 11 when he says that nobody is justified before God in the law, so “the righteous shall live by faith”. He's quoting Habakkuk there. But that was the big question for Paul and his fellow Jews. There were these big promises. Habakkuk said the righteous shall live by faith, but how were they supposed to

get there? No matter what Israel did, no matter how many reform movements came along, Israel was stuck in unfaithfulness and living under the curse. Buckling down, like the Pharisees, and doing the law even harder wasn't working. That's why Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5: “You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord”. There's a promise there, but pretty much everyone by Paul's day had lost hope. Yes, if we keep the Lord's statutes we will live, but no matter what we do and no matter how hard we try, we fail. So Paul throws up his hands in despair and, I think, most other thoughtful Jews of his day would have thought the same way. What more can we do?

But as discouraging as this story might seem, if you really believed that all of Israel's woes were the curse promised in Deuteronomy 27, there was hope that one day, somehow the blessing of Deuteronomy 30 would happen—including God's renewal of his people by his Spirit. And so, while his fellow Jews felt the weight of Leviticus 18:5, Paul saw the beginnings of hope there. This was the Lord's promise and the Lord is faithful. Paul saw it pointing to a new covenant and a new way of keeping the law—one that would finally work. *This*—this new thing—is what Paul saw had happened—was happening—through Jesus the Messiah. He goes on in verses 13 and 14:

The Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse on our behalf, as it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” This was so that the blessing of Abraham could flow through to the nations in Messiah Jesus—and so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit, through faith.

Paul saying, “It seemed hopeless, but look what God has done! The curse that Deuteronomy promised has been borne by the Messiah. Jesus can do that, because—remember—the *king represents his people*. That's why I stressed last week that it's not just the promise to Abraham that's important,

but that we also remember how David, the King, was incorporated into the promise as well. So Jesus the Messiah, the King came to the place where the pagans, agents of the curse, were oppressing his people and he took the curse on himself. And he didn't do it in some abstract way. It was obvious. It was unmistakable. The cross was *the* great symbol of Roman oppression and brutality. Jesus literally took Israel's curse on himself when he died on the cross.

Israel, through her unfaithfulness, had become like a logjam in the river of God's blessing, so Jesus the King became, himself, a literal son of Abraham and bore Israel's curse himself, thereby becoming the conduit for God to pour out his Spirit. He cleared the logjam. This is what Paul means in verse 14 when he writes that the blessing of Abraham could flow through to the nations in Messiah Jesus". That's the first result of Jesus' death on the cross. The second thing he did was to renew God's covenant. This is what the prophets had promised. The Lord wasn't just going to let Israel rot away as a logjam in the river or even bypass Israel. Through Jesus, God poured out his Spirit on Israel, giving them a new way to keep his law, so that they could, again and as he intended, be the river carrying his blessings to the nations. That's why Paul says we, meaning he and his fellow Jews who believed the good news about Jesus, we "might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith". God has dealt with the logjam created by the law and the unfaithfulness of Israel and he's done so through Jesus' death and through the pouring out of his Spirit. And now Paul and his fellow Jewish missionaries are like the river, freed of the logjam, rushing out to carry the light and life of God to the nations. For Paul, the mission to the gentiles and the fact that in Jesus, the gentile and Jewish believers were worshiping and eating and gathering around the Lord's Table together as one family, this was proof that God is faithful to do what he has promised.

That's as far as we'll go today with Chapter 3. These verses have a reputation for being notoriously difficult, but a lot of that is because for a very long time we've tried to read what Paul says here as abstract doctrinal propositions, when what Paul is really doing is telling the story of God and his people. Paul does it that way in part because it puts the faithfulness of God to his promises front and centre and gives us reason to believe him and to trust him, but Paul also puts this all in terms of this great story of redemption, because it shows us our place in the story. When we look at this in terms of the story, what stands out in the middle of it is that we are, by faith in the Messiah, members of Abraham's promised family. By faith in Jesus the Messiah, not by circumcision or *torah* or anything else. By faith in Jesus the Messiah. Getting that right was the solution to the problems in Galatia. Think about that. When we think about Christian identity, how often do we think of in terms of being sons and daughters of Abraham? This was a really, *really* big deal for Paul. And as much as we sang the song about Father Abraham when we were kids in Sunday School—*I am one of them, and so are you*—this theme is almost entirely ignored down through the history of the church. We even have a whole school of recent evangelical theology committed to the idea that only ethnic Jews are children of Abraham. But this truth, that we are children of Abraham and heirs of God's promises to him, it's absolutely essential to Paul. So much so, that for him the gospel stands or falls on this truth. It means that we're part of the story and it means that as God pours his Spirit into us and makes us his temple, we see his faithfulness to his promises.

Think on that as you come to the Lord's Table this morning. We eat the bread and drink the wine as one family in fulfilment of the promises that the Lord made so long ago to Abraham. We are brothers and sisters, because Jesus has, by his grace, grafted us into this family. The simple fact that we are here together and that God has poured his Spirit into us, is proof of his faithfulness. So eat

the bread and drink the wine, look around at your brothers and sisters, remember our place in this story, and have faith, believe, trust. We live in difficult days and like, Charles Blondin's manager, sitting on his shoulders and looking down at the long drop and the churning waters, we might be tempted to get down and walk the tightrope ourselves. Brothers and Sisters, keep the faith, keep trusting in the God who has proved himself faithful. Jesus and the Spirit have brought us this far and Jesus and the Spirit will see us through to the end.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, who keep us steadfast in faith, we pray. We are fickle, but you have proved yourself faithful. Remind us always of the great story into which you have grafted us so that we live in your faithfulness, redeemed by your Son and renewed by your Spirit. Give us grace to trust and obey you and to be your river of gospel life flowing to the nations. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.