

Freedom through Faith

Sometimes I think I've heard it all as people confronted me with my future: tarot cards, astrology's life-shaping power,



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a demon-possessed man threatening my soul and a high priest of Satan describing the devil's power. There is no shortage of religion or claims to spiritual truth in our world. But the truth that has held my attention and shaped my life through many challenges has continued to be God's grace. Neither external threat nor internal stress has been able to diminish or change my faith because "Jesus Christ was put on display as crucified before (my) eyes!" (v. 1). Although we humans possess an agile imagination, we struggle with a manageable image of God as the being of absolute knowledge and power who cares for us. We shape God as a wise father figure, radiating light and sitting on a great throne looking down at us. Because God understands and loves us, he has become "one with us" in the person of Jesus Christ. But even more, in Christ, God has taken upon himself our fears and failures, offering us his love, forgiveness and life beyond the power of fate and failure. The meaning and possibilities of grace exists only in the love of God.

No wonder Paul confronts his readers: "You irrational Galatians! Who put a spell on you?" (v. 1). Why would they turn away from the cross to a religion of ponderous works and the uncertainty of earning enough points to win a place in heaven? Yet even today, we often find ourselves shaping faith in God as a system of works and rewards, assuring we will walk on golden streets and have "a mansion just over in glory."

Paul confronts their personal experience: "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the Law or by believing what you heard?" (v. 2). Can they not remember the freedom they experienced when they learned that God loved them and forgave them? Were they willing to turn away from the presence and guidance of God's Spirit and return to endless rules and sacrifices? Can there be any real

substitute for God's grace?

"Are you so irrational? After you started with the Spirit are you now finishing up with your own human efforts?" Paul asks. Their reversal makes no sense. Is anyone clever enough or good enough to earn God's attention and favor? There is no adequate answer to such a question.

Then Paul asks them to revisit their spiritual journey. "Did you experience so much for nothing?" (v. 4). What were they before Christ? Do they really want to go back to the uncertainty, the longing for hope, the fear that in the end there would be no future? Faith is not wishful thinking; it is the assurance that Christ has opened the way to God based on God's choice to love us first.

The summation of Paul's argument demands they honestly look within themselves: "So does the one providing you with the Spirit and working miracles among you do this by you doing the works of the Law or by you believing what you heard?" (v. 5). How do you see God? Does God tally the points you earn by good deeds and services performed, then reward you with the miracles of the Spirit? Or does God's Spirit work in you and through you because this is the gracious character of God? Paul's questions sound repetitious because they all go back to the grace of God, his love that we can never earn or deserve, an offer of love made even though God knows many will never accept the gift.

Since Paul is responding to a gospel of works taught by some Jewish-leaning teachers, he turns to the Jewish scriptures to show how God's grace reaches all the way back to Abraham. The Judaizers went back to the original story of God's giving the sign of circumcision to Abraham (Gen. 17), then through Moses all the way to the time of Jesus. Since Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the misleading teachers argued, Gentiles must submit to the Law if they want to be fully God's people. Paul points out that the Gentiles now come to God just as Abraham did: "in the same way that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness ... those who believe

Formations

October 8, 2017

Scripture: Galatians 3:1-9, 15-18

are the children of Abraham" (vv. 6-7).

The key idea in today's text is that faith is made possible by the Spirit. Works do not lead to the Spirit or faith. The Spirit empowers us to do the works, to live as the children of God. In John 16:8-13, Jesus taught his disciples that the Spirit would come into the lives of believers to draw people to God and lead Jesus' followers into the truth and godly actions. Probably the greatest threat to the early church was not from the outside pagan world, but from those who would try to impose legalistic religion over the power of God's Spirit and the daily living out of God's grace.

The modern church world repeats the same errors. In the name of Christ we hear messages of strict legalism, fear of being left behind and sent to hell if you don't embrace a certain interpretation of the Bible, promises of health and wealth if you believe, support for political candidates as "God's choice" and the necessity of observing the Law along with faith. It is important to study the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. There you will find the powerful narratives of God revealing himself to humanity, shame and mystery, defeat and triumph, but every step of the way God's grace unfolding until the culmination of Jesus as God's ultimate gift of life.

History, both recent and past, reveals that without God's love we could never experience life beyond mundane and tragic years. Jesus Christ is the answer to the soul's longing. He is God in flesh, becoming fully part of our world in order to show us the way to God and then opening that way by walking through the doorway of death and inviting us to join him ... not by religious acts and sacrifices, but by faith, by trusting God in and through everything. Christianity is all about the God who loves us and welcomes us to come to him by simple faith.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.