

True Freedom: By Faith Alone

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[0 : 00] Well, every year I'm allowed about one football illustration in my messages, and so here it is. So last season, Manchester City lost the Champions League final to Chelsea.

Maybe you saw the match on TV. Maybe you were there, even, if you were and you can get tickets, then do speak to me afterwards. But Pep Guardiola, who's the Man City coach, he got his tactics wrong in the Champions League final.

Well, Man City were comfortable winners, champions of the Premier League, with a well-rehearsed and successful formula for how they played. And so from the beginning of the season right up to the Champions League final, Pep Guardiola's team selection was spot on for that season.

And yet in the final, he got it badly wrong, and he ended up paying the price by losing to Chelsea.

And the reason is, if you want my punditry skills, he started the match without his two defensive midfielders, Fernandinho and Rodri, who'd been involved all season in pretty much every game and played that role.

And then the coach took them out for the Champions League final, which seemed a strange manoeuvre. So the coach changed the way his team had been playing all season. And it was a miscalculation in what is one of the biggest matches, or what was one of the biggest matches in Pep Guardiola's career.

[1 : 21] And I guess he probably felt a bit foolish because his tactics badly backfired. Now, I don't know whether the Galatians felt foolish. In a reading, you heard Paul call them foolish.

Verse 1, he says, And it's really strong language, isn't it, to write a letter and call people basically idiots.

Paul can't believe that the Galatian Christians would be so stupid. And the reason is, is that they started out well in the Christian life, but that wasn't how they were continuing.

Because they were essentially making a serious tactical error. And Paul needs to tell them. They're now playing in a different kind of way in which they started. And it was foolish because what they were doing was turning away from the gospel of Jesus Christ, that they first believed.

They were taken in by some false teachers. If you've been tracking with us as we looked at Galatians, there were some Jewish false teachers who wanted the Galatian Christians to essentially become Jewish.

[2 : 30] So faith in Jesus plus follow the Jewish works of the law. And these Galatians were being taken in by thinking that they needed to obey the works of the law, like being circumcised so that they could become proper Christians.

And Paul's saying to them, It's foolish and you're wrong. And so the big issue in Galatians, this letter that we're looking at in church, the big issue is what is the key to a relationship with God?

What does it mean to be in a relationship with God? How does God accept people like you and like me? Is it faith or is it the works of the law?

Is it by God's grace or is it through our own human effort? How do we relate to God? Well, Paul is writing to convince the Galatians that the key to a relationship with God isn't good works, but faith.

Not by observing the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. And so what we get in our reading today, chapter 3, verse 1 to 14, is Paul arguing that we don't begin by faith in Jesus and then continue by works, which is what the Galatians were starting to do.

[3 : 47] That is a wrong tactic. It's what Paul's saying. Because it's not that we are justified by faith in Jesus and then it's up to us. No, we begin by faith and we continue by faith.

And that's essentially what it means to be a Christian. So if you're here today and you're considering Christianity, if you're wondering what it's all about or what does it mean to follow Jesus, it is by faith.

And if you're here and you would call yourself a Christian and you want to continue as a Christian, how do you continue? Paul's saying to us, it is by faith in Jesus.

And so to help the Galatians see their foolishness, Paul proves that faith in Jesus is God's way for how we're put right with him. And what he does is he highlights this by mentioning the Galatians' own experience.

And then he uses the example of Abraham so that he can show the necessity of faith. And there really are three points for this afternoon. First of all, the question of faith is there in verse 1 to 5.

[4 : 52] Second, the example of faith there in verse 6 to 9. And then third, the necessity of faith, verse 10 to 14. So first of all, the question of faith. Well, Paul gets the Galatians to remember how they became Christians in the first place by appealing to their own experience.

Now, I'm sure you can remember back to some of the most significant events of your life. Maybe it was getting married or having a child. And those dates are etched on your mind.

If you are a Christian, you'll remember back to the time that you became a Christian. Very real experience for you. And so what Paul is doing here is he's telling these Galatians to remember how they became Christians.

And then he appeals to their experience. So he says, You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

So Paul can't believe how quickly they had fallen for the nonsense of the false teachers. It's as if the false teachers had put a magic spell on them, and they went back to their days of spiritual blindness, when they basically didn't have a clue spiritually.

[6 : 05] But when they were converted to Christianity, Paul's saying Jesus was clearly portrayed as crucified. In other words, it was as if a massive advertising billboard of Christ crucified had been placarded before the Galatians.

Not that Paul was using images in his preaching, like PowerPoint or slides or anything, but Paul's preaching about Jesus and about what Jesus had done on the cross was so vivid and so powerful that the Galatians couldn't forget it.

And yet it's like the false teachers had come, and this image of Christ that Paul had preached, they had defaced it. They'd spoiled it by trying to improve it by adding their own finishing touches.

And because they did that, the Galatians could no longer see the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so the Galatians were thinking that they needed to add their own work to the already finished work of Jesus, to top up their faith in Jesus by adding these Jewish good works to be proper Christians.

And that's why Paul fires a bunch of questions to them about their Christian experience. And you see these questions all the way through verse 1 to 5, and they're all rhetorical questions because Paul is wanting to show them that their salvation is a result of God's work, not their human effort.

[7 : 31] And he wants them to be clear. So just see what he asks. Verse 2, I would like to learn just one thing from you. Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard?

And the answer is by believing what they heard. They received the Spirit by hearing with faith. They didn't receive the Spirit by doing a whole load of good works. So the Galatians had never been circumcised.

They had never obeyed the law. But when they heard the good news of Jesus Christ, they believed it. And when they believed it, they received the Holy Spirit.

And so they were genuine Christian believers. And yet the false teachers insisted that they needed to keep the works of the law, like circumcision, if they were to be proper Christians.

And so Paul asks, again, verse 3, are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? They're foolish because their Christian experience started with the Spirit, but now they were trying to continue with their human effort.

[8 : 42] And so they couldn't deny their conversion experience was God's work. It wasn't theirs, the same as any of us who are Christians. It was God's work. It wasn't us because we were smarter than all these other people.

That's not why we were Christian. It was the work of God's Spirit. And so the Galatians couldn't deny this, and nor could they deny that their Christian experience since they started was also the work of God.

God had been at work in their lives. And that's clear in verse 4 and 5. Have you experienced so much in vain, if it really was in vain? So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?

So it sounds like they'd experienced some kind of suffering for their faith in Jesus already. Not only that, they'd also witnessed God's miraculous work amongst them.

And so Paul's saying, having begun by the Spirit and having lived by the Spirit, it is stupid to now think that you can do it your way, with your effort, without the help of God the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 55] And so it was a bad tactical move for the Galatians because rather than enable them to enjoy their freedom in Christ by living to please God, it's like they were becoming slaves by turning away from the grace of God and banking on their own human efforts.

And that's why Paul appeals to them here in such strong language. It's simply because for any of us, our salvation from first to last is due to the grace of God.

It isn't what we do, it is what God does for us. And that's what the Galatians needed to grasp, and it's what we may need to grasp as well. That it is by faith in Jesus that we become a Christian, and it is by faith in Jesus that we continue as a Christian.

It's never faith to get us started, and then our own efforts to get us to the finish line. The whole of our Christian life is to be lived by grace through faith in Jesus.

And so even if we would call ourselves a Christian, we can still be foolish by thinking that our life is all about what we do instead of what Christ has done for us.

[11 : 09] As if God does his bit, and then he leaves us to do the rest ourselves. But if we have put our faith in Jesus for our salvation, then we should never think that we can top up our account by our own good deeds.

Because we can't refinish the finished work of Christ. And that's why it's never faith in Jesus. Being a Christian doesn't mean faith in Jesus plus my church attendance.

Faith in Jesus plus my giving. Faith in Jesus plus my ministry. Faith in Jesus plus my title in church. Faith in Jesus plus my preaching.

That's one of the biggest temptations for ministers, is to think that, well, yeah, we're saved by faith in Jesus, but I'm also justified by my preaching. So God likes me better because I talk about him lots, and you listen to me on Sundays.

But it's rubbish because we're saved by faith alone. Not faith plus something else, no matter how good or Christian or spiritual that something else is.

[12 : 21] Faith in Christ alone. So if we have begun by faith, like the Galatians, we must continue by faith. So question one, how do you become a Christian?

By faith in Jesus Christ. Question two, how do you continue as a Christian? Answer, by faith in Jesus Christ.

So that's the question of faith. That's the first thing. The second thing is, it follows on in Paul's argument, the example of faith in verse six to nine. After Paul appeals to the experience of the Galatians and then coming to faith and then continuing in faith, what he does is uses Abraham as an example.

And it's a masterstroke in his argument. It's like his ace card that he plays. Because the Jewish false teachers wanted the Galatians to live like Jews. And Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation.

He was the one who started the whole circumcision thing in the first place. If you've been coming to our community groups, you'll have enjoyed our studies in Galatians, sorry, in Genesis about Abraham.

[13 : 28] And that was really to prepare us for what we learn about Abraham in Galatians. And so Paul uses Abraham here as the prime example of faith. And so to these Jewish false teachers who were big on Abraham, Paul saying, okay, let's just see how it was for Abraham.

So verse six, he says, so also Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So Abraham is the perfect illustration to prove that God saves people by his grace through faith and not because of their human effort.

And so while these false teachers pointed back to the law that came through Moses and they pointed back to circumcision that came through Abraham, what Paul does is he goes even further back and he points to God's promise to Abraham, which came first before circumcision and before the law.

And he gave Abraham that promise when he was a childless old man. So he didn't even have any kids to circumcise. That's how far back Paul is going. God promised Abraham he'd have a son and he would have descendants as innumerable as the stars placing money into somebody else's account.

And so God credited Abraham with righteousness. So it was an act of God's grace. Not something Abraham earned, not something Abraham achieved, certainly not something that Abraham merited.

[15 : 01] It was God's grace. He credited Abraham with righteousness. Maybe it's a bit like somebody depositing money into your bank account or somebody giving you a birthday present.

They give it to you. You haven't earned it. They've just given it to you. And so God was declaring Abraham as righteous and free from condemnation, even when, and we know this because we've looked at the life of Abraham, even when Abraham lived an unrighteous life.

Even when Abraham did all sorts of things that were wrong because he was so messed up. And yet that wasn't the basis on which God declared him righteous.

God simply declared him righteous. And that's why Paul's argument here is genius. Abraham's righteousness didn't come through his deeds.

It was credited to him. He was declared righteous long before circumcision was introduced, which is what the Jewish false teachers were saying to the Galatians, you had to do, be circumcised.

[16 : 05] And Abraham's righteousness had nothing to do with the works of the law either because the law only came after Abraham had died.

And so Abraham is this great example for the Galatian Christians and the perfect argument against the Jewish false teachers. So Paul says this in verse seven, understand then that those who have faith are children of Abraham.

He's asking, who's the daddy? Well, Abraham is because he is the father of all who have faith.

That's why the children of Abraham aren't just those who share his bloodline, aren't just the Jews, but the children of Abraham are those who share his faith, like the Galatians, like us Gentiles.

Because what matters is not the physical descent from Abraham, but it's the spiritual. So the true children of Abraham share his faith.

And so Paul drills this even further because it's always been God's plan to justify people by faith. So he says in verse eight, scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announce the gospel in advance to Abraham.

[17 : 23] All nations will be blessed through you. So Paul's quotation goes even further back in Abraham's story, way back to what is really the beginning of the Bible, to the first promise that God ever made to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12.

God promised that he would make Abraham into this great nation and all peoples of the earth would be blessed through him, through his descendants. And so Paul's saying here that God's salvation plan was for all people.

And God made that clear at the very start when he gave his promise to Abraham. And in that salvation plan, it would include not just Jews, but Gentiles too, like the Galatians, and like you and me.

That's why Paul says that God was announcing the gospel in advance to Abraham. Because the Bible story from the beginning right through to the end proclaims one message, which is the gospel of grace.

Gospel meaning good news. The Bible is all about the good news of God's grace, of how God is the one who saves people, and we are not the ones who save ourselves. And so the right response to God's grace is faith.

[18 : 42] It isn't, let me try and work as hard as I can so that God will accept me. It is in response to all that God has done. We exercise faith.

So verse 9 says, so those who rely on faith are blessed, along with Abraham, the man of faith. And so that is the only way that any one of us, you, me, all those people we know and our families, colleagues, friends, all those who live outside, the only way we can be accepted by God is faith. Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish people, was the man of faith. The Galatians were proof that God accepts people on the basis of faith.

And so for you and me, we can become God's children, not through our own merits or anything we can achieve ourselves, but by faith. And it's always been that way when it comes to how human beings relate to God.

We are saved by faith alone. And that is why Christianity is such liberating good news. It is unlike every other religion in the world because every other religion is based on works.

[20 : 03] Christianity is based on grace. Every other religion says to you, do this, don't do that, keep the rules, live a good life, and hopefully if you do enough, if you've achieved enough, then maybe in the end you'll receive salvation.

You'll be accepted. You'll be saved. It is all about human effort, isn't it? Which is what Paul is saying will never, ever, ever get us to God.

No matter how good you are, no matter how hard you try, it won't work. And so he's saying Christianity is not about keeping the rules because we can't.

And it's not about living a good life because we won't. See Abraham for further details. Thankfully, God doesn't accept us on the basis of what we do.

He accepts us by faith alone. So when we, when I or you, put our faith in Jesus, God credits righteousness to us, just like he did with Abraham.

[21 : 10] And that's why Paul's final argument here is about the necessity of faith. And that's our third point. So there's the question of faith, there's the example of faith, and thirdly, there's the necessity of faith in verse 10 to 14.

So we can only come into a right relationship with God by faith. So if the Galatians were foolish enough to think that they could be justified before God by relying on the works of the law, Paul is saying, you need to know where that will lead you.

If you think you can do it your way, like old Frank Sinatra used to sing, I did it my way, then you need to know where that way is taking you. And so Paul points to two different outcomes here in verse 10 to 14.

One outcome involves inheriting blessing, and the other outcome involves being under a curse. So verse 10, he says, for all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.

As it is written, cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law. Paul's quoting from Deuteronomy to show that if somebody relies on the works of the law to be accepted by God, they're under a curse.

[22 : 22] Well, why? Because nobody can obey everything that is in the law. It's impossible. Keeping the law isn't like sitting on an exam where you pass if you get more than 50%, or even lower in some cases.

A couple of years ago, higher maths, the pass mark was 40%. I heard last week that in university language courses, the pass mark is between 30% and 40%.

I'm thinking, why did that never apply when I was at school? Then I might have passed some of my language classes. But that's not how God works. God demands 100% obedience, 100% of the time.

And that is why nobody, no matter how good we might think we are, nobody can satisfy every demand of the law all the time. And so it's foolish to try and keep the law as the way of getting right with God because it only brings God's curse because we can never do it.

Not because there's a problem with the law that God has given, but because there's a problem with us. And the problem is sin. And even if we deny it, deep down in our hearts, we know we're not the person we should be.

[23 : 40] And we're not the person we could be. And so attempting to obey the law, to be saved, only brings God's curse because we can't keep it. What the law does is condemn us.

It can't justify us. So verse 11 says, clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God because the righteous will live by faith. Paul's quoting from Habakkuk to emphasize that it's by faith, not relying on the law, that we're justified before God.

And then he goes on in verse 12, the law is not based on faith. On the contrary, it says, the person who does these things will live by them. Paul's now quoting from Leviticus, where God tells his people to keep his laws and live by them.

But of course, nobody can keep the law. And so his argument goes, if we could keep the law, then we would be justified by the law.

But we can keep the law, so there's no chance of ever being justified by the law. And so the question is, well, how do we escape the curse and then inherit the blessing?

[24 : 52] And the answer is Jesus. And that's where Paul concludes. Look at these last two verses, verse 13 and 14. He says, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for

us.

For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Jesus Christ, so that by faith, we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

So Jesus brings us the blessing because he became a curse for us. Paul quotes Deuteronomy again, saying, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree or hung on a pole.

And the point is, we deserve God's curse because we fail to keep God's law. But Jesus became a curse when he hung on a tree, when he hung on the cross.

And so in the Old Testament, when a person was executed on a tree, it was a sign of divine rejection. They were cursed by God. Everybody could see and tell and know.

[26 : 01] And so Paul is saying that Jesus was cursed by God when he died on the cross. And yet that's where Jesus redeemed us, where he set us free from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

Paul puts it like this in 2 Corinthians, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So what he's saying here in Corinthians and also in Galatians, he's saying Jesus was treated as the lawbreaker. Jesus was treated as the sinner even though he had never done anything wrong.

So Jesus got the curse that we deserve so that we can receive the blessing. It's like a swap. We get the blessing. Jesus took the curse.

There's a great illustration of this kind of substitution in Charles Dickens' novel, A Tale of Two Cities. I don't know if you know the story. Spoiler alert.

[27 : 07] I'm going to tell you what happens even if you don't. So the story, A Tale of Two Cities, it's set in the French Revolution. Charles Darnay and Sidney Carton look very much alike, very similar in how they appear.

And they both love the same woman, Lucy Manette. And Lucy chooses and marries Charles instead of Sidney. And then they have a child. And Charles, who's a French aristocrat, is arrested. He's imprisoned. He's sentenced to death by the guillotine. And then at the end of the novel, Sidney, who's English, he visits Charles the night before he's due to be executed.

And he offers to exchange places with Charles. And Charles, of course, refuses. But Sidney then has him drugged. And then he smuggles him away in a waiting carriage outside.

And then Sidney takes Charles' place and is executed instead of him. And then Charles and his family escape to England. I don't know why England, but England rather than Scotland.

[28 : 07] And it's a moving story of substitutionary sacrifice. And that's what Paul is saying here. He's saying this is what Jesus came to do for us.

Jesus came to be our substitute. We deserve the curse for failing to keep the law, but Jesus took the curse for us so we could receive the blessing.

Listen to what John Stott, the theologian, says about this in his book The Cross of Christ, about substitution. He says, the concept of substitution may be said to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation.

For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God. While the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be.

God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone.

[29 : 14] God accepts penalties that belong to man alone. So can you see if Jesus had to sacrifice himself in order to put people like us right with God, then there is no way we will ever be able to do that ourselves.

But as our substitute on the cross, Jesus willingly took our curse. And so when we place our faith in Jesus, his righteousness is credited to us.

We become perfect in God's sight and we remain perfect in God's sight. That is why it's not just foolish, but it's impossible to rely on our human effort.

Either to start the Christian life and become a Christian or to continue the Christian life. As a football chaplain, one of the things I've discovered from the players is that their belief is essentially that you're only as good as the last game that you played.

You're only as good as your last match. You need to prove yourself on the pitch or you'll be dropped. And so your worth, even your value, comes from how well you perform.

[30 : 31] And it can be so easy to live the Christian life believing the exact same thing. I'm only as good as my last achievement as a Christian. I'm only as good as the quality time I had with God this morning in reading the Bible or in prayer.

Or I'm only as good a Christian as much as I've been able to tell people out in the world about Jesus. Or I'm only as good a Christian as I can give my time to serve the church.

And yet, thankfully, these things don't justify us before God. Our righteousness doesn't depend on the things we do. It doesn't depend on our quiet times, our Bible reading, our prayers, our service in church.

what we do or even what we fail to do isn't the basis on which God accepts us. The basis on which God accepts us, Paul is saying, is through what Jesus has done.

Not what we do. It's through His work on the cross. Not our works by our own human effort. And so becoming a Christian and continuing as a Christian means trusting in the finished work of Jesus for us.

[31 : 51] And so whether you call yourself a Christian or not, this passage challenges us about the necessity of faith in Jesus, doesn't it? Because without faith in Jesus, we remain under God's curse.

Because we can't get right with God through our efforts. But the brilliant news is, even if your efforts towards God have meant you've never done a single thing.

This message means that God will accept you right now if you put your faith in Jesus. You don't need a back history of good works for God to accept you. Put your faith in Jesus now and you're His.

You're His now and forever. Not because you're good enough, because you aren't, but because Jesus could work on your behalf. You're His.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 56] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.