

“Hearing by Faith”
Sermon for 1 May 2016
Gal. 3:4, 7-14 & 2 Tim. 3:14-17

We are returning, after a long Easter hiatus, to our journey through Galatians. And in the Galatians passage before us, a key phrase is the one I chose for the title of this message: **hearing by faith**. My objective here is to expound on the centrality of **hearing by faith** as found in the Galatian crisis *because hearing by faith is just as vital to our own spiritual life today as it was back then*. Let's move and approach that subject.

As we begin this exploration together, I want to comment briefly on Paul's cautionary exhortation to Timothy which was read for us this morning:

2 Timothy 3:14-17 English Standard Version (ESV)

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom[a] you learned it 15 and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God[b] may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Footnotes:

a. 2 Timothy 3:14 The Greek for *whom* is plural.

b. 2 Timothy 3:17 That is, a messenger of God (the phrase echoes a common Old Testament expression).

Paul wants his protege to abide in, continue in, or to remember and stick with and **continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed**. (v.14) This is “hearing by faith” spelled out for us. It is a personal matter: **from whom [pl.] you learned it**—that would be Lois and Eunice, the mother and aunt who disciplined Timothy from childhood on up. They were believers faithfully passing on what had been delivered to them! And Paul notes **how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings through the lens of Christian faith**. The Scriptures available to Timothy were made comprehensible by faith! (Just as they must be to us and to ours.) **All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness**. (v.16) Therefore to assert that the Scriptures are somehow compromised because they were “written by mere men” is inadmissible. In short, Paul wants Timothy to be four things: astute, acute, accurate and adept. This same four-fold goal I commend to us openly. **So that, the messenger of God** (male, or female) **may be complete, equipped for every good work**.

The phrase **hearing by faith** occurs twice in this passage¹. Eight other references to faith and believing in the first fourteen verses of Galatians 3 confirms that faith is the central idea of this passage. (Indeed that salvation hinges on faith, on **hearing by faith**.) The opposing idea, coming from the flesh, is **works**. It occurs four times with one positive reference being to Paul, **who supplies the Spirit to you** (through the preaching of the gospel which is to be heard!) and who **works miracles among you**. (v. 5) So, in order to be astute, accurate and adept, we must conclude that Galatians 3, at least in the first fourteen verses is about **faith**, generally, yes, but **hearing by faith** in particular.

The next obvious thing about this passage is that Paul is expositing a passage from Genesis 12: 1-3 and chapter 15. The first passage is about Abraham, the first of the patriarchs in the so-called historical section of Genesis. Abraham was saved by **faith by hearing** specifically. It is written that **Abraham believed God and it was accounted to Him for righteousness**. (Gen. 15:5-6)—the promise in view was **descendants as numerous as stars**. As yet, Abraham had none! So we are led to this conclusion: that the Old Testament saints, who were saved, were saved by faith just as we are! Believing the promise of God (**to be a blessing to all nations**) has saving power. This is the message/gospel preached to Abraham and the implication is that all who would be saved, would be saved by faith and not by ethnicity, observation of the Law, or by race. *The gospel, or Word preached by Scripture, Who is the Word of God, being heard by faith saved Abraham. So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.* (v. 8-9) If you are astute, you will see this and be astonished; if you are accurate, you will note that the sweep of this truth includes you and yours among believers. Accuracy will also affirm that Paul is correct in his exposition of Genesis 12 & 15. And you will be adept when you apply this truth-filled passage to your life and to the lives of those you live with.

This wider emphasis is something new to me. So I suggest that part of the difficulty we may have with applying the standard of the Word/Scripture to our lives and circumstances is that we look to apply only specific verses *rather than whole narratives (such as an extended passage, a complete parable, a doctrinal position—such as Galatians 3:1-14)*. This “verse only” approach makes our case weaker, not stronger—because the Word of God seems fragmented, in bits, all broken up. But Paul evidences a deeper, more holistic grasp of Scripture (from Genesis to Galatia!). Paul sets the Galatian controversy within the context of, or setting of salvation, by the **hearing of the Word**. This understanding of context is thematic—and not limited to the surrounding verses, or woodenly to just what is on the page. Any passage set in the context of the whole sweep of biblical revelation sits better than that same passage tied up in specialized isolation to its place of occurrence.

¹**Of faith** occurs thrice and **By faith** twice, with **through faith** and **believing** and **believed** each occurring once. Ten references to faith and believing.

When Paul writes: **Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?** He is asking a crucial question related to memory in general and, I think, memory management in particular. He wanted to know if they had learned anything from **so many things** which they had suffered. Had they made any gain? Had they become wiser, better or more devout? Apparently, in v. 5 Paul is self-referencing: he is who supplied the Spirit (as it were) through the preaching of the gospel. The benefit of this preaching, to those who had **hearing of faith**, included the **working of miracles**. The memory of those gifts, and signs, were in the Galatians' recent memory files. Those converting and convicting signs, still being in current memory, were apparently not enough *apart from faith* to enable them to stay the course—that is to maintain the truth that we are saved by faith in Christ alone. “Works” add nothing to our salvation and they cannot make us more righteous than we are already made by the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

The **Judaizers** (meaning Christians who insisted that their co-religionists should follow the Law of Moses *to really be Christians*), Judaizers, Paul's adversaries in Galatia were “bewitching” and misleading the Galatians, saying, “Maybe you are saved by Christ's death and maybe you are “somewhat” righteous *but if you wish to be really righteous, you would complete the arc by fulfilling the works of the Law (circumcision, ceremonial law and dietary observances etc.)*.” This seductive logic only appeals to our flesh, our pride. It is, if we remember, a *counterfeit* gospel (a gospel plus version): no one was ever saved by the Law, neither before Christ, nor after His appearing. It is sheer foolishness to suggest such a thing. It is devilish and it makes a complete wash of everything they had learned about **faith by hearing** through the preaching of the gospel through Paul. We are saved by faith in Christ alone!

This is a very exciting place to pause. It would help if, in preparation from my next sermon on Galatians 3 if you would review the narrative of Joseph (Gen.37, 39-50). In keeping with what I have preached here, read this narrative with a view to seeing how faith operated in Joseph's life. Take notes on how you think faith might have sustained him in good times and hard times (there are both!). Ponder how the promise to Abraham (**you shall be a blessing to all nations**) became the theme of Joseph's life. Pray about how this promise might be applicable to your own life. Write some of that down, too.

Here's a hint: both Joseph and Paul were masters at managing their memories by faith. They are in fact the gold standard for this vital life skill. They refused to take what happened to them at face value, always looking for God's purposes behind, underneath, or through their suffering. We do not have to **suffer many things in vain**—when we return to Galatians 3, May 29, God willing, we shall find wonderful encouragement and strengthening together through **faith by hearing**.

Amen.