

What Kind of Book?

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture: Galatians 2:15-21

Sermon

What kind of book is the Bible? That's what tonight's lesson was about. To sum it up, the Bible is a book that has lots of small stories, and those small stories fit inside one big story, the story of Jesus. The same thing is true of us. We all have our own life stories. But by the grace of God, all our stories fit inside the story of Jesus.

HERE'S WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT. I was reading Acts 13 the other morning. It's a really great chapter. In the central scene, the Apostle Paul is invited to speak in a synagogue. Now, if you know Paul, then you know he's going to talk about Jesus. And that's exactly what he does.

But first he talks about Egypt and the Exodus. Then he talks about the wilderness and about the conquest of Canaan. From there, he moves on to Samuel and to Saul and to David. But he's just getting started. Because there's also John the Baptist to talk about and the enemies of Jesus, including Pontius Pilate. Then there's the Cross and the Resurrection. And there's also Psalm 2 and Psalm 16 and Isaiah 55. And let's not forget the Law of Moses.

It's a whirlwind. Paul moves from one character to another, from one episode to another, from one Scripture to another. And here's what it all adds up to. When Paul talks about Jesus, he does it by telling the big story of the Bible. Because that big story is all about Jesus. And because Jesus is all about that big story.

SO WHEN WE READ THE BIBLE, we always need to keep the big story in mind. Because there's more to the story of Jesus than the thirty-three years from "he was born of the Virgin Mary" to "he rose again from the dead." The story of Jesus reaches back from Bethlehem, back all the way to the beginning. And the story of Jesus reaches forward from the empty tomb, forward all the way to a new heaven and a new earth.

There's more to the story of Jesus than his thirty-three years on earth. And there's certainly more to the story of Jesus than the twelve or so hours from his arrest to his conviction to his execution on the Cross.

Can you imagine your own story being reduced to your arrest and your conviction and your sentence? Can you imagine that? Actually, I bet you can. Because police officers and prosecutors and judges have told your story that way, as if there's nothing else to say about you.

But there's more to your story than a legal conclusion. Do you hear me? There's more to your story. There's more to the story of Jesus, too.

THIS BRINGS US TO GALATIANS 2. And here's what we find there. The Apostle says, "We . . . know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." (That's Galatians 2:16). Maybe you know that Scripture. Maybe you cherish that Scripture. Maybe you pin your hope on that Scripture. And that's alright.

But let's be careful here. Because the point is not our faith in Christ. No; the point really is the faithfulness of Christ.¹ If we make our own personal faith the point, then we run the risk of paying too much attention to our own faith and to how it measures up. *How strong is my faith? How genuine is my faith? How stable is my faith? How smart is my faith?*

But that puts the focus in the wrong place. Because it's not our faith that saves us. It's never our faith that saves us. It's always and it's only the faithfulness of Jesus that saves us! That's a good thing, too. Because our faith never measures up. Because every day we can say that biblical prayer, "Lord Jesus, I have faith; help me with my lack of faith."

TO SAY IT AGAIN, THE POINT REALLY IS THE FAITHFULNESS OF JESUS CHRIST. That's how the Apostle tells the story of Jesus. He always connects Jesus with the story of Abraham and Moses and David, with the story of the Exodus and the Kingdom and the Exile, with the story of the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms.

Paul has all that in mind, when he makes a contrast in Galatians. It's a contrast between the "works of the Law," on the one hand, and the "faithfulness of Christ," on the other. The big question was, How does God's Kingdom come? Or, How will God's promises to bless the world by blessing Abraham—how will those promises be fulfilled?

One answer went like this. And this was the answer Paul himself had lived by when he was a Pharisee. Here it is. The Kingdom of God would come through Israel's faithful-

¹ There is debate about how best to translate passages like Galatians 2:16. Is it "a person is . . . justified by faith in Jesus Christ"? Or is it "a person is . . . justified through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ"? The latter fits better with the way Paul tends to tell the story of Jesus.

ness to the Law. If only Israel would keep the requirements of the Law, then God would come back and God would be Israel's King!

Well, Paul is not a Pharisee anymore. And instead of that answer, he offers a different answer, a better answer. And his better answer is Jesus. Because Jesus is faithful: faithful to the Law, faithful to the Prophets, faithful to the Psalms. Jesus is faithful: faithful to the will of God the Father, that the Messiah should suffer and die in order to deal with sin, in order to set sinners free, in order to love and save the world!

SO HERE IN GALATIANS 2, PAUL IS DEALING WITH THE BIG QUESTION. How does the Kingdom of God come? Either it comes by the "works of the Law" or by something else. And the Kingdom certainly does not come by the "works of the Law."

So what is the "something else"? Does the Kingdom come by our faith? Of course not! No; the Kingdom of God comes through the "faithfulness of Jesus"! That's what Paul has in mind when he writes Philippians 2. This is vv. 6- 11:

Being in very nature God,
[Christ Jesus] did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

There it is. That is how the Kingdom of God comes. Through the faithfulness of Jesus. God be praised!

THEN THERE'S THIS, ALSO IN GALATIANS 2. The Apostle writes: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (That's Galatians 2:20.) Or we could say, "I live by faithfulness to the Son of God."

However we put it, do you see what's going on here? Do you see what Paul is doing? When he tells the story of Jesus, Paul does it by telling the story of Abraham and all the others. In the same way, when he tells his own story—and this is true of your story and my story and the church's story—when Paul tells his own story, he does it by telling the story of Jesus.

THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL. By the grace of God, the faithfulness of Jesus becomes your faithfulness and mine. By the grace of God, the faithfulness of Jesus becomes the faithfulness of all the children of God.

Right now and forever, we live by the faithfulness of the Son of God. And the life we live here and now, we live by faithfulness to the Son of God. Jesus was faithful to the great story of the Bible. Jesus was faithful to the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms. And the faithfulness of Jesus to God the Father—his faithfulness is mirrored by our own faithfulness, our own faithfulness to Jesus.

Yes; our faithfulness is far from perfect. We are cracked mirrors. We are hazy reflections at best. But by the Spirit and the Word, our faithfulness is real. Not so that we can be saved. And not so that we can be justified.

No; we are faithful because God has given us a place inside the big story of Jesus. I should say that again. We are faithful because God has given us a place inside the big story of Jesus.

And that brings us back to the kind of book the Bible is. The Bible is the book that tells the big story of Jesus. And in the Bible, every other story finds its meaning inside that big Jesus story. That's true of our stories, too. Because the main chapter in our stories now reads like this: "We have been crucified with Christ, and now Christ lives in us."

I told you there was more to your story!

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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