

Sometimes You Can't Go Back Home

Galatians 3:1-9

Sunday, October 17, 2021 at The First Congregational
Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Galatians 3:5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

- **Introduction**

In 1940 Edward Aswell, editor for the late novelist Thomas Wolfe, published You Can't Go Home Again, a novel about George Webber, a writer who pens a best seller that makes several unflattering references to his hometown of Libya Hill (based on Asheville, North Carolina). Webber becomes famous but eventually discovers that he is no longer welcome in his old hometown. The book explores the idea that we can't really go home because the world changes and changes in ways we can't control; the hometown of our childhood is gone, our family and friends as we remember them in childhood are gone; the person we were before we left home is gone. The world changes, and sometimes that includes the world that we wish would always remain if only we had some sort of control. A theme of the novel, I surmise, is the pain at not being in control, and I think that pain is at the heart of the problem in this passage from Galatians. If Christianity is a set of rules or a philosophy by which we make the most of our days, we get the pleasure of being in charge. We can make our list of appropriate behaviors, either by some loose understanding of the Old Testament or by some list we create

ourselves. We can live by it, as best as we can and by it have some sense of control. But Christianity is more than that. It is a matter of trusting a person, Jesus Christ, who claimed that the Holy Spirit resides and guides His followers. Then we are no longer in charge of our lives, but rather we are led by someone who is better able to lead us than we are ourselves. We are to do our best, but we're not in as much control as we like to think, and that is uncomfortable. It doesn't feel like home.

- **Main Point**

The key verse for today is in Galatians, a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to churches in a region of what is now the nation of Turkey, expressing his frustration that after experiencing miracles by the Holy Spirit at the preaching of the Gospel, they have decided to grow in faith by rigidly following all the rules in the Old Testament, with probably other rules of tradition added besides, resulting in a legalistic lifestyle when the point is to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

- **God supplies the Spirit to us by the hearing of faith**

The key verse says, "He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" God was supplying the Holy Spirit on an ongoing basis and that Spirit was doing wonderful work in the people (cf. Acts 14:1-3; 8-15). Did the people receive that because they followed the Law perfectly or because the Holy Spirit impacted them with a report that engendered faith or "hearing by faith"? It was the latter.

- **Explain**

It's not that the Old Testament is bad. It's good, very very good. The ancient sacrifices teach us about the cross of our Lord Jesus, the sacred feasts teach us about the nature of God, and the moral law-the Ten Commandments-is still in force. The problem is when we look to them as a set of rules that we keep, and maybe make others keep while ignoring that it all was meant to point us to Jesus in the first place. If we live by rules then at least we have the feeling that we are in control of our lives and there is a certain comfort to that, it feels like home. Being in control is in our nature and it is more comfortable to us to do that, especially if we re-write the rules and declare ourselves to be "good" people, ignoring that salvation comes by grace or not at all. It is harder to live with the question, "what is the Holy Spirit saying to us today" or "am I more like my Savior this year than I was last year?" That's harder to live with, but it is far better to ask and live with these questions, because we need to listen, prayerfully, for the voice of the Holy Spirit and we need to be concerned about our spiritual and emotional growth as individuals and as community.

- **Illustrate**

At one time I had a recurring dream. In it I'm a slow-moving turtle who has lived his whole life by a tree in a valley. Yet somehow, I know that a flood is coming, and I can't stay where I am. In fact, considering how slowly I move, I need to leave right away if I hope to escape. I think that the message is that we can't stay as we are. We are in process, and we

must be willing to ask the Holy Spirit to change us and cause us to grow more.

- **Application**

Be open to seek the Holy Spirit in our lives and worship, without Whom everything we do becomes a cheap imitation of what God does. The application is to ask what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches in this day and age, and make this a common theme in our prayers, and an appropriate discussion point in our fellowship and study of Scripture. Now especially, this is relevant.

- **Conclusion**

Thomas Wolfe was right; you can't go home again. Home changes, and so do we. The early Christians of Galatia adopted a legalistic life of rules because, I suspect, they felt a certain sense of control under that system than by seeking the Presence of the Holy Spirit. But if we want to grow, we have to be willing to ask what the Holy Spirit is saying, and to ask how the Holy Spirit is changing us. It won't feel like home, but then, again, our ultimate home is not in our past, and it is not in anything we can control; it is in heaven, where we desire to go.