



GALATIANS



GALATIANS DEVOTIONAL PREFACE

PAUL's letter to the churches in Galatia is an urgent plea for the centrality of the gospel in all of life (Galatians 1:6-8). Jesus plus anything else is a false gospel (2:3-6). Though our situation is different, the urgency and importance of this message still rings true.

At the beginning of this letter, Paul says that Jesus has rescued us from "the present evil age" (1:4). That is the old world, the world of fallen humanity. Then at the end of the letter he says that Jesus has ushered in "new creation" (6:15). That's what is at stake: Two worlds, two ways of relating to God, two ways of defining yourself, two ways of living life.

We spent three months as a church working through this letter in sermons, small group discussions, and Bible studies. We wrestled with the context in Galatia and how it connects to our own day (e.g. 2:11-14). We too are "prone to wander," as the old hymn says. We seek assurance and belonging and righteousness apart from Christ, through various kinds of law-keeping and boundary markers and self-justification (2:17-21). We all have a tendency to live according to the values and systems of the old world.

This letter called us back, over and over, to the foundation of the gospel, our unity in Christ, and our new life in the Spirit. Now that we are free from the old system of seeking glory from one another, we are free to love one another as God has loved us in Christ. That is the true fulfillment of the law. That is new creation. In our terminology, that is the centrality of the gospel in all of life. (1:11-12; 2:17-21; 3:1-3, 27-28; 5: 13-14, 25; 6:14-15).

This collection of devotionals, written by members of our church, expresses the profound and far-reaching implications of these themes. They were written in real time, two a week, as we made our way through the sermon series. They offer unique insight into the text itself, and also provide a rich variety of personal experience and wisdom.

This work represents the diversity, creativity, and beauty of our church. In that way, it is a celebration of the freedom that is at stake in this letter. Because of Jesus, we are free to serve one another in love, and to celebrate every evidence of grace in anyone's life. This is our mission as church: to help each other believe and apply the gospel in every area of life. "For all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them (6:16).

GALATIANS 1:1-10

BY MELANIE HEBERT

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:1-10)

The opening of Galatians is striking. Paul is not kidding around here. He lays out the Gospel right there in his greeting, twice! He makes sure we know who it is that gave him authority—Jesus. Ever heard of him? He tells the Galatians he is shocked – SHOCKED – that they have turned away so quickly from God. He calls for anyone perverting the Gospel to be cursed. He leaves no question that he is not here to make friends.

It's not feel-good, flowery stuff, but man, I feel like it's what I need now as much as the Galatians must have needed it then. Has the Good News that "Jesus gave his life for our sins, just as God our Father planned, in order to rescue us from this evil world in which we live" (v 4 NLT) been crowded out by the voices of people who deliberately twist the truth? Have I made pleasing people a priority over serving Christ?

The answer is yes, of course. If I don't remind myself daily of that most basic Gospel truth, I am going to be swayed by other things claiming to be truth. I might even take others with me in the wrong direction! In verse eight Paul says "Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Gospel..." All of us are vulnerable to twisting the Gospel.

Our only hope is to constantly remind ourselves and our brothers and sisters of the Good News of the Gospel and to be open about the ways we feel ourselves being pulled away from it. Yes, the world is evil and people lie, but we know the truth. God has rescued us, he is sanctifying us, and we will spend eternity with him.

FOR REFLECTION

Having begun our time in the Galatians, spend some time in prayer ... Praise God for his grace and peace towards you in Christ. Acknowledge the ways in which you feel pulled away right now from the good news of the gospel. Ask God to deepen your roots in the gospel this fall.

GALATIANS 1:1-10

BY GRAEME DONALDSON

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:1-10)

It's never fun to maintain something; it's always more fun to create a new thing. There's excitement at something new. There is buy-in. You're willing to go above and beyond, because you're getting something off the ground. But fighting entropy is a pretty thankless task. Things get tidy just to fall into shabbiness. Clean houses become dirty houses. Functioning systems fall prey to carelessness, lackadaisical attitudes, and eventually they fall apart.

This isn't just true of kitchens and plumbing; it can also plague our commitment to Christ's Gospel. In Galatians 1, Paul's ticked to find out that the church in Galatia is getting their head turned about some other gospel that is promising their heart's fulfillment. He's not upset because it happened, but because it happened so quickly. What is true of Galatia is true of us. We shouldn't be shocked that a shiny, new, fake gospel tugs at our heart. But we should be scandalized about how quickly our heart can turn to it. It apparently happens to angels, too. Indeed, the very first false gospel happened when one angel said "no, my will be done," and all other false gospels are copies of that sentiment.

If we are going to maintain our devotion to Christ's Gospel, then we need to be able to recognize when our hearts are being tugged in another direction. Paul offers two ways to do this. First, he knows we will stay on the straight and narrow if we are able to recognize the Gospel when we hear it. Only when we have the vision of what our fidelity is supposed to look like – that long suffering for Christ in this life – can we then spot false gospels, even if angels are preaching them. There is no sense in studying every single way something can be counterfeit; if you know the real thing, you will be able to spot the impostor.

The second lesson Paul offers in order to remain faithful is a sort of diagnostic test we can run on our souls. It is perhaps one of the hardest truths in scripture. We should be always asking ourselves, "Who am I working for?" Paul says of himself, "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." Here is the hard truth: if the world loves you and your efforts are for them, your heart is in a dangerous place. Yes, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, but we must understand the difference between "love" and "pleasing."

The lesson of Galatians 1:1-10 is this: if our vision of fidelity is limp and bloodless, and if in order to compensate we say "well, I'll just work to make everyone happy," then we are in danger of that terrible curse in verse 9. Praise God that Christ died for, and is working to, "rescue us from the present evil age."

FOR REFLECTION

Praise the Lord for the Spirit that reigns inside of us, that He guides us into truth (John 16:12-15) and reminds us of the gospel of Christ. Spend some time asking God for continued protection from your heart being tugged to follow false gospels and some time confessing the areas in your life where you tend to stray away from the narrow path or tend to please man.

GALATIANS 1:11-24

BY RACHELLE SHUTTLESWORTH

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me. (Galatians 1:11-24)

I came to believe the gospel when I was about eight years old. My mom took me to church with a friend and God revealed the gospel to me quickly. From then on, my mom and I would go to church together. But, for the first five years, my dad never went with us. He never talked to me about church, or asked me anything about my faith. He seemed to hate everything that had to do with Christianity and, to be honest, I still don't know why.

About five years in, my dad – probably tired of my mom asking every Sunday morning – started going to church with us. But he didn't believe. Instead, he seemed to grow colder toward Christianity. He and I would get into arguments about the gospel over and over again, and although my small group was praying for him weekly, I truly believed that he would never understand the gospel.

Another five years passed with no change. If I'm honest, I had given up on him. Then, in October 2009, everything changed. My dad's father was dying and it brought to the surface pain from their tough relationship. One night, with no lead up, my dad got on the phone with his father, forgave him, and essentially shared the gospel with him. After this, the difference I saw in my dad was night and day. It was obvious that he fully believed the gospel.

This passage in Galatians gives us a snapshot of Paul's story and it always makes me think of my dad's story. You see, for the most part, I had given up on the salvation of my dad because I felt like there was no way I could change his mind. But in Paul's sharing of his own salvation story, he highlights a few key things to remember about God.

1. **God does the work.** We may be the ones speaking the words of the gospel, but ultimately it's the work of God. Verse 16 says "[he] was pleased to reveal his Son to me." In other words: God is the one revealing His Son and changing our hearts. So many times with my dad, I found myself carrying the full burden of his salvation on my shoulders. But God only used me to preach the gospel: the burden wasn't on me to change him. That is a job that only God can do.
2. **God knows his people.** Paul says "[God] had set me apart before I was born and called me by His grace." God is active in the world and intentional in our lives. He wants us to know Him. And He knows the best way to reveal his Son to each individual person. For me, it was a Sunday school class. For Paul and my dad it was through a unique-to-God spiritual revelation because that's exactly what was needed.
3. **God is about His glory.** Our greatest purpose in life is to glorify God and He does things because he knows He will be glorified. In this passage we see three different groups glorifying God because of Paul's salvation: Paul, the Gentiles, and the churches of Judea. Paul's conversion seemed impossible (he was trying to destroy the Church of God!), but God revealed Himself to Paul so that people across the world and throughout the years would glorify God. In times of doubt, I find myself being reassured of my faith when I remember my dad's salvation. Before God revealed Himself to my dad, I saw no possible way that he could ever know the Lord. But God stepped in, and I now see so many of my family members glorify God because of my dad's salvation.

It can be easy to forget the incredible power of God. We live in a culture where we explain most spiritual things away, but Paul's story confirms that God is actively changing hearts and doing massive things to bring Himself glory. If the Lord can transform a man actively seeking to destroy His church into one of His most outspoken and influential disciples, there is no doubting His love for us as His people and His omnipotence in our lives.

FOR REFLECTION

Using Psalm 139 as a template, spend time praying for the places, situations, and people you know who need the good news of the gospel. Practice entrusting each of them to God, who knows exactly what is needed and is already at work.

GALATIANS 1:11-24

BY COURTNEY RUNN

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me. (Galatians 1:11-24)

Paul defends the true gospel to the Galatians using the most powerful example he knows: his own story. In my Bible, I have these verses split into three sections with 'Paul's Testimony' scribbled on top, most likely leftover notes from a sermon or workshop on sharing your testimony.

It's a succinct formula to follow: In verses 11 through 14, Paul shares what his life looked like before encountering Christ; in verses 15 and 16, he clearly explains how he encountered Christ; and then in the following verses, he explains what his life looked like after becoming a Christian. While a helpful sequence to follow when sharing your own story, I was struck as I read this week by Paul's distinction between following man's gospel versus God's gospel.

When we buy into earthly saviors, we not only market a false gospel to the world but strip our own redemption stories of their power. While earthly idols and saviors abound, I thought specifically of what I often see marketed to me as a young millennial: self-care, hustle, social-media performance. When I follow the gospel of self-care, I communicate that my comfort, rest and peace aren't found in Christ, but in material items or man-made mantras. The gospel of hustle preaches that through my own strength I can succeed. The gospel of social-media says the external dictates the internal. All contradict the fundamental truths of the gospel; I'm reminded of the chilling verses in Romans 1 about the unrighteous and ungodly who "exchanged the truth about God for a lie."

These gospels will ultimately fail me, their facade revealed when root pains remain unfixed.

While I frequently catch myself believing "man's gospel," I'm encouraged that we have access to the good news that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins and offers eternal redemption. And I'm encouraged that the antidote to worldly salvation narratives is sharing our individual stories of Christ's rescue. Paul doesn't use complex theology to address the Galatians turning to other gospels; he shares his story. He proves that his conversion was not an act of man to be disproved by man but divine intervention.

In verse 24, the chapter concludes with, "And [the church] glorified God because of me." Our stories of encountering Christ are not only life to the perishing, but also encouragement to fellow Christians.

FOR REFLECTION

Are there "gospels from man" that you find yourself frequently believing? How have you seen the power of Christ's gospel at work in your life to save you from these false gospels? Give thanks for the gospel, which truly is the power of God unto salvation!

GALATIANS 2:1-10

BY TREY ARBUCKLE

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:1-10)

The pressure to conform can be intense. And the desire we all feel at times to perform as directed by those with influence is tempting. Paul saw it and called the Galatian Christians to something better. Paul's call wasn't an early form of that "rugged individualism" that Americans have prized for so long. He doesn't point to himself as an example of how to follow your own star, be your own man, etc. Nor does he portray himself as a more significant or powerful "influencer" in contrast to the "influential" men in Jerusalem or even the wanna-be influencers who are attempting to force the Galatians to follow their way of life. Instead, he continues to emphasize what he has been saying all along: he lives in obedience to God's call. And his call to the Galatian Christians is to walk in the freedom that they have in Christ, which he has been fighting to preserve for them.

In the narrative that unfolds, Paul presents two clear paths. If the Galatians listen to the false brothers who have come in to spy on their freedom, they will end up enslaved by them. Not only that, but the Galatians will have opened themselves up to allowing for a culture of dissension, backbiting, and slander. In contrast, Paul shows that the God who saved him, made him free in Christ, and called him to apostleship is the same God who was working in and through James, Peter, and John. Paul had fellowship with these apostles even though Paul was not one of the Twelve, had spent very little time in Jerusalem since becoming a Christian, and was called to preach the gospel to a different group of people than James, Peter, and John. As a result, these men were able to encourage each other in the respective calls of God upon their lives—"go to the Gentiles; we'll go to the circumcised; let's remember the poor."

Walking in the gospel of Jesus Christ frees us from the pressure to conform and allows us to experience the sweetness of genuine fellowship with those who love Jesus and love people.

FOR REFLECTION

Why do you think Paul warns that the false brothers' gospel would "enslave" them? And what does it look like to be enslaved by a false gospel today?

GALATIANS 2:1-10

BY AMANDA MCKINLEY

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:1-10)

As I was reading this week, I was most struck by the work of the Spirit on Paul's character. While not the main point Paul is trying to make in this passage, I couldn't help but be encouraged by the overwhelming grace I saw in how the gospel had transformed his life.

With a backstory like Paul's (religious zealot, persecutor of Christians), how could those around him not be wary of his newfound faith? Some things I'd be wondering: was his conversion genuine? Is his theology off-base? What kind of gospel is he preaching? Is he going to swing to the opposite extreme and persecute anyone who disagrees with him? Will this passion really last?

But in the next 10 verses, we learn a lot about his character and how the gospel has shaped him during those 14 years away from Jerusalem.

- **He is obedient.** v. 2 – 'I went up [to Jerusalem] because of a revelation.' He was called by God, so he went.
- **He is discerning.** v. 2 – He sets the gospel before the leaders privately first.
- **He is humble.** v. 2 – He wants to make sure he 'was not running or had run in vain.'
- **He is confident.** v. 5 – When it came time to make a stand for the gospel, he 'did not yield in submission even for a moment' to those who opposed him.
- **He is faithful.** v. 5 – He preaches the 'truth of the gospel' so that 'it might be preserved for you.'
- **He does not fear man.** v. 6 – He did not fear those who were considered influential .
- **He is compassionate.** v. 10 – He was eager to care for the poor.

Those are big changes in Paul's life. He could've charged into that meeting at Jerusalem with guns blazing, demanding everyone listen up because he's now an apostle and he knows stuff.

But instead, his approach was gentle and discerning. He is others-focused and sensitive to the Spirit. He is willing to take a stand against those who oppose the true gospel. But he is also eager to care for the poor. Even though he's an apostle, he hasn't forgotten the lowly.

This is the kind of Christian I want to be. Not a loud, obnoxious one who shouts it from the rooftops, but a gentle, faithful, confident one who exudes Christ through my every action and word. I love knowing that the God who transformed Mr. Guns-Blazing-Passionate-Paul into a humble, gentle, discerning disciple is the same One who is at work in you and me.

FOR REFLECTION

What aspects of your character lack the aroma of Christ? Pray about them. Confess where you fall short and ask God for help. Believe He is able and faithful to answer your prayers. May we be a winsome body of believers who exude the aroma of Christ wherever we go for the sake of His glory.

GALATIANS 2:11-16

BY STEPHANIE LUCKE

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal. 2:11-16)

I do not enjoy conflict. I mean, can't we all just get along and live in peace with one another? Mostly, I do not like awkward moments in life. They make me feel ... well, awkward. So I avoid it. And then God, in his sense of humor, saw fit for me to marry a man who does not mind conflict and eagerly wades into the awkward. After 12 years of marriage, I have come to appreciate how Glenn has pushed me to see that my conflict-avoidance is often not "love" for the other person but my own sin of avoiding "awkward" and wanting the other person to think highly of me. Sometimes love means having the hard conversation.

Paul is on Glenn's side of the spectrum about conflict. He doesn't mind the awkward, hard interaction when someone else is wrong, even if that person is the beloved apostle Peter. Talk about high drama and intense awkwardness! Paul calls out Peter "to his face" (vs 11) and "before them all" (vs 14), feeling confident that Peter is wrong. Hello, conflict! Paul doesn't care that he's the new apostle on the block. He is fearless to engage when he believes Peter is in the wrong.

What is so important to Paul that he's willing to go toe-to-toe with Peter, risking the unity of the fellowship? Nothing less than the truth and purity of the gospel. If anything is worthy of conflict, it's this! Praise God for Paul, his courage, and his willingness to hold firm to truth when everyone else around him succumbed to a false gospel or fearfully caved to the pressure of the group.

God makes us all with different personalities and gifts, and Paul's contrarian personality (along with the work of the Holy Spirit in his life) means he stood courageously in the face of opposition to the gospel. God used Paul's wiring for the benefit of His church and ultimately for unity. "There is neither Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Paul is willing to have discord with Peter so that true unity in the gospel between Jew and Greek can happen.

What is at the heart of the gospel message of which Paul is correcting and reminding Peter? Verses 16 and 17 give us the answer, which is the central theme of this book – justification in Christ alone by faith alone. What good news this is! Christ alone, and not the law, is what saves us. The "law" of circumcision being forced upon the Gentile Christians by the Jewish Christians is a false gospel, bringing slavery and dissension rather than freedom. If God can accept the Gentile Christian, then surely the Jewish Christian should accept him. Do we think we are in the right when our standards are higher than God's? Surely not!

FOR REFLECTION

Celebrate the ways God makes each of us unique and uses us at different, crucial times in gospel work. Give thanks for the gospel work Paul defended! Repent of any false gospel you might be putting your hope in today.

GALATIANS 2:11-16

BY GRACE RAO

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal. 2:11-16)

Fear, pride, and shame are powerful motivators. When fear has both hands on the wheel, we short circuit the part of our brain where rational thought and compassion live. We instinctively mobilize in service of self. Then there's shame and pride – two sides of the same coin – that stem from my assessment of your thoughts about me. If they are positive, I puff up with pride. If they are negative, I collapse in shame. In these verses and other accounts of Peter's life, I see how these emotions drive him. I also see myself in his instincts, and I'm guessing you may too.

When Peter, fearing the criticism from some of the Jewish Christians, shamefacedly withdraws from the Gentiles, he lends credibility to the false gospel that acceptance comes through faith in Jesus plus being culturally Jewish. He acts out of step with the gospel by withholding his fellowship from believers whom God had already accepted on the basis of faith. This was essentially racism fueled by cultural pride and self-doubt. Tim Keller writes that Paul, in response, reminds Peter "God did not have fellowship with you based on race or culture ... so how can you have fellowship on the basis of race and culture?"

I see a few important takeaways here:

- Our posture towards believers: Today Paul's words may sound something like: "Grace, God did not accept you based on your [passion issue, political narrative, etc.], so how can you reject other believers based on that very thing?" If you're like me, you may proudly think, "I haven't rejected anyone." But, like many gospel applications, Jesus also cares about our heart. Helpful diagnostic questions are then: Who in the church do I write off, look down on, or want to ignore? Who in the church am I unable to hold in my mind with love? These answers may point to where we unwittingly add to the gospel, and where Jesus wants to speak rest to our souls.
- What to do with emotions: I think an honest application of Paul's words to Peter requires some consideration of our emotions. It's helpful to see emotions like a GPS that provides information and points to something. We can look at our pride and shame, see what's underneath, and let it lead to the fear that we're not enough on our own. Then we can move from fear to humility and confession, where Jesus meets us, releases us from the hustle, and gives grace when we withhold our fellowship. In that pattern of understanding and repentance, Jesus changes us and his Church to look and function more like him.

We don't really know Peter's response to Paul. However, I think Peter shows us the result of letting the gospel meet us in our deepest places of fear, pride, and shame, because approximately 15 years after Peter withdraws from the Gentiles he addresses a group of Jews and Gentiles together as "Beloved" and proclaims "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Peter 2). I pray we would be encouraged by the evidence of grace in Peter's life and bravely look inward and outward in light of the gospel.

FOR REFLECTION

Read back over the diagnostic questions above and think about any difficult emotions you may have been wrestling with lately. Are there places you have been adding to or disbelieving the gospel without realizing it? Sit with these things in prayer before God for a few minutes, allowing the Holy Spirit to minister to you and remind you of the truth.

GALATIANS 2:15-21

BY SUSAN HUNT

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Galatians 2:15-21)

“Susan, you’re living in bondage.” As her discerning words sunk in, the pit opening in my stomach revealed a fear I had worked to keep hidden. You see, I had been following Jesus for some years at this point, but the days of childlike faith had faded. Living with the constant dread that I was “doing this whole Christian thing wrong”, I had resolved I was probably doomed for condemnation. I felt like I didn’t measure up to the Christians around me. They seemed so put together, possessing a theological depth I did not have, praying lengthy prayers, and “hearing from the Lord” in unique ways. Plus, I had sinned so many times as a believer ... had it been one time too many? Clearly I had invented a twisted religious system of acceptance, believing there were additional things I needed to be doing to be a “real” Christian. This belief held me in bondage and I was spiritually paralyzed.

In this passage in Galatians, Paul articulates the fundamental tenant of the gospel: As believers, we are justified NOT by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 16). To be justified is to be “declared righteous”. It is to be accepted and approved. It is the complete opposite of condemnation. This means there is absolutely nothing you or I can do to earn approval before God because he already approves of us thanks to the work of Jesus. Pause ... and let that reality sink deep into your heart.

The Lord has been faithful to transform my heart, perspective, and understanding of His grace since that conversation with my college mentor nearly twenty years ago. Still, even in recent months, I am learning just how deep my approval idol runs and how easily tempted I am to seek justification elsewhere ... whether this be in my workplace, from friends, family members, or, (*gulp*) yes, even within the church.

Paul’s words ring true, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

There is SUCH freedom in surrender and in recognizing it is His justification of us through His death and resurrection that breaks our bondage. We are vessels of His mercy and all we must “do” is believe, trust, rest. May we find our hope in Jesus alone, who declares us righteous and completely frees us to love and live fully in Him.

FOR REFLECTION

In what areas in your life are you living in bondage? Ask the Lord to graciously show you where you might be relying on your works instead of Christ alone for justification. Turn to Him today, feel your deep need, receive His grace and mercy, and walk in freedom and joy.

GALATIANS 2:15-21

BY ALEX MOSER

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Galatians 2:15-21)

What is the measure of one's life? This question hums at the deepest parts of the human heart. Whether it's as an inquisitive child looking at dandelions during his recess, or as a middle-aged professional rubbing their back from a day of poor posture at a desk, we are constantly evaluating the weight and worth of our lives in some way.

After graduating college, I felt like I walked off a cliff into an abyss of existential questions, all centered around one in particular: what will I make of my life? My friends had dispersed into their own individual careers, and I felt alone. I had defined myself in relation to this group of people that now was cast into different parts of Austin and the country. What did that mean for my life now?

Paul gets to the heart of how he sees it: the measure of one's life is found in the crucified and risen Christ. To base your worth off anything else would be to say that Christ died for no purpose. The agitators in Galatia, and the Judaizers in Antioch, said that we need both a crucified Messiah and observance of the Torah to follow that Messiah. As Paul looks at his own life, though, he sees that to follow the Messiah means that he has "died to the law, so that I might live to God."

Rather than being defined by a group of friends who align in their socio-economic status, like my college friends, my worth is found in the crucified and risen Christ. This connects me to those who also find their worth in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It's not about finding the group I most connect with personally. It's about seeing the wide array of people that no longer live as themselves but live as Christ, who lives in them. I often get caught up in trying to find the right group of people to justify what my life will be like, but Paul says that this group of people is not one where a set of personal preferences are aligned. It's the one where the Messiah indwells his people.

FOR REFLECTION

What do you base your worth in? Is it your job, your family, your money? Repent and confess any areas of your life that you obtain worth from that is not Christ. Ask God to strengthen your faith and solely remember that our true worth is found in the crucified and risen Christ.

GALATIANS 3:1-14

BY DAVID ULIANA

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:1-14)

I have a vivid recollection of the night God saved me. There was a paradigm shift, from a self-determined striving to prove myself worthy of God's acceptance to a recognition of my total inability to stand in his presence, ever, without embracing the gift of Christ's righteousness. It was a beautiful dependence. Yet, like Paul's audience in Galatians 3, more often than not I find myself far from that place of reliance on Christ alone, enticed (or bewitched!) away by the false saviors of “try harder” and “God helps those who help themselves.” Instead of depending on God in everyday life, I relegate His role in redemption to merely my justification. I'll take it from here! While quickly admitting my total dependence on God for salvation, I then live like sanctification is my responsibility, as if Christ walked out of the grave to pass me the baton and watch as I run off. I treat God as an observer instead of the source of power and growth in my life.

Paul makes it very clear that this is foolishness (v.3).” We are invited to advance in the Christian life the same way we started—in faith! The blessings and gifts of the Christian life come by faith (v.5)! So why do I find myself living “by the flesh” (human attainment) instead of “by faith” (v.11)? Why is it so tempting to trust in myself for change? Why am I slow to pray and ask God for strength, instead relying on willpower?

Many answers come to mind, but the common root is an insecure identity: I still strive for the approval and acceptance of God and those around me. I forget the good news of the gospel – that I am fully accepted by God apart from my actions – and I attempt to make up for it with performance. Even as I write this devotional, I'm tempted to place my security on how people will receive it (i.e. me)! The burden of my hope for acceptance and satisfaction transitions from the solid rock of Christ to the popsicle-stick foundation of my works. It's false, “not in step with the truth of the gospel” (2:14), and it won't hold.

So, how do I respond? Paul throws a bucket of water on my face in verse 1: Remember Christ crucified! Behold the gospel! Practically for me, this means praying every day to see the gospel clearly, to be reminded of God's holiness, my own sin, and the perfect unending hope I have in Christ! It means identifying my false saviors/hopes that are not in step with the truth of the gospel, and practicing a prayerful dependence on the Spirit as I seek to trust God and obey His word.

John Piper said that “the essential mark of a Christian is not how far you have progressed in sanctification, but on what you are relying to get there.” My prayer is that God would expose our false hopes and draw us to himself, to behold the glory of the gospel and trust completely in him.

FOR REFLECTION

What simple practices can you take up this week to “behold the gospel”? For starters, spend some time today praying that God would help you to see the gospel clearly and depend on the Spirit this week.

GALATIANS 3:1-14

BY JIMMY BURTON

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:1-14)

This season has been one of the craziest and weirdest times of my life. The first few months of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown were challenging spiritually and emotionally for a variety of reasons. The first thing that the isolation did was show me how much of my hope was really for worldly things to work out my way and not in Christ alone. Not only was I hoping for things outside of Christ, but the deeper issue was that I was trusting in external things for my righteousness apart from Him.

One of the biggest revelations was that I was still looking for righteousness in the things of this world: approval, relationships, career and material successes, and my good deeds. I was finding some of my righteousness in my moral performance and it seemed like my sins were amplified when I was by myself. More of it was in people’s approval and in being an active church member, and there was no one to praise me for all the evangelism and work I was doing trying to help others. The good news is that God didn’t leave me in this state, but led me to a serious examination of my heart.

Paul uses Abraham as a case study in this passage to help the Galatians through a similar self-examination. How did Abraham receive righteousness before God? Was it through observing the Law perfectly? Was it through checking all the boxes on his spiritual disciplines list? No. In fact, all those who rely on works of the Law are under a curse! Instead, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Abraham believed the Gospel when it was preached to him, and he believed in God’s promises through faith (vv. 6-8).

Paul mentions how Jesus obtained this righteousness for us Gentiles in verse 13: “Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us.” In verse 1 Paul emphasizes that Jesus was crucified publicly so that the Galatians will remember how they received this right standing with God. Jesus lived a sinless life, fulfilled God’s Law, and died as a spotless sacrifice in order to satisfy God’s wrath that we deserve. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5: 21). We are then united to Christ by faith and receive his righteousness before God. Jesus clothes us in his righteousness and we are no longer judged for our sin before God. What amazing and undeserved grace to sinners!

How easy is it for me to be like the Galatians and look for righteousness apart from Christ’s work. My prayer is to trust in Christ only for righteousness and of course, to remember that, “it is finished!” (John 19:30).

FOR REFLECTION

Are there areas in your life where you are finding your righteousness in something other than Christ and his work? In each of these areas, how does knowing “It is finished” in Christ change your heart, mind, and actions?

GALATIANS 3:15-29

BY JAMIE WANG

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:15-29)

I am a big rule follower. I like rules because as long as you follow, memorize, and act on them, you don’t have to do a lot of thinking for the most part. It’s like driving: you can just go into auto-pilot mode and coast through town from your house to church (back when we used to drive downtown on Sundays). You don’t think much about following the rules of the road because they are so engrained in you. This passive application of rules can lead to drifting, coasting, and potential dangers.

On the other hand, rules can cause us to overthink because we so badly want to reap the benefits of following them. Take Coronavirus: my chronic anxiety had me thinking about everything I ever touched at a grocery store, wiping down every item I bought and washing my hands multiple times. I took the CDC rules and then magnified them times 10 thinking they would make me healthier and safer. This inflated view of rules can lead to anxiety, judgment, and fear or even a false sense of temporary salvation.

Neither of these ways of living “by the rules” are life-giving or actually life-saving. The first method leads toward a life lacking enthusiasm and potential laziness. As long as nothing goes wrong, we just coast through life missing most of the big picture. The second interprets that rules equal salvation and puts us in the mindset of “I’m not only following the rule, I’m adding more layers of protection.”

Paul’s main point is a reminder that the laws/rules we are given do not replace the amazing promise God made to Abraham and his offspring. Better yet, we live in this promise today – a future and hope fulfilled in Christ along with the law. The purpose of the law is to allow more awareness of our sin, which leads us to the epiphany that we need a savior. I’m thankful for reminders to not live passively or obsessively through the Christian life. I don’t want us to miss out on the vibrancy of Christ, the beauty of the promise given to us. We cannot simply know this promise. Rather, we are called to live into God’s promise and recognize that it is fulfilled and carried out through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”(v29) The promise contains life itself – “He is the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Why do I continue to chase the rules when I have direct access to an inheritance that promises life?

FOR REFLECTION

Here are a few questions to help you pause and remember the life we have in Christ – the person who fulfilled God’s promise AND the law:

- *What rules/laws am I worshipping or enslaved to?*
- *What can I ask God to continually help me let go of in order to receive and remember the grace that has been given to me?*
- *How am I trying to use “wordly” or “religious” standards as a means of salvation, rather than the actual person of Jesus?*

GALATIANS 3:15-29

BY RACHEL PAXTON

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:15-29)

As a mother of four children ranging in age from 3 to 10, I feel like I have a firm grasp on the varying jobs of a guardian. For many years, it meant regularly feeding and changing a basically helpless infant. For my toddlers, it has meant consistent discipline (lots and lots of discipline) and a watchful eye to keep them from running into the street or touching the hot stove. For my elementary-aged kids, it means bandaging up skinned knees, working on checklists and responsibility, and reading as many true and beautiful stories as we can get our hands on. And for all of them, it has meant as many snuggles, hugs, kisses, and prayers as I can manage.

But do I want them to need me to wash their boo boos and tie their shoes forever? Do I want them to stall out at sounding out the words c-a-t and d-o-g? Or do I want them to grow to read more fluently, converse more eloquently, and lead full and responsible lives? Of course, I want the latter! My role as mother (which will always involve hugs and prayers) will last forever, but my role as guardian will hopefully have an end point. It's best for them (and me!) if it does.

That's the image Paul gives us for the law in Galatians 3. His argument thus far has been as follows: the law doesn't justify; only faith in Christ can do that (2:16-17). And the next thought naturally arises: so why then the law? (3:19). Why on earth – if it doesn't bring about salvation – did God establish his written law? Paul answers with the analogy of guardianship.

“So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (3:24-25). Just as my children need me to act as a guardian to them in these early years, God's people needed the guardianship of the law. Paul expounds on this idea in Romans 7:7 when he says, *“If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.”* The law functioned to set apart God's people and reveal their sin to them. It functioned to train, protect, and guide God's people—just as I am striving to do with my own young children.

But it was not meant to last forever! By God's grace, He planned and executed a better future for his children. Just as I “guard” my own children in their youth with the end goal of freedom and fullness of life for them, so God had plans in store for His children. Plans of freedom from the guardianship and conviction of the law.

I'm trying not to get ahead of myself because there's so much more beautiful truth about our identity as sons and heirs coming in chapter 4 ... But I want to end with this: although we are free from the burden of the Mosaic law, seeing and understanding God's purposes in redemptive history through the generous provision of a “guardian” for his people can help us trust him and walk in greater faith each day.

What a gracious Father we have!

FOR REFLECTION

Praise God for his goodness and grace towards you in Christ. Acknowledge the areas in your life where you might be still living under the “guardian of the law” vs. the freedom and fullness of life we have in Christ.

GALATIANS 3:26 - 4:7

BY AMY JO RYAN

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 3:26-4:7)

I was raised in church and was taught that I am a part of God's family for my entire life, but I remember when the idea of "sonship" became more real for me about 8 years ago. It fundamentally changed the way I related to God. Although I always knew intellectually that God was my father, I began to really experience that in a way that made a difference in how I saw myself and others. I had nothing to prove to my Father, and there was nothing I could do (or not do) to make him love me any more or any less. It was incredibly freeing and led me to move toward others in freedom because of the security I found in experiencing the love of God.

Too often, I find myself falling back into the mindset of a slave, feeling like I need to dutifully obey the rules to please my Father and keep him happy with me. This passage powerfully reminds me of the transformation that God has accomplished in my life through no work of my own—I was a slave and now I am a child. He has adopted me as a beloved member of his family, even though I have sought ways of justifying myself over and over. I see from this passage that not only did Jesus rescue me from slavery to the law and make me family, he made me an heir. I have received all of the riches of being a part of God's family and his Spirit living inside of me.

This example of being God's child takes on a new meaning for me right now as my husband and I are expecting our first child in February. I hope and pray that she will not only know but experience that she is a beloved member of our family who doesn't have to perform or strive to gain love or acceptance. I hope that as a mother I will be able to rest in knowing that I am beloved by God and have been adopted into his family, that his pleasure in me does not depend on how "good" of a mom I am or having it all together all the time. Most of all, I hope that my daughter will know how much God loves her and will see his love for her reflected in me.

FOR REFLECTION

Do you find yourself truly experiencing the freedom of being a child of God? Or do you find yourself falling back into the mindset of a slave, having to be dutiful and obey to please the Father? Spend some time confessing any areas where you are striving to please God. Ask him to overwhelm you today with the truth that you are his child and He loves you simply because you are his.

GALATIANS 3:26 - 4:7

BY KYRSTEN ARBUCKLE

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

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"I'm done sucking up to y'all!" declared one of my oldest children, the morning after an impassioned argument charged with accusations, interruptions, and raised voices. That pointed broadcast was like a punch to the gut. My child clearly thought that the way to be in right relationship with us was by keeping a tight list of do's and don'ts. When my child's limitations had a head-on collision with "the law," there was the understandable outcome: frustration and defeat. My heart sank realizing that a child of mine didn't know what they already had: all my approval, love, resources, and very self.

Paul is pushing back at a very similar belief in this portion of Galatians. He is reminding the Galatian church, and us, that we are sons of God. By default of being sons, we are also heirs. Now, I know when I hear those labels that there is something very powerful, revolutionary, and game changing afoot. To somehow be included in the family of the Creator of the universe and be among those who will inherit all that has been promised to the ancient believers of God feels weighty and meaningful. However, if I am honest, it's also always felt a little lofty and intangible.

Likely for many of us, viewing God as Father, or Daddy, is challenging. I am reminded in these verses that the fatherhood of God is not like this world's living examples. It's not riddled with expectations of performance, comfort, convenience, or control. It's given freely and sacrificially to those who believe. What a good, good Father we have in God. Likewise, being an heir in today's culture can mean you inherit property (or perhaps knick-knack type belongings). Maybe it means you inherit nothing at all, or a load of debt, depending on your family circumstances. In that sense, being an heir seems temperamental, circumstantial, and even burdensome. However, our Abba Father has the whole world in His hands, and as His sons our inheritance is Christ himself—with all of his perfection, imperishability, and blessing. We are not left miserly, empty, or weighed down. To be sons and heirs of God is life abundant. Praise be to God!

Just like my child felt their real inability to meet the expectations I had for them as their parent, so we all know our powerlessness to fulfill what the law demands. The good news that Paul wants us to remember is that if we are in Christ, then we are already sons of God. Our good Father sent Jesus to take care of the law's demands, and He gave us His Spirit to live inside of us, making God nearer to us than we can fully imagine. He is so near that His Spirit in us cries out to God as Father, almost in spite of ourselves. Plus, His Spirit inside of us is one with God and all of Christ's privileges and blessings fall to us too. We are equipped with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm" (Ephesian 1:3) and that is a glorious reality to cling to unswervingly.

FOR REFLECTION

Do you struggle viewing God as your Father? Do you have a skewed view of God as your Father because of your earthly Father? If so, spend some time talking to God about any areas that have limited your view of our Heavenly Father and ask Him to fully reveal himself to you as the Father.

GALATIANS 4:8-20

BY SOLOMON WANG

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (Galatians 4:8-20)

My wife, Jamie, and I are bringing our first child into this world at the beginning of 2021. These words of Paul provide an excellent context to ponder my forthcoming identity as a father. In these verses, Paul exhorts the church of Galatia to live into their identity as followers of Jesus—with loud and clear convictions against “those that are by nature not gods” (v. 8). “How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless principles?” (v. 9)

As Paul writes to the Galatian church about reflecting on their position in Christ, I consider what it means to live first as a Christ follower who is also a father rather than a father who happens to be a Christian. By all means, these two identities are interconnected, but upon further introspection, my worldly concerns of fatherhood can overshadow the bigger picture. I too quickly “observe days and months and seasons and years” (v. 10), especially with respect to financial planning (How much insurance do I need? How much will college cost?! Layering on a new responsibility has highlighted my sinful desire to control circumstances. I feel enslaved to principles that pale in comparison to Kingdom-living.

It helps to reflect on previous seasons of adopting new identities. Before Jamie and I got married, we consistently heard that the most important thing we can do for our marriage is follow Jesus; the mission, vision, and roles would follow. In moments when I get swept up in auxiliary concerns, I need to reflect on my vows to be a husband who follows Christ. A life in Christ equips us for all that He calls us to. Another push-and-pull is my identity as an employee. Many days, my priorities involve how to get ahead and make things comfortable for myself. However, my first calling is to work as unto the Lord, not watch out for myself. Vocationally, I could pursue other work, but God’s call for us as a people made to glorify Him in and through work does not change.

So what point is Paul trying to drive home with living into an identity? Paul wants the Galatians to follow his example and live out their faith in Jesus. “*Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.*”(v.12) Paul is not building Paul-followers, but Christ-followers. An identity is always learned through observation, so Paul urges them to emulate him as he emulates Christ. We, too, are called to live out the truth that life is found in Christ alone.

FOR REFLECTION

What are your “days and months and seasons and years” that you worry about? What “elementary principles” steer you from the freedom you have in Christ? Confess those things to God and thank him for his grace today.

GALATIANS 4:8-20

BY SEAN MILLER

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (Galatians 4:8-20)

When I read this passage, three sections jump out to me as being very applicable to my life right now, especially in the midst of the isolation of the pandemic.

The first is Paul's warning against returning to the "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world" (vs. 9). The first day I walked into Providence I was six months sober but still a mess. I did not know what to expect. I did not know where God was leading my life. Honestly, I did not realize God was leading my life, period. At this point, I felt like I was good if I was not drinking or using drugs. As time went by, I began to learn that walking with Christ is much more than dos and don'ts. I was eager to learn and willing to submit to whatever I was told. I craved the spiritual disciplines.

Fast forward to this present season. I have felt like I am just going through the motions, and being separated from many people has made it easier to hide. I can deceive myself into thinking I have a good prayer life because I pray before eating. I can say I am in the Word because I read it on the weekends. I am good because I am not committing crimes. I am good because I am not a complete jerk to people. I am good because I am giving money. In reality, I am just back to where I was—thinking I am good since I do not drink and use drugs anymore. I do not know where things begin to slip, but I do notice when I have already fallen deep into the "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world." My relationship becomes with this world and not with God.

Vs. 11, "I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain," also keeps repeating in my mind. There are many who have labored over me. People who have visited with me, prayed with me, and truly invested in me. These are people I would listen to and follow instructions when given. If possible, I would have gouged out my eyes and given them to these people (vs. 15). Now I feel I put up a wall if the message I hear does not line up the way I think it should. I can become resentful towards what I am being told.

"I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you" (vs. 20) makes me think of the pastors, elders, and GC Leaders. For a time now we have been somewhat separated. Unlike Paul, we have Zoom and phones to check in with. Yet it is still challenging for the leaders to know where we all are spiritually. I see the longing to be together again consistently. This is not on them though. I am trusted with the task to preserve the truth of the gospel. I have been raised up to further the Kingdom. They should not have to be perplexed about me. They should be able to trust I will live by and preach the gospel, no matter the situation.

FOR REFLECTION

Where do you currently see the tendency in your own life to just "go through the motions?" What areas of your life feel isolated and separate from others? Confess those things to God and talk about them with someone in your GC this week.

GALATIANS 4:21-31

BY JONATHAN FOSTER

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

*“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than those of the one who has a husband.”*

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:21-31)

Had I been Abraham at the moment before he was about to slit his son's throat, as a sacrifice to God, I might have thought, “At least I have Ishmael.” At least I have a backup plan. That's something I can still control.

Throughout my life as a Christian, I have been presented with the promises of God, time and again. God is always with me. God loves me. God is faithful to forgive my sins. I'm told that I cannot earn God's favor or absolution with even my best of intentions and works. I was born in sin, and my heart is exceedingly deceptive and prone to wander, as they say. There have been many times when I was able to fully embrace the truth of the Good News. That I have been set free from guilt, from condemnation, from impossible and overwhelming standards of holiness. Not just set free from those things, but set free to a life lived in spirit and in truth. A life where goodness and mercy flow from me out of abundance, and not coerced out of guilt, shame, and fear.

And yet, soon after I try to coast on the presumption that I “get it,” the oldest of satanic doubts whispers in my ear “did God really say...?” The way of self-righteousness is more palatable. The rules are laid out, and I can easily compare myself to the other imperfect participants. I can hold onto the free grace of God, but I can also do my part to make sure He likes me, and that He'd have extra reasons to let me through the pearly gates.

God had promised Abraham an heir. Not just an heir, but a bloodline that would become more numerous than the stars of the heavens and the sands upon every shore. For an aged man and his equally elderly wife, this was a laughable proclamation. Perhaps in the first few years, the thought of it caused a chuckle and a fair amount of hopeful anticipation. But as new wrinkles formed, bodies conceded to entropy and time eroded those dreams, a husband and wife harvested the thought that maybe God wasn't going to deliver on his promise. If the end result was for Abraham to be the father of many, did it really matter what the means were? They needed a baby. Sarah's bondslave, Hagar, made an acceptable surrogate. A little wine, mood lighting, and the timeless magic of procreation, and they could finally get the next chapter of the story started without bothering God.

A son is born, and they call him Ishmael. Far from being just “God's plan lite,” he actually becomes an antagonist against what God has destined. He stands in contrast and opposition to Isaac. It may seem harsh to send away Ishmael and his mother, but in God's kingdom, there is no room for such conflict. There's no Ying and Yang. No balance of opposing wills. I cannot choose Isaac and Ishmael. The promise and the insurance policy. I can accept the freedom and forgiveness God provides through Christ, or shackle my ankles and return to a futile attempt at works righteousness. There is no alternative. I cannot bring about my own salvation.

Thankfully may we offer up praise to our heavenly Father who has delivered us from slavery through the perfect life, sacrifice, and resurrection of His son for those who trust and believe. That He may usher us into the kingdom that awaits us, the new Jerusalem, along with all the true and promised descendants of Abraham.

FOR REFLECTION

Thanks be to God that we are children of the promise! Spend some time praising God for the ways you have seen Him fulfill promises from Scripture in your life and confess any areas where you are trying to bring out your own salvation.

GALATIANS 4:21-31

BY DOROTHY BENNETT

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

*“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than those of the one who has a husband.”*

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:21-31)

I’m a huge fan of figuring out which character in a story I want to be most like. From the March sisters to the cast of the Office, I indulge in this continuously. But, Paul’s compare-and-contrast of Hagar and Sarah gives me pause. Paul asks us, who do you want to be a descendent of — the son of the flesh or the son of the promise?

With the characters of the story diminished to symbols, I immediately want to be a descendant of Isaac, the free child of Sarah, because that’s the clear winner. And it’s good that I have this reaction as a reader. Paul’s question, first intended for Christians who proselytized the Law in Paul’s day, is also a warning for any group with institutions and rituals that can become fleshly security in lieu of salvation. The question then applies to today’s Church as well. Do we want to rely on our institutions and merit or on God’s promise? The options are open and the resultant fruit is known.

But, because the options are presented in the form of two real women, I fear the natural error of judging the women instead of judging where God did and did not move. This troubles me, like lax readings of a Bathsheba responsible for enticing David. In the case of Hagar, we are not privy to her opinion of century-old Abraham. What transpired was legal and an elevation of Hagar’s social status in Abraham’s household. And yet, it was utilitarian, not a fairy-tale. My heart is tugged because Hagar had the least agency of the three named figures. Are she and her progeny inherently dismissible due to movements outside of her control? Is she unworthy of salvation because her fate was dictated by careless masters? No. Twice God met her physical needs in the desert, and more than that, God addressed her by name when comforting and prophesying over her. She, when destitute, was seen by our God. Of Ishmael, although a bleak figure in Christianity, I wonder if he is truly condemnable for the understandable fault of laughing at the child who took his place, while Abraham and Sarah are guilty of laughing in the face of God? Because afterwards Scripture states “God was with [Ishmael] as he grew up.”

When I think about it, knowing that I choose to cling to God’s promise (even though I do it falteringly), and so allegorically choose Sarah as my mother; I also have to take into account that an easy dismissal of Hagar misses Paul’s point. Does it matter that I dismiss a woman so long passed that she’s regarded as a symbol not a person? Maybe not. But it does matter if I draw lines around the children of God, with a name for those I’ve excluded. Paul’s dense little allegory in the midst of his otherwise straightforward directives actually opens the doors to the Hagars and Ishmaels of reality, illustrating how there is no worldly requirement to be a child of God. All are welcome: slave or free, man or woman, Hagar or Sarah. Christ did not die for Isaac’s line alone. This is revolutionary and humbling, not least because Paul’s allegory includes me in an inheritance I do not deserve, physically or spiritually.

FOR REFLECTION

How do you see the tendency in your own life to want to “draw lines around the children of God”? Confess that to God. Spend some time reading Ephesians 2:1-22 and thanking God for his scandalous grace to you in Christ Jesus.

GALATIANS 5:1-15

BY KARINA VENABLE

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. (Gal. 5:1-15)

Do you think any of the slaves who Harriet Tubman led to freedom returned to the South? I had the honor of introducing my sons to this historical giant as I read to them at our dining table. Our younger son who loves justice was instantly a fan of hers. We learned gritty details of traveling the Underground Railroad: being chased by bloodhounds, hiding out in heaps of refuse, having little to no food, and constantly fearing being caught. It was so difficult that some of those "aboard" Harriet Tubman's Freedom Train actually begged her to take them back to their slave masters. So, Harriet could relate to Moses in more ways than one.

The stories of the Exodus, the Galatians, and even the Underground Railroad serve as warnings that all freed men will be tempted to go back to what enslaved them. Have you read about Harriet's response if she couldn't convince them that they didn't really want to go back? She would pull a silver pistol out of her pocket—either they could continue north to freedom, or die then and there.

Becoming free carries an exorbitant price. Jesus our Lord made the grueling walk to Calvary and shed his blood so that we would be free (for free!). However, the freedom he purchased was not just a physical freedom, but a freedom from the crushing weight of sin, a freedom from trying to follow the Law perfectly in order to win God's favor.

So, possibly with even more determination than Harriet Tubman, Paul wanted the Galatians to walk in that freedom. His pistol was his pen: Now I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, "Christ will be of no advantage to you ... You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace."

Severed. Paul didn't mince words in writing about circumcision! His point is clear: just like the slave can't go north by going south, you can't be freed by Christ by trying to obey the Law. The thought of a slave returning to his old master is bewildering, but sometimes I go back without even realizing it! Each day I must choose which way I'll walk: freely following my Lord, or seeking approval and salvation from my performance. The enemy and the world tell me that God is a harsh master and that having a relationship with Him is restrictive: "You'll never measure up to God's expectations." But Paul's letter to the Galatians brings me back to my senses: God is no harsh taskmaster. He is the Liberator.

If I walk with the mentality of a freed daughter, completely accepted and loved by my Father, the pressure to perform is lifted. I can thank God for forgiving each word I speak in anger, and I can rest in His love. Being free isn't heavy—there are no shackles, there is no condemnation. Let's not be tricked into thinking that going back would be better.

FOR REFLECTION

In what areas of your life are you most tempted to return to slavery? This week, share with someone in your GC one way that resting in your freedom in Christ changes how you might think or act in one of these areas.

GALATIANS 5:1-15

BY ELLIE BARTON

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. (Gal. 5:1-15)

Six years ago Christ divinely intervened in the pit of my darkness, where I was consumed by the notion that I was not worthy of being saved—that I was forgotten and there would never be any form of healing or justice. Almost overnight, plans were set in motion for me to move to Austin, and over time, I have learned how radically wrong I was in my understanding of grace. The Holy Spirit truly moved me on this path, but at the beginning I had absolutely no idea how hard it was going to be. Coming back to my faith and healing deep wounds took a lot of work. I also naively thought everything would start to fall into place in the way I wanted it to, since I was technically doing all the “right” steps. How wrong I was, and yet, how grateful I am for this journey!

In this passage, Paul is telling the Galatians that if they try to follow the law as a means of salvation, then Christ will be of no use to them. On a very personal level, for my life this has meant that I cannot claim faith while still seeking justice on my own terms. The amazing freedom we are called to is, in fact, the freedom of being at peace with God. Through the blood of my savior, I have laid my own turmoil in seeking my own path, and completely trusting Him and His loving will for my life. Clinging to guilt, anger, or anything other than Christ is slavery. However, Christ has liberated us to set not only our soul, but our will, free from this bondage to sin.

For Christians, following God’s laws is not about blind obedience, but rather we seek to want to abide in Him. I’ve learned that love is not always simply an attitude or notation, but rather it is a Godly action. As a Christian, my behavior transcends blindly checking the boxes of His laws. Instead, I am seeking a state of righteousness, where I am in a state of acceptance with Him. I am not capable of seeing the divine view that he has for me, for you, or the world. My work and freedom is rooted in my trust in Him. No matter what injustices I have faced, the true scandal of grace is that we are all free from the bondage of sin when we put our faith and obedience in Christ, and him alone.

FOR REFLECTION

Is there an area in your life where you are not trusting Christ, but are holding onto guilt, anger, fear, etc? Confess your lack of trust and ask Christ to strengthen your faith in him today.

GALATIANS 5:16-25

BY CHAD TRIM

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:16-25)

If you're anything like me, you've probably taken up some new form of self care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether it is baking more frequently, walking with your family, or playing many hours of Animal Crossing or Among Us, you've probably found yourself seeking out new ways to deal with the ongoing stress of a global pandemic. For me, one of those stress-relievers has been meditation. By itself, meditation and mindfulness falls short of a Christian worldview. So I have been learning to incorporate prayer into my mindfulness practice, particularly focusing on inviting the Holy Spirit into that time. When I start my day with meditation that orients me toward God, I feel grounded and rooted in the fruit of the Spirit. I am much more likely to feel joy, patience, and peace, especially.

Unfortunately, as the day goes on, I begin to feel the works of the flesh creep in. I have a tough call at work and feel anger. An email congratulating a coworker on a large sale hits my inbox and I am suddenly flushed with jealousy and idolatry. I could turn to God, but more often than not I lean into those works of the flesh and refuse to crucify those fleshly desires. My morning practice falls to the wayside if I refuse to let the Spirit intervene.

Orienting myself toward God is a great way to start the day, but walking by the Spirit is not something we do for 10-15 minutes in the morning. Paul mentions that the works of the Spirit and the works of the flesh are constantly fighting each other internally. Unfortunately, even in non-COVID times we will battle the discord between these desires of envy and gratitude, selfish ambition and contentment, etc. The sweet thing is, we are not in this battle alone. We do not have to pay for an app to invite the Spirit into our daily liturgies and moments of desire for earthly things. Because we belong to Christ, we can take those desires and nail them to the cross daily. Not just for 10-15 minutes in the morning, but throughout our day and throughout our lives. When we live by the Spirit and with the Spirit, the works of the Spirit can continually win out.

FOR REFLECTION

Which desires of the flesh are you most likely to fall prey to? What would it look like for you to "keep in step with the Spirit" instead?

GALATIANS 5:16-25

BY COURTNEY RUNN

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:16-25)

Reading this passage during election week, it's difficult to read these verses and not think of our culture right now. Galatians 5 includes strife, division, enmity, idolatry, and rivalry as works of the flesh. When I read the news and scroll on social media, I see division among friends and families, enmity and rivalry between political parties, idolatry in the worship of candidates, and strife as opinions are set in stone. I've been the most dismayed at fellow Christians engaging in this type of social-media behavior. Within, and certainly outside, the Church, it feels like the flesh is winning right now.

Following the works of the flesh, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. When I read these verses, I'm reminded of Sunday school lessons and VBS songs and Veggie Tales. I can easily skim past them because they are so embedded in Christian culture. Alongside John 3:16, my eyes skip past them as I think, "Yeah, yeah I know that." But when I slow down and truly study the fruit of the Spirit, I long for them. Doesn't it sound revolutionary right now for someone to exhibit genuine love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? It's this kind of fruit that squelches the blazing fire of the flesh.

Despite my longing to both personally exhibit and see this fruit in others, it can feel like an impossible to-do list. But I'm encouraged that I'm marked by the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of Courtney. As long as we're on earth, we will fight against the flesh. In his commentary on Galatians, John Stott writes that just like actual crucifixion, the crucifixion of our sin is pitiless, painful, and decisive. When we're saved, our sin is crucified with Jesus, and as we're continually sanctified, we must learn to leave our sin on the cross.

"It is as if, having nailed our old nature to the cross, we keep wistfully returning to the scene of its execution," Stott writes. "We begin to fondle it, to caress it, to long for its release, even to try to take it down. We need to learn to leave it there."

I pray this week—and every other week—we can be known by the fruit of the Spirit who leads us, so that in a hurting, broken, and dark world, our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control would be a healing balm to everyone we encounter. May we leave our sins on the cross and walk in the Spirit.

FOR REFLECTION

Spend some time in prayer this morning—praising God for the Spirit that lives inside of us! Confess any areas in your life where you find yourself returning to the "scene of the execution of our old nature" and ask God to help you leave it there.

GALATIANS 6:1-10

BY CONSTANCE DOYLE

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.

Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:1-6:10)

Weary. I think we all know how it feels to be weary.

I'm weary of looking for healing in a world of brokenness. I'm weary of working for peace in a world of uproar and unrest, for reconciliation in a world of division, for righteousness and justice in a world of sin. And these things that make me weary are not merely "out there" in the world, but also "in here," in my very own self.

Unrest in my own soul, a divided heart with clashing desires, my own prejudice, self-righteousness, pride, and a body that experiences pain that will only increase with time. If I look inward too long, discouragement sets in fast. I wonder if I'm engaging in a losing battle.

The Westminster Confession doesn't sugar-coat this reality, nor does Paul in Galatians. We are in a "continual and irreconcilable war" against this pervasive power of sin. At face value this phrase does not seem to provide any help to my weary soul, but a deeper look changes everything.

Until we are perfected in the presence of God once and for all, Paul says the Spirit, who has made a home within all who believe, will not be reconciled with the defaults of our broken human-nature. The Spirit must crowd out sin, and His territory within our souls is promised to only grow and grow. He supplies us with strength and desire to beat back the sin that would take over if we were left without the "promised helper." The guarantee rests upon God. He promises; he will be faithful. He will not leave. Sin will not crowd out the Spirit.

Paul, with incredible certainty tells us we will reap, if we do not give up.

These realities are more precious to me as I write them today, than they ever could have been a few years ago. Jesus's incredible perseverance to change and to keep my heart, that has been so ugly and so fickle, amazes me and brings me to tears of wonder.

Let this encourage your heart today: if there is any ounce of fight left in you, any ounce of dissatisfaction with the sin you see in yourself, this is the mark of God's spirit, who is already persevering for you, on your behalf, and who will make you able to live in victory over sin and to do good in this world that will matter forever. There is an end to this war. Do not grow weary, do not give up. All our identity, all our strength, all our assurance and peace rest in this: Christ Jesus is not finished with us yet, and He is not weary of helping us. His mercies are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness.

FOR REFLECTION

Where do you feel weary: in your spiritual life, your physical life, your missional life? Spend some time asking the Spirit to refresh you and to give you the strength to not give up but to continue to do the good he has for you this week.

GALATIANS 6:1-10

BY TJ HARDY

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“Never above you. Never below you. Always beside you.” This has been the motto of the United States Marine Corps reconnaissance community since its inception in WWII. It has always been a point of fascination to me how dangerous men living in extremis seem to come to eternal truths with a clarity that few of us possess. We can look to that community for an example of what Paul is speaking about here.

In the Marine Corps, weakness is detestable. When faced with the fact that they will, at some point in their career, face a tough, determined, and relentless enemy who does not care for their wellbeing, it becomes painfully clear that success can only be achieved through the combined effort of a team, not through the strength of an individual. Or, as they are oft to say, “Two is one, one is none.” Individualism is weakness. So too in the body of Christ. Attempting to go it alone, however commendable it may appear in the short run and reinforced by society at large, will lead to almost certain destruction in the long run. We are all sheep in the body of Christ. You may be strong and proud, but separate yourself from the flock and Shepherd long enough, you will be eaten.

Among the profession of arms, it is widely understood that you are either an asset or a liability. A functioning member of the team, or someone who is going to get themselves or someone else killed. An asset is someone who makes sure they lead by example. Their gear is squared away and clean. They train corporately and individually like their life depends on it. An asset puts their feelings aside and receives feedback with grace and an intent to think about it seriously. More importantly, an asset has the moral courage to provide difficult feedback to their team face-to-face because their desire to make the team better is greater than their desire for comfort. Embodying humility, they understand that they are not more or less vital to the team than any other member, but strive to preserve the strength of the team through individual actions. An asset understands that little infractions lead to big ones and seeks to root them out both in himself and in the team. Lastly, an asset pursues emotional maturity, going out of his way to know his team like he knows himself. This way he can meet them where they are and provide support without another member of the team knowing they even need it.

A liability, on the other hand, believes the team needs them, or that success rests on their shoulders alone. They do not understand the difference between being hurt and being injured, and in an attempt to show strength they weaken the lot. A liability is self-aggrandizing, belittles others, does not hold themselves or others to a standard, doesn't train, and dismisses feedback as fool's words. They are immature, like a child, often mistaking reproof for insult. A liability refuses self-reflection, focusing merely on outward performance as his measure of effectiveness. Because of this, he is incapable of growth, and when the trials of combat are upon him, he will find himself lacking in all but the pride he so desperately clings to.

FOR REFLECTION

*Think through these two fundamental categories: In what ways do you currently need to take greater responsibility for **your own discipleship**? In what ways do you currently need to take greater responsibility for the **discipleship of those around you**? Keep in step with the Spirit this week for the strength to not grow weary. He is more than capable of the task!*

GALATIANS 6:11-18

BY SARAH PYLANT

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen. (Galatians 6:11-18)

“Those who want to make a good showing in the flesh.” Ouch. Surely I am not one of “those”?...

Well, I am. And can I tell you something? I once took a job at a non-profit for this very reason. If you asked me five years ago about my new pursuit, I would have said, “I love serving people,” and “I really believe in this ministry.” Are either of those things inherently bad? No. BUT, the intentions behind them, I have since reconciled, were selfish at best. I wanted to be seen. I wanted to be heard. I wanted to “make a good showing.” Not necessarily for Christ first and foremost, but for my seemingly holier-than-thou jump out of the advertising industry into the nonprofit world. I wanted my outward mark of sacrificing an annual salary to be on display. See a theme here? “I wanted.” Two words that have “human” and “flesh” written all over them. In this passage, Paul is entreating the Galatians to not let an outward mark like circumcision be the end of their salvation story. He points them (us) over and over to God’s grace, mercy and peace as the “mark” by which we should live.

Though I’ve felt convicted by Paul’s words and my past, I can feel these tendencies creeping into my current life as a stay-at-home mom (first time typing that, still feels new and strange 7 months in). In moments, I can feel myself raising up my kids, mainly my toddler, with a motivation to “make a good showing in the flesh” and to “boast in her flesh” by relying on my power alone to teach and guide her. Do I want Christ for her? Absolutely. BUT I have to make a choice; day-by-day, minute-by-minute, second-by-second to raise her not out of my own power, but out of God’s abounding grace, mercy, and power.

Serving others looks very different for me right now. I am not able to be the first volunteer to sign up or the one who works the most hours. I find myself serving through my family, my two littles and honestly mostly through prayer. God graciously brought to light my intentions in serving in order to restore my heart for loving others. Not to be the first one to text someone who I find out is having a tough time or to be the first one to sign up for a meal train, but to pray and ask God, how do they need to be served? How do they need to be loved? Not how I feel they would best be served and loved. He continues to show up in this new practical application of loving my neighbors, but again it’s choice. With every text, prayer, phone call, or chat, I have to choose to seek the other person’s good and not my own.

FOR REFLECTION

Where do you see this tendency in your own life to “make a good showing in the flesh”? How is that tendency preventing you from loving others in the way God desires for you? Confess that to God, and ask God to focus your boast on the cross of Christ this week.

GALATIANS 6:11-18

BY RACHEL DODDS

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen. (Galatians 6:11-18)

One of my favorite things to do is find Christians “in the wild.” Discovering that you share the most true and significant part of yourself with a complete stranger is a beautiful thing. These interactions create an otherworldly feeling as both people connect over a shared reality. In his final words to the Galatians, Paul refers to this holistic reality and identity as a “new creation” (vs 15), whose true essence is found internally and not externally. Paul boasts in the message of the cross of Christ (vs 14-15) and calls out the message of the world (vs 12-13) and with it the hypocrisy of false teachers. The world in all its small-G glory has been crucified to Paul; it no longer has influence or power now that Christ is his master.

Paul’s plea to the Galatians to not get swept up in the false narratives propagated by the Judaizers of that day, and instead break free through the new and true narrative found in the gospel of Jesus Christ, certainly has relevance to the environment the church finds itself in today. 2020 has been a lot of things to a lot of people. Personally, it has been a year of greater clarity and recalibration. With the increasing cultural and societal pressure to reject a biblical worldview and couch everything as “nuanced,” I have experienced a greater desire to know God’s Word and reestablish a firm foundation upon which to live. I am more aware of the spiritual battle that exists in my everyday life and the ways I bend the knee to these value systems for my own glory and comfort.

During this season, God is using community and His Word to challenge my view of personal holiness and expose my self-righteousness. He is renewing my mindset so that, like Paul, I can be free to relate to God and others as someone who is neither inferior nor superior. Paul’s words are both challenging and attractive to me. How can a person have so much confidence in their position? Someone with clarity on who they are (Gal. 2:20) and where their calling is from (Gal. 1:12).

Paul’s parting words are on brand: Don’t be deceived by an alternative message that conflates an external religious act with true saving faith in Christ. Stay true to this gospel. When Paul says, “all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them”, he is saying those who submit to Christ as their “rule,” or way of life, will find peace and mercy. I want this life.

FOR REFLECTION

As we wrap up Galatians, Paul reminds us that we are a new creation or as 2 Corinthians 5:17 puts it, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” Spend some time meditating on this good news. Ask God to reveal the areas in your life where you are living in your old self, the world vs. in your new identity and the cross of Christ. Ask him to give you the faith to walk in your true identity and calling.