

Freedom Resisted

The word “freedom” occurs more frequently in the letters of Paul than any other New Testament book. As



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Americans, we think of freedom as privacy in thinking and choices, but for Paul it was the discovery that he no longer needed to labor under the impossible demands of religious laws and practices that daily reminded him he could never completely meet God’s standard. At the peak of Paul’s zealous faith, when he was adding to his religious scorecard the persecution of those dangerous Christ followers, Paul met the risen Christ on the Damascus road and truly found God for the first time. This new Paul made a dramatic reversal, becoming a missionary to people he formerly saw as fuel for the fires of hell. His choice to follow Christ made him a target for death by the Jewish leaders and suspicious to the early church leaders. But his preaching and teaching proved Paul to be a powerful witness for Christ, a leading theologian and able church planter across the empire.

The different tone of this Galatian letter is obvious from the first words as Paul identifies himself as having authority, not from any human agency, but from “Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead” (v. 1). Paul also omits his usual warm words of gratitude for the Galatians, instead stating his deep disappointment: “I’m amazed that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ to follow another gospel” (v. 6). This is a challenge, a calling to account, as he reminds them the way of Christ is grace and “anyone who teaches otherwise deserves to be cursed!” (vv. 8-9). This warning is stated twice, because the unequalled message of the cross and resurrection is being threatened by the bondage of legalism.

“Judaizers,” most likely refers to Jews who now followed Christ, had been visiting the churches of Galatia and presenting the idea that a true follower must keep certain parts of the old law, specifically that men must be circumcised. Remember, the New Testament had not been written yet, so these legalists were basing their ideas on the Old Testament as proof. The Jewish faith was so different from the common religions of the world that it was easy to argue from the established “Jewish Bible.” The pagan world was also well-versed in the idea of rules for living as well as rituals and sacrifices to gain the attention and favor of any pagan gods.

Paul addresses this error concisely and strongly. Why would they trade grace for law keeping? Did they really believe anything they did could compare to the cross? Who were they trying to impress: God, the false teachers, the world around them? The same questions can be asked today.

Human thinking is all too easily focused on getting into heaven. We bog down in degrees of sin and how to escape hell. Paul knew by hard experience that earning God’s love through memorizing creeds and keeping the ponderous laws of Judaism did not work. He experienced in God’s grace through Christ an unbelievable freedom of heart and soul. But do not overlook Paul’s joy of life in this world. What marks Paul’s words and experiences is how Christ changes and blesses us every day long before we walk on the streets of God’s heaven! This is a motivating influence on his strong words to the Galatians who were so willing to turn away from Christ to a life of bondage by impossible laws.

Paul’s firm admonishment was preceded by what he wishes for the Galatians: “Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3). He is worried about those he had guided to faith in

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Christ. Those who were repeating a gospel of works were not preaching “good news,” but rebuilding the old wall of guilt and uncertainty that Christ has overcome. Paul’s message of hope comes from God, not a human origin (v. 11). Paul encountered the risen Christ in a vision on the road to Damascus that produced a radical change of heart and mind.

We have a tendency to reshape God to fit our expectations and needs. I grew up in a family that believed in God, so it seemed natural for me to be a Christian. At 17, I had a crisis of faith, a realization that God was little more than a religious concept, a good idea or an influence for morality. On a weekday midnight I could not concentrate on my math homework. Friends had talked about Jesus as their friend and accepting him as Savior. I had been through catechism class and was confirmed and baptized, but Christ as “my personal Savior and friend” seemed a strange idea.

I pulled the Bible my grandmother had given me off the bookshelf and began to read the gospels again. In that dark night, I discovered that God loves me! Love meant relationship, concern, and hope. All I could do was look out at the darkness and tell God I loved him and wanted Jesus in my life. For fifty-eight years I have lived in the security of God’s grace, through hardships and joys – not because I am a church member, not because I am better than anyone else. “It came through a revelation from Jesus Christ” (v. 12) at midnight in Virginia. There is freedom in God’s grace that you will find nowhere else.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.