

## AN APOSTLE

We read from the letter to the Galatians. Galatia is not a city but a province – an area. On his very first missionary journey, Paul had started little house-churches in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe. He was beaten and stoned for his efforts, but these churches held on in the heartland of today’s Turkey. It may well be that this letter to the handful of new Christians in this area is chronologically the first and oldest writing in the New Testament. (First Thessalonians holds that spot for some.) Paul writes back to his friends – the fruits of his first major effort to form churches – and encourages them to keep clear about their faith and keep true to the wondrous grace they have found in Jesus Christ, and all that this portends for their future.

Often called “Little Romans,” the letter to the Galatians rough-drafts the themes and issues that appear in the longer and more polished letter to the Romans. But the brevity and personal candor of Galatians keep it fresh and powerful in its impact. Some think the letter a little severe, but I suspect that’s only the cold ink on white paper. Paul chides and teases and exhorts, to be sure, but it comes from the warmth and closeness of all that has been shared, endured, and believed together. No one would talk this way to strangers or formal acquaintances. Chapter three starts off, “You stupid Galatians!” You cannot get away with that except where friendships are true and close. Most of the letter makes it clear that Paul is writing to dear friends. (3:15, 26; 4:6, 12, 19, 28, 31; 5:13; 6:1)

Sometimes I have visited in territory where I have preached in former years. I often find myself wanting to say to them, “Have you read Galatians lately? Why don’t you read Galatians? You really ought to read Galatians together.” I don’t say it, of course. Besides being presumptuous, I am not their pastor anymore. So I keep my mouth shut. But it builds up in me all the same: “You should read Galatians!” Only, now I am back home in my own territory, and this comment has been building up until it needs to go somewhere. Guess where? “Have YOU read Galatians lately? Why don’t you read Galatians? You really ought to read Galatians!” There is no insult intended. I don’t read it to insult myself either. It’s just such a great blessing.

On the other hand, it might be even more fun if we read it together – read it and muse as we go. Galatians is only six chapters. You can read

the whole thing in ten or fifteen minutes. But it is one of those little writings that has changed, transformed, and inspired thousands of people – when they finally started to hear it. So maybe you will decide to read the whole letter at least once each week, and I will preach from Galatians for the next few Sundays, and we'll see if it can reach any of us.

Scripture gets the most interesting when we get in dialogue with it – when we get involved with it personally. Most of the time, people are trying to “be right” about Scripture – trying to have correct views; trying to have the one right, best, and only understanding of what it really means. Isn't that pathetic? Is that the way you would approach a sunset? Or a symphony? Or even another human being?

Well, some of us would have to confess to the same blunder, at least occasionally, with other human beings. “Jill is bad.” “Jane is good.” Jill hurt my feelings the other day, therefore no matter what she thinks, says, or does or what side of any issue she is on *from now on* ... she is bad. Jane, on the other hand, has been really wonderful to me and my family. Therefore no matter what she says, does, or thinks *from now on* ... she is good and right. Well, who knows, maybe I am right about Jane, but in no way am I right about Jill. Neither am I “right” about Scripture. There is no “being right” about Scripture, because life is not a true-or-false quiz. Life is an essay exam, and we write the answers with our lives – with the way we live, day by day.

Reading Galatians together will not bring us to right opinions on various subjects. There may be some things that move us deeply or call us to see things in a special light. We might feel moments of shame, or blessing, or of serendipity, or strong aversion. And if we read the same words over again a few days from now, the impact may come in a different way. Scripture is just as alive as we will allow it to be, even as Paul was very much alive when he wrote this letter to the Galatians. So we will not be in a hurry. We will take all the time we need to get connected. And doubtless we will never finish reading Galatians at this rate. That's okay; it will be around the next time we want to pick it up. Some people will be reading Galatians for as long as human life exists on this planet. And some people will be missing it. Of course, some people will read it a few times and still miss it. But my point is: Most of what we read is not this tried-and-true. Most of what we read will not be read past next year. Even less of it will matter to people fifty or sixty years from now. How many of the movies that we spend time

and life viewing today will matter to people two generations from now? I do not claim to know how to keep balance between knowing what is relevant in the present moment and knowing what is relevant in the long run. But I do know that the present moment is fleeting, and that if the present is all we care about, we have no notion of what is really going on, even in the present.

Galatians, chapter one, first verse: *“From Paul, an apostle commissioned not by any human authority or human act, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.”*

Usually we would go right on reading. Who stops to look around after the very first sentence or after the very first step of any journey? This is supposed to be an eight-mile hike; nothing interesting is allowed to happen for at least the first mile. If interesting things were going to happen in the morning, God would never have invented the afternoon or evening, right? So work hard until noon or maybe two o'clock, and then start watching for interesting developments.

Paul often sneaks vast foundations into his first few sentences. We can be annoyed or bored – or we can move into the dynamism and excitement of what he is saying.

*“From Paul, an apostle.”* How many apostles have you known personally? How many of *you* are apostles? Could I see a show of hands please? Or better yet, would the apostles among us please stand up for just a moment? How many of you are apostles?

Does it take nerve to make such a claim, or what?! [Thanks, you may be seated, if you like.] Would a person rise to that identity in pride, or in humility? Let's not get fancy here. This definition is not from any theological work; it's straight from a college dictionary (*American Heritage*): *Apostle* = Someone chosen by Christ to preach his gospel; a missionary of the early church; one who leads or advocates a new cause. From the Greek *apostolos* = messenger, envoy.

With such hesitancy do we claim certainty that we are messengers of Jesus the Christ! How tentative we are about being advocates for Jesus! Is it a matter of pride or of humility if we consider ourselves to be chosen by Christ to be errand-runners – messengers? Certainly it was not our idea! No matter how much we may come to love it, and take heart because of it, and experience the Kingdom as a result of our

involvement in it – nonetheless, it was *not* our idea. Nor was it Paul's. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide." (John 15:16) Paul did not come before the Galatians as one who had figured everything out, nor did he come before them with "the answers." No, it was not his idea, his personal agenda, or his design. Someone greater than himself had called him out, set him apart, asked him to carry a message not his own – a MESSAGE far greater than any message he could ever have contemplated or imagined. Paul's comment may sound arrogant to thoughtless ears, but it is made in deepest humility.

Paul writes back to the Galatian churches, knowing they will share his letter around the various congregations, and he starts off reminding them that he is a mere messenger – a mere errand-boy – of the Christ. He does not think that he himself is much, but he *does* believe that the Message he carries is tremendously important. After all, it is not *his* Message. Because of where he knows it comes from, he is certain that there is no more important Message, no greater topic, no higher agenda anywhere in the world. He is not great, but, through no fault of his own, he carries this greatness with him. He wants to talk about the Crucified One who, in love beyond imagination, wants to be with us, share life with us, heal us, guide us more and more into a heavenly Kingdom in and beyond and more real than the physical realm where we are presently living.

Four words to begin a letter: "From Paul, an apostle." Now familiar, it was an incredible and audacious way to start a letter back then. It is still incredible, if we hear it. It strikes me, though, that we cannot fully hear or respond to this letter unless we identify in some way. Most of us would agree that Paul was an apostle. Actually, I keep running into people who are not willing to grant Paul this title anymore. No big surprise; many people in his own day also rejected his claim. In fact, Paul would not be making this claim in this letter if people were not challenging his right to call himself an apostle. So I should not be surprised when former cohorts of mine "swear off" the Apostle Paul, and claim that he corrupted the teachings of Jesus and invented a church and a theology that are really against who Jesus was and what Jesus taught. It should not surprise me – but, of course, it does.

And they try to persuade me that we should no longer talk about sin or salvation, about conversion or redemption, about atonement or

grace or forgiveness or repentance. That's all negative thinking, they say, and comes out of the warped perspective of a Paul who did not understand Jesus or true Christness. They assure me that the Gnostic heretics were the ones who got it right, but then were persecuted and driven underground by all the narrow-minded and hateful bigots who had somehow gained control of the entire early church. And that finally, in our time, Gnosticism is resurfacing with the true Message of Jesus, and now we can realize that we ourselves are the Christ, sin is not a problem, and Christness can now emerge in us if we just decide to stop feeling guilty and let our wonderfulness unfold. Only, we must no longer deal with sin or shame or any of the images that suggest something is wrong with us. Never repent, or apologize, or convert – just bloom and grow. You do not need a Savior – just believe in the Christness within.

Without animosity or rancor, I must say that when these people speak of Paul, it is not about any Paul that I recognize. And when they talk of the new religion, however nicely they word it, it is not a religion I trust or identify with. True heresy never dies, because humans will do almost anything to stay in charge of their own lives, stay separated from God, keep in control instead of turning will and life over to the Holy Spirit. This still leads ultimately to despair. If that is what they want – fine. But if that is what *you* want – that is not fine! There is something far greater awaiting you. Paul was rooted and grounded in Christ, and indeed he was the Great Apostle – called, converted, led, and sent by the Resurrected Jesus. He knew the Message because it had happened to him. That did not make him perfect. Indeed, such a notion would be false to the Message itself. Perfection is for heretics. But Paul knew the Message because it had happened to him. Therefore, he carried it with authentic power and appropriate humility.

Clearly Paul did not think of himself as the Christ. Though he spoke of “life in Christ” and said things like “It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me,” yet it is clear that he did not think of himself as the Christ. But he did think of himself as a sinner who was forgiven and redeemed and was now appointed to carry the Message of this possibility to others. Paul knew that some kind of reconciliation between God and each one of us is necessary before the spiritual journey can truly begin. And after that, it still requires a daily reiteration of the theme: a turning it over, a constant WAY of prayer and devotion and obedience – a Way based on this new relationship between forgiven, loved, supported sinners and the Resurrected Christ who came for us, who never quits on us,

who never merges with us but always stays relational – loving, caring, guiding. We become Christlike insofar as we grow in a closer and closer bond with the Resurrected Jesus until gratitude and obedience, love and hope, repentance and forgiveness talk to each other in and around everything that happens to us. But we do not “hatch” out of our individuality into Christness, nor do we ever desire to walk apart, alone, or self-contained. Neither do we want or expect to lose our separateness, merging into a Christness that no longer sings praises or feels love or gratitude – that no longer knows it is being saved by the love of Another, or is being groomed for dimensions that go far beyond this one.

“From Paul, the Christed one, to all the other Christs that have emerged in Galatia.” Not hardly! Audacious as it sounds, Paul claims a title far below that. In humility and wonder, he merely claims to be an apostle – a messenger of the Christ. There is a difference between *being* the Christ and being *a messenger* of the Christ. And of course that makes the Message very different too.

Can you identify? Now that you have had time to think about it a little more, how many of you are apostles? Would ... *will* ... any more of you stand with those who stood before?

Paul is an apostle because of the Damascus Road theophany. Never mind any of the details for the moment. For Paul, there had been a dramatic encounter with the Living Christ on that road. No matter how anybody explains it – with negative words or positive, with approval or scorn – the *fact* remains that Paul’s life was changed forever. He knew from that moment on that someONE in very high places loved him, cared about him, had work for him to do. And yes, despite everything he had been and done before that. Forgiveness and grace are real! He had been surrounded by them, or that would have been the end of his journey instead of its beginning.

Now, some contend that this was all a delusion. If it *was* a delusion, that delusion operated as powerfully as any reality that had ever existed. If Paul were standing here at this moment and we said to him something like: “Hey Paul, in our modern day of scientific, psychological knowledge – far beyond anything known in your day – we have concluded that what you experienced on the Damascus Road was really a delusion brought on by a combination of your guilt for persecuting Christians, and an unresolved inner conflict resulting from your need for approval from your unloving and overdemanding father. It was only a kind of wakeful

dream ... ” Paul would merely laugh and say, “May you all dream such a dream and find a waking reality to touch you as that one touched me – and may you know that it came from the Resurrected Christ. And may it come to you soon!” (By the way, psychologists who play that game don’t seem to recall that becoming a rabbi, as Paul was doing until the Damascus Road experience, would have pleased his father a lot more than conversion to Christianity.)

Reading these four words, “*From Paul, an apostle,*” it struck me that, like it or not – through no particular fault or virtue of my own – I am an apostle as well. And it also struck me that most of you are apostles too! I happen to know that most of you have had encounters with the Undefinable One. Today I am only asking: Can you admit it? Do you claim it? Are you an apostle? Have you acknowledged the love and the grace and, in some way clear at least to yourself, become a messenger of Jesus the Christ? There are, I hope you all realize, a myriad of ways to be messengers for Jesus – to be apostles. One of them is tailored just for you. It may be fun to watch professional tennis players, but they are not the only tennis players on earth. I get to play too. The fact that they do it before millions of people for millions of dollars doesn’t change that. I get to play too! In Christendom, there is nobody who cannot play. There are only those who do not want to.

Paul also knows that he is an apostle because of the fruits of his labors. That is, wherever he goes, the Spirit is at work. It’s not just Paul at work, and it never actually happens quite like Paul plans or imagines it. Sometimes very little happens, when he thinks a lot should. More often, things are happening all over and around his efforts that exceed and are different from what Paul expects. Nevertheless, wherever Paul goes, the Spirit moves people, changes people, things happen. The Message of God’s undeserved love, as revealed in Jesus Christ, makes some people furious. Of course! Humans hate anything undeserved, especially if it comes to others. Paul is an apostle – a messenger. Reactions to *any* message in this world are always mixed. If it is a great message, the reaction will be great – both positive and negative. Paul is merely an apostle. He carries a Message. What happens as a result of that Message is not his province – it’s none of his business. Though he will carry the Message in the best way he knows how – and improve on how he carries it all along the WAY – nevertheless, what results from the Message is in the hands of the One from which it came.

I have asked you, as I have been asking myself: Are you an apostle? On appropriate levels, and in ways tailored to you and your own life, have you been called, touched, given a MESSAGE and a HOPE to carry wherever you go? Have you, and do you, see any fruits coming from your carrying the Message? Do not answer in haste. Be fair to the One who blesses your efforts.

No faith in the world is so exciting for followers – and so boring for spectators – as Christianity. If you read Galatians thinking Paul is an apostle but you are not, then yawn – double bore – and any television program is better. But if you identify ... if living for the Kingdom is your game too ... if you also are a messenger, in some fashion, for the Christ – then musing together with this old pro named Paul is wonderful encouragement indeed. For we are *“commissioned not by any human authority or human act, but by Jesus the Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.”*

## TO VISIT CEPHAS

Sometimes we read a passage from the Bible, and it feels like people do not give very much credence to what is written. For an increasing number of people, it seems apparent that the story of Jesus is just another story. If a story, or some portion of it, is told well, they may laugh or cry for the moment, depending on what mood is struck. But that is not the same thing as taking it seriously, taking it to heart, letting it become the structure and foundation – the warp and woof – of our very lives. It's getting harder and harder to tell what we should and should not take seriously.

Paul took his experience on the Damascus Road seriously. I know people who do not take such experiences seriously *even when they themselves have had these very experiences*. Whatever the immediate impact, such “touches” from The Beyond are disturbing and disorienting. And I know nobody who has made it through very many years with no “touches” at all. I know some people who *claim* they have had no significant spiritual experiences – until they stop for a while, get quiet inside, and give their minds a chance to remember. And I know some people who discount their spiritual experiences even after they remember – warding them off, determined to pay no attention. Lots of us walk past burning bushes for years and never turn aside to pay any attention to them. Paul could have waited it out also. God would have let him up for air in a few days. He could then have withdrawn from active persecution of Christians, perhaps, and gone on about his life as a rabbi. Many have avidly wished that he had done so, and consider that the world would be better off if he *had* done so. Some of *you* have been struck hard by the Spirit but are trying to shake it off – trying to go on with your own life as a rabbi or an engineer or entrepreneur or whatever.

Last week we thought about the four opening words of Paul's letter to the Galatians: “*From Paul, an apostle.*” Despite the fact that the word “apostle” (messenger, envoy) has acquired such a high reputation in Christendom, we toyed with coming to a greater awareness of our own apostleship. It is clear that we will hear the letter to the Galatians on a very different level if we accept our own apostleship. It is also clear that if disciples do not become apostles, Christianity will die. If disciples do not become apostles, Christianity has not sunk in; it is still a spectator sport. We may be taking notes, even making astute comments on how

others are playing the game, but if disciples do not become apostles, we are not yet part of the game – part of the new LIFE. Suddenly there is nothing theoretical about this old warrior’s experiences and observations. Paul’s life reveals the real nature of Christianity. It does not make him right about everything – not at all! But it does make him terribly relevant.

*“I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.”* You see? If you are *not* apostles, then this is a fine old historic statement, and maybe on its best day it seems like good rhetoric as well. But it doesn’t really matter much, one way or the other. Most people wouldn’t get out of bed to hear it or think about it. And of course, thousands of people prove that every Sunday.

But if *you* are an apostle, that makes it very different. Then I can ask: Is the gospel *you* carry of human origin? And you are compelled to reply. I don’t mean you are coerced to reply; I mean that the question itself is compelling. You cannot be an apostle without wrestling with this issue. It affects everything we do as apostles. Does the message we carry come only from human institutions? Is it merely the product of how we were raised? It most certainly was not the product of how Paul was raised! Is it the result of our love or respect or fear of those who taught us or cared about us? Do you carry a “hand-me-down” religion? Or is it true for you also that it did not come from any human origin?

I cannot answer such questions for you, though I often try, as you know. But I do know that I resonate with Paul’s comments. It was not the Damascus Road for me; I have never lived in Syria. But it was under a Pepper Tree about thirty miles and fifty-three years from here. I was shown what exists elsewhere, and what is to come, and the first glimmers of what was expected of me. It was certainly nothing expected by any humans. And yes, it changed my path forever. I was young, and I realize I might have been overly impressionable; if you were to talk to me about it on a conversational level, I might be perfectly willing to muse with you about psychological phenomena, and illusions and delusions. Only, when we were all through talking, I would still know that what I saw there was reality, and that what I know here is only shadow – only partial, half-life – and however much we are loved or love each other, we are still struggling to become real. Sometimes in my own life I become more shadowy, and sometimes I become more real – and I watch it happening to all those around me. It is why I love the story of Pinocchio. And sometimes I sit here before the service wondering how I got here, and does it matter, and can I continue. And then I look up, out the

## TO VISIT CEPHAS

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window here in the sanctuary, and there is ... that pepper tree. All of *you* know that this is a mere coincidence. But I don't walk past burning bushes as easily as I used to.

In any case, I resonate with Paul. I did not convert myself. It was not any human's idea or plan. My faith and the tasks that come from it are not of human origin. I certainly have picked up a great deal of help, support, error, opposition, and encouragement from many humans all along the Way. But at the core and center of it, it is not from any human origin. There are times when knowing this becomes essential for any apostle. That is why I ask you: Is your apostleship from any human origin? Are you trying to carry a hand-me-down religion?

Most of you have realized that in some fashion you are an apostle. Sometimes, like me, you neglect or forget it. But the truth is that on some level, you also are a messenger – an envoy of the God who, in mercy and love, chose to reveal himself in Jesus the Christ. And on some level, harder and harder to keep vague, you realize that you also are sent to some area or situation of life as a disciple/apostle of Jesus. Moreover, beyond other joys and trials, that is the deepest reason for your being, and the source of the best energy and satisfaction you have ever known. Is it clear to you, my friends, that the Gospel you have received – and now carry – is not of human origin? I am very interested in your answer. I like to know and hear about such things. But I do not need to know this answer. YOU need to know! Are you on your own – a free agent? Can you take it or leave it alone? Are you a servant of some group or institution or gathering of people? Or are you, when it comes down to it, an envoy of the Christ? It makes a difference.

Paul remembers his own faith journey. His conversion had been remarkable. We would expect him to have run almost immediately to Jerusalem to visit with the apostles who had walked with Jesus. Why was he off to Arabia (to think and to ponder and to pray), when he could have been going to Jerusalem – to the human sources of information about Jesus? He would go to them eventually, but it was not his primary need. By the way, Paul went to Mount Sinai, the Holy Mountain of Moses and Elijah. If I say to you “Arabia,” you think what? East of Damascus? It's five hundred miles across the trackless Syrian Desert to Baghdad; one thousand miles to Dhahran on the Persian Gulf; nine hundred miles south of Damascus to Mecca. That is our notion of Arabia. But why would Paul have headed to such places? Whatever our geography, Paul

mentions his own in Galatians 4:25: “*Sinai is a mountain in Arabia.*” After his conversion, Paul headed for the Holy Mountain. Of course.

Is it clear and significant to you like it is for me? Paul is our link (the connection) to Christianity as Holy-Spirit-guided life – in contrast to Christianity as an institutional structure, a thing passed down by human authority. In the Christianity of the Holy Spirit, prayer is the focal point. It depends upon each individual’s personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ is the power – the living and guiding presence for each of us. We gather and we have organizations, but they exist to enhance and supplement. They are not our primary loyalty or allegiance. The presence of the Holy Spirit with us *outranks all other things*: mate, church, children, security, Bible, boss, anything. When we are lucky, there is no quarrel, and often our mates, our children, the church, our security, the Bible, our boss, and our friends may greatly help and enhance our pilgrimage and our purpose for being here: our apostleship. But if and when it comes down to it, the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is number ONE – top priority, allegiance, obedience – the source of our comfort, and our true security.

In any form of institutional Christianity, the Holy Spirit may receive honorable mention, but it is not central – it is not the highest priority. Overt, objective authority is primary to and outranks the subjective dangers of personal prayer. The Bible, creeds, and often humans with ecclesiastical authority must be obeyed ahead of the Holy Spirit. Please, I am not mocking – only trying to distinguish. Humans have good reason to fear the errors and mistakes of subjective judgments and decisions, and all true prayer is subjective. That is why true Christianity is so scary. It is also why institutional Christianity is often dull and dreary: duty instead of passion; rules and obligations instead of the transforming power of God’s personal love and destiny and guidance.

Please do not misunderstand me. I love Peter; Peter was wonderful, and I happen to believe that Peter himself was guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit of the Resurrected Jesus through most of his later life. But that is not how most of Christendom sees or understands Peter. Peter was the first Pope. The true authority of the church has been passed down the human chain from Peter to each succeeding Pope. The power (and protection from error) is in the institution, not in the personal relationship of each individual with God. People in the institution may still have a personal relationship with God (though most do not), but if so, it is circumscribed by traditions, creeds, biblical interpretations,

and people who have risen to positions of authority – all a very logical checks-and-balances to individual subjectivity. The problem is: by this logical, careful, sane approach, Moses would never have gone back to Egypt; Elijah would never have defied Jezebel and Ahab; Jeremiah would never have made prophet; and, most certainly, Jesus would never have gone to the Cross.

It is clear and obvious but needs saying: Paul was not among the twelve who walked with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Paul was not converted by any of the twelve who walked with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Paul was converted by the Holy Spirit directly and personally – after it was all over. Or at least after most people *thought* it was all over. Paul claims his apostleship by the reality of the Holy Spirit's personal influence and guidance in his life. Paul comprehends and identifies with the Message of Jesus – with grace and forgiveness, with surrender and obedience, with a life of prayer – and Paul identifies with Jesus' death and resurrection at least as much as, and probably more deeply than, any of those who walked with Jesus in the flesh. Eventually Paul would disagree with Peter on one of the most important issues in the entire history of the early church, and Peter would realize that Paul was right. And from every available human perspective, Paul was the most dedicated, most fearless, most effective, most tireless apostle of them all.

You understand what this means, don't you? You do *not* have to be part of the institution to get it. You do *not* have to be present with Jesus in His earthly ministry to get it. You do *not* have to have it passed to you from Peter or any other human source to get it. The Holy Spirit of our Resurrected Lord is alive – and unlimited by time and space – and YOU can be touched and converted and appointed just as deeply, just as authentically, just as powerfully and personally and completely ... as any other human who has ever walked this earth! Christianity is not a hand-me-down religion. We can go at it that way if we insist. We can ward off the Holy Spirit's touch. We are granted that kind of free will, if we are determined to use it. We can limit ourselves to institutions, to what others say, to what others have written – if we insist. But Christianity is not a hand-me-down religion. The God of our Lord and Savior is a personal God. And he does not want from you what he has ever wanted from anybody else. God does not sit up in Heaven saying, "Oh shoot, they all look alike to me." But YOU are the one who must decide to let God in beyond institutions, rules, creeds, and what

anybody else wants or expects of you. All those things can have value, but they cannot be at the center – not if we want to walk in the WAY of Jesus Christ.

Have I skipped over it too lightly?

*“I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.”* Paul is establishing his freedom to, if necessary, speak and act independently from any earthly authority or institution. *And* he is telling the Galatian Christians that, if necessary, they must be ready to do that too. Things were getting hot. The Jerusalem church, we suspect, was getting close to issuing an official statement designed to close down Paul’s ministry and authority. Paul is actually saying to them: “Even if I myself am dumb enough (or unfaithful enough) to recant what I have told you about the grace and mercy and personal presence of Jesus Christ, don’t pay any attention to me. Pay attention to what you yourselves have experienced with the Holy Spirit.” (Galatians 1:8, paraphrased)

I believe that all human beings are hungry and searching for spiritual life: for connection with God; for awareness of the destiny that connects them with the Kingdom beyond this world. It even seems to me that all of our most powerful appetites – for sex, money, food, power, fame, land, recognition – are physical manifestations of a far deeper spiritual yearning. And that these appetites are fraught with evil precisely because we do not understand the magnitude of what is driving us and what is calling to us.

When we get converted – when we awaken to God’s presence, so close and caring – the shift of perspective and emphasis is immense and overwhelming. It is then imperative to know that this change – this revelation, this new awareness – is not of human origin. Otherwise we will subvert it, find ways to deny it, or assign it to serve human institutions, human authorities, friends, relatives, or our own desires – and quickly end up back where we started, or worse. And the cry then is the cry of disillusionment, cynicism, and lost faith. And we cry as if we had no part in the loss of this WAY that leads to all we most seek, and all we most want, in life.

Once established – clear in his mind and heart about who he was and what he was about – Paul went back to Damascus and tried to start a ministry there. Now that Christ was with him, now that he had turned

his will and his life over, now that he was truly converted ... *he failed miserably*. The effort was a disaster. It would be another seven or eight years before Paul would come out of Cilicia, team up with Barnabas, and go to preach for the first time to the Galatians – and then later write this letter to them. Just a little realism and reminder for those of us who keep wanting to turn the Christian pilgrimage into instant success or a short-range security blanket. I am talking to myself, of course; I'm the one who keeps wanting to rush things. Only, that's not how it works.

Anyway, it was three years after his conversion before Paul got around to visiting with the people who had known Jesus here on earth. Does that sink in? Do you promise never to forget?

Paul and Peter did finally get together. I like that very much. It is good when Christians get together, especially when they remember that they are not under each other's authority. *"Three years later I did go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas, and I stayed two weeks with him."* Cephas, of course, is Aramaic for "rock," the nickname Jesus gave to Simon, whom we call, from the Greek, *Petros* – Peter. Just in case you wonder, there is no doubt: Cephas is Peter.

Nevertheless: *"I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin."* And even if you first hear about it from me ... when it really comes to you, it will not be of human origin for you either.

## AN EVIL GENERATION

You are surprised that we are still in the first chapter of Galatians? Has anybody ever mentioned that our world is in too big a hurry? Are you among those who think it's better to watch twelve poor movies than to watch one good one? Or to read twenty mediocre books than to read one classic? Have you, like me, ever read a classic and missed most of it because you were in such a hurry to get on to the twenty mediocre? For some years, I thought the real reason for reading was to convince myself and others that I was well-read. And I *was* well-read. I could tell you the titles and authors and what the books said, and even which ones were right, and to what degree. I still missed most of it. So did a lot of my professors. They were well-read too.

Some of you have been reading Galatians two or three times a week. Thank you! Now, what if for the coming week you let Galatians be the *only* thing you read? No newspapers, television, books, movies. Just read and reread and ponder Galatians instead. Of course, that's how it really was for the Galatians to whom Paul writes. No movies, computers, television, newspapers, magazines. They didn't even have a personal copy of the letter; they heard it read when they got together. They heard it over and over, talked about it, memorized it, even thought about what it meant. Why would Paul say these things? Was he right? Others had said differently. The Galatians themselves had long *believed* differently. It was not really the letter, of course, but *what the letter was talking about* that mattered. Have you ever wondered how they "got it" so deeply and profoundly, when many of them were what we would call uneducated peasants? Uneducated does not mean unintelligent. And they were not distracted like we are.

*"Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed; to him be glory for ever and ever! Amen." (Galatians 1:3-5)*

We have talked about Paul being an apostle, and about our being apostles. We have revisited the eerie claim that the Gospel we have received is not of human origin. At least some of you agree that tracking these Pauline thoughts leads us into strange and valuable territory, and that the more we ourselves mean to walk the Christian WAY in true and earnest devotion, the more fascinating Paul becomes to us.

Nevertheless, in comparison to the phrase we are highlighting today, the others recede to the sidelines, to the periphery. *“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed ....”*

Being an apostle means nothing if we have no message to carry. We cannot be emissaries if no one has sent us.

I am frequently told that Paul’s kind of language is no longer useful – that his imagery no longer reaches or moves people. Actually, people have been telling me this for as far back as I can remember – that the “sin/salvation/evil-age/rescue/died-for-our-sins” approach to spiritual growth is old and out of date and no longer calls people into newness of life. That always amazes me. First of all, I live in a community where people are deeply moved by this Message – where they are in fact finding newness of life, new purpose, new comfort and strength – and they keep growing more confident, more effective, and more loving because of it. Moreover, the people who tell me it is old and outdated, or dumb and wrong, are (with very few exceptions) ... how do I say this gently? They don’t strike me as having much depth of spiritual peace, discernment, devotion, commitment, or even a very active personal relationship with God. What can I say?

Well, I can say that this language is still useful to me. It reaches and moves me mightily, and has for years. Rather than diminishing with time and familiarity, it seems to grow stronger and more compelling. While to me I don’t seem to be a very good illustration of this new life – and like some of you I feel ever sheepish about how little I seem able to accomplish for the Christ who keeps doing so much for me – still, I do know what direction my life takes when I am left to myself and my own devices. Worthy or not, I still claim the Kingdom – the new LIFE in Christ – with gratitude, and confidence, and inner rejoicing.

That puts us in a bind, doesn’t it – if this language and imagery are incredibly important to us, but dull or obnoxious to others. I do have friends, especially among the clergy, who say, “Keep the old concepts if you like, but at least find fresh language and fresh symbols for expressing them.” I do find fresh *illustrations* all the time, every day, all around me. The Spirit has not stopped any efforts on our behalf. But why would I have objections to the language of sin and salvation, of

death and resurrection, of conversion and giving my allegiance to a new King who reigns over a different kind of Kingdom?

Frankly, most of the alternative images and “new” language I hear sound too tame, too bland, too anemic. They are usually a watered-down, limp suggestion that maybe we have a lot of potential and should just try harder to realize it. Now, who could pretend that this is wrong? A little focus – a little concentration – would certainly help most of us. But that’s a far cry from the heart-stopping drama of a Living God who bails out of Heaven into the suffering and anguish of human life because the children are so precious – and so lost – and something *must* be done to save them.

Frankly, when I hear people objecting to biblical language and images, I suspect that it is not the imagery which is old or tired, but that they are still trying to duck or dodge the Message itself. Naturally, it’s easy for me to come to this conclusion because that’s what I have so often done myself. My problem with the language and imagery of sin and salvation is that it is not merely language and imagery. I can pretend on the outside just as well as most of you – not as well as *all* of you, but as well as *most* of you – that everything is fine, I have it all together, and I don’t have any difficult inner issues of fear or loneliness or dread or greed or despair; that my heart and soul are perfectly tuned to the will and heart of God; that my life is a living illustration of willing obedience and service and devotion. (Doesn’t that sound incredibly wonderful?) I can pretend I am like that and that my life is like that, but this is not my total experience.

Being fair, not just to me but also to you: We do know moments when we live on the higher levels. I suppose that if we didn’t get whiffs and tastes of the Kingdom, we wouldn’t have such an incredible longing for more – we wouldn’t have such a hunger to keep walking with Christ. So the Jesus who came among us – who lived and died that we might dare to trust, and begin to return, the love that the Father bears toward us – that is not just imagery! And neither is the sin or the alienation or the fear that makes it so hard for us to trust – so hard for us to believe – that there really *is* a God of LOVE: that is, a God who loves us. It’s easy to believe in a vague, generic, impersonal God. That does not cost or require anything from us. It’s even pretty easy to believe that God loves other people, as long as we don’t know them very well. A New England friend used to tell me, “Jesus died that we might dare to stick our necks out too.” Sometimes he would add: “And that

we might dare to stick our hearts out and get them wrecked and hurt, and leave them out there anyway.”

Do you live in an “evil generation”? Why would Paul call his time “a wicked age”? Wouldn’t Turkey have been beautiful in his day? Sunsets and clear air and sparkling beaches; the seas and the rivers were teeming with fish; the rainforests were not endangered; there was no threat of radiation or global warming; nobody had yet asphalted the most beautiful farmland in the world. Of course, there were slaves everywhere, strings of boy prostitutes, Roman occupation – and Paul knew that people just like him had killed God’s Messiah. He knew it because he himself had been part of the mop-up operation.

Do you wake up in the morning and say to yourself: “Golly, I sure hope God can rescue me out of this present wicked age”? It starts to sound weird for a moment. But what’s really weird is that for a moment, we thought it sounded weird. You can tell about our fear of this wicked age by the thickness of the shields we wear. They are so thick and heavy that some days we can barely lug them around anymore. Lots of us actually *cannot* lug them around anymore; we get sick and depressed, and dream only of finding some place to go hide away from it all.

It is now familiar to most people that one of the pronounced patterns in the disease of alcoholism is a thing called “denial.” Seeing the reality with clarity would directly threaten the pattern of the alcoholic life itself. If the alcoholic begins to acknowledge how much damage alcohol is doing in his life, it brings to consciousness the terrible thought that he may need to stop drinking. Since that is an intolerable conclusion to any alcoholic, the mind will literally do anything it has to in order to avoid blaming alcohol for the problems. So the problems are not acknowledged. “Problems? I don’t have any problems! What problems?! Some self-righteous person is exaggerating them. Some hypocrite is making it up. Everybody has a fender-bender once in a while, so what’s the big deal if *I* do?”

I noticed a news story about a drunk driver who was arrested for knocking down one of the few remaining telephone poles still standing on Kauai. I smiled because I knew how that drunk was feeling: “Jeez, a hurricane can knock down everything in sight, but the entire police force drops everything and comes running after me because of one little pole. The injustice of it all!” Drunks think like that. Even if the problems get too obvious, we can still deny that alcohol is the cause. It was the

spouse, or the neighbor, or the boss, or the government, or God. Well, even non-alcoholics sometimes blame the government; I was sober a long time before I realized that even sober people sometimes think like drunks. Denial is a serious phenomenon. Denial protects *the disease* instead of the person who has the disease. Denial shields the disease against solution or healing. *“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”* (John 8:32) Thanks be to God! But the counterpart is: *“If we keep our denial, then the denial will ensure that the disease will go on developing and getting worse until we die.”*

All of us fight an enormous denial when it comes to sin – our alienation from God. We do not easily admit that the sin is causing us any problems. And if the problems get undeniable, then it is not our sin – that is, it is not our fault; it is circumstances beyond our control, or other people (spouse, boss, children), or the government, or God.

Do you live in an evil generation? “Nah, we gotta keep thinking positive. It gets a little difficult from time to time, but life is still pretty good. We’re plugging away. We’ll make it. Did you see the game yesterday? What a cliff-hanger!”

*“... Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age ....”*

Is Paul depressed? Is he being negative, or cynical, or paranoid? Not at all. He is only echoing Jesus: *“This generation is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah.”* (Matthew 12:39; Luke 11:29) (Repentance is the sign of Jonah: turn – convert – join a different Kingdom and live for a different reality.) We do not have to stay spiritually drunk all our lives – unconscious to the presence of God. We can stop drinking-in the myths and excuses of a secular, alienated, broken world. *“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed; to him be glory for ever and ever! Amen.”*

Do you realize that this is a wicked age? You can park your car at a trail-head and come back to find everything gone. You can even get back home and find that your home has been ransacked. Is that enough to call it a wicked age? It depends on the day, I suppose, and whether it happened to you. So if it happens to somebody else and I’m not much concerned about it, is that not one of the clearest marks of a wicked age?

“Today, an African-American boy in an urban area is more likely to die of a gunshot wound than was an African-American male who served in the Vietnam War.” (*The Wonder of Boys*, by Michael Gurian.) Fifty-nine thousand American soldiers were killed in the Vietnam War. Over sixty thousand of the surviving veterans have committed suicide since that war. Does that bother any of you – that we are killing ourselves faster than our enemies can kill us? Does it bother you that there were fewer casualties among U.S. servicemen *during* the First Gulf War than when we were at peace?

Why is our society now content to emphasize individuality and glorify every separate racial, ethnic, and cultural group? And not just that, but that *instead of* responsibility and participation in the larger community to which we all belong? For decades, schools and churches have been undoing the very things we marched for and believed in during the civil rights movement. Never mind black and white together; never mind becoming a united people – everybody back to their own heritage. Forget the wings; focus on the roots. Our world once again found a way to deny and delay the imperative of coming together, of identifying with each other, of working together against disasters about to envelop and destroy us all. So let’s each continue our loyalty to our past glory and our past hurts, and blame each other for our hard histories, Do you know what happens in any marriage, any community, or any world that wants to keep its resentments, angers, and vengeance – and never learns forgiveness or rebuilds love? Divorce = alienation = SIN. If the words are so outdated, how come the reality stays the same?

Is it a wicked age? You know I could go on and on, as you could yourself, with far grimmer illustrations of the same reality. *Of course* we don’t like to think about it too much. Denial is appealing for many reasons. There is still beauty all around us, despite the growing destruction. I am always amazed that in the midst of this wicked age, I keep running into so many courageous, loving, caring people. How come it is still a wicked age, when there are so many wonderful people? Well, a wicked age brings forth great caring. It is one of the sad things about studying history: to see that humans are so bad when things are good, and so good when things are bad. For instance, when did the great schools of Greece develop – Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, and the rest? They were what made ancient Greece great, right? Wrong! They were part of the death throes of Greece – a desperate attempt to train up the young men to character and values that might avert the decline. All to no avail.

In any case, no matter how remarkable the wonderful people are, the air and the waters are still being polluted, abuse and dishonesty still run rampant, the third world is still starving, and the time of the privileged is fast running out.

Strangely enough, it has always been true that conversion – the awakening of the Spirit – has also been an awakening to the magnitude of the evil and wickedness all around and within us. People do not flock to Jesus – turn their lives around, begin to walk the Pilgrim’s Way, become followers and servants of the Christ – until the shields and shells of denial are cracked wide open. It is not until we see the world and ourselves in the throes of the alienation, divisions, hatreds, and fears called SIN that we begin to grasp the magnitude of our plight – *or* the magnitude of the brazen and audacious purpose of what Jesus is doing for us and among us, and what He is inviting us into.

Most of the time, I suspect, we miss the Christian Life because we expect a big change on the outside and a minor adjustment on the inside. And most of the time, it is the reverse. There is a minor adjustment on the outside (at least that most people can see at first) and an incredible change on the inside: A change of values, allegiance, purpose, motivation. A change not of the personality, but of the pillars – the foundations on which it stands. A total reworking of what we are worth, why we are here, what we are trying to accomplish, and how.

The glory of the Christian Life – of the New Kingdom of Christ to which we give our only true allegiance – is not that it will save the world for democracy. It is not that it will solve the outer problems of our reeling, hurting world. It is not that it will save the spotted owl, or restore the forests, or make all the races and religions live in peace. We may work toward some of those ends from time to time, as God gives us light. But that is not the reason or purpose of Christianity.

The glory of the Christian Life is that we get to *be* – to exist – in God’s presence ... that we get to *know* the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ ... that we get to be part of a community of other sinners whose only authentic bond – and our only credentials – is the sheer awareness and acceptance of God’s love and grace.

*“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed; to him be glory for ever and ever! Amen.”*

## GOD AT WORK

The saints are many, and many are alive all around us. We don't always agree about who is on the list, though it is said that the humble can learn from anybody. Nevertheless, while we all have our own personal list of saints who have especially blessed us, there are some we hold in common.

The Apostle Paul is one of these. This is partly because he came so early and was a participant in the earliest Christian communities. Much more than that, his Christian experience was dramatic and intentional. That is, he really meant it. That does not make him "right," but it does make him a fascinating and trustworthy witness to the Christ, and to the Christian WAY.

It's fun to play in Galatians. Like with any relationship, we don't get to the best of Paul with casual, shallow, and occasional encounters. It takes time, interest, thoughtfulness, caring. Then we begin to feel the depths beneath the surface, and understand something of what he was going through, and why.

So now we have moved into the second chapter of Galatians. We can quickly see that Paul is struggling against the influence of Christians with whom he does not agree. He is in a power struggle, and hopeful that his friends will see the issues clearly. It is the classic struggle between Law and Gospel – between trusting in our best efforts and behavior, or trusting in the grace and love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. But that is always and also a struggle between trusting human traditions and institutions, or trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit – in the presence, the personal caring, and the specific purposes of a Living God.

Since the time Paul was among them, others have visited the Galatian churches. We have to figure this out or we cannot understand this letter at all. Why is Paul being so passionate, even cantankerous? His first missionary journey took him into central Turkey – Galatia – where he established four churches. Do not imagine buildings or white steeples in your mind. We are talking about small groups of people – so-called "house churches" in four different towns – who have responded to Paul's preaching. They heard him first in the synagogue of their town.

He told them that Jesus was the promised Messiah; that Jesus had been sent by God; that Jesus was the inevitable next phase and fulfillment of Judaism; that Jesus was the fulfillment of the biblical prophecies, but that nobody had realized it until after they had crucified Him – until He had appeared to them as the Resurrected Christ. And doubtless Paul told them how he himself had tried to destroy the followers of Jesus, until Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

The problem with Paul's Message of grace and love was that it put the Jewish leaders and the Jewish establishment in a bad light. They had killed God's Messiah. It was a harsh dilemma, no matter how you came at it. Either Jesus deserved what He got, or there had been a terrible mistake. If it was a terrible mistake but nobody would admit it, then that was a second mistake even worse than the first. If it was not a mistake, then there should be no Christian Movement, and why were people talking nonsense, telling all these lies, causing all this furor? So it was a terrible dilemma, and there was no way to smooth over it. People who have encountered the Risen Christ are not about to keep quiet about it. And people who have not encountered the Risen Christ do not see why they should be blamed for heinous crimes when they are just trying to be faithful to the religion they have been taught and have tried to follow all of their lives.

Remember that there was no formal split between Judaism and Christianity yet; there wouldn't be for another thirty or forty years. We are seeing the mayhem of a religious culture and tradition (Judaism) trying to deal with a dramatic new revelation welling up from within itself. Some accepted and believed in it; others did not. So the reaction to Paul's Message of grace and love was dramatic. They beat him and stoned him and left him for dead. Only, there were small groups of people in each town who found Paul's Message compelling – and overwhelming. The Holy Spirit had invaded them too. Some of them helped Barnabas get Paul to an insignificant and out-of-the-way little village called Derbe (forty-five miles south of Iconium, three miles northwest of Zasta), where he could recover from his wounds. And while he was recovering, guess what? A little house church formed in Derbe. I wonder how that happened!

Once sufficiently recovered, it was only logical for Paul to go east from Derbe to Tarsus, his home town, less than two hundred miles away. But no! Back into the lion's den went Paul, though more quietly this time,

to visit all the little groups of people – the “churches” – that had responded to the Message.

Meanwhile, news eventually traveled from the angry Jews of Galatia back to Jerusalem. They told of this strange duo that had been raiding synagogues and masquerading as faithful Jews so that they would be invited to preach and teach on the Sabbath – where they then twisted the Scriptures all around, insisting that a dead criminal was the Messiah and that He rose from the dead (of all the ludicrous ... ) – and they ended up stealing members away from the synagogue. Whew! Well!!!

Now, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (“Jewish Christians” is an awkward phrase; remember, there was no official Christianity yet, and *all* the Christians in Jerusalem, and most of the Christians in all Israel, were Jewish – born and bred, raised and taught) were still living according to Jewish ways and customs. They had no particular reason not to. They loved and honored Jesus, but they still went to the temple, ate kosher, and kept Jewish laws and customs. After all, so did Jesus. But the point is this: Their well-being, their jobs, and their security depended upon their convincing the Jewish culture around them that, while they loved and believed in Jesus, they were still good, faithful, practicing Jews. And if it became clear that they were not good, faithful, practicing Jews, what would happen? They would be persecuted, ostracized, driven out, even killed – as many of them eventually were. Remember Stephen? James the disciple? And later, James the brother of Jesus?

So now the Jewish neighbors, some in positions of great authority, came to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and said, “What’s going on? We hear from our relatives in Galatia that some of your leaders are trying to steal our people from the synagogues – teaching them things that aren’t Jewish at all, and calling us all a bunch of murderers. Are you guys Jews, like you pretend to be, or not?”

The threat was real, and serious. So the Christian Jews in Jerusalem replied that these so-called leaders were upstart troublemakers without authority or sanction who would soon be put in their place. Then they sent angry messengers to Antioch demanding to know who gave Paul and Barnabas permission to weaken and threaten the position of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem, and the reputation of Christians everywhere. And they sent Jewish Christian messengers to Galatia to meet with those who had listened to Paul, and to inform them that Paul was a

fraud without knowledge or authority; that they needed to make sure they lived like good Jews; and that they needed to make sure all the Jews in Galatia knew it, so that no more bad reports reached Jerusalem about followers of Jesus being a threat to Judaism. “It may seem okay for you to be a little sloppy out here in the boonies,” they said, “but back in Jerusalem, our lives and our livelihood are at stake.”

And of course, you remember Paul’s response to this development. We have the letter: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel.... You stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes 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 with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?”* Have you heard the old expression, “The fat was in the fire”?

So I’m playing in Galatians, and hoping you are too. Sometimes we have played with huge themes, and sometimes with side issues. Today I want to muse with you about a tiny little detail, a mere turn of phrase. I quote from the eighth verse of the second chapter: *“The same God who was at work in Peter’s mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles.”*

GOD IS AT WORK. Do you hear that?

Paul really believed that God was at work in Peter’s ministry. He also believed that God was at work in his own. He could see it in the lives of the people he worked with. If it saddened him that more people did not believe the Gospel, it must also have surprised him that so many did. What moved them to respond so incredibly? Surely not his own few and feeble words. It had to be the Holy Spirit. Why else would they risk so much so quickly and willingly? So Paul had been carried off, nearly dead, to a tiny hole-in-the-wall village called Derbe to recover from his wounds. Nobody would look for him there. But what a disaster! His career had very nearly ended before it began. And how long was he holed-up, recuperating in Derbe, where he never meant to go – where nobody would go on purpose? Only, there he made a life-long friend named Gaius, who would travel the world with him, even to Jerusalem. And what of Lystra, where Paul had been stoned and left for dead? Not a very impressive way to finish an evangelical tour.

But from Lystra came a young man named Timothy, who would not only become one of Paul's dearest friends, but would carry the Message for many years after Paul was dead and gone. The outer context does not have to obliterate the inner conviction. God is at work.

*"The same God who was at work in Peter's mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles."*

Despite what looks to us like dramatic action on Paul's part, Paul didn't feel like he was doing any of this. It was God at work. The Holy Spirit was in charge. Paul was just along for the ride – hanging onto the coattails, taking orders and suggestions when he could “hear” them clearly enough – but he had no idea how it was happening, who would respond, what would come of it. He even thought the world was about to end (and he was dead wrong about that), but it didn't matter. God was at work. God was doing it. Paul was only trying to cooperate, go with it, be useful in little ways around the edges of God's dynamism.

You know what's coming, don't you? “The same God who was at work in Peter's mission, and in Paul's, is also at work in yours!” Hard, isn't it? I mean, hard to take it seriously – without any jaundice, without equivocation. Paul really meant it, and he meant it on the level we just put it on too. *“Whatsoever ye do, do it as unto the Lord.”* (Colossians 3:17, 23; Ephesians 6:5-7) It has always been the belief of Christians that God is at work in them; that any work they do is an offering to God; that God will inspire and help them with their work – indeed, that behind the outward level of physical labor, there is a larger and more important task going on and they are participants in it. God is organizing and choreographing things on levels we can only dimly see, but it is happening nevertheless, and we are part of it if we choose to be. And we can become more conscious of it if we open ourselves to be the willing servants of this God.

**By the way, where do you work?** A friend of mine was confessing just the other day that for years she did not take God to work with her. God and church and spiritual growth and stuff like that were in one compartment of life, but work and career and success and dealing with the world were in an entirely different compartment of life. You remember how Charlemagne held his right arm up out of the water when he was baptized, because he still had a lot of infidels to kill? It's okay to trust God with the soul – with the inner stuff that is private and personal – but in the outer world, it's still up to us; God cannot be trusted to

understand or know how things work in the real world. So God does not get our work – our energy and our labor. And he does not get our allegiance and loyalty and obedience – not where it really counts, or where others might be influenced by it.

**By the way, where do you work?** God wants to go to work with you. God wants to go with you to your work. Lots of people do not believe this, but I hope that everyone who ever comes here ends up believing this. It is the dimension of life where we get to be partners with God on a serious basis. To have such a Partner to work with, and to work for, turns work back into joy. If you do not believe this, you are missing at least fifty percent of the joy and delight of life, since that is the portion of our waking hours that most of us put into work.

A Zen master was invited to a great Catholic monastery to give instructions in Zen practice. He exhorted the monks there to meditate and try to solve their koan (Zen question) with great energy and zeal. He told them that if they could practice with full-hearted effort, true understanding would come to them. One old monk raised his hand. “Master,” he said, “our way of prayer is different. We have been praying in the simplest fashion without effort, waiting instead to be illuminated by the grace of God. In Zen, is there anything like this illuminating grace that comes to one as the sheer gift of God’s caring?” The Zen master looked back and laughed. “In Zen,” he said, “we believe that God has already done his share.”

Just so! Get God out of here, and let’s take over and finish it up. Isn’t that the way it goes? God already did the divine part and then departed; now we get to do our own thing however we wish or however we think best. Is that right? No, that is wrong! In Christendom, we believe that God is still at work – creation is still in process. The outpouring of love and grace and forgiveness to all who will receive it is still available. Whether we work by faith or by grace, we work – and by strange and often mysterious ways, God is at work in our work. In fact, our work turns out to be small bits and pieces in God’s far-greater working.

*“For the same God who was at work in Peter’s mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles”* – and is also at work whenever and wherever YOU work. If you will allow it. If you will have it so.

## GOD AT WORK

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How often we suspect or assume that whatever it is we are doing, it couldn't be very important, at least not important enough to be of any real concern to God. And yet, is this not the God who made all things – even us, and all that we touch? There is nothing in this universe that God is not interested in! There is no place and no task *anywhere* in which God wouldn't appreciate having a faithful, responsive, and obedient servant. Oh, be one of them!

Friends, it is only a simple reminder: Wherever you are, whatever your work, your efforts can be dedicated to God – your labor can be in partnership with God. You have a right, and indeed an imperative, to claim this work as part of your Path – indeed, as a large part of your Christian WAY. If this is not part of your daily awareness, you will not be watching for the guidance – and you will not be conscious of the expansion that God is trying to bring through your efforts.

*“The same God who was at work in Peter’s mission to the Jews was also at work in mine to the Gentiles.”* This same God will also be at work with you, if you will allow it and cooperate with it. And you will never again be bored with your work.

## THE LIFE I NOW LIVE

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is bigger than Paul, and Paul knows it. Paul knows himself to be a tiny part of the vast drama that God has undertaken, a drama in which God will win the frightened and erring children of the earth back to God – to peace, and love, and the true destiny for which they were each created. Not an easy task. It requires the transformation of every single human life. You cannot just put something in the water, or put everybody into a generic program. It requires the transformation of each and every human life, one at a time – each person coming into a personal relationship with God. Who but God would dream of undertaking such a thing? And of course, humans cannot imagine it, so they keep trying to turn it back into something more institutional; something en masse; something where “one size fits all” and we can all get processed much faster by believing the same thing in the same way, responding to it in three simple steps, and that will be the end of it. Of course, when we try to do it that way, it IS the end of it. You cannot mix the Gospel with the goose-step.

But we are so afraid that the Risen Christ is not really here – that the Holy Spirit will not speak to our kids or our neighbors fast enough or loud enough to avert all the disasters – so we keep trying to “improve things,” streamline things, speed it up, make it so nobody can miss it ... just like Satan has always done. Pretty soon it’s hard to tell the difference between “Youth for Christ” and the “Hitler Youth Movement.” The names have changed, but the techniques are the same.

Paul is rabbinically trained. He does not see Jesus as a brand-new, unheard-of theme or effort on God’s part. For Paul, Jesus is the culmination of what God has always been about. The same God has been moving toward the same purpose all through history: with Adam, in Noah, with Abraham, in Moses, in the prophets. Always God has been at work to bring Creation to completion: to win it back because it has gone astray; to save it because it has rebelled and is headed toward destruction. Only, it IS a winning – a persuasion, an invitation, a calling. God will not cheat. Coercion does not count. Always, Adam (humankind) can choose: choose to go further “away,” OR choose to hear the call and head for home – to draw closer to God. You hear that call every day, don’t you? So do I. And every day, all day long, we decide whether to do it our way – go it alone – or to let God back in. Shall we be strong and independent

and do things our own way, or shall we be wimps and let God help us with our lives?

Paul sees Jesus as a startling new move on God's part to get on with what God has always been doing – an effort to gain the trust, loyalty, and maybe even a little understanding from the children. The Cross and the Resurrection are for RECONCILIATION, that the true Kingdom (real LIFE) may be known and chosen. For it must be CHOSEN. Even Cross and Resurrection are done in such a way that they do not take away the choosing. Jesus does not repeal the Garden of Eden story. He adds the Garden of Gethsemane story to it. But Adam and Eve choose – and keep on choosing – throughout all history. Why is it so terrifying to raise children, or to love *anybody*? It is terrifying because we can all make wrong choices, and frequently do. We keep looking for some way to take that part out of life. We keep wanting to find a way to raise our children so they cannot make wrong choices. And that keeps turning out to be one of our own worst choices. There is no escaping the Prime Directive – the decision of God never to do anything that would destroy our free will.

Jesus makes it possible for us to keep undoing past choices – to re-choose. It is a thing so incredible, we barely dare to believe it. So we keep trying to turn Jesus into a different Messiah: a Messiah who will not let us make mistakes; a Messiah who makes us all perfect, or who dusts us off once and then keeps us perfect ever after. Only, perfect means you cannot grow, learn, or change. Jesus will have none of that. What has perfection got to do with things like mercy, grace, love, forgiveness, redemption, salvation, repentance? There is no room in the Christian language for “perfection.” Jesus makes it possible for us to keep undoing past choices – to re-choose. If you are happy and content with yourself the way you are, this is no place for you. We are not good enough for you. You will be finding faults and imperfections as if that were some kind of surprise, or as if you had a right to expect better. Or you will want us to be about helping others as if there were no need for us to get any help ourselves. The truth is that the only help we have for others is the same help we need and are getting for ourselves.

Of course, we all understand the longing for perfection. Discouraged beyond belief with our poor and wrong choices, and the poor and wrong choices going on all around us, we have dreamed/prayed/hoped/begged that God would come and usurp the choices – start making the choices

for us. It has been pictured and hoped for with such poignant longing that we can hardly stand it: The GREAT DAY OF THE LORD. The MESSIANIC AGE. The COMING OF THE MESSIAH. The SECOND COMING. Always we long for some huge dramatic time when God will come and take the choices away, force the conclusion, right all the wrongs, set everything right – and it will have nothing to do with us. We can just lie back and watch it happen, and nothing can stop it and nobody can do anything about it – there will be no choice. And that is the key to our apocalyptic dreams and errors: we long for the day when it will all be taken out of our hands.

So we go from Eden, to Canaan, to Passover, to Easter, to Pentecost, partially realizing each time that what is required is a turning: a returning, a repentance, a re-choosing ... a giving of our hearts and lives to God that will transform us – that will change our reasons for everything we do, as well as our methods, our goals, and our values. But each time we start down this inner road, we quickly talk our way back out of it. Better to work on others than to seek conversion for ourselves. Better to be the pastor of a church or a member of a church than to BE the church. Better to do good for others than to confront our own inner being. How long do we have to help others before it turns into a reconciliation between us and God? Do we think there is no difference between a Cross and a handout? So instead we dream of some dramatic outer event, when God will come, with sword flashing, and kill all the bad guys, then set things up so it won't be unpleasant for the good guys anymore.

Where do we think the good guys come from? How long has it been since you thought a bad thought, said a mean thing, did a deed you were not proud of? I have never made it through one single twenty-four-hour period without doing or thinking something that would not be worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now, I realize that I'm a lot worse than most of you, since I didn't grow up with perfect parents, friends, or teachers, but where do we think the good guys come from? There *are* no good guys, only forgiven bad guys – redeemed, loved, changed and changing bad guys. Just like there are no bad guys, only hurt, lost, confused, frightened good guys.

So what does it mean when we start thinking in common, familiar terms about who is in and who is out – who is in the Kingdom, who is in the church, who gets into Heaven ... and who is kept out? It means we don't get it yet! Jesus comes for sinners. The good guys are already in Hell

because they cannot grow or learn or change – they cannot get along with anybody but themselves. The Kingdom is for bad guys who are being forgiven, saved, redeemed, healed, loved – and who love it when that happens for anybody else. They don't have any real help to give to anybody; they just know where the help comes from, and how huge and unending it really is. Remember D.T. Niles? "True evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find food."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is bigger than Paul, and Paul knows it. But however big the Gospel, and however great the Christ of God, Paul is also able to connect with it. However small a part, he is a part of it now. And in this tail end of chapter two, Paul's personal involvement gets pretty clear. He is not the Gospel; what happens to him does not make or break the Gospel. Only, he has *felt* the transformation. He feels it working within him still. And he tries to put into words a taste – a hint – of what that has seemed like and felt like in his own experience. I thought we might try to track that together, for a little while.

### THE LIFE I NOW LIVE

Start out with the sermon title, a quote from verse twenty. An interesting phrase, don't you think? THE LIFE I NOW LIVE. We will now take a two-hour recess and each of us will write an essay on "The life I now live," and then we will reconvene and read our essays to each other. Wouldn't that be a marvelous way to spend the Lord's Day? A supplement to Galatians, chapter two: We know about Paul – what about us? What is the life *we* now live? What was it like before? What forces have changed us? What are we living for now, and how? Has Jesus made any real difference for us? Oh, it's easy to be magnanimous and inclusive and accepting of other religions, if you have never really tasted your own. Has Jesus made any real difference in you?

Such a question is still bound to be mixed with light and shadow. The life I now live is not what I dreamed or expected it would be, by this time in my life. My memories are clouded with events, people, and choices that are unlike anything I imagined when I was planning my future back in my teens and twenties. Life comes in more dimensions than I could possibly have realized back then. To be fair, a lot of it has not been my fault, both the good and the bad. But some of it has been. Often, with God's help, I have given better than I have received. Often I have received more than I was able to give. Seldom have I knowingly returned evil for

good. But what I have tried to do has often turned out to be less beneficial than what I intended – or, to be straight, evil has come from it. Many of you do not believe in Satan or the dark powers, but something stalks this life looking for ways to ruin what God blesses.

To be frank, there was a time when I expected to end up in a much larger church, to have a much wider influence, to be a stronger force for the Christian Faith. I thought perhaps I would be a major voice in our denomination, but I also assumed that our denomination would grow and increase its influence these past forty years, instead of shrinking and shriveling. I am simply saying that the life I now live is not what I once expected to live. I have not done well, by my former lights. And yet, on the levels I care about most, my life is far better than I ever imagined. Surely no fault of mine.

What about the life *you* live? Has any Christ come to change your goals and values, or to pull you out of dark pits or dead ends? Have your values or priorities changed much as the years have gone by? What is the life you now live? Do you like what you live for? What you serve? Where your hope is? The ways in which you love and find love? Oh, I do earnestly hope so. If not, the Christ still invites. Jesus is about undoing past choices, making it possible for us to re-choose.

#### I HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Whatever does Paul mean? We cannot escape it, can we? Paul is just sitting somewhere, writing this letter to some friends. Yet he makes this astounding claim to have gone through the most amazing experience in earth history. *“I have been crucified with Christ.”* (Galatians 2:20) (If some of you treat this passage the way I have seen you try to treat some other passages, I wonder what images dance in your heads.)

We know from many passages that the early church considered all Christians to “have been crucified with Christ.” In some interior way, symbolized in baptism and experienced as rebirth or conversion, we Christians share an experience of having our lives turned around and realigned, and in a way so profound that we know something old has died, and something new has come to life within us. That is, we have had a taste of the *principle* that governs and defines the entire Christian WAY of Life – the principle that operates the pilgrimage we are on. It is the principle behind the hope and faith by which we walk and in which we trust: DEATH AND RESURRECTION. For us, everything that happens is

somewhere between Cross and Resurrection. Every one of you, no matter what phase or cycle of life you are in or what you are facing, is somewhere between Good Friday and Easter. You have died to the old, but the new is still being born.

Endless words are used, and none are sufficient. This doesn't matter, except that we need to keep speaking of it somehow. *"I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me; and my present mortal life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."*

I don't have any complaints with the way Paul says it. But I still have to make sure I comprehend. What has died? Some say the ego. Well, that's not my language, and my ego has not died. Nor would I willingly destroy that which God has made. But faith in my own power – *that* has died. Confidence in my old ways of "making it" has shattered. I do not believe in them anymore. I don't think that getting more money or better sex or more personal power or greater influence will make me into the person I long to become. I don't think it will "save" me, make me happy, or help me to accomplish what my soul truly and deeply longs for. The old beliefs die hard, like any deep habit, but they die because they have let me down once too often.

I no longer believe that property, position, or being a great parent, an outstanding spouse, or a good minister will "make it" for me, nor will any of these mean that I have "made it." It will not "save" me, or fill the empty places in my soul, or give me any clue to who I am or why I am here (or why my spouse or my children or you are here, either). Do I feel superior to others who are still counting on such things? No – my memory is too good. I know how it feels to try to believe that if I just tweak it one more time, it will work. If we just pull the lever one more time, the machine is bound to pay off. I do not believe it anymore, but I still remember how it feels to believe it.

I might even still pull the lever – I just know that if it pays off, it won't mean what I used to hope it would mean. Sex and money are part of our reality; for a few more days I still have some property and a little position; I am still a parent and a spouse and a minister. These are part of life and can be wonderful in their own right, but I have died to them. They are not where my security lies – not anymore. Even being "good," being moral – trying to behave in ways that God or society would approve

of – that is not my security system anymore. That is not going to “save” me. Even if I could shake all my imperfections and do everything really right, it still wouldn’t cut the loneliness, give me identity, give my life meaning, or carry me through death. Morality still exists, and I want to be a “good” and moral person in the ways that match what I think God wants of us. But that performance is not where my security lies. I have died to it.

I don’t mean to imply that we can describe all the mystery of the Cross, but in the times when I have felt drawn into it – when I have known the reality of it to be nearer than time and space – something has always “snapped” inside me. *All* of life as I have previously tried to understand it no longer matters, no longer holds true. The vertigo is enormous. The despair – *the loss of all hope* – plays peek-a-boo with a new hope: a new light beyond anything our world has ever known or tried to teach.

When Jesus died the way He died ... when it truly dawns on us *how* He died – that is, if this world (us, them, those who live and believe like we do) killed Him – *if we killed Jesus* – well, then, all my hope and security are slain with Him. You see, I thought the world would get better if we all tried hard to be better. Maybe we could work harder, try harder, make better rules, be more conscientious about keeping and enforcing the rules. But it was all nailed to that Cross. Every last shred of it. Being “good” is just as dangerous as being bad. In lots of ways, it’s *more* dangerous, and it makes us even more vulnerable.

God may love the good – and that which is of God within us does love the good – but this world does not love the good. This broken, alienated world hates good even more than evil. Why do you think Jesus kept telling us to do our good deeds in secret, and kept begging the people He helped to keep quiet about it? The very truth and love which Jesus embodied clarified and *demonstrated* the highest aspirations and longings of our souls. He was what we say we want to be like – what we wish other people were like. He was what our world has always pretended we all want to be like – what we want to move toward and work for. And all of it was nailed to that Cross – every last shred of it.

All old security is gone. All former hope has been emptied. Everything I ever thought or hoped might help me to “make it” has all been shattered. Every piece of old truth was connected to this belief that I wasn’t good enough but that if I could get better – be better – things

would improve. And that if I got *really* good, life would be wonderful here. Lies! All lies! I have seen die ONE who was better than any human I could ever have imagined. All old truth died with Him. Oh yes, dear Paul, we also have been crucified with Christ.

And the life we now live? It's the same old world, but we are not the same old people. Security is no longer based in this realm. I am a "foreigner" here in the most absolute way possible. I expect nothing that is linked to this world or its systems to last or matter. My identity is not here, my aspirations are not here – and my true hopes for you are not here, either. In the old language, we belong to a different King, and to a different Kingdom.

Some think this sounds grim. And it would be, except "awakening" is not the only thing that goes *snap* at that Cross. From it also flows a LOVE of unspeakable magnitude and power. The touch of it fills voids and brings a security that none of the earth's blessings can touch or imagine. *That* is what is going to save us. *That* is what has been holding and sustaining us since long before we were aware – since long before we understood any of it. And that is what will go on tracking us through all the life and death that is still to come: this strange, unearthly power we call "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

## BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

On the surface of things – the historical part – Paul seems to have received a letter or a visit from some friends who informed him that the Galatian churches were being strongly influenced by pressure from the Jerusalem church. Under this influence from what seemed at the time to be the center and source of Christianity – headed by a leader with awesome credentials as the biological brother of Jesus – the Galatian churches were turning back to the precepts and practices of Judaism as necessary for salvation. It was no longer enough to believe in the love of God and live your life under the influence of the Risen Christ; it was also necessary to eat kosher food, be circumcised, keep Sabbath Day laws, and do all the other things prescribed by Jewish law and tradition. (How can we translate? It was necessary to be baptized, celebrate birthdays, buy people Christmas presents, graduate from college and become successful, do email. Otherwise, you were not truly acceptable.) Of course, to the Jerusalem church, the purpose behind requiring all this was stronger than that – stronger than custom or ethnic identity. It included all that, but went beyond it. The favor and the acceptance of the Holy God were at stake. Nevertheless, if *Jews* did these things, the whole culture around them supported it. But if *Gentiles* did these things, they would be cut off from family, friends, and work, and nothing in the culture around them supported or understood these things. Therefore, Gentiles had a hard time understanding why these practices were beneficial. Since they didn't have the same history or tradition to back it up, most of them had a hard time with "Because God said so!" Some of our ethnic Christian friends have the same problem with some of us today.

Paul is both alarmed and irked by this situation – by the Galatian Jewish converts turning back to what has been familiar and safe for them. Paul knows that if this trend continues, it will limit the Gospel to those of Jewish origin, even in far-flung Galatia. He comes to that strange place where he must defend his credentials, his Message, and his behavior to the very people who got excited about the Gospel of Jesus because of him in the first place. Without Paul, they would not have the life, the faith, or the community they now have. They have seen him beaten and stoned for his efforts, and still carrying on despite severe illness and bad eyesight. Now "hotshots" from the so-called "Mother Church" – from the human hierarchy – have been talking them out of the

very things that got them all excited in the first place. They do not want to go back, but what if Paul was wrong? What if God is getting angry and about to punish them? They are afraid, and so they start to waver. It's not easy to move beyond everything we have known and been taught since childhood.

*"You stupid Galatians!"* begins the third chapter of Paul's letter. I am trying to get you to forgive Paul for speaking so harshly. Some of you have translations that say, *"You foolish Galatians!"* You think that softens it? *"Whoever calls a brother 'fool' will be liable for Gehenna fire."* (Matthew 5:22, Sermon on the Mount) If this teaching from Jesus is known in the early church, is Paul deliberately risking the fires of Hell to "reach" his Galatian friends? Probably. And also trusting the mercies of Christ beyond the teaching, and thus risking his eternal future on the very Gospel he is re-presenting to the Galatians. Paul does that a lot.

Well, that was a long time ago. Paul really lived and the Galatian Christians really lived, and the decisions they made changed the course of history – and that is all interesting as history. Yet history is not the only link we have with this letter, or the Galatians who wrestled with it. The letter raises issues that plague and bless the Path of every person who tries to walk the Christian WAY.

Paul makes many statements and assertions in this letter to the Galatians, but he also asks powerful questions: Who has bewitched you? What is your experience so far? Do you look to the spiritual, or to the material, to save you? Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the Law, or by believing the Gospel Message? Do you hear him asking you these same questions?

Because it is "Bible language" and our minds put it in "Bible categories," we sometimes miss the realism. Paul is not appealing to creeds; none of them have been written yet. He is not trying to remind his friends of something they learned in Sunday School; there would be no Sunday Schools for another eighteen hundred years. Paul cannot appeal to ecclesiastical authority because what exists of that resides most predominantly in the Jerusalem church, where opposition against him is strongest. (Not officially, of course, but whenever his back is turned.) Behind the words we now think are so formal, Paul is asking his friends: What has your life been like so far? What is your *experience*?

Can you hear it on that level? What about your *own* experience? What has made you truly “happy” in life? Trying hard to be “right,” and trying hard to make everybody around you be “right” – has that made you happy? You all have some experience of living in that mode, I presume. You all have experience of people around you living in that mode, I presume.

We are now going to fix this bad and scary world – and this is the way to do it, and everybody has to help by doing it this “right way.” So woe betide anybody who doesn’t do it “right,” who makes a mistake – who eats wrong, drives wrong, votes wrong, thinks wrong, acts wrong. God will save us when we all get it right and make everybody else get it right. There are deep themes of life that run along this wavelength, and there are few who have not tasted them. Paul is asking his friends: Did this make you happy? Is this what you really want to go back to? More accurately, Paul is asking: Now that you have tasted the forgiveness and support of the Holy Spirit for a while, now that you have actually started to experience community built on a different premise – on love, and mercy, and new chances – do you really want to return to the way it was before? Never mind love, compassion, acceptance, support; we are here to ferret out errors, to judge, to condemn, to punish ... until we all get it “right.” Life is not about learning and growing; life begins after we get it right. Does this mindset make you happy?

Am I getting you back into “Bible language,” or am I getting you into the *real* Bible? What has made you feel most alive, challenged, thrilled, and fulfilled in *your* trek through life so far? And maybe I have to add: Not the momentary thrills, but the deep stuff that sticks and lasts? What makes you most deeply thankful to be alive? In conversations that quietly ponder such topics, we usually don’t hear about bank accounts, trophies, material objects, or times we put other people down. More accurately, these are not the focus. They are often involved in the settings, but the outer efforts are done “for my mother” or father, or brother or sister, or a friend or a spouse or a child. It is not just accomplishment – it is accomplishment FOR someone. Even “acquiring” – the passionate part of it – nearly always has someone else in mind. For most of the people I’ve known, what makes life worth living touches on healing, transformation, appreciation, understanding, teamship, the search for truth or beauty. And usually there is a hunger, however hidden, for some kind of intimacy, some form of love – including encounters with the Holy One. All the rest are merely stage props.

“*You stupid Galatians!*” Paul says. “I know you. I was there. I saw you coming awake to the presence and reality of the Holy Spirit. And I watched the Spirit changing your lives – giving you a whole new awareness and faith in God’s love, and putting you into a whole new bond of acceptance and caring and support for one another. And now you are thinking of trading it all in for the way it was before? Somebody must have cast a great spell over you – a spell of blindness and memory loss, a spell of unknowing. How else to explain such stupid behavior!”

This passage reminds me that it is not enough for me to know something or to have experienced something. It is not even enough for God to have set up an encounter with me or to have died for me and raised me up – and God has certainly done all of this for me, more than once. But there is one more piece to it, sometimes called RECEIVING: I have to *trust* it, remember it, and let it in to change the way I react and respond to life, and to everything around me. And I have to trust it enough to *expect* God to go on acting this way toward me in the future.

Humans, or at least this human and the Galatian humans, are perfectly capable of turning away from the very things that have worked best for them – the things that have worked wonders in their lives. Over and over, I have persuaded people to start praying on a daily basis. They have done so and, by their own admission, their lives have improved immensely. You would think that no power on earth could ever again persuade them to stop praying. So what do they do? That’s right! They stop praying. And you know what else? It happens to me too, even after all these years. Our time with God has to be our absolute top priority, or this world will steal it away from us. There are no exceptions. That’s the way it is.

Often I have spoken with men about the most satisfying and exciting times in their lives. Invariably, some of these times have been times of deep companionship with other men. Not always, but many times the outer circumstances were somewhere between challenging and incredibly dangerous. It was war, a company crisis, or some threatening dilemma. But within this context, the common denominator has been friendship – sharing the adventure; being for and with each other in the heat of the day. At some time or another, friends have been a lot of the reason why life has been worthwhile. So what do most men do? They stop seeking friends, stop spending any time with other men, stop having any male friends – and they try to make sure they don’t get into any more situations where they might need each other ever again.

I am simply saying that humans are very capable of turning away from the very things that they cherish most, that have worked best for them, that they care about most of all. And you think there is no Satan?! Humility works best, so we concentrate on pride. Apologies and repentance work best, so we concentrate on being right and never saying "I'm sorry." Honesty works best, so we find dozens of reasons for pretense and subterfuge. Forgiveness works best, so we concentrate on getting even. Serving God works best, so we serve ourselves, or others.

I correspond with a friend from a former parish. She has continually amazed me with her growth, wisdom, courage, and steady commitment. Few would have imagined that a woman coming out of her background could have built a life and a family so steadily and consistently. She has two lovely daughters and a very responsible job, and all seemed to be going well for years.

So I was very sad when I heard her start to talk about leaving her husband. They had been through a lot, good and bad, but I felt like they had also been a big part of each other's growth and progress. Now she was dissatisfied with almost everything about the relationship, and her intolerance for the level of intimacy and communication and appreciation had her ready to turn it all in. I began to suggest some things from afar, but she was tired of trying. The motivation was gone. Then one day I received a letter that included this paragraph:

"Bill was very ill early this summer. He got Valley Fever, a potentially lethal virus. We were on pins and needles for a while. It takes months to get over. He is much better now, but still low on stamina. I cooked a lot of soup for him and realized I don't want to grow old without him."

Why did it take Valley Fever for her to realize this, to remember it – for it to be real for the two of them again? Sometimes it just does. Can you imagine them at their fiftieth wedding anniversary? "Tell us, what's the secret of your long and happy marriage? So many couples don't make it. What helped you?" Valley Fever. "I cooked a lot of soup for him and realized I didn't want to grow old without him." Without Valley Fever, she wouldn't have started doing things for him in that way again. And without Valley Fever, he wouldn't have been able to receive from her. And without Valley Fever, the two of them might never have started talking to each other on caring, personal levels again. God has counseling tricks I've never been able to come up with.

Paul's big question is the deepest one of all: "*Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the Law, or by believing the Gospel message?*" Let me rephrase: Is the relationship you have with God because you live such an exemplary life, or because you have come to believe in God's personal love and caring for you, no matter what?

There are still many people whose link to God is based on how well they think they're doing – how right they are, how good they are, how successful they are, how moral they are. Many others turn to God because they think it will be the key to their becoming right and good and successful. In either case, if caught in a mistake or a wrong action, their link with God is shattered. If adversity comes and their success is diminished or destroyed, their connection with God is shaken. Isn't it a sad thing that even Almighty God has so many fair-weather friends? Paul is asking: Are you one of those people – are you going back to that basis of relationship with God? You who have known the Cross and felt the presence of the Son of God in your own life and mind and heart, are you now going back to depend upon your own goodness or on this world's approval – on outer signs or rituals or forms?

Please back up with me for just a minute. We need to see how Paul's personal argument with the Galatians (and maybe with us) fits into the larger picture of Christian meaning and experience. Jesus came (or was sent) out of highest Heaven to participate with us here on earth, to show and tell what the mind and heart of God are really like, that we might know God – that we might get past our fear and anger toward the Creator of this place and be reconciled, and start trusting ourselves to both the Creator and the destiny for which we were designed.

The early church quickly came to understand Jesus' life and ministry as something reaching far beyond Palestine – far beyond one moment in earth history. (There are seeds of it in Paul's writing, and it's even more clear in John's Gospel.) A concept now called "the preexistent Christ" was part of the understanding from as early as people had time to think about it. "*In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*"

In other words, the physical carpenter from Nazareth was not understood to be an isolated quirk of God's caring. The Christ always has been and always will be of the nature and character revealed and made plain to us in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. God's love did not

start when Jesus started His ministry, as if it had never existed before. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection revealed it more clearly than it had ever been seen before. In the old phrase: Jesus did not *invent* God or God's love; God sent Jesus to *reveal* it – to reveal God's very self.

What is at stake? Why was the emphasis on the preexistence of Christ so important to the early church, and why has it been to all Christians ever since? Two things:

1.) If the Christian Faith is merely a matter of the physical ministry of Jesus, then the drama is time-locked and has true relevance only to people who lived in the first century A.D., and in one very tiny portion of the world.

2.) If the Christ has always existed (if the love and grace of God have always existed), then why haven't we humans always known it and acted like it? Why did Jesus have to come, if the Christ has always been here trying to help us?

The answer, not just in my words but in many Christian writings down through the ages, has been that God has always loved us, but we did not know or trust it. The Holy Spirit has always tracked us – each one personally – and tried to guide and help and reassure us, but we have been mostly too frightened or too busy to notice. And when we *did* notice, it seemed so unlikely and preposterous that we talked ourselves back out of it before it could take full effect. The notion that Almighty God could have that kind of concern for specks like us? Not likely! We must be imagining it ...

A few caught glimpses – Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah. And there have been some others from various other traditions who have sensed the presence of God and didn't think the truth was what most people suspected it to be. But mostly the world has been frightened or angry toward God. And though many are busy trying to rework or reinvent the records, primitive religions are *not* full of a friendly, caring God. Nor has the coming of Jesus been able to convert us very quickly from all our old approaches and superstitions. Even the church keeps going back to the ways we thought and behaved before, which is the very thing Paul is ranting about in this letter.

So Jesus came that we might know. The Spirit must necessarily speak in a whisper – influence gently and quietly ... most of the time. Otherwise our free will would be destroyed. God must walk softly in this world, or coercion would quickly replace our chance to learn and grow – to respond and return the love authentically, because we really mean it.

But it's hard, in this physical, limited, alienated world, to hear and believe the whisper of the Spirit. So God cheated up to the maximum degree possible without taking away our choice: The *embodiment* of the Spirit. The *demonstration* of the character, personality, agenda, method, values, passion of the Holy Spirit. "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*"

But if this is at all true, then Christianity – *from the beginning* – has never been as narrow, exclusive, damning, haughty, or conceited as so many of its later proponents have made it sound, or as so many of its detractors have supposed. Once we realize this, we begin to hear Paul and John and the others saying almost the reverse of what the majority of people in our time seem to be hearing them say.

I don't see how we can straighten such things out, except in our own faith, and in our own faith family. Nevertheless, with great sadness – and sometimes with awareness enough to convert us – we see the reaction of our world to this embodiment of love and caring and spiritual power. It came to a Cross – and, by the power of God, to Resurrection – and Jesus left saying: "When I return to my true identity and dimensions – when I can be with you, each one, at all times and in all places – do not doubt that I am here. Pay attention to my whisper and trust it. Know that I am tracking you always to the ends of the earth, and to the end of time. Now that you have locked-on to my signal, trust it ... trust ME. I love you, and you saw me prove it. I will go on loving you and guiding you. Do not turn off again. Do not let anything ever persuade you that I do not care. And no matter how tough it gets or how big your blunders, never believe – never let *anything* or *anyone* persuade you, ever again – that I have quit on you. And try to love each other the way I love you."