

YOU ARE THE LIGHT

We have some reports of what Jesus said and did and what happened to Him, and also some accounts of His impact on individuals in a number of different situations. These reports are frustratingly brief and incomplete, yet powerful enough to have evolved into sacred Scripture for Christians. By the way, if you call them “Scripture” (or “Holy Bible”) before you are a Christian, that’s just a cultural overlay and doesn’t really mean much more than a nod at common verbal usage.

Paul tries to explain what Jesus’ coming means to us, including to himself. And we now have thousands of books and millions of sermons trying to explain what Paul meant by his explanations of what Jesus meant and means to us. You can add in just about as many layers as you wish. What did I mean by that explanation of what Luther meant, or what Calvin meant, about what Augustine meant, about what Paul meant when he tried to explain what Jesus’ coming meant and means to us? Even so, I am way oversimplifying the situation. I cannot speak of any of this without making it clear, directly or indirectly, that a huge number of people who are giving their explanations are dead wrong, and they would say the same of my explanations. And this has also been going on for two thousand years. Arius against Athanasius, for instance. Paul against James the brother. And what do you think all the “church councils” were about? Nobody writes creeds until they think somebody is telling it wrong. Nobody worries about heresy until they think heretics are leading the people astray. And are you sure that all the church councils got it right?

Many people throw up their hands (and minds) in horror and just want to cut through the maze to a simple, clear, and straightforward approach. Religious “Chopsticks”: let’s just live by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, and forget all the complicated mess that makes our heads spin. And that sounds really wonderful, until you actually try it.

The glorious thing about this mess is that it reminds us that every sincere Christian must come to some understanding of their own about who Jesus is and what Jesus’ life really means to them. A great deal of what goes under the name of “Christianity” is about what somebody else thinks or what some religious organization thinks Jesus is supposed

to mean to you. That can be incredibly valuable and useful – if you don't stop there.

If you want religious “Chopsticks,” you have to go to the literalist and inerrant fundamentalist approaches. Then it is no longer the Christian Faith; it is the Christian Formula, and everything is simplex and cut-and-dried: You accept Jesus. You were bad before; you are saved now. It's just a matter of waiting for the Second Coming and, in the meantime, telling everybody else the formula so they can be saved too. And if they won't listen, to Hell with them. It sure does make preaching a lot easier. Things are bad ... here's the formula ... get saved. You can apply it to any area or situation in life. Push the button and out it comes.

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12) Paul knows we are not the Savior and cannot save ourselves. So what does this mean? It means that conversion is only for openers. That once we enter the Christian Life, we go on learning, growing, praying, and pondering for the rest of our lives, making it more and more our own. Therefore it is not enough for Paul to explain it. *You* must explain it too. *“You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.”* (Luke 10:27) You cannot claim it or love it until it matters to you so much that *you* also form the images and the explanations, wrestle with the meaning, and try to track where it is leading you and how it is changing the way you live and decide everything. And sometimes you will share that with others who are interested or hungry for the spiritual life. They are everywhere, and some of them want more than just canned phrases. They want to talk to people who actually walk the Path and can speak out of personal experience, and who are not afraid to share doubts and failures as well as the joy and comfort of the Christian Life.

“Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling.” Does that sound like it's all cut-and-dried? One size fits all? Five minutes after you are converted, you know everything there is to know about Jesus and how to get from sinner to saint? If you think the theology trail is long and complex, what about the trail of medicine, physics, geology, or economics? Why is *God* the only subject we think we should be able to grasp fully without any effort – without any confusion or contradiction? Why do we want to believe that no new light or insight will come to

the Christian Faith or belief? And that if it does, it must be wrong, or even evil? Why is it important to pretend that Christianity, alone among all the important areas of life, is the only place where we have never made any mistakes; where we will never need to change our minds about anything; where we can never comprehend anything better, more deeply, more helpfully, or more faithfully than how it was explained two thousand years ago? Meaning, if Paul said it one way, am I automatically damned if I try to comprehend it in any way clearer or more powerful to me? Is it heresy or pride if you try to put some things even better – at least more clearly for you – than he did? Why is this not encouraged instead of being stifled and condemned? If it was faithful for Paul to speak about Jesus with his own best images and understanding, why is it not faithful for us to do that too? In fact, is it not *faithless* if we do not? If we do it, then we could get something authentic from Paul in the New Testament and something authentic from each other too, and use them both as we bring our own faith to as much clarity and conviction and practical application as we possibly can. And then we might also become a living, thriving, dynamic faith community, as alive in our time as Paul was in his. And if we don't do it, then we are doomed to become the typical dead and lifeless church – a religious museum that merely displays artifacts and relics from the past. If you are alive, you have your own understanding. Then there is the delightful possibility that people who come to know you will find not only the witness of the Bible, but the living witness of you and your life in the present – both inviting them into Life in Christ Jesus.

By the way, none of the infant churches Paul started would have survived if they had not moved to this level. And that is why Jesus never wrote anything down – so we would be forced to seek the Living Word, and not get locked down too tightly or too woodenly to the printed word. It is our relationship with the Living Word, with the presence of Jesus Christ – our life with the Holy Spirit – that moves us from “Chopsticks” to the symphony of the Christian WAY. And it is always an unfinished symphony.

“I am astonished to find you turning away so quickly from him who called you by grace, and following a different gospel.” I am well aware that this very verse can be and often has been used to castigate anyone who dares to think or say anything different from what appears on the printed pages of the New Testament. But I am also aware of what a lot of simplex preachers never mention to you: *that Paul never heard*

of the New Testament. None of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) were written until long after Paul was dead and departed from this realm. Paul's own letters were not yet collected and would not be canonized as Scripture, even by usage, until more than a hundred years after his death. Formal canonization would be closer to two hundred years after his death.

Therefore, Paul cannot be meaning what most preachers want you to think he means. That is, he is not talking about a written-down Gospel. He is talking about a Living Word – a Message embodied in Jesus the Christ. In this letter to the Galatians, Paul is speaking against the rigidity of the religious establishment. He is speaking against the influence of the Jerusalem church that wants to replace the freedom of grace in Christ Jesus and take the Galatian Christians back into the bondage of the rules and regulations of the Law. He is speaking against any influence, anywhere in the world, that wants to substitute the unspeakably wonderful and freeing Message of God's love and acceptance – revealed in Jesus Christ – with any different message that argues against our trusting this love and claiming this relationship that God in Christ Jesus has invited us into. Moreover, Paul knows that if we do not *trust* this love and grace and mercy – and trust it more than anything else in life – we have no chance to experience this New Life. If we do not trust God's love, we will not walk the Christian Path or Way more than a few feet before the world bribes, frightens, threatens, or entices us back into some way of life more compatible with the way the world sees and does things.

When Paul speaks of the Gospel, he is not talking about something as yet unwritten. He is talking about *an experience* of grace and mercy, of being loved and being wanted, of being valued and invited to come help – when there could hardly have been any person less qualified or less deserving than Paul to receive any of these things, especially from Jesus. The Gospel started for Paul on the Damascus Road, and it continued to transform his life thereafter. It was nothing you could put on a printed page. It was the living presence of Jesus the Christ.

Paul not only trusts this Gospel, he trusts that this same Lord will extend to others this same grace, mercy, and love, the reality of being wanted and valued, and the invitation to come help with the mission. Paul thinks he knows Jesus well enough to know that He will do all of this for others too – if they will allow it. So Paul extends the promise and the invitation – the Gospel – to others wherever he goes. We call it his

“missionary journeys” – a weak phrase for what was really happening. And lo and behold, the Holy Spirit of Jesus showed up and made good on Paul’s promises. Many folk were filled with the Holy Spirit – not only in Galatia, but wherever Paul went. And Paul is dumbfounded that after having tasted the personal love and presence of the Spirit, some of the Galatians are turning back to the old fears, restrictions, and demands of the religious institutions of their time.

History repeats itself, at least in theme. And the only thing we ever learn from history is that people never learn from history. In our day and time, the Bible itself is being used, with rigid applications of its printed pages, to frighten hundreds of thousands of people off of the Gospel that Paul preached – off of the Gospel that Jesus lived and died to reveal and proclaim to us. How much of the Christian World today trusts the love of God revealed in Jesus – trusts it so much that they have no fear of Hell; no fear of the condemnation of preachers or church hierarchies; no fear of the Pope or the latest popular televangelist; no fear of the Second Coming or of being “left behind”; no fear of failure, cancer, imprisonment, or death; no fear of scorn, shame, disgrace, or even the betrayal of friends? Do I need to remind you that Jesus feared *none* of these things? Do I need to remind you that Paul came to trust Jesus so much that *he* feared *none* of these things?

Now, in the name of both Paul and Jesus, and in the guise of honoring the printed page, Christians today are taught to fear all these things. How very clever that the Bible, which can be one of the Holy Spirit’s very best tools, has also become one of Satan’s very best tools. Oh yeah, we forgot about The Adversary. Again! Because in our kind of church, even if we read and try to honor the Holy Bible, we consistently pass over, neglect, and delete the part about Satan.

How does the world think? That you must be good before God will love you. That you must be good before God will hear you or answer your prayers. This is the way the world operates; it’s no surprise that it applies it to religion. The world wants to know: What is your collateral? What is your experience? What is your track record? Can you prove ahead of time that we will get a good return if we invest in a relationship with you? If not – if it’s not pretty certain and looking pretty likely – then you are not worth our time or resources. Therefore, the world over, the only way to be sure you deserve love and will “fit in” is to delay your full admission until after you have proven your worth (performance, effectiveness, righteousness, good deeds, whatever). So we have endless rituals for

finding out ahead of time – for trying to minimize the risk of dealing with each other: A job interview. Recommendations from those who have known you from before. Periods of probation – time before tenure or full partnership, or before the contract locks-in for good. Dating is relational probation.

Jesus inverts this. He invests *first*: I believe in you, love you, trust your worth. Here is my life, on the line for you. Yes, you have so much to learn and grow into – so far to come. But we establish the relationship first! Then on the power and confidence of the love I already give you, you will be given eternity to grow into your true self and your true worth. The Damascus Road is only one illustration of this unearthly principle, but it is a great one.

And Paul comments: “*The Gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.*” Not hardly! Paul had certainly never heard of such an approach before. It is not the way our world thinks or behaves. In fact, it is so far beyond the way our world thinks and behaves that we can barely grasp it – and after that, barely trust it and go with it. It seems so strange, feels so new, impacts us so powerfully that we aren’t sure we heard correctly, and we are forever trying to minimize it and make it safer and more familiar. And even after we decide to trust it, there are countless, endless scenarios where we cannot figure out how to apply it in our own lives. And it always feels like the world will destroy us if we try to do so. Of course, that’s not far from the truth. It is, in fact, so dangerous that we need to pray constantly, and we need to be careful about getting in charge of each other’s lives. I trust the Spirit not to get us killed unless a lot of people will be saved by it – that is, not unless we ourselves would end up being very happy about the results and the trade-off. I don’t know why more Christians do not trust that. Christianity is not about martyrdom except in special circumstances. And many martyrs have gone to their deaths because they took matters into their own hands, instead of seeking the guidance of the Spirit. But perhaps that’s another subject for another time.

All of this leads up to verse 15. I have been trying for two Sundays to get to it. “*But then in his good pleasure, God, who from my birth had set me apart, and who had called me through his grace, chose to reveal his Son in and through me, in order that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.*”

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How can you sit still?! Is this actually part of the Gospel, or just the repercussions of the Gospel? I guess it doesn't matter. But it sure is one or the other. Do you remember our Christmas Eve service? It was from John's Gospel, but John got many of his basic concepts from Paul. We were lighting candles and tracking from the heights of the Old Testament: from "*I appointed you a light to the nations,*" to the famous Jesus declaration "*I am the light of the world,*" to Jesus' famous commission to His followers: "*YOU are the light of the world.*" We are children of the light – carriers of the light – light-bearers.

So often we try to leave ourselves out of the story. Or we get into it as recipients – grateful, but too humble to be builders of the Kingdom. So many churches, this one included, make it obvious that you can be a "good church member" (whatever that means) without being very deep into the Christian Way and purpose. Maybe even a layman (church member) can help support and make a difference to the life of the church. But a spiritual warrior? An apostle? An honest-to-goodness companion and cohort of the Christ who is helping to build the Kingdom of God? *Children of light ... Message-bearer ... YOU are the light of the world.* And I don't just mean helping to change a tire once or twice a year, putting a few bucks in the offering plate, or being a moral and ethical citizen of the community. Not that I have anything against such activities.

Paul comes to see that God had a destiny for him from long before the Damascus Road made him aware of it. That is mind-blowing to me – and extremely important as I assume and apply that principle to myself, and to all of you as well. But there's more.

We know the theological claims and precepts: "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.*" God revealed himself in Jesus Christ – made himself known to us in the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus revealed God to us – as was the intention, plan, and purpose of God. But how many of you know the clincher? How many of you know what closes the loop and activates the whole affair on the level that changes us, uses us, counts us in, and makes us a true and living part of the whole incredible affair?

"God ... chose to reveal his Son in and through me"

Jesus revealed God. Who reveals Jesus? Paul! Who else?

WHO ELSE? YOU!

After the Damascus Road, and being sent to the Gentiles, Paul begins to realize more and more that God has chosen him to reveal Jesus to those who do not know Jesus. And how can this happen? Well, in many ways, if the foundation is in place and real. Christ runs Paul's life. Not perfectly, by the way, but that is clearly and truly Paul's desire and intent. *"It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me."* Christ Jesus influences, impacts, guides, and directs, and is always in the process of transforming Paul. Those who get to know Paul end up seeing and realizing what Jesus is like and what Jesus is about, because Paul both consciously and unconsciously reveals it. That is what his life is about – what it has come to be about. Paul constantly points beyond himself to Jesus, as Jesus constantly pointed beyond Himself to God. Nevertheless, this "revealing" is what energizes and awakens the light and its Path for others. Look at the record: individual after individual, church after church, comes into the light – comes onto the Path and Way – because Paul reveals it, embodies it, makes it real and possible. Paul is not living the Life because he is a great theologian; he is a great theologian because he is living the Life.

We are not talking about doing some good deeds, though clearly Paul did some along the way. And no man was more hated than Paul in his day, even as he was also well loved. That was also true of and consistent with the Lord and Savior he followed. But Paul was dealing all the time not just with the theory, but with the actual impact and reality of Jesus' purpose and mission: to save us; to transform us; to change us from within; to set us free from sin and death – the bondage of this broken world; to make us fearless; to make us confident in God's love, and in eternal life.

God chose to reveal himself in Jesus the Christ. Jesus revealed God. Who reveals Jesus in our day and time? Not Paul; he has been called away. Who then? You then! And if you do not, a lot of other people will – including many who have no idea what they are talking about, and who remake Jesus into an ugly and vengeful prototype of their own inner shadow. You have been given spiritual credentials, that God may reveal his Son in and through you.