

Connecting the Content

In the first twelve verses of Galatians, we have seen that living freely and lightly requires first and foremost an act of God to deliver us, to rescue from our sin and the evil of this and every age. Freedom is won for us, and it is done so at the pleasure of our heavenly Father. But, second, our remaining free requires that we not abandon the good news that God is here and God is on our side, regardless of what other information or ideas about God we run across. A lie about God, is a lie about life, about what true and abundant life is. We must pay attention to what is sold—and what we are buying—when it comes to God. If we have any doubt or hesitation, we need only compare the ideas of God with the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature, the one who holds together the story of creation and redemption by the power of his Word, i.e., Jesus (Heb. 1:3). Set our minds' attention and hearts affections upon Jesus, and we will indeed learn to travel freely and lightly in this life and the next.

Do you need proof? I mean do you want to know that freedom is more than ideal, more than a theological concept, or political propaganda, but rather the story of the world? Of course, you do! And you know where you need to look? At the story of your life. At least that is what Paul encourages the believers of Galatia to do in the final twelve verses of Galatians chapter one. Let's read Galatians 1:13-24 it together.

Employing An Old Tradition

In these twelve verses, Paul is doing something that Jews, the Hebrew people, have done throughout their storied history. He is joining in with all those before him who have told their individual and momentary story as an **Exodus narrative**, a rescuing from slavery, a forming in the wilderness, and entering the promised land of a new and free life by God's grace.

Think about how many times you have read in the Old Testament recounting of God's deliverance from Egypt spoken in the first person, eye-witness narration, by someone hundreds of years removed from the events, whether it be a prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah or a king like David. When you read the Old Testament chronologically, you'll notice that the Jewish people, the same people Jesus and Paul come from, understood the story of their history as an **ever-continuing Exodus narrative**, a removing from slavery into the fullness of freedom with God. And that tradition continued in the New Testament most clearly through Paul.

Malcolm Guite describes the continuation of the tradition this way,

From the earliest times Christians have found in the story of the Exodus both an archetype of our redemption in Christ and a map of our inner life. That rousing call from Moses to his people to leave the slavery of Egypt, the Passover meal, the flight to the Red Sea, the going down into what they feared and emerging free, with their pursuers left behind them; and then the difficult but companioned journey through the wilderness towards the promised land, following a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night; that whole sequence seemed to the early Church to show the pattern of Christian life. We were summoned by Christ to seek freedom from slavery of sin going down with him into the 'Red Sea' of baptism that drowns our sin but sets us free, and then learning intimacy and trust with our savior as we journey with him through the wilderness that lies between our baptism and our final crossing of death's Jordan stream, and our entry into heaven...

When God spoke to Moses from the 'lit bush' he promised, 'I will come down'; and come down he did, in Christ. Wherever we are in our wilderness journey, we are not alone; he walks with us, even as we walk with him. What happened 'out there and back then' can happen 'in here and right now.'¹

Each time Paul tells his story in the book of Acts (22:1-21, 26:1-23) and here again, he is defending the story of humanity, **God's story in humanity**, as a rescue story. God saving, God forming, God dwelling, through Jesus, so that there might be freedom here and now and forever.

Seeing Our Story Through Paul's Story

In some ways, Paul is defending the credibility of his life to the Galatian people, but he is doing so to remind them that the reliability of their faith comes from the same storied structure. Through Paul's story and the way he tells it, we learn to connect the dots of salvation history in our past, present, and future as well.

Look again at Paul's story. Paul begins in verses 13 and 14 by reminding the readers that he was saved, delivered from his false ideas about God, released to see what he could not see before, and in verses 15 and 16 given a purpose—something more and other than he expected. The one who thought himself the purifier of God's people going to invite in the unclean into the family of God, what amazing irony and grace!

And here is the kicker, Paul discovered this story by entering the wilderness just like his ancestors. Except, Paul calls this wilderness Arabia. Here, in this place between being set free and living fully into that freedom, Paul learns to live by grace—God's acting, his responding—not the other way around. There in the wilderness of Arabia, like Jesus, did in his 40 days (Matthew 4) and the Jews in their 40 years (Numbers & Deuteronomy) before him—Paul confirmed that genuine, free, and full life was found in God's way and no other. He learned that he

¹ Malcolm Guite, *The Word in the Wilderness*, xii.

could trust God, follow God, depend on God, and no longer had to work for God in his power or through his vision, Paul no longer had to defend God's purity but instead could live purely in the grace of the Father.

Paul, through the revelation of God in Jesus, realized that he

"is not the one who does things for God; God does things for him. God is not the background for the dramatic events in which Paul is the chief actor; God is the central mover and maker, and Paul is the one moved and made..."²

That's how Paul told his story, with God at the center, God as the chief actor, God moving, God making, and Paul being moved and made to continue in the every-continuing Exodus narrative of life with God.

But it is not just Paul's future that is a part of God's story; it is also his past. The life Paul lived before this encounter was not worthless or forgotten, even if it was in rebellion and full of regretful actions and attitudes. Read again, verse 15.

But when he who had set me apart *before* I was born, and who called me *by his grace*...

Everything Paul went through before he realized his slavery and experienced his freedom in Jesus, God had made of use. "Each detail of each person's life is part of a larger story, and that larger story is salvation."³

Paul's history, while not determinative of his future, was also not disregarded by it. Because he lived in a bigger story, his story was the setting of salvation and always was. Whether redeemed or used as a reminder, nothing that came before Jesus was left out in Jesus, but neither was it left the same, and that's why Paul needed Arabia, **the silence and the solitude to learn to see his past and his future through the gracious acting of God upon him.** To step into a bigger story, so that he might move fully and freely into more than he could ask or imagine, living God's story as his story. And you and I can do the same.

² Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 49-50.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 78.

Your Story is God's Story

How do you discover our story in God's story? Well, you have to go into Arabia, into the wilderness, into the silence and solitude required to be reoriented to live by grace, live in grace, freely and lightly.

No one can connect all the dots for you or give you your calling, not in the way you want them to (v. 16b). They can help you process—that's what happens for Paul through the "disciples at Damascus" in Acts 9 and later in the church of Antioch...and they can affirm this retelling of your story and participation in the continuing story—that's what happens for Paul with Peter in verse 18.

But you have to take the step and follow the pillar of fire, be led by the Holy Spirit across the divided waters, and into the wilderness.

The freedom we discover in our stories through Galatians 1:13-24 is that we are free because we are chosen (while still in our mothers' womb)...we are free to choose our response to the relationship revealed to us, to learn to live in a relationship with God who acts first, who we know through Jesus, free to chose to persevere, change, grow, and mature as we live in the ever-continuing pilgrimage from slavery to the promised new life.

Eugene Peterson describes our movement into Arabia this way,

Arabia is a time to sink ourselves into newfound truths...A few hours set aside in a quiet room can be Arabia. An hour of worship each Sunday can be Arabia. Seizing times of solitude, we can explore the meaning of God's love for us, develop the ramifications of God's forgiveness of us, deepen the sense of God's acceptance of us. Out of such days and hours new energies flow, and the skills of freedom are worked into our daily routines.

Paul was in no hurry to get back to work. He didn't have to be in a hurry, for he knew that God was at work. God didn't him; he needed God. Arabia was Paul's place and time for the leisurely, contemplative training in this new way of life in which God was at the center, in which Paul himself was accepted, and in which he could travel light.⁴

Perhaps, in the extended solitude of this moment, we might take advantage of the opportunity and choose to follow God into the wilderness to discover our story in His Story. We have a host of resources our Follow Jesus page to help with that, but let me encourage you in these few moments to get your heart, mind, and soul started with a few questions:

- What false ideas of God and self have (are) you been delivered from?
- What has (is) God called you into?
- Who are you sharing your "history" with? Swapping stories to confirm and affirm the gospel story in which you live?

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message Study Bible*, 1819.

Freed By Story

There is one last thing about understanding your story as a story of freedom that is important for you and me at this moment in time. When we recognize our story is God's story—his saving, his reshaping, his giving us a part to play in the every-continuing Exodus narrative of history, we are freed by story. For,

'Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin...?' When my origins are certain in God, the implication is strong that my future is also certain in him, and those certainties provide the conditions that encourage me to live by faith in the present. If, via the story, I can experience what it means to be taken seriously, and...can find that my life is part of the story of salvation, I can live with confidence. Having gotten some of the details of my life tied into the clearly narrated ways of salvation history, I no longer have to know the meaning of all the details. If I know that I am part of an existence that has discernable meaning, I don't have to scrupulously figure out the meaning of each feeling, or gesture, or pain. **I don't have to know, at any given moment, the whole story if I am convinced there is a story...**a redemption story that God has been writing for a long time, and will continue writing.⁵

⁵ Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones*, 109.

Our Shared Prayer

We prayed this prayer⁶ as an *expectation* of what the broken body and shed blood of Christ on the cross makes possible for us. We have prayed it as *a confession* of our individual and collective need for deliverance, to live free indeed. We have prayed this prayer *against the lies about God*, about who he is and what he is up to, that keep ourselves and our neighbors imprisoned in a less-than life. And today, we pray this prayer as ones whose *lives are stories of freedom in Jesus*.

We join our prayers today in intercession for the men and women in our faith family, in our daily lives, and in our city who are trapped:

those who are trapped in poverty and debt with no sign of relief;
those who are trapped in jobs and stages of life that engage but a fraction of their powers;
those who are trapped in families and relationships where love has ebbed away;
those who are trapped in unwanted alliances out of which they cannot break;
those who are trapped by the fear of discovery, or by dependency on others, or by the need for drugs, or by an addiction to any other distraction;
those who are trapped by sin, their own, and others.

O Father, whose will it is that we be free, and who did give Your Son that we might be delivered from all coercive powers;

make us examples of Your freedom,
proclaimers of Your freedom, and
instruments of Your freedom;

snap our chains that we may loose the chains of others.

Then shall the joy of the liberated rise from the earth like a mighty hymn of praise,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁶ Ernest T. Campbell, *Where Cross the Crowded Ways*, 44.