



Connecting the Content

Over the previous weeks, we have discovered something fundamental, amazing (though often taken for granted), and even perplexing in this life, which we are created to live and move and have our being. We have discovered that freedom is essential to our humanity, necessary for you and me to experience the fullness of life as God intended. And yet, freedom is not inevitable. The encompassing surety of death traps us, and not just death someday, but with the daily stings of sin—our own and others—ever decaying that which is alive. While we are created to be free, we are born enslaved, though most of us would prefer to deny such offensive limitations.

At the same time, we realized that even in the middle of death's domain, there is life. Good life. Beautiful life. A life worth living and striving after. Somehow, where we expect to experience little but decay and death, there is life because God acts, because God resurrects life from death. Fundamentally, our existence is predicated on this life-through-death action of God. We are people who are acted upon by God, and God's action is deliverance, a rescuing so that we might be free.

God's acting upon us, towards us, for us, is how we fundamentally understand ourselves, our identity as children of the Father and siblings of the Son, our purpose in existing as participants in his ever-expanding Kingdom, and our means and model of relating to God, one another, and the world at this moment. And, God's action toward us, for us; this foundational nature from which we "live and move and have our being," is motivated by delight.

David in Psalm 18:1, 16-19, speaking to a people and as a person who knew the limitation of the human condition and the rescue of God's acting, exclaims in praise,

The LORD is my rock and my fortress
and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take
refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my
salvation, my stronghold.
You sent from on high, you took me;
you drew me out of many waters.
You rescued me from my strong enemy
and from those who hated me,
for they were too mighty for me.
They confronted me in the day of my
calamity,
but the LORD was my support.
You brought me out into a broad place;
you rescued me, because you delighted in me.

Hundreds of years later, the prophet Jeremiah would echo David's refrain, this time in calling for a lament over the people's submission to sin and the oppression of evil. Amid their "calamity," Jeremiah reminds the broken, bruised, and confused that,

Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. **For in these things [practicing steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth] I delight, declares the LORD.**' (9:23-24)

Fast forward some 600 years from Jeremiah, and nearly a millennia from David's psalm and the apostle Paul joins in the remembering with his first and final words to the Galatian people,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, **according to the pleasure (will) of our God and Father...** (1:3-4)

[So] far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom (or by which) the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (6:14)

God delights to save, to rescue, to deliver, to restore. As the elders sing in the throne room of God in the book of Revelation,

Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and
power,
for you created all things,
and **for your pleasure, they existed and
were created.**
(4:11)

God created because he desired to, wanted to, willed it, and he rescues from the same motivation. This is why it is said that "for the joy that was set before Jesus endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2), the very object of our freedom, and our reason to boast in God's acting upon us. At least, that's what Paul said in the first five verses of his letter to the Galatian faithful.

He, like them, is one who knows himself and his place in this world because of the will (pleasure) of the Father and the work (sacrifice) of the Son.

Digging In

The famous author and Christian thinker, C.S. Lewis, once said that the most essential knowledge we can possess is the knowledge of what God thinks of us¹. What God thinks of us, is that we are worth saving. That he desires to save, to rescue, to set us free from all that cost us life in the mundane and in the forever. Is this not the good news? The best news? That while still sinners Christ died for us, considered us worth the patience and the price. That each day we wake into that same patience for God wishes none to perish but all to have a life with him forever. God is here, and God is on our side! That's the good news we call the gospel. What else is there to know?!

Well, another influential theologian around the same time said something a little different than Lewis. He said that "What comes to our mind when *we think about God* is the most important thing about us."² Lewis argued that the most critical thing was God's thought, but here, a man by the name of A.W. Tozer seems to be suggesting the opposite, arguing that the most important thing is what we think about God.

Who is right? Well, the reformer John Calvin, writing about four hundred years before Lewis and Tozer, would argue they both are right, for, as Calvin contends, we cannot know God without knowing ourselves, and we cannot know ourselves without knowing God. It seems circular, doesn't it?! But stick with me.

The point is this: **that the foundational must fundamental truth of your existence is that God delights in you, delights more specifically in rescuing you so that you might live freely and fully into all that he has created for you—now and forever.** It is his joy to be your Father, to be your Saviour, to be your Teacher and your friend. His actions prove it. And you are one who has been acted upon...whether you embrace this truth conceptually and in application, or not.

For as we said last week, freedom is essential, but neither inevitable or without opposition, and the opposition comes in its most subtle and yet devastating form: through our thoughts about God. As Tozer said, "We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God."³ Whether self-formed, forged through experience, handed down to us by others, or assumed in ignorance; the images we form of God in our minds, give shape to how we experience God and relate to the world around us.

You see, what God thinks of us is never changing. How God acts towards us is never changing. And so, sunrise after sunrise, his mercy is new is sufficient, never changing.

Yet we do not experience life that way, do we? We wouldn't describe life with such consistent terms, would we? Why do you think that is? Perhaps because we perceive our lives not from God's perspective but our own, and so, if our image of God is off, false, or skewed, we will not experience the easy yoke and light burden of Jesus, but the yoke of slavery. At least this is Paul's next point on freedom in this letter to the faith families of Galatia.

Let's read together Galatians 1:6-12.

¹ C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Essential C.S. Lewis*, 366-67.

² A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.

³ Ibid.

Imagining Lies

Unlike in his other letters, here in Galatians, Paul does not move from a gospel summation of his and his readers' foundational identity into a warm and friendly affirmation of that shared gospel ground. No, his next words after telling us what God thinks about him and the Galatians is to say that what the Galatians think about God is a lie. That they have in thought and in actions, embraced a "different gospel."

And that those perpetuating that lie—whether human or other-than-human—should experience the full weight of their falsehood. Twice, Paul calls down their destruction, "let him be accursed." (1:8,9). Paul calls for an end to their evil, even if that might mean ending them.

Sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it? That's Paul's intention. Like Tozer, he understands that there is something crucial at stake for the lives of his brothers and sisters. That, as Eugene Peterson so aptly states,

"A lie of God becomes a lie about life...Nothing counts more in the way we live than what we believe about God. A failure to get it right in our minds becomes a failure to get it right in our lives. A wrong idea of God translates into sloppiness and cowardice, fearful minds, and sickly emotions."⁴

Holding onto a lie about God, "turning to a different gospel," puts our freedom—our hard-won and graciously given freedom—in danger.

The irony of religion is that,

"Where two or three are gathered together and the name of God comes up, a committee is formed for making an idol. We want gods that are not gods so we can 'be as gods.'"⁵

It is what happens on Mt. Saini with the golden calf (see Exodus 32) what happens throughout Israel's history in the promised land (see Judges and 2 Kings), and ultimately is the cause of their final downfall in the Babylonian exile (see Ezekiel 8-11). We want an image of God, and not God himself; for an image we have sway over, we can control, manipulate, twist to our intentions and self-justifications. Things we cannot do with a living, present, and liberating God.

Idol building is an old habit of humanity, a sad self-submission to that which imprisons us. Idol is an archaic word that inspires little imagination for many of us. Just the mention of the word endues pictures of statues of wood, metal, and stone, some looking like humans, others like animals, and still more a mixture of worldly and otherworldly creatures. Things distant from our modern sensibilities.

The truth is that idol crafting is actually pretty creative! Historically its been an imaginative sport with humans from all sorts of perspectives. And, I would argue that it continues to be today, just differently.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 35.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 4.

You see, idols are images, images of God, images we make of God, images of what we think God is like, what he wants, what he requires, what he accepts, who he is for, who he is against, what he provides. God is like...an old angry man in the heavens...a blazing, powerful sun, a murderous ogre, a voluptuous beauty, a milk rich mother, etc. All these are images of God, crafted from the minds of people who had the skills to bring them into the world. But so are the images you and I make up of what God is like when we do so through our history, our philosophy, our religion, our hopes, and our desires. They are crafted figures, brought with skill into the world. But also like the carved versions, they are but a parody of life, containing nothing living within them, unable to breathe life into anything that submits to them. Like those that submit to them, they decay, unable to bring life through death.

Psalm 115:4-8 talks about the impotence of idols, the inability for them to both relate and function, concluding with this, “Those who make them [idols] become like them; so do all who trust in them.”

This is what upsets Paul the most. That, while what God thinks about the Galatians, has not changed, what the Galatians think about God has. They are believing a lie, turning to an idol, an image of God that is impotent, and thus they too are becoming impotent themselves. Paul’s apparent harshness comes from his concern.

“Paul is not tolerant when people he loves are being told lies about God, because he knows that such lies will reduce their lives, impair the vitality of their spirits, imprison them in old guilts, and cripple them with anxieties and fears.”⁶

Such lies—as we shall see in the coming chapters and weeks, will keep them from loving one another, and ironically enough, from fulfilling the very heart of the law they now so desperately are striving to submit.

⁶ Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 34.

Knowing What to Curse

Now, such lies are not new to humanity, nor unique to the Galatians. Throughout the ages, there have been peddlers of idols, imaginers of god likenesses. Paul says he is not one of them in verse 10, and in so doing, unearths the motivation behind those who are. Let's re-read verse 10 together:

Do you think I speak this strongly to manipulate crowds? Or curry favor with God? Or get popular applause? If my goal were popularity, I wouldn't be bothering being Christ's slave.

The human and not-so-human (see our discussion on [non-human beings in the bible and our world](#)) liars speak of God in the way they do for what it gets them. Power and influence, favor—support for what they want—and popularity. And let's be honest, there are lots of benefits of having power, influence, support (favor), and popularity!

People don't create idols to keep; they do so to sell and enslave, hoping, expecting, believing that they will prosper in their craftsmanship. And people don't buy idols for decorations; they do so to help them get what they want. Prosperity, retaining a locus of control over our life, influence in relationships or our various daily roles, salvation from you name it, support or favor from God, a "good life."

What are some of the lies we are being sold? And why are we buying them?

- That we can relate to God any way we'd like?
- That sin doesn't matter?
- That religion is about feeling good?
- That happiness comes through self-knowledge?
- That God is angry or God is distant or that I can find God through developing the right habits around God...to get a better life?
- That I only need more information about God?
- That there is a program out there that can get me right with God, and thus a happy life...happy marriage...happy working situation...happy etc.?
- That if I just believe more, do more, listen to more, read more, consume more...?

So, for a few moments and in the stillness and quiet of our isolation, consider these questions:

What are the idols—human crafted images of God—being marketed to me in daily life?
Why do I buy them?

Free in Jesus

So what is the solution? How do we discern the lie? It's quite straight forward really. No complicated formula needed to memorize, no mysterious code to discover, no mystical encounter or incantation necessary, simply a revelation of Jesus.

That's what Paul says in verses 11-12,

Know this—I am most emphatic here, friends—this great Message I delivered to you is not mere human optimism. I didn't receive it through the traditions, and I wasn't taught it in some school, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is revelatory, “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,” who “upholds the universe by the word of his power.” (Heb. 1:3) He is the only image of God we need, and thus the only one we should submit. That is why any gospel that is not “the gospel of Christ” (v.7) is a distortion, a lie, a false gospel, an idol. And why we need “a first hand faith,” an image of God through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, a faith that comes from following Jesus ourselves.

Paul is not merely arguing the validity of his gospel; he is giving us the means of testing every other gospel—every other bit of “good news” being marketed to us in our daily living. Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection. We know God, in that we know Jesus. As Jesus said to his friends the night before he died for their freedom, “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

So, what image of God does Jesus portray?

Our Shared Prayer

Freedom is necessary and fundamental; though it is neither inevitable or without opposition. Therefore, it must be zealously guarded and passionately defended. Likewise, that which might steal it from us, keep us from experiencing the completeness of its maturation, must be vehemently cursed. As much as we love freedom, we should despise that which would enslave—not only us, but our brothers and sisters in Jesus, and thus our neighbors, co-workers, and community.

We prayed this prayer⁷ the first week in *expectation* of what the broken body and shed blood of Christ make possible for us. Last week, we joined together in the prayer as *a confession* of our individual and collective need for deliverance, to live free indeed. And today, we pray this *prayer against* those lies about God, about who he is and what he is up to, that keeps ourselves and our neighbors imprisoned in a less-than life.

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.

⁷ Ernest T. Campbell, *Where Cross the Crowded Ways*, 44.