

Maturing Through Freedom & Failure | 3:15-26

“Until we abandon ourselves to [the reality that ‘The first response of our lives to God is the act of faith,’ trusting that God his here and sharing his life with us] nothing else [as Jesus followers] will make sense [, and everything else we *do* [as an attempt to ingratiate our Savior and progress in our faith] will be imprisonment, a constraint, subjection to a masterless custodian with no maturation date].”¹ This is what Paul is trying to encourage the Galatians to understand. Not an abandonment of religious activities and moralities, but a way of religion that is a life lived in response to what God has done.

If last week we learned to think through the nature of our Spirit birthed life with God, then this week, we are to think about how that life matures. For most, the means of maturing in faith, in spirituality, are the methods of religion that we have been referencing throughout the series: traditions, moralities, practices, programs, cultural distinctions, sacred symbols, holy artifacts, and the like. For the first century readers of Paul’s letter, the means of maturation was specifically “the Law of Moses” expressed in the traditions and customs of a way of life shaped by cultural adherence to the rules and regulations prescribed within the law. The law, including those famous “Ten Commandments” we all know, was sketched out by God to keep Israel on track in the right relationship with God. Of course, this would be the means of maturing in faith, right? After all, Exodus with its dramatic rescue and spectacular covenant ceremony on Mount Sinai, is the part of the Old Testament story that most of us know and that the Jewish people continue to circle back to throughout their history, and still today? Surely, if we are mature in our religion, in our faithfulness, then the law—even if we didn’t start there—is the way we get into the promised land, right?

When we reach this point in our story that moves from beginning to maturing, Paul encourages us to think about our life of faith through “the Scripture” (a phrase uses twice in this chapter (v. 8, 22), which is Paul’s shorthand for the entire story of what we call the Old Testament). If we are to live freely and lightly, we’ll need perspective from the whole story of salvation, which started before Exodus, and grounds Exodus and exile in the middle of the story. “the Scripture” story that foresaw our faith (3:8), and “the Scripture” that includes the story of imprisonment and guardianship meant to ensure that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (3:22); shows us that there was more to the story than the middle—the law. What the Judaizers did, what many religious people continue to do today, is narrowly focused on one part of salvation history, rather than recognizing the arc of the entire story, it’s movement towards something more like the beginning than the middle. The middle is actually where we tend to get bogged down.

The Galatians had been hearing the stories of the Exodus and Exile, and the departure of God’s presence from the people and the temple because of Israel’s irreligion—or at least twisted, perverted, corrupted, co-mingled, religious expressions. The law was given, for a while kept with blessing, but then the law was broken (actually broken over and over and over again), and finally, the curses were upheld. The lesson from all this: God’s

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 101.

people must remain faithful to the law to ensure a right relationship with God, to make certain that the long-awaited Messiah's redemption from the curses of disloyalty and rebellion—the rescue of his people—would be fulfilled completely and finally. Makes sense, right? Disobedience brought curses; obedience brings blessing and fulfillment, so keep the law. Let's not offend God, again, and cause another departure of his presence.

And this is where most of us, myself included, get bogged down by religion. We live attempting not to offend God or neighbor and upset the delicate balance of favor and wrath, blessing and curse. And in doing, the religious life is anything but full or abundant. The yoke does not feel easy (made for us) or light. While our intentions are noble (maybe), our thinking is not sound.

Maturing through submission to “the law” and its many manifestations, only makes sense if we leave out the first part of the story, the beginning of faith and its formative and forecasting place in how we are to imagine growing up into maturity into Jesus who said (in John's gospel (8:56)) ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.’

Faith is where our place in the story of salvation begins, trusting that God is here, that God is sharing his life with us, in everything we are and everything we do. This is not a new twist in salvation history. Faith, as the means of our involvement in life with God, was not something that came about at the cross; Jesus on the cross, instead, became the object of our faith; the confidence of our faith. No, faith—trust that God is here and shares his life with us, has been the beginning from the beginning. This is how Abraham, the founding father of the Jewish people and the one God chose to work through to be a blessing to every human, including you and me, finds himself in the story of salvation.

“Somewhere in the shadows of the nineteenth century B.C. in Ur of the Chaldees, in a corner of the Persian Gulf...[Abraham] heard God's call [a promise for life with God forever, a life beyond his ability to fully phathom], [and he] left [his] home and began a long trek westward. [Here is what the story of Abraham tells us about our life of faith,] He left his religion, his home, his culture and his security. God was more important to Abraham than anything else—country, comfort, culture. Abraham listened to God. Abraham obeyed God. Abraham believed God.

From [the stories of Genesis 12-25], we come to discover a radically new way of life, a life of faith. [God offered himself in a personal relationship with Abraham and his lineage; Abraham responds with nothing less than a life of trusting God's promise and presence.] God offers himself in personal relationship with us; we respond with nothing less than our lives [trusting God's promise and presence]. [Like Abraham] Everything in and about us—our work, our families, our affections, our plans, our memories, our play, our possessions—is coordinated and arranged in that foundational, responding, living relationship with God. [Like Abraham] I live by what God says not by what I can discover [or piece together on my own]; [like Abraham,] I move in accordance with God's promise not by my ambition; [like Abraham,] I venture boldly into a life where I am directed, instead of cowering in an imprisoning [religious security system] in which I am afraid to make a move lest I offend God or a neighbor.

...Abraham was the person for whom the invisible was more real than the visible. What God said to him was more important than what [humanity] said about him. He chose to live extravagantly and recklessly **by promise...**

[You won't find any talk of law in Genesis.] [You won't] find any [directional] arrows painted in that wilderness into which Abraham ventured[.] Did he have a rule book that showed him step by step what he must do to please God? Did he have [Google Maps,] which showed all the best hotels and oasis rest stops between Ur and Canaan? No, he lived by faith in the promise and the presence [failing and maturing along the way]. He was living in response to God, obeying God, consulting God, being changed by God, being challenged by God, growing in relationship with God, listening to God, praising God, [doubting God and himself], believing God. [And, by the end of his story, a man whose faith spoken matched faith expressed.]

Did Abraham have a twenty-year plan with carefully defined objectives as he launched his important career as father of the faithful? No, there were delays, interruptions, detours, failures. He didn't do it all correctly—he didn't live without doubt or sin or despair—but he did it. He followed and confessed and prayed and believed. God was alive for [Abraham]. God was the center for [Abraham].

We don't live by faith by reading a rule book, or following a map, or working through a career development program, or [searching for directional] arrows. We do not begin with things, or pieces of paper, or ideas, or feelings, or deeds, or successes...**Any formula that prevents failure also prevents freedom.** We begin with God. We dare to believe that God cares who we are, knows who we are. We dare to believe that God is the reality beyond and beneath and around all things, visible and invisible, [that he puts an end to evil, brings justice, destroys wickedness, forgives sinners, instructs even sinners in the way,]and that he provides for us and loves and blesses and saves us."²

Abraham wasn't perfect. He often failed³. The surprising thing in the Genesis' stories is not that Abraham fails, he is after all only human, but God's response to his failures. God's faithfulness to the promise and presence. "For nearly five hundred years [, between Abraham and Moses,] men and women lived by faith without the benefit of the law. They had nothing to tell them how to get from here to there, nothing to regulate their actions, nothing in black and white to explain and define God."⁴ And yet, they walked with God, wrestled with God, took risks that God would honor their faith, overcome injustices, forgive their failures, and take what was done in evil as the means to bring about his good. These are the stories of Genesis 25-50; stories that look similar to Abraham's story **with its ups and downs and God's promise holding fast as his children matured through their freedom and failures as they lived by faith, not by law.**

Abraham's family lived by faith until they grew strong enough to forget about God, causing their hosts to preemptively oppress them before they used that strength to take over. Enslaved, freedom removed, every movement detailed for them; this was the condition of Israel when they left the bondage of the Egyptian rulers, economy, and gods. Unsure how to trust, unsure how to be free, they were satisfied with giving their freedom over to a mediator (Moses on Mount Sinai), rather than giving themselves into a personal relationship with God. Their fear of freedom required specifics, as verse 17 describes it, "the law which came 430 years after" (3:17) the promise to Abraham and his life of freedom by faith.] Later, because of Israel's propensity to abandon the relationship, to prostitute themselves out, the same law became a guardian to

² Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 101-103.

³ Sometimes intentionally (the 1st masquerade of his wife as his sister was a mistake, the second, a taking advantage of grace(!)).

⁴ Peterson., 103.

both impose discipline on the wayward children and ensure they knew how to come back into the relationship.

God was the initiator in both the stories of Abraham and Moses. Abraham chose to live by faith. The people of Israel through Moses decided to live by the law. One was counted righteous; the others required a constant atonement, a system to restrict their movements to ensure that righteousness would not be wholly abandoned. **One matured, while one kept repeating the cycle of adolescence over and over and over again.** Neither was perfect, but only one was free. And this is Paul's point.

The law is neither the beginning nor the conclusion of the story; it's a chapter in the middle, a chapter that we can learn from, a chapter that points to an ending, a chapter necessary to connect the beginning to the climax, and a chapter that can help all those who read it discover the grace needed beyond it. This is how Saint Augustine describes the value and usefulness of the law in the story of salvation and our stories of salvation:

“The utility of the law, Augustine says, “is, that it convinces [humans] of his [or her] weakness, and compels [her or] him to **apply for the medicine of grace, which is in Christ.**”⁵

Or as the apostle, John said it at the beginning of his gospel account (1:17),

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

This is what Paul explains in verses 19-25, reminding his readers and the Jewish Christians attempting to spy out their freedom in Christ Jesus and bring them into slavery (2:4)—remember that is what is happening in the specific context of Galatians—that the law of Moses was not the blessing itself, was not the unmediated blessing of God with them, sharing his life with them; rather, it was means of revealing sin and reprimanding discipline; a youth detention center and a pedagogue.

“What Paul means by ‘guardian’ [in verse 24] is literally a ‘pedagogue’—a slave appointed to serve as a child’s protector. In wealthy Greek families, children were individually raised by pedagogues. From age six until late adolescence, the child was under constant care and supervision. The pedagogue was part babysitter and part chaperone. Since he was in charge of discipline, the pedagogue was also part probation officer. Ancient drawings usually depict him holding a rod or a cane to administer corporal [physical] punishment.

The pedagogue was not primarily a teacher, although sometimes he helped a child review his lessons. [What the law does for us is help us evaluate our lessons of faith in life with God, our actual experiences of living by faith, it doesn’t teach us, mature us]...[Now] The pedagogue did have to make sure the pupil made it to school [the law made sure we had the opportunity to learn to live by promise and presence but was neither the promise nor the presence.] [The guardian] helped to feed and dress the child, and also to carry the child’s educational tools. Once at school, there was a special room where pedagogues waited for their young students until their lessons were finished. But the pedagogue was not the educator; he was the disciplinarian. [This, again, is why John begins his ‘good

⁵ Saint Augustine, quoted by John Calvin in, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, 307.

news' account of Jesus' life with the statement, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (1:17) Jesus didn't come to be our guardian or disciplinarian, he came to teach and train us to live maturely (fully human), free in relation to God's promise and presence!]

[Now, before we dismiss the law altogether, we need to note that] A pedagogue served the best interests of the child in many ways, [and] a close bond of affection often developed. [Think about the passionate and affectionate songs about God's just decrees in Psalm 19 and 119.] [Likewise,] Discipline was not necessarily [and always] severe [though sometimes it was required to keep the children from self-destruction], and the pedagogue provided protection as well as punishment. He also served as a moral tutor, shaping the child's ethics [Think about the summation of the law to which even the Pharisee's acknowledged as; loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. This is why Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, to make it complete (Matt. 5:17-20).]

In the [story] of salvation, the law is the pedagogue that raised the Jews [during] adolescence [a particular time and a particular chapter in salvation history, but not the whole story. It did not move them from the stereotypical teenage perspectives into maturity]. It was not a schoolmaster to teach them how to get better and better until God finally accepted them. On the contrary, the law was for discipline. It told God's people what to do, and then it punished them for failing to do it. There were times when the Jews chafed under this discipline (chaperones have never been very popular!). But all the while, the law was preparing God's children to enter their majority [for something beyond it...a promise].

Like any pedagogue, the law eventually [as intended] worked its way out of a job. [As Paul said it, "the law was a guardian *until* Christ came...we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all [heirs] of God, [children] through faith." (3:24-26)]"⁶

In the story of salvation, the law was given, as Paul says in verse 19, "because of transgressions" because of the reality that Israel's way of life, their view of God, and how they were to live with one another and their neighbors were askew, bent, off the created order of Genesis. The law was there to show them that sin—the skewed view of God and life with God and others—was imprisoning not only in that it brings of death but also in the demanding and limiting requirements to keep from walking in it and having it cleaned up. Sin weighs us down in and out of religion. The details of the Mosaic law describe the rules and regulations for becoming and remaining clean from sin so that the people of Israel could remain close to God, but never assumed they could be completely free from sin. The problem was, to ensure this "rightness," every detail of life had to be covered! It was an imprisoning set of regulations, limiting the world of the Jews. But **this limiting served a dual purpose. It showed them that sin was impossible to overcome even by the most devout, and yet, that forgiveness (atonement) was always available. It also served to shape Israel's trajectory, to ensure that they got to where they needed to, to learn from the things they needed to, to experience the consequences of their rebellious activities and forgetfulness as they needed to; so that at the right time the one event, the one person who could overcome sin and fulfill the law would change everything, entering as a suffering**

⁶ Philip Ryken, *Galatians*, Reformed Expository Commentary, 139-140.

servant and tearing down the veil (curtain) between heaven and earth, God and humanity; the promise and the presence filling the earth.

Commenting on the critical verse 22, which says, “the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by *faithful* Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe,” John Calvin noted:

“This sentence is full of the highest consolation. It tells us that, **wherever we hear ourselves condemned in Scripture, there is help provided for us in Christ, if we betake ourselves [choose to go] to him [reflexively]**. We are lost, though God were silent: why then does he so often pronounce that we are lost? It is that we may not perish by everlasting destruction, but, struck and confounded by such a dreadful [verdict], *may by faith seek Christ, through whom we ‘pass from death unto life.’*”⁷

All of us, at one point or another, and perhaps at several points, will want the apparent security of the “works of the law,” of a set of religious beliefs, behaviors, traditions, etc., that if kept give us exactly what and how we are to live. We will, at one point or another, think that maturing comes through submission to the particular rules, regulations, practices, etc., rather than walking, wrestling, struggling, succeeding, doubting, believing by faith in God here and sharing his life with us. Tempted by arguments, stressors, immaturity, and uncertainty to return to the middle of the story. But, in those moments, we are to remember the beginning and the end of faith, free life in a personal relationship with God in which we, as Abraham’s descendants, walk with God, wrestle with God, take risks that God will honor our trust in him, overcome injustices, forgive our mistakes and sins, lead us in the ancient paths, and take what is done in evil as the means to bring about his good—living by faith **with its ups and downs, in God’s promise by faithful Jesus Christ, holding fast as his children maturing through our freedom and failures by faith, not law.**

Let’s pray.

⁷ John Calvin, quoted by Douglas Moo in, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 240.

COMMUNION:

On the night before Jesus was crucified, he gathered his friends into a room and shared with them the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. He broke the bread, shared the wine, and washed their feet.

“The body and blood he took for our sakes, woven in Mary’s womb, is shared with us as he shares our nature, extended to and through us, so that we too are Christ’s Body [his church]. Amazingly and wonderfully, he who took our human nature shares with us his divine nature. The Spirit is here for us to breathe, the substance of the true God is there with us, [the one who began us through hearing by faith is] not high and inaccessible...but close, humbled below us, kneeling at our feet to wash us, or broken and placed into our hands to feed us.

And all this happened ‘on the night that he was betrayed.’ It is not when we have already purged ourselves [proven our loyalty] and attained some long-sought moral height [or religious perfection] that these things are offered to us. It is here and now, in the confusion and ambiguity of our daily life, in the midst of our darkness and disloyalty, here where we need him most, where he meets us: [and as the poet says,]

Though we betray him, though it is the night.
He meets us here and loves us into the light.”⁸

May we hold fast to the promise and the presence of life through Jesus. In Jesus' name, Amen.

⁸ Malcolm Guite, *The Word in the Wilderness*, 164-165.