

God is with us

Psalm 146

1 Kings 17:8-24

Luke 7:11-17

Galatians 1:11-24

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Galatians has been called the Magna Charta of Christian liberty. My Oxford annotated Bible writes of this Epistle, "The importance of this brief letter is hard to overestimate . . . it gives many autobiographical details of the apostle's earlier life and evangelistic activity . . . The declaration of the principles reiterated in these six chapters made Christianity a world religion instead of a Jewish sect."

The book of Galatians deals primarily with the question of whether Gentiles need to become Jews before they can become Christians. But the truth of Paul's teaching goes far beyond that. Paul was struggling to communicate with the early Christians that they don't need to follow earthly rules to know who Christ is, and to be one with God – they are free to know God always.

This text shows us some of what Paul was struggling with in this communiqué. He seems to be defending the fact that he was a very devout Jew – he had a very good spiritual life and he left that for something even better. Jaime Clark-Soles, wrote, "Paul never speaks of his "conversion"; rather, he refers only to his "call" . . . Paul was not "converted" from one religion to another. When he became a Christian, he believed in the same God, drew upon the same Scriptures and moral code as he did in Judaism. Paul was called into Christian Judaism rather than Pharisaic Judaism."

So, because of Paul's life experiences he probably should be that last one on earth to take the point of view he was espousing - against the belief that these gentiles needed to follow Mosaic Law in order to become good Christians. Paul is saying that when he accepted Christ his view of God freed him and all who follow him from these restrictions. Why on earth did he do that? He did so because he *experienced* the **living God** through his acceptance of Jesus as Christ, and he didn't want anything to stand in the way of that experience.

William Loader wrote, "In Christ's name [the mosaic Christians were] wanting to impose an understanding of faith that is based on strict observance of biblical laws. Paul [knew] that this failed to reach the heart of the faith that Jesus lived and died for. *He refuses to allow himself to be drawn down into a debate about legal authorization.* So convinced is he that faith sets people free and that this has a transforming effect which goes far beyond what meticulous observance of laws, including biblical laws, can achieve, [Paul goes] on to speak of love not as a reason to keep rules, but as a fruit of the Spirit".

So to Paul, the most important aspect of Christ's gift to us was the freedom to have faith and experience love – and he wanted **no one** to *ever* put stipulations upon that gift from God. For experiencing God can be done at any time –

any second – no one can put anything between God and humanity at any time. Craig Koester wrote, “Paul could not tolerate anything that would obscure the centrality of Christ crucified. He *insists* on a clear distinction between *what God has done* and *what people do*. **When the two are confused, people begin to play God.**”

In many church traditions this Sunday is when they celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi (Latin for Body of Christ). It honors the Eucharist – reminding us of Maundy Thursday, when Jesus shared the Last Supper. This experience of Christ suffering and rising from the dead to show that God is limitless in his ability and desire to be with his people is what Paul found so vital to the understanding of faith – and Paul wasn’t even there.

But how important is it to humanity today that we are *aware* of how God is with us? Because I believe that God is with us no matter what we do. The degree to which we are aware of this fact is what determines the direction of humanity on this earth. This is what Paul was trying so hard to show everyone – faith – the desire to be with God has no restrictions to it. You want to experience God? No problem – because God is already here and there isn’t anything we can do to deserve it or to deny it.

What is most frightening about this revelation is that whatever evil is done in the world – humans are dragging God into it. There is no time and or place where God is not. Everything we do – God is there. And if we do evil – God is ignored – and is in pain.

The gift of his son, Jesus Christ is God’s way of showing us this. And also God’s way of showing us how to deal with the pain and evil humans cause. Christ was showing how to live our lives, he showed us that we are all called to seek reconciliation and try to right the wrongs that we or others have brought about in this world.

Christians have a responsibility to commune with God – and out of the spirit of love and the knowledge that God is with us – go out and do likewise. How odd is this concept in today’s society?

Lisa Miller, the religion editor of Newsweek Magazine wrote a book called, Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination With The Afterlife. It looks at the various versions of Heaven throughout history. Most say they believe in it – but what exactly is it that they believe? She spoke recently about her book on a television show and I was very impressed with something in particular that she said.

She said the best version of heaven came from Dante – and his view of heaven is, “all these different levels of light and brightness and all of the people in heaven are sitting around in this stadium looking at this beautiful light and there is a kind of communing with God who is transcendent and unspeakable and completely beautiful”.

Now let’s contrast that to what most people today believe heaven is. She said that now, “Heaven is this kind of; you can eat all the ice cream you want and not get fat, you can drive a big gold Cadillac, you can have your most perfect beautiful body, and you get to hang out with your best friends, and chat all day and see all the people that you miss from life . . . What’s problematic about contemporary version of heaven is that God isn’t there”.

Has contemporary society come around to the point where they are no longer interested in communing with God and more interested in making themselves happy? Have people been *led to believe* for too long that the *challenges* to being a religious person are difficult and the rewards too few?

Perhaps this is what Paul has been warning followers about for centuries now. Being a Christian means we know that God is with us and we know how to live, and from that we know great love and great joy – gifts of the spirit.