



*Redeemed!*

*Devotions on  
Galatians*

*Louis Nel*

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# **Introduction to Galatians**

## **Introduction**

How sure am I that my case with God is right? If I come to the gates of heaven today, am I sure Peter's going to unlock that gate for me? Can anyone ever be sure that he can get to heaven? Is it not just God's decision whether someone will go to heaven or not? Maybe, if I bring my side, read my Bible and go to church regularly, the Lord will allow me there!

This may sound like a silly question to you, but for many people it is a gigantic question. Often, even for believers, it is a question they have struggled with for years.

If you carry any of these thoughts or questions in your heart this morning, then I have wonderful news for you: Galatians has the answer to each of these questions! Paul writes in this beautiful letter that it is not necessary for me to first bring my side before God looks at me. It is not necessary for me to first follow a set of rules and get my

relationship with God right before He considers me favourably for a place in His Kingdom. You cannot earn your salvation. No one can earn it! God gives it for free, because He wants to give it. Pure grace! Jesus has already paid for it, the full price, and God only asks that I believe in Jesus to get it all.

But would that now mean that I can do just what I want, as long as I just believe? Someone was once very upset when I wrote that it does not help you to abide the law. “But that's cool! Then I can just kill and steal and do what I want?” No, that's definitely not what Paul meant. All he says is that we do not need to convulsively try to win God's favour for our salvation, God gives it to us!

However, when we receive it, a wonderful thing happens: God not only gives us salvation, but He also gives the Holy Spirit who comes to live in the heart of every believer. The Holy Spirit then leads you to live a life that fits that of a redeemed citizen of the Kingdom. Of course, I have a choice

whether I will listen to what the Holy Spirit says to me, and that decision is still mine whether I will make a success or a mess of my new life. The message of the letter to the Galatians can make a huge difference to your life. Come and enjoy it with me!

Of course, as you may have noticed, this letter was written by none other than the great missionary, Paul, and he originally addressed it to the Christian congregations in Galatia. These congregations were formed because of Paul's own missionary work, and while he was preaching the Gospel elsewhere, he received the disturbing news that there were people preaching heresies in Galatia. They were destroying all his hard work there with their skewed doctrines.

We can assume that these people were Jewish Christians who came from Jerusalem, and still clung to the old Jewish laws. They were trying to convince the believers in Galatia that Jesus alone is not enough for your salvation. No, you must first obey all the Jewish laws and rituals before you can be

part of God's people. The poor people had to be circumcised first and they had to strictly observe the Jewish almanac with all its festivals and frills in order to be eligible for salvation in any way.

This was bad news for Paul, because he had heard that the congregation was already accepting these perverted doctrines, because it was now real, genuine Jews from the Holy Land who came to teach them these things! Then he wrote this letter to try to convince the people that those preachers were stuffing trash into their heads. He exposes this false doctrine and then explains very clearly that the things he preached at that time are the true and pure Gospel, and that they come from God.

Since Paul wrote this letter 2,000 years ago, many “teachers” have distorted and wrenched his message. And it still goes on today! Some professors in the highest positions try to indoctrinate young, future preachers with all sorts of falsehoods. Some scholars spread all sorts of blasphemous

rumours, trying to seduce people into the abyss. Only by clinging to the pure Word of God as recorded by Paul and the other writers of the Bible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can we stay on the right path. Do not believe everything you hear. If you read my meditation, I also ask that you test it to the Word. Indeed, there are people who do and comment. I appreciate it, because I do not want to preach false doctrine! My prayer, every time I write a devotion, is that the Holy Spirit will give me the words for it, because I am just a fallible person.

Prayer:

Lord, please keep me from ever preaching any heresy!



# **I Greet You!**

## **Galatians 1: 1-5**

Do you ever think what you say when you greet someone? It is often just a formality that needs to be completed as quickly as possible, because it does not really matter. But how important is a greeting really?

For Paul, this was a very important part of his letter. And have you listened carefully to how the pastor greets the congregation before the worship service? Yes indeed there are the few who mumble something inaudible, but most pastors go to great lengths to make that greeting something very special. First there is the votum, which is a Latin word meaning something between "prayer, desire and longing." With this God is called upon, His Name is called out and the Holy Spirit is called in. At the same time, the church is called to a confession of God's presence, and our dependence and devotion to Him. An expectation is also created for the Word.

After the votum follows the blessing greeting that basically says: "The Lord bless you."

So you will understand that this is a very complex greeting that says very deep things. When we read Paul's greeting at the beginning of the letter to the Galatians, we find that it is equally complex. There is much more locked up in it than you notice at first glance.

The custom in those years was that when you write a letter, you first say who you are. Then you say to whom you are sending your letter and then you greet the person. This is exactly what Paul is doing in this letter, but he decides that the message he wants to convey is so important, that he throws in a few thoughts with the greeting so that everyone should get the message properly right from the onset.

It is very important that readers not only know who the author is, but why he is qualified to write certain things to them. So often you believe everything someone writes

without even knowing anything about the author. Someone who is good with words can write the biggest nonsense and get you carried away by it.

Blatant untruths on Whatsapp often flood our post today, and it is presented as the sacred truth. You are then urgently requested to forward it to all your acquaintances. Often you are played on as a believer. One such message is that the Pope is rewriting the Bible! The stories that are dished out are sometimes heartbreaking. They also do not even hesitate to exploit children. A common one is of some beautiful little girl with an angel face who has a rare disease and needs millions of rands to get treatment. The problem is when such a case really happens, no one wants to believe it anymore! Someone who spreads such blatant lies are servants of the devil!

While the person is an "ambassador of Satan", Paul makes it very clear that he is an ambassador of God, appointed by Jesus personally on the road to Damascus where

he had that traumatic experience which changed his life and also the lives of many millions of people dramatically over the centuries. He therefore speaks with authority when he writes this letter, and every reader will know exactly who and what he is.

Right from the onset, Paul began to preach. He tells of what Jesus did for our salvation. They say, "When the heart is full, the mouth overflows." Jesus Christ is so exciting to Paul and his whole life is so full of Him that it simply cannot be helped that he is bubbling over from Jesus and all that He has done. It's like a strong fountain that you can simply not plug in, because you're closing one hole, then spraying the water out of another hole. For Paul, the most important thing in life is Jesus, and absolutely nothing can stop him from talking about Jesus. People even tried to stone him, but when he got up half-dead, he was already talking again!

Usually someone who talks so much is just full of himself. There are quite a few such people that I know. However, Paul is

completely different here, because although he said at the beginning that he was personally appointed by Jesus himself as an apostle, it is not about Paul, but about Jesus, and he gives God all the glory: "To God be the glory forever and ever!" (v5)

What does your greeting say about you? I know people for whom I am actually afraid to greet, because "depressed and grieved" is written all over their faces, and the burdens of life press heavily on their shoulders. Someone else again cannot stop talking about himself and what he or his children have achieved in life. But fortunately I also know some true sunbeams, where the happiness and love of Jesus radiates from his face in such a way that you simply cannot help but be touched simply by his greeting, and get a positive inspiration for the day.

You can change people's lives today simply by the way you greet them!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me a ray of sunshine and an inspiration to people today to all who need it!

# **Only One Gospel**

## **Galatians 1: 6-10**

Paul is upset! No, actually that is put very lightly, he is severely upset when he writes this letter. In Paul's day, letters began with a preface and immediately thereafter a thanksgiving. Take a look at the other letters in the Bible, and you will see how the author expresses his gratitude for some matter or situation. Here however, Paul simply starts off with harsh words. He is surprised that they became so faithless. We can understand his dismay because they succumbed to heresy. They were, as it were, snatching away the salvation that God had given for free! They were chasing after people who preached a false gospel! God's precious grace has been violated. The heart of the gospel was seized and ripped out bloodied!

As I listen to Paul's tirade like that, then I must surely ask whether believers may not differ from one another? Why then are there so many different churches? Which one is

right? I have often heard a church leader say that his church is the only one that will see the inside of heaven!

There may be differences, because we interpret the Bible in different ways.

Some people believe that baptism is also for babies, and others that you must first come to maturity in faith. Some believe that the Sabbath is on a Saturday and others that Sunday is the holy day. Each of the groups that have a specific conviction has evidence from the Bible that it's standpoint is correct. The fact is that the other side has similar evidence of their point of view. These types of differences, although for some people of utmost importance, are actually insignificant differences.

As a staunch NG Church member, I have always believed that Pentecostal churches preach the wrong message, and that cooperation is a matter of impossibility. On a few occasions an AFM Pastor led our Dutch Reformed Church worship service! An AFM



pastor says that on occasion he was the pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist congregation. One NG congregation has appointed an AFM Pastor as a pastor in their congregation. In Ballito we have a very successful worship group of men made up from all the different churches. And so I can go on. Different churches can (and should!) work together, because we have one gospel to preach. What does a few differences matter? You can live with that. And by the way, I differ vastly from some of the other men's views, but we have decided that we may differ from each other, as long as we do so in love and peace and do not condemn each other.

Now we must also realize very thoroughly that there are certain things in the Bible that we simply cannot interpret differently. Let us call them the basic truths, and we dare not try to change them.

And that is exactly what upset Paul so much. The people who preached in these congregations preached things that touched

and undermined the deepest foundation of the gospel, God's grace through Jesus Christ. Paul is so serious about this matter that he utters a double curse on anyone who preaches anything other than the true gospel.

However, Paul wants to make it very clear that this is not about him or his preaching, but that it is about a much bigger issue. He is, as it were, only the messenger who conveys this message to the congregations and therefore to us today. He does not want any credit for it, otherwise he is not a servant of Christ.

It is very important that we understand that God's blessing also has another side, because whoever rejects God's grace and blessing brings a curse on himself. It is also important to note that Paul is uttering this curse on anyone who would preach a false doctrine, and he includes himself in this. God's message is always more important than the messenger, no matter who this messenger is. Even a professor at the

university's theological school will not escape that curse!

What is important today is to be able to know who the false messengers are and to be able to discern their heresy. The so-called New Reformers is one such movement that seeks to explain the Bible in a post-modernist way. The blasphemous things they utter make your hair stand on end, such as questioning Jesus' virginal birth, His resurrection from the dead, and His miracles. They also question the inspiration of the Holy Spirit over the Old and New Testaments. They even doubt the prophecies that foretell Christ's birth and Messianic Kingdom. Another group of false preachers is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who trample on the Deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Then there is New Age, Christian Scientology and a whole host of others who preach an "alternative gospel".

Paul made it very clear: "There is no other gospel!" (v7)

Prayer:

Lord, please keep me from ever preaching anything other than the pure gospel!

# **Paul**

## **Galatians 1: 11-24**

Paul is probably one of the most interesting people in all of history. Several books have been written about him. I myself put on the naughty shoes a few years ago to write a series of reflections on Paul's experiences. You can download it for free from our website.

Paul is probably the Bible figure we know most about, because through Acts and the many letters from him that have been preserved, we get to know him, with all his joys, his sorrows, his fears and the thriller dramas he has gone through time and time again. Indeed, he faced death several times and even taunted it! He was flogged, locked up in prison, stoned, yelled at, bitten by a snake, shipwrecked several times and chased out of cities!

But there were also the many flourishing times in his life. A multitude of gentiles were

converted under his preaching and congregations around the world were established under his hand. Fiery teachers were born under his leadership. There was also humour, like the night when his sermon lasted so long that one guy fell asleep and fell out the window. In fact, it was almost a tragedy, because the man was smashed to pulp, stone dead! However, Paul prayed for him, and he awoke from the dead! After that, Paul casually continued his sermon!

Paul grew up in Tarsus, and as a young boy his father took him to Jerusalem to study under the famous teacher Gamaliel. There he acquired an extremely thorough knowledge of the law and all the scriptures, something that was invaluable to him in his later life.

Paul took his preaching very seriously, and in this paragraph of his letter he explains why. That Damascus experience he had turned his whole life around. He was a fanatical Pharisee who cruelly persecuted the church. He threw many Christians into prison

because he simply could not stand this "sect"! He was even partly responsible for the murder of Stephen, he watched as his colleagues cruelly stoned Stephen to death. It could not be described other than murder!

And then Jesus came to him in a vision on the way to Damascus, on just one more of his fanatical persecution expeditions. The risen Jesus touches Paul so dramatically that there is an instant reversal in his life. It was certainly not easy for Paul, because now the Jews rejected him because he suddenly became "soft" and sided with the "enemy". On the other hand, the Christian believers still distrusted him. They wondered if it was not just a sly prank to get to them? It meant he had to emigrate to Arabia, where he probably made a thorough study of this new faith in which he found himself. He could return only three years later. Gradually, some believers began to trust him very sceptically. To Paul, it meant bitter hard work to win the believers' trust.

Does all this hard work and all that he had to go through make him a “good Christian”? Paul does not reckon so. It was God who, in His great mercy, called Paul to accomplish these things. Paul tells these things to the Galatians, not to show how hard he worked or how good he was, but to prove to them that the gospel he preaches is true and comes from God. But also that he preaches things to them with the authority of a true Apostle. They must therefore take careful note that the “alternative gospel” they have heard is therefore false. Secondly, he also wants to emphasize God's great mercy, even over a former fanatical church persecutor like him. No one's sin is too great for God to forgive!

Paul's life story reads like a fascinating novel that plucks your heartstrings. It's full of tension, but at the same time also has moments that are so beautiful that you cannot stop the tears of emotion. However, it is much more than just a story, because from this story we learn about God's great grace



and love and therefore Paul's story succeeds in being meaningful to every reader.

Paul's life story should also encourage you and me as ordinary people to dedicate our lives to the Lord. You do not have to be a full-time minister to work for Him. Paul was a tent maker by profession, earning enough to preach the gospel throughout the world. You can work full time and still carry the gospel, just be creative! I know of many people who preach the Word in such creative ways. I myself am not a pastor, I work part time for the church and supplement my income by publishing books. But the daily passages I write every morning reach thousands of people daily. The great secret lies in the fact that you must not do it out of your own strength, but in total dependence on God, because without Him absolutely nothing is possible. All glory goes to God alone!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me useful to Your Kingdom today. Give me the zeal to carry the

wonderful message of the gospel to the world  
around me in every possible way.

## **Differences in faith**

### **Galatians 2: 1-10**

Every two years, the church leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church meet to reflect on all kinds of issues. Often there is no agreement on certain things. On one occasion it is, for example, the gay issue that dominates the meetings, and then again the question of the re-baptism of adults. The issue of church reuniting in the Dutch Reformed Church family is a huge headache. Other churches have solved this issue years ago! Often there are very hot debates, and then the men (and women) get hot under the collar. However, when different churches have to make important decisions from different religious backgrounds, then I can imagine how the men would take each other on about it. I will not even mention examples of the differences, because with these daily passages I try to write about those things on which we all agree.

Of course, there are faith issues that we will never agree on, but let's forget about them. I have often been taken on about such issues, but I refuse to comment on them because no one is going to be convinced by the other, so it is an unnecessary waste of precious faith energy.

However, sometimes there are things that are vertical to the biblical truths, and then I may not remain silent. Where the Bible, for example, describes the crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection or even the Deity of Jesus Christ in no uncertain terms and presents it as the full truth, I dare not say that these things happened only in the hearts of the disciples, and that we should see it "spiritually". Then it's a blatant heresy.

Paul has encountered such things in the congregations of Galatia, and therefore he tells them of the leaders' meeting he attended in Jerusalem, where these matters now being proclaimed have already been ironed out. There were Jewish Christians in Galatia who insisted that all new Christians

should be circumcised, and that they should maintain the Jewish customs, all the holidays, rituals etc.

Paul explains that these matters had already been clarified at the Jerusalem Summit years before, where he had met with several other church leaders. Of course, this summit was not without its pitfalls and struggles, just as it still is today at synod meetings. Jerusalem, of course, was in the heart of Israel, and the Christians there were, of course, mostly conservative Jews, most of whom still clung to the old Jewish customs. On the one hand, they experienced the deliverance of Jesus, but on the other hand, they still could not get away from the legal ties that bound them. These same ties then also wanted to impose on all the new converts around the world, whether they were Greeks or Romans or whoever.

Paul put his foot down: Jesus is enough! It was not necessary for any non-Jew to adhere to the Jewish traditions. The same, of course, applied to circumcision, a tradition

that weighed extremely heavily on any Jew. The church leaders listened to Paul's plea and concluded that no non-Jew could ever be forced to keep the Jewish laws. The leaders who made these decisions were also not just a bunch of self-appointed leaders, but men with authority: there were Peter, John and James, among others, who were considered the pillars of the church. The decisions were therefore taken with great authority.

Those great men realized that Paul was sent to them by God. Moreover, they knew that he was called by God himself to do missionary work among the gentiles. He had, in other words, a mandate from God, and therefore they agreed with him. And now there are false teachers who are trying to force exactly these same thoughts that Paul fought so hard against again in Galatia. Not only are they spreading misinformation, but they are also violating the "Jerusalem Agreement".

The message today is that there will always be differences of emphasis between

believers' views on different matters. These differences can be easily bridged if we make room for each other and respect each other's views. If the other church baptizes differently than you, he is not necessarily wrong. Some believe in the rapture, and others do not, but what does it matter? How you baptize or how you believe about the rapture is definitely not going to keep you out of heaven! There are even Jewish Christians today who strictly adhere to Jewish traditions and festivals, and there is nothing wrong with that. What is extremely important, however, are the fundamental truths of the faith, such as that God saves us by grace without us being able to contribute anything to it. All He asks of us is our faith in Jesus. So too Jesus' Deity, suffering, death and resurrection. This kind of thing may never ever get in jeopardy.

Prayer:

Lord, please give me tolerance towards people who believe differently from me!

## **Peter Again!**

### **Galatians 2: 11-14**

I got to know John years ago, a wonderful person, humble, friendly and always there when you needed him. No one was ever below him and you could entrust your darkest secrets to him because you knew it was safe with him. In short: a true Christian who followed in Jesus' footsteps. One day, John gets a call. He is offered a fantastic appointment, one for which he simply could not say no. And so he is gone.

Years came and years went by. And then, one day, this flashy guy got out of his flashy car, and I gasped at him. And suddenly I recognize him: But it's John! "John, where have you been?" I am overwhelmed with joy. We're going to have a coffee somewhere in a café and talk endlessly. But soon I find out that John is no longer the old John that I know. This new Flashy-John is full of himself, and he's barely interested in me or anyone



else. "What's wrong, John?" I finally want to know.

"No, nothing", he wants to pretend, "can not be better!" But I can see that John has lost something along the way. That humility, the passion for people, the love for God, it's not there anymore. It is with a heavy heart that I say goodbye, because John is dead. The old John I remember is no more.

Over the years, I have come to know many people whose hearts were burning for the gospel, but for some reason were extinguished. What makes people drift away from the most important things in life? Sin! Sin comes in many forms, and you must guard against it every moment of the day, because sin drives a wedge between you and Jesus, and it causes you to lose your passion, as happened to John. Was it his wealth and success that made him arrogant? Maybe he just didn't have time for God anymore? Oh yes, he was still involved with the church and he was chairman of every

commission and activity that was deserving, but that was just a mask.

Aren't John and I perhaps one and the same person?

Paul tells of a man who also changed, a man I gained a lot of respect for: Peter. I remember Peter as the hot-headed disciple who spoke before he thought, the man who was not afraid of anything. Was he not the one who jumped into the stormy sea and walked on the water to Jesus? Oh, and then his courage trembled when he saw the giant waves.

Peter was the one who assured Jesus that he would stand by Him through thick and thin, yes that even death would not frighten him. Only a few hours later, terrified of a maid, he lied that he has NEVER known Jesus. After Pentecost we got to know a completely different Peter. Suddenly he rises as a leader of the church like never before. Fearlessly, he even approached the Jewish Council because his passion for the gospel

was unquenchable. He was willing to completely set aside his deep-rooted Jewish traditions so that people could see Jesus in him. Peter was on fire for the gospel!

And now Paul comes, and he tells of the “other” Peter, a Peter who again became afraid of the waves, afraid of the maid. This time it was not sea waves or the high priest's maid. Now Peter was simply afraid of Jews looking down on the non-Jewish Christians. Suddenly he began to forget about the “other” people in the congregation, and he began to click with the Jews. After all, he himself was a Jew!

Did Peter begin to become arrogant? Has his passion for the gospel begun to wane? Perhaps Jesus no longer took the place in His life that He had previously taken? Did the successes he achieved by being “head” of the church perhaps go to his head? Did he perhaps yearn back to his old Jewish life? Or were there other things that seduced Peter? We will not know. What we do know is that this “going astray” of Peter may have given

the “conservative ones” who were now causing trouble in Galatia the necessary boost to do their thing.

You and I need to listen carefully to what Paul is saying here, and constantly do introspection, whether we are not walking the same path as Peter, perhaps just on a different path. Are there things in my life that are building a wall between me and Jesus? Is there perhaps something that prevents me from continuing my love work with the same passion? Has anyone perhaps said something that has annoyed or hurt me, and now I am walking with pent-up feelings that cloud my Christianity instead of forgiving and forgetting? Have I simply become lazy, or complacent, or arrogant, or too rich or exalted above the “mob”?

If we are drifting away, then it has become time for us to prayerfully seek the will of God!

Prayer:

Lord, where I often drift away from You, I beg  
You to hold my hand tightly and pull me back  
to You.

# **Spiritual Haughtiness**

## **Galatians 2: 15-21**

When he walked into the bookstore, I just knew: here comes trouble! This guy is on a mission, and it's definitely not to buy a book! The Christian bookstore where I worked in Welkom did not sell very many books, and often people just came there to talk. It so happens that you walk around with a problem in your life that you cannot discuss with anyone, and here was a total outsider who was willing to listen to problems. No, I certainly did not have all the answers. I still do not have all the answers, but a willing ear is often all a person needs.

However, the problem of the man who walked in that morning was of a very different nature. Nobody wanted to listen to him anymore, so he came and told me. "We are the New Israel", he dropped the bomb. Of course I agreed because we as believers are the people of God!

"No, you do not understand at all!" he explains. That "us" of which he spoke meant the Afrikaner nation. I just felt, this was going to be a very long day. He explained in detail how he had discovered that us Afrikaners are now the chosen people and therefore now enjoy all the privileges that Israel had of old: Holy, untouchable and exalted above all other mortals!

Yes, this is about how the Jews of old believed in themselves and how some Jews still believe even today. Spiritual pride, one might call it, because simply your origin alone is enough to place you on a platform above the crowd. Of course, there was also the other extremely important point for the Jews, and that was to keep the law of Moses, because by doing so, you naturally showed that you are really serious about your origin. The sad news was that it was not only the orthodox Jews who had this mindset, but also of the Jewish Christians. In Galatia they were the very people who caused Paul so many headaches with their heresy.

Paul wants to emphasize that those things are of absolutely no value, because there is only one thing that gives you acquittal: the reconciliation that Jesus Christ brought about through His death on the cross.

Yes, it is very easy to accuse the Jews or even that group who believe that the Afrikaner is the chosen people. We distance ourselves from them because the Bible teaches us that it is wrong. What we soon forget, however, is that there is a similar spiritual pride within the church today that is just as dangerous. The disturbing thing is that it does not take place among unbelievers, but rather the active believers who are involved in all areas. We must be extremely careful not to see ourselves better than other people. If I'm one of those willing guys who's always willing to throw my weight in where it's needed, it will become so easy to look down on those who are just passengers on the faith train and never do their part. If I have made good progress in my spiritual life, it is so easy to look down on



the “little ones” who are still in their infancy, and to consider myself better than them. After all, I have already arrived!

Acquittal is by faith, and not by the law, it is what Paul wants to bring to each of us. We simply cannot earn salvation in any way. Not through hard work or Bible study or going to church regularly every Sunday or whatever. God gives salvation for free to anyone who is willing to receive it. And the only way we can receive it is by believing in Jesus. He died on the cross in our place, thus paying for our sins. This is the foundation of the gospel. Furthermore, we must remember that all people are sinful, corrupt and evil, even the most holy people. Your best efforts to do good are corrupt, even if you do not think you are doing too badly right now!

However, there are some wonderful things that happen to you the day when God forgives your debt and writes it off: You are dead to the law! In other words, you no longer have to cling to the law or have to do good things. Now you are free to live for God

because it is a joy for you and because you want to do it. You partake of eternal life only because you believe in Jesus. You have been crucified with Christ and therefore you share in all the benefits of His death. And Christ lives in you! A new "ME" arises where Jesus takes over the core of your personality through the Holy Spirit. From this a new life begins that takes place according to God's will, and you simply cannot be haughty, because it is not you but God who does all these things in you.

Prayer:

Lord, please keep me from getting a big head and becoming arrogant in my spiritual life. Please always keep me humble!

# **The Holy Spirit**

## **Galatians 3: 1-6**

How important is an “experience with the Holy Spirit”? With this question, I might be stirring this morning, because different people understand different things under this term, and some people can get very hot under the collar if you just mention it. In the Dutch Reformed Church there has been a tradition for many years, that you do not even talk about this, because it is "sectarian". 1 Cor 13 is a very popular passage of Scripture, often for the wrong reasons. This passage is about the excellence of love, and then it says that love is much more important, even than Spiritual experiences. However, this does not mean that an experience with the Holy Spirit is unimportant or inferior, although we in the Dutch Reformed Church often want to wish away experiences with the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes to the Galatians about basically the same problem. In their case, however, it

was the Law of Moses that became more important to them than the Holy Spirit. Paul is quite impatient when he writes about this, because the law cannot save anyone, but something happened to those people when he preached the gospel to them at the time, which made their faith burning. What was it? They received the Holy Spirit. From what Paul writes we can derive that the work of the Holy Spirit could be seen in a very clear way in their lives after their conversion. We do not know exactly what happened there, because Paul does not mention it, but we can only guess. Possibly it is the fruit of the Spirit that was expressed to such an extent that they had literally radiated. It could also have been speaking in foreign languages or something similar. In verse 4 Paul asks, "Were your afflictions in vain?" The 2020 translation reads: "Have you experienced so much in vain?" It refers to the powerful works of the Holy Spirit of which Paul speaks in verse 5.

What Paul is really saying here is that God gave the Holy Spirit to each of these

believers after hearing the gospel of Paul. So Paul preached the gospel according to God's will. His preaching was correct. This is why he asks them the question over and over again, how then did they receive the Holy Spirit. Only later did the false preachers come and mislead them, thus completely distorting Paul's message.

It is important to know what a tremendous change the gospel brought about at that time. In an old established tradition of idolatry, these people suddenly had to accept a whole new view. They had to reconcile with a religion that was radically different from what they were used to and often made no sense at all. Human reasoning could never bring them to other insights, only the powerful work of the Holy Spirit! It not only changed their thinking to abandon all their gods to believe in only one God, moreover, a God who had His Son sacrificed for them! It changed their whole lifestyle. Hatred, revenge and anxiety made way for love and trust.

And today? What difference does the Holy Spirit make in my life? I get embarrassed when I realize to what little difference I am often willing to admit but am not willing to allow the Holy Spirit to make drastic changes in our lives. God has not changed since Paul's time! What has changed then?

It can be a combination of a number of things: firstly, we have been taught in the church over many years that you have to worship very sedately, specifically in the Dutch Reformed Church and it's sisters. You do not want to be branded as "Charismatic" do you? Secondly, I think our advanced technology and scientific thinking are also making it's mark. Anything that cannot be scientifically proven is often dismissed as a myth. Faith in Jesus Christ, and the working of the Holy Spirit is such an "unseen" thing, and so you keep it quiet otherwise you may be laughed at. Someone told me one day that he cannot believe in God, because he can not believe in Someone who is omnipresent? No one can be in two different

places at the same time, can he? It's completely impossible!

It has become time for us to give the Holy Spirit free rein in our lives. Thank goodness that many NG congregations are awakening, and that we can see wonderful change there. My prayer is that it will also infiltrate all individuals, and that you and I will allow the Holy Spirit to fully control our lives so that we will become burning and useful in God's Kingdom.

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, please come and set my mind free so that I can give You free rein in my life to work in me and through me.

## **Man of Faith**

### **Galatians 3: 6-14**

Believers in Abraham's time were apparently sparsely sown, so it would appear from history. Abraham's father, Terah, had three sons: Abraham, Nahor, and Haran. Abraham was married to his brother Nahor's daughter, Sarai. Those years, weddings were kept in the family! In the same way, faith was kept in the family. Noah's son, Shem, bore the seed of faith he received from his father, and many, many years later, shortly after Noah's death, that seed of faith was still alive when Terah raised his sons in the fears of the Lord. For them, faith was simple: believe in the Most High God!

So it came to pass that God spoke to Abraham, when he was 75 years old, and told him to move to a strange land, Canaan. Everything that was known to him he would leave behind and live in a country where faith in God was completely unknown. Only he, Sarai and his brother Nahor's son Lot and his



family moved. It must have been very difficult for him there in the foreign land, far from his family and all alone in his faith. However, he was able to hold on to God's promise, the promise God gave him when He sent him the foreign land: "In you all the nations will be blessed." Often Abraham must have thought back to that day and God's wonderful promise. Maybe he was wondering what God really meant by that? Even when he was an old man, just short of 100, and the doubt about his offspring had worried him because there was no offspring in sight for him, he still clung convulsively to God's promise.

Years later, after experiencing the joy of parenthood, that faith of his was again severely tested when he was commissioned by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Indeed, Abraham had already gone through deep waters, and over the years he had learned to trust God so that even this terrible test would not make him falter.

Abraham had made some huge blunders in his life, but one thing was certain: his

unwavering faith in God, even through the most difficult circumstances.

It is to this hero of faith that Paul refers in Galatians 3. As already stated, Abraham was also only human, and the day when he was desperate, he lied about Sarah and on more than one occasion told a king that Sarah was actually only his sister. And every time, he almost ended up in very deep trouble. On top of that, he also became impatient when the Lord tarried with His promise about descendants. He even went so far as to try to help God on a little! In desperation he sired a child with Sarah's slave girl! At least that was with Sarah's knowledge and approval. But even this God forgave him, because Abraham was acquitted on the basis of his faith in God. This faith was, of course, passed down from generation to generation after Abraham, first Isaac, then Jacob and his hordes of great-grandchildren. Indeed, it was not always so successfully transmitted, and idols often triumphed.

God had to intervene! He had to give the law to the people via Moses. If they could sustain it, there was salvation for them. But it was extremely difficult, and even these simple guidelines for life were often simply too difficult for them to follow. Moreover, it was limited, because these jealous Jews would not simply allow any outsider to partake of God's grace. Once again God had to intervene, this time very drastically. It would be a very expensive undertaking to keep His promise to Abraham.

Paul now tells what that promise to Abraham meant in those years. Thousands of years would pass before Jesus was born of the seed of Abraham. Through Jesus' merits of atonement, the doors were opened, not only to Abraham's physical offspring, but now to all the nations. Someone who could not obey God's law was subject to God's curse. Jesus took that curse upon Himself when He died on the cross, and so once again acquitted everyone who believed only in Him.

God made promises to Abraham and kept each one of them. God also made promises to you and me in His Word. His Word is full of promises and He fulfills each of them. However, his promises are subject to something on your part. No, it does not mean that you have to obey the law in it's fullness, because that is completely impossible. It asks of you and me just one single old thing: **BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST**. If you do this, you will not only receive God's acquittal, but also God's blessing. This blessing is spelled out for us in many places in the Bible, but the greatest aspect of the blessing is the fact that God gives the Holy Spirit into your life. If you allow Him to control your life, then wonderful things await you.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, for heroes of faith like Abraham. Holy Spirit, take my life and please make something beautiful out of it.

## **The Testament**

### **Galatians 3: 15-25**

Uncle Ritchie draws up his last will with trembling hands. He was a successful businessman, and over the years he has built his business into an extremely profitable company. But now Uncle Ritchie has only a short time left to live. He never married, and so there is no one to inherit his wealth. Still, there are quite a few hopefuls waiting to bait!

And then he dies. His will is locked up in the lawyer's safe. One by one, the hopefuls come to visit the lawyer to find out how the will reads, but his lips are sealed. They try to persuade the lawyer to change the will in their favour, but he refuses. What was written was written. This is final.

One day the lawyer calls all the hopefuls together, and very dramatically he opens the sealed envelope with Uncle Ritchie's will. Inside is one sheet of paper with the words: "To my nephew Barnie I bequeath my entire

business." That's it! Just that single sentence!

Barnie is shocked: "What did I do to deserve it? I've never really done anything for Uncle Ritchie, I hardly know him! I do not understand it!"

The rest are all highly upset. They tried so hard to impress Uncle Ritchie, and they did not get a penny! "I'm going to prosecute!" Henry yells. Suzie, a distant cousin, shouts in a shrill voice: "I'm going to fight it in court!" Old Carl is furious: "All my life I have worn myself out for old Ritchie. What do I get? Nothing!"

And Barnie? He is overflowing with gratitude! Then he makes a decision: "I will try my best to make a huge success of the business, and I will plough the profits back into the poor community."

Ever since we started talking about the law and grace, a few people have raised eyebrows, because what was the purpose of the law of Moses if it no longer applies to us

today? Why did God give the Law in the first place? Should we now completely forget about the Law?

Paul put it very adequately when he compared it to a will. God made His will known to Abraham. In it He promised, among other things, to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed in his descendants. With this, God actually told Abraham that He would bring Jesus out of Abraham's descendants, and that Jesus would give the complete acquittal.

As we have seen, Abraham was a deeply religious man. Unfortunately, we cannot say this of all his descendants, and often they grieved the Lord very deeply. For example, when Moses was in God's presence on Mount Sinai in holy moments, the waiting time for the people became too much and they began to worship idols. And this while the holy conversation between God and Moses took place! These people had no understanding of how to associate with God, like their ancestor Abraham.

God had to intervene and lay down guidelines for them about what was expected of them. He had to spell out to them how you should honour God and treat your fellow-man. Still, this was not enough, and later Moses had to bring in all kinds of religious rituals to set the minds of the rebellious and stubborn Jews on God. Special feasts had to make the people remember that it was only God who could give salvation. After all, he saved them from the bondage of Egypt! Other rituals had to remind them of the holiness and purity of God.

Still, these things were not enough, and the poor discouraged Moses had to come and spell out every little thing in fine detail for the rebellious bunch, just as you would have to lay down rules and regulations for a naughty child. They were like a bunch of babies who had to be looked after every moment of the day. The purpose of the law was therefore to take care of this rebellious bunch as a "babysitter". Never was the purpose of the law to give salvation. God's grace alone



could give salvation. If the matter between you and God is right, you will love Him and automatically do the right things for Him! Then you will give Him love and respect and the same love and respect will flow to your fellow-man.

In God's testament to Abraham, He promises Jesus. The law must serve as an "intermediary" until that promise is fulfilled. The promise has meanwhile been fulfilled and the promised Messiah has indeed come. This, of course, makes the law "superfluous". Does this mean that we no longer have to comply with the things contained in the law? No, certainly not to obtain salvation! However, it must be a natural consequence to do these things naturally out of gratitude, because that is how you act towards God and your fellow-man. The important point that Paul wanted to bring home here is that the law is never a means of redemption, but that **FAITH in CHRIST** is the only way to salvation.

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for Your redemptive work,  
because my best works would never give me  
salvation!

## **Multi Fruit Tree**

### **Galatians 3: 26-29**

It was a bitterly cold, unpleasant day in Stanger, about 20 years ago. On the pavilion of the school's swimming pool, a group of very excited people are waiting for the pastor to arrive. The tension is unbearable! My eyes sweeps over the group. There are old people, young people and children, even some babies. The whole congregation is gathered here for a very big event in their lives.

A year or two earlier, a missionary began working among the Hindu and Muslim communities of Stanger. Eventually there was a small congregation of 30 members, all gentile converts. The evangelist suddenly realized with a shock that none of these members of his had ever been baptized. He discusses the matter his flock, and together they decide to make it one big baptismal event. There is planning, talking, speculating, and the more they think about it, the more

excited they become. One young man says that he would like to experience his baptism as an immersion to symbolize the washing away of sins, unlike the traditional sprinkling that is practised in the Dutch Reformed Church. Another, however, is more conservative and wants to stick to the water that is sprinkled over his forehead. Our pastor is called closer, and the missionary explains what their situation is, and "It would be nice if you could help, Reverend!"

And so the icy morning dawns. In the back of his mind, the pastor has to plan for the baptism where in the end quite a few chose to undergo the immersion. The bitterly cold water of the pool lay like an iceberg in front of him, and of course he was used to being very respectfully dressed in a black suit and toga for such an important event as a baptismal service. He thought and re-thought his options, and finally he shows up where everyone was waiting for him in suspense and excitement. He was dressed in a neat white shirt and tie, and underneath it, very

conspicuous..... a diving suit to protect him from the cold! The whole congregation was baptized that morning, old people and children, young people and babies. Some were submerged and some were sprinkled. Several new members braved the icy water to partake of Jesus Christ. That baptism was an extremely emotional and moving occasion that I will never forget!

Through baptism we are all united with Christ, says Paul in Galatians 3:28. It's like being vaccinated. In my young days, there were not all kinds of things like TV, cell phones and tablets to keep people busy. There were simple things that provided entertainment. One of the very popular activities was to graft twigs from different types of fruit trees onto one tree. The lower end of a young shoot is carefully cut into a "V". On the mother tree, a notch is cut into a twig, which has exactly the same shape and size as the "V" of the shoot, and then the shoot is pressed into the notch on the mother tree and tied tightly. There must be complete

reconciliation between the two plants. Life-giving juices from the mother tree flow through the barrels of the shoot and feed it. Eventually he grows there completely and forms a unit, and this shoot can even bear fruit. So then you would eventually get a yellow peach tree that bears plums, apricots, wild peaches and a variety of other fruits!

In the same way, through baptism we are "grafted" into Jesus Christ to eventually become totally one with Him, and grow with Him into one spiritual tree. As with the multi-fruit tree of yore, there is also a variety of "fruit shoots" in this spiritual tree. Not only is there a variety in culture and race, but also in different worship styles: NG, AGS, Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Full Gospel - you name it. There is a rich variety of different views and denominations, but all have one thing in common: all grow on the same "Tree", Jesus Christ, and all are inseparably part of that same "Tree".

A question that is often asked is, which of those shoots are actually the most

important? In Paul's day, men were the most important creatures on earth. Women were several steps lower. Children were just a small step higher than the slaves, who of course did not have much more status than mere property. The Jews again saw themselves as exalted above everyone else, and if you were circumcised, you were also a step higher than the uncircumcised. Paul wants to make it very clear that if you are in Christ, then everyone is exactly equal. The deciding factor is whether you believe in Christ or not.

Today we also dare not make a distinction by esteeming one person higher than the other. In the church of Christ there can be no such thing as discrimination. Of course, there may be differences, but everyone must respect the other and see the other as an equal, and never as inferior, but part of that "Tree", Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Thank you for giving me a share in your wonderful “fruit tree”, Lord.



## **Adopted**

### **Galatians 4: 1-7**

Steven and his wife never had children, so they adopted a boy, Johnny. From a young age, Johnny was taught the love of the land, and this farm became his life. But first there was, of course, agricultural school. He had to go to a boarding house. On weekends he became one with his great love, the veldt, hills and animals. Farm life was in his blood!

One day the principal calls him in: there is bad news: his father is very ill, and he has to go home immediately. A few days later, Pa Steven died. In his will he bequeaths his farm to Johnny. His father's death is a great blow to him, because they were very close to each other, but the comfort of his wonderful inheritance wipes away his tears. Johnny simply cannot believe it: the farm he loves so much is now his! But then he has to be shaken to reality: there is a clause in the will that stipulates that Johnny can only get ownership of the farm the day he turns 21.

"But why?" Johnny wants to know, "I can just leave school and come and farm!"

Steven knew very well that Johnny might act unwisely if he took over the farm as a young boy, and therefore he determined that the farm was managed on Johnny's behalf until the time was ripe for Johnny to be able to control it wisely. Oh yes, the farm already belonged to Johnny, but until he was of age he had no say in it.

Paul uses the well-known example of an immature heir who has to wait until the time determined by his father to explain world history. Just as Stephen did with Johnny, God set for mankind a time of deliverance, namely, when Jesus was sent into the world.

Just as slaves were redeemed at that time, so Jesus also came to redeem mankind. How did He get it right? He first had to become human just like you and me, and so He went through the normal birth process and He had to go through the humiliation that every child had to go through in those days.

He was, like every other Jew at that time, subject to the law. Through His suffering and death, however, He came to redeem us, and the wonderful result is that we (you and I) have been adopted by God as His own children.

Is an adopted child treated any differently from a parent couple's other children? No, definitely not! They are the parents' children in the fullest sense of the word, and share in all the privileges that the other children share. So it is with us as "adopted children" of God. We share in all the privileges.

Before Jesus' coming, mankind were slaves to legalistic religious rules. Although it was not God's intention for them to earn their salvation through this, they nevertheless tried through various forms of legalistic religion to bring about their own salvation. Liberation, however, arrived at the time determined by God, when Jesus came.

The absolutely incomprehensible thing, however, is that there were so many people

who craved back to that time when they were slaves of the law. This is exactly what the Galatians were doing. They thought they could earn salvation by keeping all kinds of laws, but they made a big mistake. They were, in Paul's words, "immature."

In verses 6 and 7 Paul mentions what a privilege it is to be an (adopted) child of God: God gives the Holy Spirit into our hearts. This is not something special that only happens to certain privileged children, but God gives the Holy Spirit to every believer. He, the Holy Spirit, convinces us within ourselves that we are God's children, so that we can cry out: "Daddy! Father!" He helps us to experience it in practice, for example in our prayer life, to be able to speak and talk to God with confidence.

To be able to experience these things is an indescribably great experience. However, there are still Christians today who, like the Galatians of old, became "immature" and exchanged that wonderful experience for the observance of legalistic religious rules. Paul's

advice is to forget about it and set yourself free from that bondage. Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and let Him guide you to unprecedented heights in your spiritual life. Really experience again what it means to be a liberated adopted child of God who shares in all the wonderful privileges He so generously bestows on His children.

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for making me Your child. Please teach me to realize this every moment of the day and to live out my childhood to the fullest.

# **Redeemed!**

## **Galatians 4: 8-20**

Paul is a desperate man. The false doctrine adhering to the congregation in Galatia rests heavily on his poor overladen shoulders, and he tries everything in his power to bring them to other convictions. Now he launches a heartbreaking, emotionally-charged call to try to convince them that they are wrong. It is totally incomprehensible that they are trying to adhere to this wrong doctrine!

In verse 8 he says that they were previously the slaves of "worthless idols". They adhered to a religion where they were bound by all sorts of rules and rituals to try to keep these so-called gods happy. They had to offer sacrifices and perform all kinds of rituals according to the priests' instructions, and all this for gods who could do absolutely nothing for them.

Then Paul brought them the message of God's salvation. They hear the good news that Jesus can free them from this terrible

bondage of idols. They accept the offer Jesus offers them, and the slave chains disintegrate. They are free!

But what do they do then? They go and lend their ears to false teachers who teach them that they must now obey all the old Jewish laws. After all, that's how it should be done! And now they are slaves again from before, this time slaves of the law! "I am afraid, all my hard work on you may have been in vain!" Paul cried. He is discouraged.

How are they slaves of the law? In Paul's own words: They have decayed into a bunch of "inferior and miserable legalistic religious rules" (v. 9). Instead of living their faith in Christ freely, they now had to concentrate on keeping up with the Jewish festivals and rituals. The Jewish religious calendar had clear precepts that had to be strictly observed. It had to be celebrated on exactly the right date, and there was often a heated argument among the Jews as to which date was actually the right one. And then there were the regulations about what exactly had

to happen on each occasion, such as from leaven that had to be thrown out of the house to the last crumb. And the dear Sabbath laws that had to be obeyed so terribly painfully. There were dozens of rules and regulations to prevent you from accidentally doing something that was not permitted on a Sabbath!

The poor people became so entangled in the do's and don'ts that religion became a pain for them. They spent so much time keeping the laws, that they could never get to the true Religion.

Paul reminds the congregation how warmly they initially received him, and the wonderful love they showed him. Yes, here they still truly lived out their Religion as God wanted it to be. Paul was sick at that time, but they received him as if he were an angel of God (v. 14). In those years, disease was often seen as demonic possession, and they stayed away from such a person. But in spite of that, they received Paul with open arms.



But now? Paul sighed very heavily because their error had alienated them even from him. "Have I then become your enemy?" he cried.

We want to click the tongue and say: "Shame, poor people!" We are so glad that we are not caught up in the Jewish laws. However, we must be very careful that we do not fall into exactly the same trap as these poor people of Galatia! It is so easy to lapse into Religious laws and rituals. It's spiritual slavery! You may be surprised, but so often all sorts of spiritual rules are presented to us that we have to slavishly follow. These can be things that have become important to us in our spiritual life, but which are of no value. Take an example: someone is organizing a fasting period, and now you are being bullied into participating in it. If you do not do it, you feel very guilty, so you do it. No, there is nothing wrong with fasting. It can be very beneficial, but if you do it out of duty, it is spiritual slavery. Another good example is these pesky Whatsapp messages that instruct you to send them to ten other people

within ten minutes. If you do not do this, then you are ashamed of the gospel! Let me put it bluntly: If you send me such a message, no matter how beautiful the message is, it immediately ends up in the trash! I refuse to make myself a religious slave! Jesus set me free!

Let us live as true liberated children of God, redeemed by Jesus. Bought very, very expensive! He gave His life for our freedom. If we do not use it, we despise Him.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, You redeemed me. Please help me to live that wonderful freedom according to Your will.

## **Slave or Free?**

### **Galatians 4: 21-31**

Paul wants to bring his message home very clearly, so he has an allegory to explain it. No, it's not an ugly word, but if it's not used very carefully it can be dangerous. An allegory is a symbolic representation. Allegorical arguments were often used by scribes to bring certain truths home to people by taking a story from the Old Testament and then attaching a deeper meaning to it. This would then be the true spiritual meaning of the events. Risky, because you can go overboard and try to give a spiritual meaning to every ordinary event, and so the Bible eventually gets pulled out of context. However, Paul does so with great caution.

He takes the famous events of Genesis 16 and 21, of the childless Sarah and Abraham. Out of desperation, Sarah gave her slave girl to Abraham to conceive a child, Ishmael. Later, in her old age, Sarah of course also had her own child, Isaac, and then they were

faced with a dilemma. Finally, Sarah convinces Abraham to chase Hagar the slave girl and her son away into the wilderness.

Now Paul comes and he seeks the deeper spiritual meaning in these events, and tries to apply it to the problem of the Galatians. The important thing in the story for Paul is the fact that Hagar was a slave and Sarah was free. He connects Hagar with Mount Sinai where God gave the law to the Jews. Mount Sinai and Jerusalem are synonymous, because Jerusalem is, of course, the capital of the Jewish religion, the heresy preached in Galatia. So it is nothing but spiritual slavery. If you try to earn your salvation by strictly obeying the law, then you become a slave of the law, and it becomes a tyrant who gets you into his power.

Paul, on the other hand, sees Sarah as the symbol of spiritual freedom, something you would certainly not associate with Jerusalem, the Jewish religious capital. However, there is another Jerusalem: the new heavenly Jerusalem, which we read about in

Revelation, among others. This Jerusalem is the spiritual mother of all who believe in Jesus and do not trust in the law. That is why Paul urges the Galatians to realize that they are like Isaac and not Ishmael. They are spiritually free and therefore may not be allowed to be enslaved again by the false teachers. Rather, like Hagar of old, those preachers of the false gospel must be driven into the wilderness.

Is there a message for us today in Paul's argument? Does this still apply to me and you? Definitely yes! We have two options: I can choose spiritual bondage and try to restore my relationship with God by following strict rules, for example. This unfortunately leads to a terrible situation, where I become so obsessed with the rules that I become a spiritual slave to my own rules. The second option is spiritual freedom, which means I can actually do nothing to gain God's approval. Instead of trying to earn my own acquittal for my sins, I accept with a believing heart the acquittal that Jesus offers me.

It is strange that one instinctively chooses the path of slavery! I think we have become so used to taking care of ourselves in life that we automatically want to apply it to our relationship with God. Often it even happens that someone has discovered spiritual freedom, and later goes to look for his old slave bands again, just as happened in Galatia.

Someone once sent me a interesting story about a man who prays the "Our Father" and then is interrupted by God. The Lord wanted to know if he actually realized what he was praying for, and if he meant what he was saying. The man was upset that the Lord interrupted him, because he was doing his duty to pray! Do not let prayer or reading the Bible or going to church ever become a duty to you, because then you will start to miss the whole point. Then you are doing exactly what the Galatians were doing. To pray must be for me a need to talk to God and listen to Him and never a duty to obey. The same is true of my Bible, which should be a source of

inspiration to me and a library of God's promises.

I should have a burning desire to come to church on Sunday mornings. It should excite me, because there I can share my faith with other Christians. Of course, the worship service is primarily about worshipping God. However, I also get that spiritual food there that stimulates me throughout the week to live fully for Jesus. I thoroughly enjoy my involvement with the congregation, and even dull church council meetings often excite me. I do not miss a worship service unless it really cannot be otherwise. And it is not at all because I am such a “good Christian”, but because every worship service is an experience for me that I do not want to miss for anything on earth!

How do you experience your spiritual life? Are you a slave there of or is it a wonderful adventure for you?

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for setting me free!

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# **True Freedom**

## **Galatians 5: 1-12**

Paul is very serious about Christian freedom! He simply cannot stress it's importance enough! In this pericope he steers it to a climax before concluding his argument. It is of the utmost importance that it's readers take this to heart. He urgently pleads that they should not succumb to the misconceptions of heretics. It can cost them their freedom!

It is of utmost importance to know that Paul's plea was not only for the Galatians at that time, but still applies to us today. The Bible is absolutely timeless! A letter written two thousand years ago is still fresh and relevant in our modern times today! Indeed, the false teachings we are dealing with today seem a little different from those of Paul's day, but the essence of the Christian religion remains exactly the same. We can sum it up in one single word: Freedom!

Through the ages, people have strived for true freedom, and put it to the test in all sorts of ways. In our modern times, the most prominent freedom action is probably that of the Hippie Movement of the sixties. I still see them clearly in my mind's eye, the bleached, blond long hair with flowers in it. They propagate "free love" and their days consist of doing nothing and idling around. An old battered Volkswagen Kombi is his transport, because it has room for many souls! A haze of cheap liquor and marijuana surrounds them. All they needed was to be able to live out their "freedom". "Peace" and "Make love, not war" was their slogan. This was a false sense of freedom and it eventually died a slow death.

The Hippie era was not the only one, through the ages there have been many wars for freedom from some kind of oppression. Millions of people have sacrificed their lives for freedom, only to find themselves in another form of slavery. For the Greeks in Paul's day, true freedom meant that you

could do whatever you wanted. In the time of the American Wild West, "freedom" also prevailed, but it was often so free that one and all lived daily in fear of death, because you were free to kill anyone for almost no reason. You were never sure if you would still be alive the next day. This is of course if you can believe what they dish up in the movies for you!

However, true freedom can only be achieved if you have a living relationship with God. This can only be achieved through Jesus Christ. Anything else, however popular or logical, is just another form of spiritual slavery. The Galatians were yielding to the pressure of the false teachers to accept the Jewish traditions. This would mean that they would be forced into a slave yoke again. Paul warns them very urgently that this kind of religion, which on the surface seems very Christian-like, will mean that they will break the bond with Christ! It sounds awfully harsh, but when they succumb to that small adjustment they are actually adopting a false

gospel, a gospel whose foundations are not laid on God's grace but on their own accomplishment.

What is complete freedom then? Paul says that a believer is essentially a future person. He is someone who lives in "Hope". This "Hope" is not just vague, wishful thinking, such as hoping that my rugby team will win, but an absolute certainty that certain things will happen. Believers can thus look forward to the day of judgment and have a 100% certainty of complete acquittal. This certainty does not, of course, lie in yourself or your own achievements but in God, because if you believe in Jesus Christ then you already have full acquittal. The Holy Spirit therefore confirms this truth for you.

However, a believer is not only a future-person but also an action-person, because your faith turns into deeds through love. No, it is not faith and deeds that save you, or as many people believe that faith comes first and then deeds. This is one single action!

Good deeds are a direct, automatic result of faith.

In verse 9 Paul uses the example of leaven to illustrate how the preaching of the false teachers has soured their whole being. However, the same is true of how faith affects your humanity. Just as a little leaven leavens the inedible dough so that you can bake a fragrant bread with it, so the leaven of faith soaks into your life so that you spread a pleasant flavour and taste in a practical way. Faith gives you total freedom, but at the same time it makes you useful for the Kingdom. However, you no longer do your good works because you are forced to, but because you have an intense desire to do so out of gratitude.

Prayer:

Thank You for setting me free, Lord. Please inspire me that I may live out that freedom to the fullest.

## **A Way of Life**

### **Galatians 5: 13-15**

The reports were in the newspapers: Reverend and Elder get into a fight! In detail, it was described how the two tackled and beat each other, because the one would allegedly have been courting the other's wife. The dirty laundry was on display for the whole world to see. The unpleasant story makes it's turn in the church council, the presbytery, the synod and the court! An ugly spectacle!

Years ago I worked with a "most holy" man who preached to me all day long about everything in my life that was so terribly wrong. He was a highly esteemed priest in his church. One day I heard that he had just cheated on his wife and moved in with another woman, openly and shamelessly. When I asked him about it he just shrugged and went on to preach to me. "Sin is in the flesh," he told me, "but I live in the Spirit!" I could not understand that explanation at all!

Over the past few chapters, Paul has continued to harp on freedom - freedom from the law, acquittal from sin, and freedom from all the flourishes of the church. In short: you do not have to diligently obey the law in the hope that God will acquit you!

Paul, however, realized very well that people could misunderstand this thought completely, just like that priest who messed up so badly with his wife. If you are free from the law, as Paul said repeatedly, then you can live as you wish, as long as you only believe in Jesus. Paul warns, "Do not abuse your freedom as an excuse to sin!"

All people are subject to their sinful nature. And yes, that includes me and you too! The great danger is that you can allow your sinful nature to play havoc with you with the Christian freedom you have gained in Jesus. It is of the utmost importance to know that freedom means two things. Indeed, it means that you are free so that you do not have to do certain slavish things. But at the same time you are indeed free to do other things.

“But serve one another in love,” Paul explains so poignantly in verse 5. Christian freedom makes your fellow-man important to you! Such freedom is nurtured by love! Even more, love becomes your “boss,” and you become, as it were, a slave to love through your freedom, no matter how absurd it may sound! Once you understand this concept correctly, you can never say, “I do what I want!” You will rather use your Christian freedom responsibly by saying, “I do what God wills!”

Love is not always easy, especially when fellow believers sometimes act unreasonably and may make you bitterly angry. Paul writes in verse 15: “You bite and tear one another apart; take care that you do not later devour each other completely!” I was once a witness when an elder and a youth worker wanted to attack each other. The elder rented out the young people's facilities without the youth's knowledge, and the sparks flew. We held a meeting to defuse the situation, but it only added fuel to their fire. And then the two men



tackled each other! If we did not intervene that night, there would have been ugly consequences! The sad thing was that both men were deeply religious and took their faith seriously. Each one was convinced that he was doing the right thing, but there was a conflict of interest. One saw finances as a priority while the other had the interests of the young people at heart. So there was no communication!

Paul takes a passage from the Law in Leviticus 19:18 to emphasize the principle of love, something that has been deeply rooted in history. It says: "Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against thy neighbour; thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. I am the Lord!" Jesus quoted the same passage when the scribes tried to convince Him about the Law. Love is the pivot around which everything revolves. Although this quote comes from the Law, in your Christian freedom you should not see it as a law to follow diligently, but rather as a way of life, a guideline to live according to

God's will. In the first place, it is God's great love that has given us freedom, and that's why love must dominate your life. It is first and foremost love of God. Not a forced, fearful love, but a free heart-felt love. Secondly, it is also love for your fellow man. Jesus made it clear that there must be a special brotherly love, especially for your fellow-believers. But also towards non-believers and even your enemies, there must be a passion that urges you to do good rather than bad towards them.

As already mentioned, it is often extremely difficult, especially if you try to do it on your own. But for that, the Holy Spirit gives you the power when you need it most. Allow Him to do it!

Prayer:

Lord, please fill me with Your love, and remove the hatred and revenge from my heart.

## **Dirty Pig!**

### **Galatians 5: 16-25**

I run into my bedroom. It's half dusk because the curtains have been drawn. On my bed is a bundle of something, now not exactly unusual, because in a boy's room there is always a messy bundle of "something" on the bed. But this bundle is different, tidier and not the usual mess. And it snores! For a moment, I was completely baffled. Carefully I nudge it with my finger. It moves suddenly and with a hysterical, unearthly scream it jumps off my bed. I'm scared out of my wits! I stare after the beast that wanted to claim my bed as he slip-slides trying to get out the back door. A pig. A low, unpolished, dirty, smelly pig! And in my bed! He must have sneaked in by the back door and then in his journey through the house he discovered a lovely soft place to lie on my bed. It was many years ago on Grandpa's farm near Waterval Boven.

These days, it's the in thing to keep a pig as a pet. Adorable little things, at least that's what they say! You have a choice between a skinny little pink or a chubby little black pig with such a flat face that looks like he was involved in a serious head-on collision and a pot-belly dragging on the ground. And intelligent, clean little animals, or so they claim!

But have you ever seen them in their natural state? I'm not talking about modern pig farms where they do not even know what mud is. In the old days, a pigsty was one big mud puddle. It was not created originally so by the farmer, but the pigs make it into one. It is ploughed and churned with their flat round snouts, so after the first rainstorm it is one big mud nest. And then the pigs frolic so that the mud splashes! And if there is no mud, they simply splash through their food bowls and churn it until the food is one big jig. As long as they can be dirty then it's heaven on earth!

Galatians 5 is the well-known part that deals with the fruit of the Spirit, and about which many sermons have been delivered. But as with every passage of the Bible, the true message is lost if you do not read it with the rest of the letter as background. So keep in mind what Paul is constantly trying to say: No man can be acquitted of guilt or sin by doing good deeds, but only by faith in Jesus. Second, if you believe in Jesus, you are spiritually free and that does not mean you have to follow long lists of do's and don't's. So be careful not to make Galatians 5 a list of rules we must follow to fix our relationship with God, but see it the other way around. Because our relationship with God has already been rectified, we must earnestly strive to use our freedom properly.

This is about how you live if you have been acquitted by Jesus. Through the Spirit of God (verse 16). A spiritual battle is raging within you. On the one hand you have your sinful nature with its natural instincts that rather do bad things than good. (This is now the dirty

farm pig frolicking in the mud of sin.) On the other hand, there is the Spirit of God that is in line with your sinful nature. It's almost like two battle lines ready for war. In practice, the believer is torn in two between the sinful nature and the Spirit. You feel like giving in to sin, but you also want to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you. You alone can make that choice, which is why Paul appeals: Make the right choice and let the Spirit guide you.

If you succumb to your sinful nature, ugly things like immorality, uncleanness, debauchery, drunkenness, extravagance, hatred, anger, envy, and many other disgusting things come to mind - just read Paul's list of sins in Gal. 5: 19-21.

However, if you live under the control of the Spirit, completely different things come to light in you. Paul names it the "fruit of the Spirit." Note: not fruit (plural) but fruit (singular), because all these things should be part of the life of a Spirit-controlled believer. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control" (verse 22). These are the things that should be the hallmark of a believer's life.

The practices of sinful nature consist of a number of unpleasant things that are usually sudden surges of your emotions and lusts. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is things that come forth quietly and calmly. The sinful practices stem from an obsession with oneself, such as self-interest and self-righteousness. The fruit of the Spirit, on the other hand, is a gift from God. Paul deliberately begins this list with "Love", because this must be the starting point and overriding factor in the Spirit-controlled life.

Prayer:

Spirit of God, please take full control of my life.

# **Carrying Each Other's Burdens**

## **Galatians 6: 1-10**

Paul often made a few loose remarks at the end of his letters. Now he does the same in the letter to the Galatians.

His remarks are very closely related to the previous section, about what one's life under the control of the Holy Spirit should look like. In the previous meditation we saw that it is dangerous to abuse your freedom in your relationship with your fellow-man and especially towards your fellow-believer. Paul is now, as it were, rubbing in his warnings with specific instructions on how to live out your love.

We must remember that we all still have that sinful nature in us and that anyone can stumble at some point. Usually, however, you are blind to your own mistakes, and self-criticism is out of the question. So it sometimes happens that I “catch” a fellow believer that he ends up in some heinous sin, possibly in something like Paul's list of sins of



Gal. 5:19 and 20. "Peter is drunk again!" one could shout, for example, and condemn the poor man to hell. You are most probably going to hang his sin on top of the big bell. "No," says Paul, "it is not the right way!" Let yourself rather be guided by the Holy Spirit on how to act towards Peter. In our previous devotion we read about what a great part love should play when we are controlled by the Holy Spirit. The idea then is to live out that love for Peter and correct him in a spirit of meekness.

On top of that, I have to remind myself that I am also human, and that it is so easy for me to end up in exactly the same situation. The devil is waiting for a suitable moment to seduce me, a time of weakness, where my relationship with God may not be so strong. So I may not judge, because the same judgment can strike me too!

Paul further says that we must be willing to bear one another's burdens. Which burdens? The issues that make life difficult for your fellow believer. It could be illness,

unemployment, financial problems and the like or maybe emotional problems, like someone who had to sacrifice a loved one who died. Be a shoulder to cry on for someone who is going through a time of sadness. Be willing to listen and thus lighten that person's burden. In this way you carry out the law. Which law? Love!

Furthermore, Paul asks that we do critical self-examination. I do not think that maybe I am more important than I really am. Is what I do really good and commendable? If I compare my life with other people's lives, then I'm making a big mistake. Actually, I have to compare my life with what God expects of me in my life: How many points am I going to get?

If I may take an example from my own life: these daily devotions are a huge success. They are read daily by thousands of people around the world. Various congregations use them in various ways. Reason to brag? Reason to think I'm better than others? Not at all! If I start getting stuck up over these daily

devotions, then I might as well stop writing! On my own, I am not able to write a single piece of the day. It is grace alone, and much help from the Holy Spirit that makes them happen. Besides, it is God who has given me a writing talent, and if I do not use it to His glory, I will abuse it. Indeed, I also have to account for what I do with my talents. The Lord gave me the talent to write. Am I using it? Am I hiding it under the proverbial measuring bucket? Or maybe I'm abusing it?

Then Paul asks his readers to support their spiritual leaders. Do not let anyone put all his time and energy into the work of the congregation without also helping him financially. I know there are congregations where the spiritual workers, youth workers, Pastors etc. receive no or very little compensation while the congregation lives in luxury. This is wrong!

At the end of this pericope, Paul says that we need to look very closely at our spiritual life. Do not fall into sin, for what you sow you will reap. If it is sin, you are reaping bad things.

The choices I make all have consequences. For example, when I gossip about someone, not only do I harm the other person, but I end up being branded a slanderer.

The idea is to rather do good to other people. Have the interests of others at heart. Be aware of your fellow-man's need and do something about it. Love should be the focal point of your life. Oh yes, of course your fellow-believers are going to get preference when you have to help somewhere, but also remember that there are other people in the world, unbelievers. Never forget about them. Jesus once said that you should love even your enemies. Love is not an emotion, but a practical exercise of your faith, and therefore you must also show mercy to unbelievers.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to do honest introspection and correct what is wrong in my life, and especially to be able to live out my love practically.

## **Greetings**

### **Galatians 6: 11-18**

Do you still write letters? No, maybe you're don't quite understand, I'm not talking about typing a letter on a computer to email or send away with Whatsapp. I am talking about a real, genuine letter that was written by hand, pasted in an envelope with a stamp on and thrown in the mailbox. It's totally out of fashion! If such a letter were to arrive in your mailbox today, you would frame it because it's a work of art!

Hard work, to write a letter by hand, because you may not make mistakes. If your hand slips, you have to re-write the whole thing! But such a letter is so personal! There's a piece of yourself in that letter. I still remember the days when I did military service, far from my Mosbolletjie. In the evening, in my tent, sitting flat on the ground, I poured out my whole heart in my letter I wrote to her. There was a piece of myself in each letter.

And in the mornings, as the mail jeep drove up from town, I stood waiting anxiously because I knew there would be a letter for me. In anticipation we all stood there. My name is called out, and my heart misses a beat. I carefully open my letter and read it over and over. Each letter was written by her own hand, so personal! To feel her so close to me, to be able to soak in the scent of her perfume clinging to the pages!

Ai toggie! (Sigh!)

Paul could not really write - probably due to problems with his eyes. But that did not stop him from writing his thoughts down. It was common practice to use a professional secretary to write your letters, someone who was usually trained in the art of writing beautifully. Paul then dictated his letter to the secretary and not only signing as is fashionable today, but writing the last few lines himself to show that the letter was genuine.

In the Galatians' letter conclusion, Paul does so again, and then he writes: "Just look at the big letters!" Was it to compare his writing with the neat handwriting of the secretary? Or maybe because he could not see well? A third reason sounds more logical to us: He wrote the last sentences in large letters to bring home the importance of the thoughts to the readers!

Normally, Paul concludes in his closing greetings to one or the other. In this letter, however, Paul is so upset about the things that were happening in Galatia that he dedicates the whole conclusion to a summary of the things he wrote to them. Those things are just as important to us today as they were to the Galatians. We can summarize it like this:

It is totally impossible to get acquittal of our guilt and sins based on our achievements - they are of no value!

The only way to gain acquittal is through faith in Jesus. Our best efforts are useless! Only

Jesus' great sacrifice on the cross can give us acquittal.

When we understand this truth, we come to the realization that arguing over all kinds of accomplishments is totally useless. The most important thing is that we believe in Jesus, and that we are made anew in Jesus.

If we believe in Jesus, we are part of the new people of God. In other words, we are the new, true Israel. You do not need to be a Jew to be a part of this nation. There is only one requirement: The belief that your old self died on the cross with Christ, and that it is no longer you who lives, but Christ who lives in you.

Paul did indeed walk a long and hard road before writing this letter. This road was littered with weeds and thorns and he bears the scars of it on his body. He endured much pain and hardship to bring this gospel message to the world, even at times facing death. Please read 2 Corinthians 11: 23-27, where he tells of everything he went through.



It makes your hair stand on end, that one man could go through so many hardships! And all because he firmly believed in what he preached. Is that not reason enough for you and me to pay attention to what he teaches us through the letter to the Galatians? So take it to heart!

Paul concludes with a blessing, as was his custom. In it he emphasizes once again God's grace. My prayer for you is that you will experience that grace every day, and that He will guide you so that you will never overlook the wonder of His great, great grace, or perhaps become so accustomed to it that you will no longer be amazed by it.

Prayer:

Lord, I pray this morning that Your grace will shine on everyone who reads this devotion!

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