

Faith. Faith in “Jesus Christ [who] was publicly portrayed as crucified.” Faith allowing us to receive the Spirit. Faith, that single distinguishing trait that identifies us as Abraham’s descendants—regardless of our biological bloodline. Nine times in this passage, Paul uses the word **faith—that basic trust that “God is for us, and shares his life with us,”**—as verification of good standing with God, of being in the right place in the story of salvation, contrasting faith with “the works of the law.”

The “works of the law” are those visible elements of religion that appear essential, especially for those who desire to live well in relation to God. Many people become captivated by the appearance of religion—the traditions, morals, customs, practices, service projects, statutes, cathedrals, artifacts, and exclusions. Yet in reality, these elements are but **shadows, darkened images that are the voids of the light that pours over the object that they hide behind.** Follow the shadow to its source, and you find something amazing, but living in the shadow of the divine is not the same thing as living with the divine.

For the Judaizing Christians, circumcision (and the adjoining customs and obligations summed up as “the works of the law”) is a powerful symbol of what life with God is like: it is physical (not existing solely in ideas or an ethereal state), living with God is intimate, it leaves a permanent mark, and it is a reminder that through obedience there is a cutting off to be made whole. It was a powerful, even “dazzling” symbol of life with God, one that both proved your loyalty and that you could never lose, but circumcision is a symbol and not the actual thing. **It’s a shadow if followed that would testify to the relationship with God to which it points, but it was not the relationship itself.** What the Galatians were doing in prioritizing the shadow was, “identifying a symbolic appearance with a real presence,”¹ making the shadow the object. A “foolish” mistake as Paul so bluntly points out.

The Galatians were guilty, as we too often are, of failing to think, failing to reason through their religion and practices and requirements of their religion, failing “to [make] connections between the visible and invisible [what they could see and what they knew to be active beyond what they could see], [failing to be] aware of proportions of importance, [failing to remain] in touch with [real] experience, [failing to continue to be] active in using common sense...[and failing to be] receptive to God’s plenitude.”²

Life with God, a free life, requires us to use our minds to think with rigorous reason so that we might understand the relationship of reality to appearances. Remember, we are gifted a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind ([2 Tim. 1:14](#)), because,

“Life is [complicated]. It increases in complexity [the higher the life form is, ascending in complication] from vegetable to animal to human. The highest form of life that we know is the free life. [However,] The appearances of such a life do not always correspond to the deepest realities. **There are many**

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 82.

² *Ibid.*, 92.

movements and actions that appear to be free but which are only imitations [shadows of freedom].

The ability to reason in relation to what is in our lives, to assemble all the evidence, visible and invisible, so that we can compare what is happening now with happened last year, [with what happened in history, and what happened on the cross], to hold what we experience with our senses in relation to what we receive by promise, to read Scripture accurately and our own hearts honestly is essential for living freely [and lightly]. It is the mind's task to do this complex work of holding these disparate [on the surface dissimilar] and contrasting elements of appearance and reality together and [discern] the created and redeemed order in and beneath them. [This is what the writer of Hebrew calls maturity, "the solid food," of faith ([Heb. 5:11-6:2](#))]

Persons who fail to think—that is, who fail to make rational connections between the visible and the invisible [what they can see and what they know is happening beyond what they can see], between what is right before our noses and what is sifted through the memories of generations—are bound to miss the point of many things and get mired in dead-end responses.”³

What we *do* as religious people, those visual elements that make up what most of us think about as religion, are not unimportant. Still, more-than-often, these shadows become the central, most critical facts of our faith. We know we are in good standing with God because we do ____ and have ____; pray the right prayers, read our bibles, have the correct theological system or tattoo, give to the poor, we were baptized, we walked the aisle, we take communion, we never miss a meeting, etc. We identify a symbolic appearance with a real presence.

Yet what we have seen throughout Paul's letter is that "The cross of [Jesus] is the central fact to which all other facts are subordinate. After [Jesus'] resurrection [the cross] too became a symbol, not unrelated to circumcision, but far surpassing the earlier symbol in power and significance. But [and here is the issue] the Galatians were treating the cross as an item of religious trivia [a wall decoration or artistic expression] and [treating] circumcision [i.e., the visual elements of religion] as a crisis issue.”⁴

The Judaizers argued that the Galatians, the Gentile-converts, needed something to verify their identity as children of God. Like many of us, the Galatians bought what was being sold. Who wouldn't want a verifying symbol of their fundamental identity? If you go through the process to attain this symbol, possess this symbol in or on your person, hold to it tightly in practice and belief, then you can know for sure, without doubt, with all certainty, that indeed you are one who is a part of the family of God. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? Don't we all want a mark that we can look to, a moment we can hold to, an artifact we can point to, to verify that we are saved, that we are really a Christian?

Well, such thinking is reasonable only if we fail to use our minds—when we are out of touch with what actually happened to, in, and for us at the cross. For example,

“How did you become a person? Was it by doing something significant so that one day your parents said, ‘Wonderful, you just spoke a complete sentence; you are now our son or daughter?’ Or did you first experience your own intelligence when a teacher said, ‘You passed the examination with flying

³ Ibid., 83.

⁴ Ibid., 87.

colors; that proves you have a mind'? Or how did you experience the fact that you are a body, a physical being? Was it when a physician said, 'You came through that surgery beautifully; I opened you up and can verify that you have blood and muscle and bone—you are a genuine body'? Or how did you experience being a Christian? Was it when a pastor or church leader examined your record of performance and said, 'Yes, I think that you qualify for God's love; here is a certificate that will admit you to heaven'?

No! You knew you were a child because you experienced love, presence, and provision. You knew you could think because you were thinking. You knew you were a body because you could touch and feel it. And, you knew you were a child of God because you experienced the presence of God, the Spirit, whether in your feelings, your mind, your body, or all the above through faith.

We are out of touch with reality when we need someone else or some thing—like circumcision? a baptismal certificate? a bumper sticker? a cross tattoo? a shelf full of bible studies? a record of good works?—to verify our existence. The sane [mature] person is in touch with relationships and feelings and thoughts, and accepts [the] experience [of these] as primary [as real and valid]. [For you and me,] **The primary experience is faith, the basic trust that God is for us and shares his life with us [as ones who are begun by his Spirit, as he supplies his Spirit, now we are alive in Christ].** This basic trust works itself through all our relationships and perceptions. If we forget that, we lose touch with what is basic to reality, become fragmented and at the mercy of isolated feelings or incidents or memories that never get lived coherently [becoming imprisoned by our constant searching for verification, for identity]. The gospel keeps us in touch with our personal experience by bringing us back to the act of faith [in Jesus publicly portrayed as crucified]."⁵ We are not live in the shadow; we—by thinking--follow the shadow to the object itself, God sacrificing, sharing his life for us.

The gospel begins by receiving. That's what Paul says in verse 2. We receive God's life, God's presence, his Spirit, not by accomplishing something, not by holding onto visual religious elements, not by "works of the law," but simply by "hearing with faith."

"God pours out his love for us on the cross. He mercifully provides access to forgiveness...We embark on this way of faith, trust that God is for us and shares his life with us. We are filled with hope. We live more intensely and more amply than ever before. [Do you remember the early intensity of young faith?!]

Now, having begun there, what is the next step? What is the next step after love? Cautious mistrust [of God]? That is silly [foolish]. What is the next step after faith? Anxious attempts to avoid anything that might displease God? That is silly [foolish]. What is the next step after grace? [Cleverly] bargaining with God so that we can manipulate him for our benefit? That is silly [foolish]. That is like saying, 'Having learned algebra, I will now go back to counting on my fingers.'"⁶

⁵ Adapted from Ibid., 89.

⁶ Ibid.

But don't we do this? Having received a higher education, having been brought into the depth of something complex—life with God—don't we often opt for a lower existence, one in which we fail to think because we don't want to, because algebra is more complicated than counting on my fingers? Yet, only when we remain rooted in the faith of the gospel,

“can we apply the great truths of love, forgiveness, and grace to everyday [roles and relationships]. When we hold firm to the gospel [‘living in the flesh by faith’] what we experience in relationship with God [here and sharing his life with us] we can continue to experience in our work and our play—[when we read the latest news on our phones, stream the latest episode of whatever show], when we plan the spending of our money and when we respond to the demands and needs of family [, friends, and neighbors.]”⁷

Why? Because God is the one who “supplies the Spirit and works the miracles among us,” as Paul says in verse 5, not, again “by the works of the law,” but by “hearing with faith.” The word “supplies” in the original language means something more than merely to provide; it carries with it an image of someone throwing a lavish, celebrative dance, and such a spectacular affair it is, that the guest experience (feel, taste, see, smell, embody) the plenitude [the complete abundance] of the host!

Not subordinating faith in the gospel—the cross of Christ that has become the symbol for us that God is here, God is for us, and God is sharing his life with us—for any another symbol, a visual element of religion, a token to verify our identity, is what it means to live by faith, to live rightly with God. Faith in God here, God sharing his life with us, has been the foundation of pure religion since the beginning of the gospel story, from Abraham to you. “From the beginning of Creation God has foreseen the sorrow our misused freedom might bring, and chosen, from the beginning and in that knowledge, to share with us the consequences of our own mistakes, that he might redeem us from them.”⁸ To live by such faith requires you to think, to use your mind, and let faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you (2:20) train you into mature ways of living freely and lightly with the God who calls you his own and supplies all that you need to remain and mature as his child.

The Galatians were guilty of not thinking, of making the shadow of circumcision the most crucial fact of their identity as God's children, substituting “works of the law” for life in the Spirit received by faith. **What shadows are we (you individually, and us as faith family) substituting for the real thing, God here, God on our side, God sharing his life with us?**

Let's pray.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in Jesus before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless [entirely accepted] before you. In love, you predestined us for adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of your will, to the praise of your glorious grace. Let us be ones who think well, who take the gift of sound mind given to us and live by faith in your loving, redeeming, transforming presence and purposes in every area of our

⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸ Malcolm Guite, *The Word in the Wilderness*, 150.

lives today and the week to come. Through Jesus Christ, who gave his life that we might know what life with you really is. Amen.

Communion

With your elements in hand—the symbols of Christ body broken upon the cross, Jesus' blood poured out upon the cross on our behalf—let me read again for us Galatians 3:1-14. As I read, hear by faith, what the Spirit in Paul's words supplies, to think with clarity about the life you have been given and continue to live with Jesus.

You crazy Christ Citians! Did someone give you a hallucinatory drug? *Something* crazy has happened, **for it is obvious that you no longer have the crucified Christ in clear focus in your lives.** He was certainly set before you clearly enough. Let me put this question to you: How did your new life begin? Was it by working your heads off to please God? Or was it by responding to God's pleasure working in you? Are you to continue this craziness? For only crazy people would think they could complete by their own efforts what was begun by God. If you weren't smart enough or strong enough to begin it, how in heaven's name do you suppose you could perfect it? Did you go through this whole painful learning process for nothing? It is not yet for nothing, but it certainly will be if you keep this up!

Answer this question: Does the God who lavishly provides you with his own presence, working things in your lives you could never do for yourselves, does he do these things because of your strenuous moral striving or because you let him do them in you? Don't these things happen among you just as they happened with Abraham who *believed* God, and that act of belief was turned into a life of righteousness?

Is it not obvious to you that it is persons who believe (*not* persons who are circumcised!) who are like Abraham? It was all laid out beforehand in Scripture that God would justify the Gentiles by faith. Scripture anticipated this in the gospel promise to Abraham, saying in the book of Genesis, 'All nations will be blessed in you.' So those now who live by faith are blessed along with Abraham who lived by faith—this is no new doctrine! And that means that **anyone who tries to live independently of God by his or her own efforts is doomed to failure.**

Scripture backs this up, saying in Deuteronomy: 'Utterly cursed is every person who fails to carry out every detail written in the book of the law.' The evident impossibility of carrying out such a moral program should make it plain that no one can sustain a relationship with God that way. **The person who lives in right relationship with God does it by letting God arrange it for her or him.** Doing things for God is the opposite of letting God do things for you. *Rule keeping does not naturally evolve into living by faith, but only perpetuates itself in more and more rule keeping,* a fact observed in the scripture, in Leviticus saying, 'He who does these things (namely, rule keeping) continues to live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the self-defeating, cursed life by absorbing it completely in himself.

Do you remember the scripture in Deuteronomy that says, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'? That is what happened when Jesus was nailed to the cross: he became a curse and at the same time dissolved the curse. And now, because of that, the air is cleared and we can see that Abraham's blessing is present and available for Gentiles [all the world] too. We are all able to receive God's life in and with us by believing, just the way Abraham received it.

By faith.

Let us receive by faith the blessing promised and fulfilled by the one who in love gave his life so that we might live well, rightly, forever. We do this in the name of Jesus.