

Yesterday, I was talking with my wife Denise about vacation bible school next week and I mentioned to her that I needed to go down to Wal Mart to look for a shower cap or swim cap or something like that so that I could play the role of Joseph. You see, the Egyptians shaved their heads, having an aversion to hair (maybe for practical reasons, like head lice, for instance). She told me, "Honey child, I hate to tell you, but you're already bald." Marriage is good like that, keeps you from taking yourself too seriously. Paul the apostle is not at all worried about what people might think about him, his entire focus is what pleases God.

Reading the book of Galatians, you see nothing resembling compromise. The tone is way different than Paul's other letters. Sometimes Galatians is referred to as Paul's angry letter. But that's a lousy disservice and for lack of a better word, dumb. Others call it the Christian declaration of independence. It's a fantastically layered masterpiece.

What made Paul so angry? The Galatians were a collection of churches that Paul had earlier established in the region of present-day Turkey. Shortly after Paul left, the churches were influenced by Judaizers, who insisted that Gentile converts abide by certain Old Testament rites, especially circumcision, in order to be made just in the eyes of God. They claimed that Paul was not an authentic apostle.

Paul responds by clearly establishing his authority. He goes on to say that by introducing these additional works-based requirements, they were presenting what Paul calls a perverted gospel. He gives a beautifully eloquent discourse that only by grace through faith is man justified, and only by faith can man live his life in the freedom of the Spirit. Galatians represents the core principle of our faith: salvation through grace and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not through our own fruitless striving.

At the end of chapter 2 (I'm reading from The Message), Paul says:

"Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily."

When I was a boy my dad owned a wonderfully carved double barrel shotgun made by L.C. Smith. It had one problem: Occasionally, for no apparent reason, it would shoot both barrels at once, which was no fun at all when it smashed against your shoulder. Well, Paul lets the Galatians have it with both barrels. Why so angry? He didn't care in the least what people thought about him, he only cared to live out the grace Jesus bought for us. But he loved his churches and was heartbroken to see his friends moving away from God. The last thing he wanted was for them to go through life burdened by the law.

Listen to Paul's words at the beginning of Chapter 3:

“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?”

In our culture, the word “foolish” doesn’t seem so severe, does it? When I was a kid and I had driven my dad beyond exasperation, he’d say, “Boy, you ain’t got a lick of sense!” Never failed to get my attention. You Galatians, you ain’t got a lick of sense.

Let’s take a look at today’s scripture, starting with verses 25 and 26: “now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

Before we go any further, we got to be clear what it means to be children of God. Many times I’ve heard Christians utter the phrase “We’re all children of God”. Well, no. Children of God refers to believers in Christ. Our salvation is a result of a faith that is given to us by God’s grace. Paul calls us Children of God because we receive an inheritance based upon Christ dying on the cross for us. Yes, God loves everyone. But, that doesn’t mean everyone is a child of God in the context of this scripture.

The second part of “children of God” that seems misunderstood is to suggest that an actual child (for instance a 10 year old girl) is exactly the same as a mature believer. Throughout his letters, Paul implores us over and over again the importance of mature beliefs that aren’t swayed by the latest fad. Mature believers hope for a humble and obedient understanding as the Spirit fills our minds as well as our hearts. A spirit-led understanding is crucial for instructing and protecting our kids.

Does Galatians even apply to us anymore? After all, I don’t feel burdened by the 613 laws in the Torah. Unfortunately, today, the message of Galatians is as relevant as it ever was. If Paul were to write a letter to us today, would he say, “You foolish Presbyterians”? Intellectually, I believe that plenty of us so-called mature Christians understand that our works do nothing for our salvation. In spite of that intellectual admission, we still struggle to live a life of freedom. What does “freedom in Christ mean”? It’s not just nice sounding words, but a way of life that releases us to live a wonderful life full of gratitude and joy.

“Freedom in Christ”: let me be honest with you. For me, this concept is very difficult to understand. The word “freedom” can mean just about anything to anyone you ask. I’m going to approach freedom through some stories that happened to me.

Let’s get the simple stuff out of the way. Freedom clearly doesn’t mean you get to

do whatever you want, even though we are no longer bound by the law. Paul goes to great lengths in several of his letters to make sure we understand that. In Galatians chapter 5, he lists many sinful behaviors that he calls desires of the flesh. Some of the items in the list are sins that everyone has done at one point or other in their life. For instance, who hasn't sinned with jealousy, anger, or quarrels? After the list, he says that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Be careful with too literal an understanding! Clearly we Christians are forgiven, and acceptance of that forgiveness is paramount to our freedom in Christ. The way to understand this is to continue with your reading to the next paragraph, which talks about fruits of the Spirit. The point is that we will be unsuccessful on our own to overcome these sins. It's all about a life walking in the Spirit, or as Habakkuk puts it: "The person who believes in God is set right by God – and that's the real life".

This leads me to the next part of freedom, which is a lightness which comes about when we no longer live a life of fear which often leads to sin. Back in the day, kids lived a freer life than kids today: many of us were free to roam as long as we got our chores done and made it back in time for dinner. But we were still reliant on our folks for our everyday existence. After we'd been on a couple of backpacking trips with my dad, my little brother and I and my best friend and his little brother cooked up this idea that we could do this on our own. I think I was twelve. How cool would it be if the four of us set off on our own backpack trip? How hard could it be? We felt like we knew how to find our way, set up camp, get water, and live on our own for 2 days and a night. You're probably thinking, oh-oh, here goes the run-away disaster scenario. Fortunately, we asked our parents.

With all the wisdom of young boys, we were savvy enough to pitch the idea to our dads first. I don't know if we actually expected them to agree to it. Amazingly, they thought it was a good idea. Looking back, I think it was an incredibly wise decision that they agreed. I don't think I ever told my dad how much I appreciated that. I still wonder how they convinced our moms. Maybe they all needed a break from us.

We lived in Socorro, New Mexico. About ten or fifteen miles out of town, heading west, there was a long, gradual hill called Sedillo Hill. The high school kids liked to see how fast they could go in their cars down the hill because it did not require raw horsepower so much as a good neutral gear. Our dads drove us to the top, and let us off right next to the highway. We could see our destination, the Magdalena Mountains to the south.

The plan was to cross the grassy plain to the mountains, then make camp at a popular picnic spot. Accompanying us was our Labrador retriever, Malcolm. Going across the plains was slower and further than it looked. We were getting pretty discouraged until we spotted a herd of antelope. Our dog spotted them also,

and it was off to the races.

I have never seen or heard of this since. Maybe the antelope knew we were harmless. They would run in circles and let Malcolm almost catch them, and then they would put on the gas. This went on for a good five or ten minutes until they wandered off, and Malcolm came dragging back to us with his tongue hanging out.

Backpacking is less about physical ability than it is about mental determination. The antelope were all we needed to pick us up, and it was enough to make it to the mountains. Problem was, we missed the goal. We hit the mountains at a place called South Canyon. We knew it wasn't right. For one thing, there was a paved road through our goal, Water Canyon, and this canyon had no road. No fooling us. At least we had the sense to follow the foothills to the west and make our destination.

Things were going good now. We were really tired, but we had finally made it. We had water, food, shelter, and wood. We set up camp and got a fire going. There's plenty more to tell you about this trip, but that's enough. What does this story have to do with freedom in Christ? Well, I think it's about fear and courage. So many wonderful things can happen when we put fear aside and live in the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that whatever happens, ultimately we're covered.

The next story about freedom has to do with not worrying about what other people think about you. Paul talks about this a lot. He just doesn't care about opinions; he wants to please God, not people. Looking back to my life as a teenager, I feel that I did not live as full a life as I could have, because I worried too much about the opinions of other kids. We all want to be loved and accepted and have true friends. But man, it can really be a burden at times. There came a time in my life when a switch went off. I felt this tremendous freedom and lightness from not worrying about what others might think about me. I think it's harder for kids today because of social media and cyber bullying. I encourage you to seek the quiet voice of Holy Spirit and know that you are loved unconditionally no matter what. As I've become older, I've realized that people actually think about you a lot less than you might think because we're much too busy worrying about ourselves.

I saw a sign a few years ago in a pecan orchard near Shalem Colony road north of town. The sign said "No nut picking". I don't know why but it just sounds funny to me. I guess it would never occur to me to stop and pick 75 cents worth of nuts. The sign didn't seem necessary, but I guess it was or the owners would not have put it up in the first place. The phrase became an anthem for my brother and I. Every time we see a sign or anything else that just seems superfluous and unnecessary and freedom-killing we turn to each other and say, "No nut picking." The same is true with freedom in Christ. At the end of the day, nothing much really matters but to love God and love your neighbor and you're good to go. From my own experience, I know it isn't as easy as it sounds, but there you have

it.

My last story is about Costa Rica. When I was in Costa Rica, I saw the phrase “pura vida” everywhere. Literally translated, it means “the pure life”. In Costa Rican culture, it refers to living a life of optimism and gratitude. Sounds like Holy Spirit freedom, doesn’t it?

I leave you with one last thought about Holy Spirit. How can we hear him when he speaks to us? I think it’s about being aware of his influence. Open your eyes, open your ears, and listen. And thank him constantly. Amen