



## **Week 1: Freedom from People Pleasing**

### **Read Galatians 1:1-12**

This lesson is about four things:

1. The background and overall themes of the letter
2. Our longing for human approval
3. The phrase “freedom from this present age”
4. The Biblical terms “slave” and “apostle.”

*“When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident...”*

I suspect that the readers of this study will recognize the words here, attributed to Thomas Jefferson, from the Declaration of Independence of the American colonies from the Crown of the British Empire. In many ways, Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a declaration of independence, independence from the oversight and authority of the apostles in Jerusalem, and independence from the religious laws of Judaism. The letter, much like the declaration, is laced with righteous anger, and seeks to lay out a case for Christian *freedom*. In this brief letter, we get a glimpse into the heart of the Apostle Paul and the tensions in the early church. We see modern versions of these conflicts in the Christian church today. More importantly, we see the same tensions playing out in our own hearts and lives as we seek to live the Christian life. This is why the letter to Galatians is so very important.

### **The background and basic themes of the letter**

Many scholars believe that the letter to the Galatians is the earliest letter of the New Testament. Remember that the gospels, which finally document the story and teachings of Jesus, were written between 70 and 90 AD. This letter is believed to be written around 50 AD, or perhaps as late as 55 AD,

and is one of the first three of Paul's letters, with first and second Thessalonians also viewed as early writings as well.

Galatia was an area of the Roman Empire that is now central and northeastern Turkey. In fact, the Turkish capital Ankara was the capital of one tribal region of Galatia. The region was inhabited by the descendants of Gallic invaders who came from France and Belgium in the third century BC. ("Galatia" comes from the Greek for Gallic.) When the term "Galatians" is used, it can mean an ethnic group, or it can mean people who live in the region of Galatia, or it can mean a much broader geographical region in which many ethnic Galatians lived. Actually, we just don't know exactly to whom this letter is addressed.

However, we do know that Paul made three missionary journeys to plant churches. The first journey, in approximately 47-50 AD, he traveled primarily to the region of Galatia, and there he planted four churches: Antioch of Pisidia (not to be confused with Antioch of Syria, which was Paul's home church and the origin of all his missionary journeys), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (see map). On his second and third missionary journeys, he went through this same area again, so he was very familiar with the people there. The churches Paul planted were comprised primarily of a small number of Jews. Soon, however, Gentile Greeks and other Galatians were attracted to the Spirit at work in those congregations, and Paul made it crystal clear that both Jews and Greeks were welcome in these churches. Here is the problem: apparently, some other Jewish Christians had come through Galatia and taught that yes, of course Greeks were welcome, but they had to convert to Judaism and be circumcised first. Additionally, they had to follow all the Jewish religious laws. The teaching of these Jewish Christians, sometimes called Judaizers, incensed Paul, and was the trigger for this epistle. This letter describes the doctrine of salvation (here described as liberation) by grace through faith, a basic underpinning of our Protestant faith.

In his letter to the Romans, a later letter, Paul explains his understanding of salvation by grace through faith in more detail. In this letter, his description is grittier, full of emotion, expressing his feelings of betrayal. He sees the teaching of these Jewish Christians as a personal attack on him, and he responds with equal vitriol. His ire is aimed at Jews and Gentiles who have chosen circumcision and religion over the freedom that is the gospel. Paul's argument contains a number of key elements:

- 1) He has been given a special revelation from God.
- 2) The apostles in Jerusalem and he have settled this issue in previous discussions.
- 3) Reaching the Gentiles is a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.
- 4) The Holy Spirit is what changes human beings, not the practice of religion. This was the experience of the Galatians, and they have somehow forgotten it.
- 5) The practice of religion "just to be safe" only binds you back into slavery to the law.
- 6) The law's purpose is to show us how much we need grace.
- 7) The Holy Spirit's work in us is demonstrated by how much we love one another.

We will explore these themes throughout these eight weeks. Unfortunately, they are not all laid out in single chapters, but are intertwined throughout the various chapters and parts of the epistle. I encourage you to read through all six chapters of Galatians more than once during this time, and you will see these themes popping up throughout your reading. Most importantly, I hope you will ask yourself some hard questions during this study:

- Do I live the Christian faith as a religion – a list of things to do and practice, hoops to jump through?
- Do I live my life trying to win the approval of others, or do I really seek to please only God?
- Do I experience the Holy Spirit at work in my life and my relationships, and see the fruit of the Spirit in the way I love others?

This study will be most significant for you if you keep your heart open to God’s work in your life, and be willing to address the questions openly and honestly.

## **Our struggle for human approval**

It is somehow built into us. I get up in the morning and put on my clothes. As I get dressed, I am unconsciously thinking about how others will view me today. Do I need to wear a tie? Will I be somewhere that is expected? I look at the events on my calendar. These are opportunities to love others and live out my mission, but are also the ways I seek to meet the expectations others have for me. Someone says good morning to me, and I respond with a hearty “good morning” in return. It is a ritual that recognizes we have a social contract with one another. Every single one of us (almost) seeks to please others, to win human approval. We were created to be social animals, to live in community with one another. There are some people who do not care at all about human approval. These people are called “sociopaths.”

In the first 12 verses, St. Paul makes three references that point to a claim that he is not seeking human approval. First, in verse 1, he claims he is “*an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father.*” He is representing no faction or other human institution, but rather God alone. Second, in verse 10, he says he is not trying to please people, or win human approval. He goes on to say that one can’t have it both ways - if your intention is to please people, then you are not serving Christ. Finally, in verse 12, he reiterates that he received his gospel not from humans but from Christ.

It is important to remember that at this time, Christianity was still a tiny group, quite distinct from the larger cultural experience of the Roman world. It was a tiny countercultural movement in the Jewish community, and the addition of Gentiles still left it a tiny countercultural movement in the broader community. The issue at this point was not whether this new community would conform to the standards of the Roman world at large. Both sides were in agreement on that issue. It was not to happen. The issue was what the nature of their distinction would be - would it be an outward practice of religion, or an inward transformation by the Spirit.

Surely, Paul is no sociopath. Of course he cares about human approval. The fact that he is working so hard to convince the Galatians that he is right indicates that winning them over is important to him. The vigor with which he cries out about their reversal of opinion indicates that it matters greatly to him what they think. Even his repeated claims that he has a divine commission seem to point to a desire that the Galatians understand and give credence to him and his argument. All of us have that desire to be accepted and approved by the social constructs of which we are a part.

A group of researchers in Berlin, Germany conducted a series of experiments on the how our opinions are influenced by others. They found that there were two significant factors that contribute to a change in opinions: 1) the expert effect, and 2) the majority effect. The “expert effect” is the impact of one individual who is highly confident in his or her opinion, and makes a passionate case for his or her cause. The “majority effect” is the influence of a large group of less confident individuals, all of whom agree with a particular opinion.<sup>1</sup> Both of these can have an impact on each of us, and none of us are immune to their effects. Paul is calling upon the “expert effect” here, and doing it with as much intensity as he can muster. He is aware that other so-called experts have swayed the opinion of the Galatians, and then the “majority effect” has kicked in, leading the whole subculture to begin to revert to religious legalism.

So how will we handle our desire for human approval? Will the approval or disapproval of the community dictate what we will believe or how we will behave? Or, have we developed a relationship with God through prayer and Bible study so that we have our own opinions, beliefs, values, and behaviors that are distinct from that of those around us? Are we so concerned with what the neighbors think that their opinions of us are the most significant motivating force for our own? This is, indeed, the first “bondage” we face: bondage to our desire to please others. Paul’s claim is that he is free from that bondage. Indeed, Paul’s direct experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus, as well as the evidence from his experience seeing the Holy Spirit work in the lives of Gentiles along the way of his missionary journeys, has led him to be assured that he has God’s approval and endorsement. Up against that of others, including the approval of the apostles, he is clear that he is a “slave” to Christ and not to public opinion.

So what about you and me? Four thoughts:

First, we can never be completely free from the influence of others on our thoughts and ideas, nor should we be. God uses the people in our lives as instruments to lead and guide us. Paul himself is claiming to be that instrument to guide the Galatians. If I feel I am well suited to be a pastor and teacher, and all those around me say “NOOOOOO,” then a healthy self-image pays attention to that feedback. If I feel I am called by God to be an opera singer, but my friends cover their ears when I belt out an aria, then I need to change my plan. If my opinions and understandings about what it means to be a Christian are dramatically different than the rest of the faith community, then perhaps I need to reconsider my own views.

Second, when we have a healthy sense of self and a certain confidence and assurance in our relationship with God, we are willing to open ourselves up to other opinions and other ideas and thoughts. We do not walk in fear that we will take a misstep, or that we will discover our former opinions and ways of life were wrong. These new opinions and thoughts help us to grow and become.

Third, conversely, if our views and opinions always seem to be aligned with those around us, or aligned with a particular group of people, party, or ideology, then perhaps that is a sign we aren’t thinking for ourselves, and our relationship to God isn’t strong enough to allow God to guide us. The Christian faith

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<sup>1</sup> Mehdi Moussaïd , Juliane E. Kämmer, Pantelis P. Analytis, Hansjörg Neth, “Social Influence and the Collective Dynamics of Opinion Formation,” <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0078433>, (November 5, 2013)

cuts against the grain of conventional wisdom. Jesus was dramatically counter-cultural, and said and taught things that led him to a cross.

Fourth, this is why the disciplines of our faith are so important. Prayer and Bible study are not equivalent to Christian faith - that would be a works-based religion. Instead, prayer and Bible study are a means to an end, and that end is a sense of connection to God in Christ that is close enough that we can trust him, rather than social pressures, to lead us through the challenges of life, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us as we make the important decisions about what to believe and how to behave.

## **Two interlocking freedoms**

Verses 2 and 3 are part of what is called the “salutation” of the letter. The form was standard for letters in Paul’s day. They began as a modern day business memo.

From: *Paul... and all the members of God’s family who are “with me.”*

To: *the churches of Galatia*

Regarding: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen*

Sometimes, the “grace and peace” part of the salutation is a simple affirmation of blessing. But in this case, Paul gets right down to business and begins to explain the gist of the letter. Some have called verse 4 the thesis sentence of the letter. We have been set free! But free from what?

**First, Jesus set us free from our sins.** This is the basic proposition of the Christian faith. Too often, we think of bondage and oppression as external forces that keep us down. Much of our bondage is bondage of the heart. We are oppressed by our own habits, attitudes, actions. The sin of racism oppresses the person who is marginalized because he or she is a part of a minority group, but the racist himself is also in bondage. Our greed and desire for more and more wealth has us captive. Our hatred for an enemy has its foot right on our neck, and we can’t seem to shake it. Our unwillingness to forgive a friend has us in a prison of anger, resentment, and victimization. Our separation from God has made us captives of death, and nothing we can do on our own will free us from its grip. Sometimes, we think that if we can just be religious enough or giving enough or kind enough or loving enough, we can free ourselves from the grip of sin. This is Paul’s fear... that in our striving to be good, we will miss out on the grace that can really set us free. We get the order wrong. We think that goodness will somehow earn us grace. That is not only not possible, but it would make it not grace at all. No, it works the other way around. It is grace that works to make us good. Goodness does not get us grace. We will talk more about this in coming lessons.

**Second, Jesus set us “free from this present age.”** This is less familiar to most of us as Christians. Sin is not only something inside us, but it lives as part of the culture and world of which we are a part. When Isaiah receives his call as a prophet, he has a moment of clarity about sin and his part in it. He says “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” (Isaiah 6:5) It isn’t just him, but it is the whole culture of which he is a part that is broken.

The word “age” in Galatians 1:4 is the Greek “aionos.” It is sometimes translated as “world.” It speaks of what is the authority and power that controls our actions and our lives. The theme runs throughout the New Testament, beginning with Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God.

- *for Demas, in love with this present world (or age), has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica (2 Timothy 4:10)*
- *Do not be conformed to the standards of this world (or age), but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. (Romans 12:2)*
- *He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Colossians 1:13)*

When Jesus tells us that we are part of the Kingdom of God, that the Kingdom of God is at hand, he is saying that we no longer must be under the power of the prevailing forces of the world in determining our thoughts, behavior, and attitudes. Instead, we are under the authority and power of Christ, who will control our thoughts and actions if we choose to submit.

There is a phrase that we use often in Christian circles. We say Christians are to be **in** the world but not **of** the world. This is based on a passage in John 17, in which Jesus prays for his disciples. *I do not ask that you take them out of the world (or age), but that you keep them from the evil one. (John 17:7)* But sometimes, this makes it seem that the end game is to be “other worldly,” or “not of this world.” Look more closely at a longer part of whole passage:

*<sup>14</sup>I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>15</sup>I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup>As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

Yes, of course disciples are to be free from the present age, free from control of the world. But that freedom is not the purpose. We are to be not of the world so that we can be sent into the world, to be a transformative force. We are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world... *in the world*. And we can't lose our saltiness or extinguish our light with the world's darkness... so we must remain not “of the world.” The movement is not away from the world, but rather right into the heart of it.

Let me share an example of being free from this present world, this present power, this present age. In 1998, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, two boys, ages 11 and 13, pulled the fire alarm at their school, and then as the students streamed out, shot and killed four students and a teacher, and wounded ten other students. Because of their ages, they could not be tried as adults, or imprisoned beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays. The public outcry was for them to be eligible for capital punishment. An eye for an eye. Justice must be done. This outcry was the way of the world, the power of the age, the conventional wisdom.

Contrast this with the 2006 murder of ten girls in an Amish school in Lancaster County Pennsylvania. The man who committed the murders brought with him restraints and sexual lubricant, in an apparent plan to sexually assault the children as well. He began to execute the girls and then took his own life when

he heard the police coming. How did the Amish react? They started a fund to help the widow and family of the man who committed the murders. “Columnist Rod Dreher writes: ‘yesterday on NBC News, I saw an Amish midwife who had helped birth several of the girls murdered by the killer say that they were planning to take food over to his family’s house. She said – and I paraphrase closely – ‘This is possible if you have Christ in your heart.’”<sup>2</sup> This is what it means to be delivered from this evil age. It is not that evil will not attack us. But Christ has set us free from its dominion over us.

## **Some “Sunday School Words” for better understanding**

Spend enough time in church or with Christians and you will run across some words that we don’t use frequently in our normal day-to-day conversation. However, these concepts are important for understanding Paul’s letter and the Christian faith. Each week, we will examine a few of these “Sunday school words” so that they may shed light on the context of the lesson.

### **Apostle:**

The word apostle carries multiple meanings, all having to do with one who is sent. In Greek, the word is *apostolos* meaning envoy, ambassador, or messenger commissioned to carry out the instructions of the commissioning agent. First, it can mean one of the twelve Apostles. This is a “capital A Apostle.” Second, it is often reserved for those who witnessed the resurrection of Jesus or were specifically commissioned for the ministry of the followers of Jesus. This is Paul’s claim, that he received a specific revelation and commissioning from the risen Christ himself on the road to Damascus, so that he has the same authority as do the twelve apostles who were with Jesus (after Judas’ death, they chose Matthias as the twelfth apostle. See Acts 1:26) Paul would see himself as a capital A Apostle in this sense as well, and the church has recognized him as “The Apostle Paul.” Third, the word with a small a is often applied to people who have the specific calling to plant and lead churches or ministries. This is what is referenced when the Bible says that some of us are “called to be apostles.” (Ephesians 4:11) Finally, the word apostle can mean anyone who has been sent. At St. Luke’s church, we talk about all of us understanding ourselves as apostles, those who have been sent by Christ to proclaim the good news and to be the good news. We are in the business of making not just disciples (followers) of Jesus, but apostles of Jesus, each of us sent into ministry. More about the word apostle:

- Appears seventy-nine times in the New Testament (ten in the Gospels; twenty-eight in Acts; thirty-eight in the Epistles; and three in Revelation). The vast majority of these occurrences are found in Luke-Acts (thirty-four) and in the Pauline epistles (thirty-four), and refer to those appointed by Christ for a special function in the church.
- Matthew and Mark identify the Twelve as apostles only once, and in each case, in the context of a missionary journey (Matt 10:2; Mark 6:30). Here the word designates function rather than status.

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<sup>2</sup>“ Grieving Amish raise money for killer's family,” <http://www.wnd.com/2006/10/38231/#HtUzA9kfyBcFlz5q.99> (10/4/2006) Alluded to in a column by Janice Riggie Huie in the United Methodist Reporter

- Luke, however, frequently and almost exclusively calls the Twelve "apostles" (Luke 6:13; Luke 9:10; Luke 17:5; Luke 22:14; Luke 24:10; Acts 1:26; Acts 2:43; Acts 4:35-37; Acts 5:2; Acts 5:12; Acts 5:18; Acts 8:1).
- Except for Luke 11:49 and Acts 14:14, Luke applies apostolos only to the Twelve. Because they had been called by Jesus, had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, and had witnessed his resurrection, they possessed the best possible knowledge of what Jesus had said and done.

### **Servant/ Slave:**

The Greek word *doulos* is translated alternately as slave or servant, sometimes in the same translation of the Bible, changed only by the context in which it is found. Can mean various things from hired worker, to someone who is property of another, to someone who is a faithful follower, to those who are a slave to their sins. As slavery was a part of life in the Roman world, it would not carry as much emotional charge for Paul's readers as it does for us today. In the Gospel of John, Jesus models being a slave to one another by washing the disciples feet, calling us to be like servants to one another regardless of position or life status. In Galatians alone, Paul uses the word slave in both positive and negative terms. In 1:10, Paul says he is a "slave to Christ." In that context, the word carries all the connotations – submission, ownership, service of others, humility, low station. Later, he admonishes the Galatians, "*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" (Galatians 5:1). Bob Dylan put it in clear terms, and set it to music: "You're gonna have to serve somebody... Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, But you're gonna have to serve somebody."

### **Conclusion**

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...*"  
I wonder what St. Paul might say to our declaration.

Perhaps that like felons, we gave up our right to freedom when we chose sin and the slavery to our selfish pursuit of happiness and human approval.

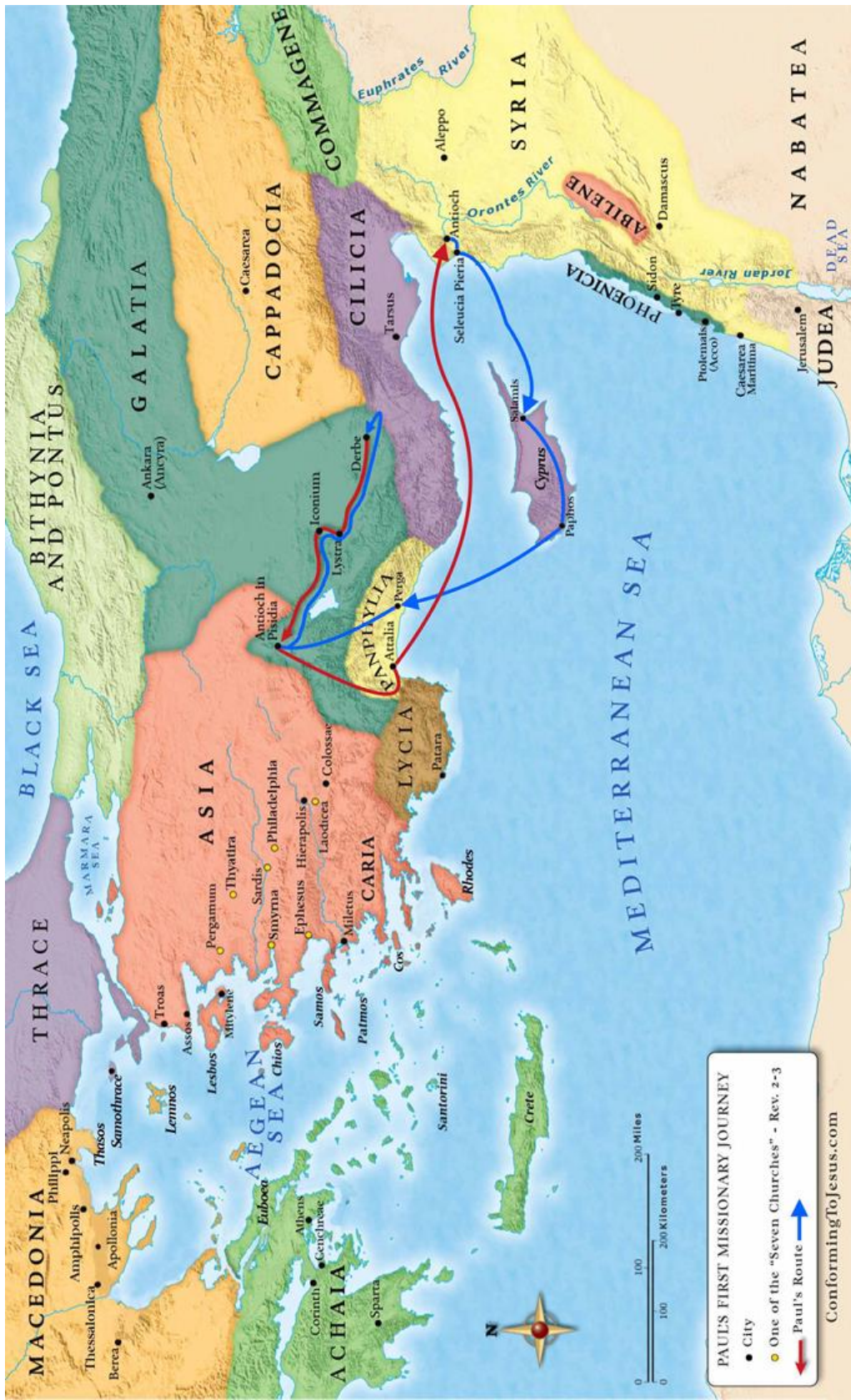
And that in Christ, we are given liberty from that sin so that we might serve him and the world into which we have been sent.

*So if the Son makes you free, you are free indeed! (John 8:36)*



## **Discussion and Reflection Questions:**

1. When do many scholars believe that Galatians was written? What significance for you, if any, is there to the thought that this letter preceded the gospel writings?
2. At the beginning of Paul's letter to the Galatians, upon who's authority does he claim his apostleship? What does apostle mean in this context?
3. How does Paul initially greet his readers? What appears to be his reason for writing to them?
4. Have you ever been tempted to rely on the "practice of religion" rather than the grace of God for salvation and transformation?
5. What are some of the ways the universal church today can struggle with relying too much on the "practice of religion?"
6. Has there been a time recently when you sought the approval of others rather than to please God?
7. What is the "expert" and "majority" effect? Which is Paul employing for his argument?
8. What are you in danger of being "in bondage" to? In regards to Paul's letter to the Galatians, in what way(s) can you choose freedom today?



[http://www.conformingtojesus.com/images/webpages/pauls\\_first\\_missionary\\_journey1.jpg](http://www.conformingtojesus.com/images/webpages/pauls_first_missionary_journey1.jpg)



## **Week 1: Freedom from People Pleasing Daily Readings**

### **Week 1: Day 1 - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8**

**Commentary:** One of the most difficult things to face in life is when people around you don't value or believe in the work that you are doing. Paul often times faced great opposition in his calling to spread the gospel message to the gentiles. But Paul trusted in his calling and worried not about people pleasing but about being faithful to the one who had called him. We are all tempted to say the type of things that we know other people want to hear or write the type of papers that we know will get us good marks from our professors. But at the end of the day our faith in the one who saves us is a reminder that we are free from the need to simply please others. There is one God in who we must answer to and that is Jesus Christ.

**Reflection Question:** Do you find yourself always trying to please others rather than being true to God's calling in your life? How might God be employing you to join in the miraculous work that He is doing this week?

### **Week 1: Day 2 - Romans 8:1-4**

**Commentary:** We may be tempted to define ourselves by our shortcomings, "I am a terrible father or a failure as a daughter." But because of who Jesus is and the work of His saving grace we are no longer known by those things. You are more than the failures and struggles of your life. You are a daughter or son of Christ set free from the bondage of sin in your life. Boast nothing but the cross and find freedom in the knowledge that God sees the finished work within you.

**Reflection Question:** Is there something or someone from your past that still affects who you are today? As God to grant you freedom from that identity today and then join in the work that He is doing in and through you.

## Week 1: Day 3 - Ephesians 2:1-5

**Commentary:** With all that is going on in our culture today it can be difficult to know which side of the fence you should be on a particular issue. Family, friends, and social media all argue for their team in a way that often times leaves us feeling like we don't fit well on either side of the argument. Leading us to either be inauthentic about our true feelings or to disengage the issue altogether. The freedom we have in Christ reminds us that when it comes to cultural issues we don't have to choose between truth and mercy, justice and grace. God is making all things new and will use us to be a part of that transformation. Find freedom in the truth that first and foremost you are on God's team and that title is more important than any other that people will try to assign to you.

**Reflection Question:** Is there an issue in our society that you struggle with how you feel about it? Be honest with your feelings, don't disengage, and ask God how he is calling you to address your feelings and the issue at hand.

## Week 1: Day 4 - John 8:30-40

**Commentary:** When Jesus says that "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin," He is including all of humanity without exception. Elsewhere in scripture Jesus tells his disciples that they are no longer slaves or servants but his friends and family. We do not move from being in bondage to our sin to being a slave to God, we now have freedom from our sin but also a permanent place in the presence of God as his children and friend. Where once sin forced and trapped us, the Holy Spirit beckons and woos us back to God.

**Reflection Question:** What sin in your past did you previously struggle with? What sin are you currently struggling with today? Ask God for freedom from your sins and imagine Jesus inviting you to sit at his banquet table.

## Week 1: Day 5 - Isaiah 61:1-2

**Commentary:** When Jesus was beginning his ministry that would change the world forever, he returned to the place where he was raised and got up in the synagogue to read from the scriptures. The text that he specifically choose to read was this scripture from the prophet Isaiah. By choosing to read this scroll Jesus was making a profound statement about what he had come here to do. The gospel message, or good news, of Jesus is that Christ has come to heal the sick and comfort those who are heartbroken. Those who are enslaved will be freed and those who previously were blind will find their sight again. As the church we are to spread this message both theologically and practically. Those who are enslaved or blinded by their sin will find freedom, those who are oppressed or marginalized will find justice and comfort in the Lord's favor.

**Reflection Question:** Which part of the good news of the gospel will you claim for yourself today? How might God be calling you to share or be the good news for someone else?