



## **Week 2: Freedom from the Past**

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

This lesson is about three things:

- 1) Telling our stories
- 2) Facing our past and claiming our call
- 3) The concepts of 'revelation' and 'glorify'

### **Telling our stories**

There is a story-telling organization in New York City called "The Moth." The Moth began because George Dawes Green wanted to recreate in New York the feeling of hot summer nights on his native St. Simon's Island, Georgia, where he and a small circle of friends would gather to tell spellbinding tales on his friend Wanda's back porch. He said the moths would come in through a torn place in the screen, drawn by the light. He and his friends were drawn to the story-telling just like those moths. Today, The Moth is in 27 different cities around the world, has outreach projects in high schools, justice projects for those incarcerated or affected by the justice system, a radio show, widely heard podcast, and much more. Indeed, people are drawn like moths to a good story.

Jesus understood this, which is why he often taught in parables. I suspect it is also the reason Paul tells his own story over and over, because it has more power than does pure theological teaching. The version in Galatians 1 is perhaps the earliest version of Paul telling his own story. We see him tell that same story other places in Scripture, too, later in his life. Luke is the author of the Book of Acts, much of which describes Paul's ministry. Remember, it is written 20 years after the letter to the Galatians. In Acts 9, Luke chronicles the description of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. In Acts 22:1-21, when Paul is arrested in Jerusalem, Paul tells his story to the people in Jerusalem, beginning with his past life, his conversion, and his ministry to the Gentiles. Then, in Acts 26, Paul is taken to Caesarea to meet the

Roman Governor Festus and the Jewish King Herod Agrippa, and he again tells the story of his past life and conversion and preaching.

Paul knows his story has power. As he concludes, we read of this interchange:

*Agrippa said to Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains.” (Acts 26:28-29)*

Stories had power for Paul, and they have power for us too. We find them in all sorts of contexts. They are now the most significant marketing tool. More than a mission statement, a story gives an organization an identity.

TOMS Shoes includes this on their website:

*TOMS humble beginnings happened unintentionally. While traveling in Argentina in 2006, Blake [Mycoskie] witnessed the hardships faced by children growing up without shoes. His solution to the problem was simple, yet revolutionary: to create a for-profit business that was sustainable and not reliant on donations. Blake's vision soon turned into the simple business idea that provided the powerful foundation for TOMS.*

Charity:Water tells the story of its genesis with this story from its founder:

*In 2004, I left the streets of New York City for the shores of West Africa. I'd made my living for years in the Big Apple promoting top nightclubs and fashion events, for the most part living selfishly and arrogantly. Desperately unhappy, I needed to change. Faced with spiritual bankruptcy, I wanted desperately to revive a lost Christian faith with action and asked the question: What would the opposite of my life look like?*  
(<https://www.charitywater.org/about/scott-harrison-story/>)

St. Luke's began our counseling center as “St. Luke's Center for Counseling and Life Enrichment.” Catchy, eh? Well it told what it was and what we did. About a year later, a generous donor family was willing to add their story to our ministry. Nick Finnegan was killed in an automobile accident the summer before he began college, so full of promise and possibility. *“During the next five years the Finnegans experienced much needed support from family, friends and counselors, which helped them grieve the loss of their son. Because of this support, the Finnegans found faith to move forward as a family and wanted to give similar support to others.”* Soon the Nick Finnegan Counseling Center was born. The mission and work was the same, but now it had a story, and the difference that made in the growth and impact of the center was incredible. Like many organizations, if you go to their website, you will see place to click: “Our Story.”

The same principle holds true for us as individuals. Each of us has a story to tell. That story helps to shape our identity, and telling the story ourselves is part of that formative process. What made Paul's story particularly powerful was that it was a story about himself, told by him directly. As a preacher, I know that the stories I tell about myself have additional punch, because they are first-hand and not

second-hand. They belong to me. Therefore, while some may doubt their veracity, they cannot doubt their authenticity. The hearer is receiving it right from the horse's mouth.

Just like Paul, I tell my story fairly often. I grew up in a nominally Christian home, with grandparents and extended family deeply steeped in the life of the church, and parents who were thinking people, part of academia, who asked lots of questions. At one point, in the 60's, we stopped going to church - cold turkey it seemed to a ten-year-old boy - for reasons I don't really know for sure. A few years later, in eighth grade, a number of events came down my pathway. My parents divorced. My sister came close to dying of a heroin overdose. I began association with the wrong people: people who were angry and sad and dark. The trajectory of my life was not so good. One day, in the school cafeteria, a young man asked me to come on a youth retreat and play my guitar. I was flattered. I went on the trip, and the youth group that I met there was so bright, so fun, so loving, so full of people with joy that I decided I wanted what these people had. I gave my life to Christ at that retreat.

Those young people became my best friends, and the church became the center of my adolescent life. I met a girlfriend there, and she eventually became my wife. Her father was a United Methodist pastor, and her family drew me in. In times that I am sad, still today, I can close my eyes and go back to that moment when God used a community of loving Christians to lift a burden off of my shoulders and remind me how much God loves and accepts me, and it feels fresh and real all over again.

The truth is, of course, that my story is far more complicated than that. There is much more to it, with many nuances. But sometimes, being able to give an elevator speech version of the story helps to crystallize what really matters. There is an old unsubstantiated story that the outer space author Arthur C. Clarke (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) and some other authors were having lunch with Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway bet everyone at the table ten dollars that he could write a perfect story in only six words. Everyone took the bet, and Hemingway scrawled on napkin these six words: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Everyone paid up.

Because I tell my story, and because it has seeped its way inside me both by living it AND by telling it, the narrative as it is told has shaped my identity, my sense of calling, my values. I still believe in the institutions of the church, just like my grandparents did. I still embrace those who question things, just like my parents. I still want people, more than anything, to know they are loved and accepted just as they are, both by God and by a community of faith, just like I was accepted and loved so many decades ago. And I still want people to feel the joy of having those burdens lifted off of their shoulders, just as I did and still do. These are the things that drive me, and this single story has formed by life and ministry more than anything else.

I believe Paul's story shaped his theology and his ongoing ministry in three significant ways:

- 1) He was a scholar, advanced in the teachings of the Jewish law. It was because of that deep involvement that he could clearly see the role of the Jewish law in setting a standard, and the inability of the Jewish law to transform people that they might reach that standard. When people who are fully committed to a faith abandon it, they are often its harshest critics. They have lived its shortcomings.

- 2) He persecuted the church, but now is proclaiming the faith (Galatians 1:13-15, 23-24). This is the story that shaped his proclamation that the Holy Spirit comes into the life of believers and changes us. Throughout Galatians, we hear about that transforming power of the Spirit.
- 3) He received a special, direct calling from God, giving him a ministry to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:11-12, 15-16a). This is the driving force behind his belief that salvation is by faith, not by any religious practices.

Paul's story was "before Jesus, after Jesus" story, as was mine. It describes his life before he had experienced the call of Christ, and then describes his life afterwards. But that isn't the only kind of story. For example, yours could be:

"always knew Jesus, drifted away, came home."

Or, "grew up thinking Jesus was A, B made me question that, and then discovered Jesus was C."

Or, "I had Jesus all along, and Jesus helped me survive XYZ."

Or, "I have seen Jesus in the hands of the people who have loved me throughout my life."

God has been working in your life one way or another. Open your eyes to see it, and you will find your story. And in finding your story, you will discover your identity all the more clearly.

### **Facing our past**

It is interesting how closely related the words "story" and "history" are. Part of each of our life narratives includes our past. Here is a scenario from my own life:

*I argue with the therapist: "Seriously? That happened 45 years ago! Yes, my parents divorced. Lots of people have parents who divorce. I have other stuff going on in my life right now that I cannot figure out how to deal with. Do we have to go over all of this before we can get down to business?"*

Apparently we do.

It seems that everything in each of our lives is built on something before that. Sure, you can watch one scene in the middle of a movie, and it can make some sense to you. But the whole time you are watching it, you are trying to figure out the context, understand what happened before this scene, and how this particular scene fits into the whole narrative.

It seems that life works the same way. One thing is built on the thing before that, and that thing is built on the one before that, and that one on the one before that, and so forth. And, just as it is when you are watching a good movie, a part of the joy of the movie is the struggle to understand just what was **really** going on in those early scenes, the reality of which is usually only revealed as the movie reaches its climax. So, yes, we have to take a look at our past: what has happened to us, the mistakes we have made, the places God showed up in the midst of those mistakes. Our past matters.

**But it doesn't have to hold us hostage!** We can face it, deal with it, embrace it as Paul does, put it into context, and use it for God's glory. God can set us free from its painful tentacles.

Let's explore some ways that we might learn from Paul about how to face our own past experiences.

**First, Paul fully acknowledges his negative past, and doesn't hide it.**

*You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. (Galatians 1:13-14)*

When we don't acknowledge our past, the mistakes we have made, the promises broken, the times we have tried and failed, or worse, the times we have failed to try, there are internal consequences that are destructive. There can be secrets lodged within us that we don't speak about, but still make themselves known in the way we live and breathe. King David writes (and sings) about what that is like in the Psalms:

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. – Psalm 32:3-4*

Sometimes, it is a particular failure that haunts us. Most believe Psalm 32 was written after David's sin of murdering Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, and taking her as his wife. He carried the weight of his horrible deed every day. I know a man who was responsible for the death of another boy when he was a small child. No matter what good things that man does in his life, he always views himself as "the guy who killed the boy." A woman was molested by her father, and as she grew older, she said nothing as her father molested her little sister. For 25 years, she was silent, and the inner turmoil led her to all sorts of negative behavior.

But for most of us, the failures are not so dramatic and more generalized. We had a difficult relationship with our parents. Or we neglected our children when they were at a vulnerable age. Or we weren't good wives or husbands. Or we drank too much. Or we said nothing when we should have spoken up, or we said something stupid that hurt a friendship. Or we grew up in great families, who worked to instill great values, but instead we lived selfish lives, pursuing our own agendas rather than God's agenda. We just fell short of what God intended us to be.

*When we keep silent, it feels like God's hand is heavy upon us.*

Sometimes, it isn't a mistake you made, but rather a tragedy, a trauma, and a circumstance in your past. Your mother died when you were small. You were the one neglected or abused. Your mom was mentally ill, or your father was an alcoholic. In his book, *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Buechner writes of his father's death when he was only ten years old.

*"We didn't talk about my father with each other, and we didn't talk about him outside the family either partly at least because suicide was looked on as something a little shabby and shameful in those days. Nice people weren't supposed to get mixed up with it.... We never talked about what had happened. We didn't trust the world with our secret, hardly even*

*trusted each other with it. Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel was the law we lived by, and woe to the one who broke it."* (pages 9-10)

Finally, sometimes it isn't the events themselves that we keep secret, but the impact those events have on us. We move forward claiming we are fine, just fine, not even admitting the pain to ourselves. The pain and hurt and betrayal and doubt are all absorbed into our spirits. But they aren't really gone. They just lie dormant, weeds cut off at the stem with roots still buried and active, showing up again when we expect it the least.

Yes, we carry secrets. And secrets, whether our fault or someone else's, can eat away at us. To face our past means to bring those out into the light of day. We can share them with close friends, or counselors, or even make them public and a visible part of our stories. Speaking them aloud takes courage, but it is a first step toward stripping those secrets of their power.

**Second, while Paul acknowledges his past openly, he does not let it define him.**

Too often, we stay trapped by our past. The man who has been unfaithful to his wife always sees himself as the adulterer. The woman who was caught stealing from her company to make ends meet always views herself as the thief.

King David continues his Psalm:

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Psalm 32:5*

Of course there are consequences to David's transgression. God declares that he cannot build the temple because he has blood on his hands—the murder of Uriah. But still, flawed as he is, God declares that David is "a man after God's own heart."

Similarly, Paul refuses to let his prior life persecuting the church be the defining characteristic of his life. Instead, Paul understands himself as a person with a special anointing of God's Spirit. Here is how Paul defines himself – he says God has "set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace." Indeed, he marks that transformation in his life with a change of name, from a Jewish name – Saul, to a Greek name – Paul. While he openly discusses his former life, his new identity in Christ is as a man called by God.

At one time, I began each Sunday worship service with a little memorized liturgy.

Pastor: Good morning saints!  
People: Good morning!  
Pastor: Good morning sinners!  
People: Good morning!

Indeed, both were true, and both were necessary. We acknowledge our sin, our brokenness, our shortcomings both past and present. These bring us humility and a realization that we are completely and totally dependent upon God's grace. But we refuse to live with that sinfulness as our primary identity. Instead, we recognize that we are saints, redeemed by God's grace, infused with and transformed by God's power.

**Third, Paul is both like and unlike his past, and that is part of Paul's strength.**

One of the things I find most interesting is that Paul brought to his work for God's kingdom the same set of skills and traits he had when he was persecuting the church. He speaks often about his transformation, and it is clear that his agenda has changed from his former days as Saul. And yet, it appears that God has taken the power and personality of the old Saul and redirected it in this transformed Paul. Paul speaks of his **zeal** in persecuting the church and in the traditions of his ancestors; we see the same zeal in his pursuit of his mission to the Gentiles. We hear of Saul's former life of **excellence**, advancing "*in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age.*" And the transformed Paul challenges his churches to have a faith that grows more and more, and he himself strives to "*press on toward the goal to win the prize of the high calling of Jesus Christ.*" (Philippians 3:14) Yes he is different, but he is also the same.

Transformation does not mean our whole personalities change. We were created by God, formed by a particular DNA, shaped by events and circumstances and people. The Holy Spirit does not simply cast all of that away and start completely over. Rather, God redeems the spiritual gifts and talents, the personality and skills of each of us, and uses them for the work of the kingdom.

Adrian has always been blunt. He has never been afraid to say what he thinks, and it has landed him in trouble many times. When his schoolteachers seemed to be less than prepared, he would tell them they should do their homework, too. When he married and had a family, his hypercriticism led to a divorce and a difficult and broken relationship with his children. At the office, he was not able to work successfully on teams, and found himself moved from business unit to business unit, never advancing to a real leadership position. Even at church, it was a problem. He was quick to call the sinner a sinner, and was viewed as judgmental and narrow-minded. One day, when he was at his lowest, he was convinced to attend a men's conference with his church. It wasn't a blinding light on the road to Damascus, but a small crack did open up in his heart. The Holy Spirit doesn't need a very big crack. He caught a glimpse of the damage he was doing with his criticism. Through counseling, prayer, and honest conversation with friends, Adrian began to address the broken relationships and his destructive behavior. He changed, and now he is not only moving forward at work, but has become an important part of the leadership at his church.

But God still needs prophets who will speak the truth, and God chose not to temper Adrian's spirit altogether. Instead, the Holy Spirit redirected Adrian's energy and added a spirit of love to his words. Now, he has become the one who asks the hard questions in the meeting, or calls attention to the elephant in the room that needs to be brought out into the open. He is the one who serves as the conscience of the church leadership, respectfully calling out a challenge when the leadership may be drifting from their

values or taking pragmatic shortcuts that are on the ethical borderline. He is different, yes, but in some ways just the same.

- The one who was the people pleaser, always trying to keep everybody happy even if it meant sacrificing truth and honesty, becomes the leader who is able to keep the whole community moving forward together toward a single goal. She is transformed by the Holy Spirit... different, and yet the same.
- The party animal who did whatever would make him popular with his peers now works to build real authentic community with his gift of hospitality. Transformed by the Spirit... different, and yet the same.
- The one who was driven by greed to compete and make money now is driven to make even more money, but her purpose is simply to provide as many resources as possible for her mission to provide basic health care to children in under-developed countries.

Facing our past means allowing the Spirit to use the raw materials of our old selves for God's agenda: construction of the kingdom.

#### **Fourth, the power of Paul's witness is the transformation God has brought into Paul's life.**

Paul has indeed been fruitful in his ministry. Churches planted. People coming to Christ. But it isn't simply that Paul is effective that makes his story so compelling. Rather, it is the change in Paul that is so compelling. Paul makes it clear that God is the actor, the one that has made all the change happen. Look how Galatians 1:15 begins: *"But when God..."*

Paul explains this in his letter to the Philippians: *So work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.* (Philippians 2:12) God works in. We work out. God, in God's mercy, has set us free from the chains of our past. God is the one who has done it. It is grace. Furthermore, God is using us for God's glory in the here and now. And God has a marvelous hope and future for us. But it is always God who is the one who is the subject, and we are the object. This message goes all the way back to the book of Genesis. The Biblical narrative begins *"In the beginning, God..."* It is all about what God does, rather than what we do.

In the first letter to Timothy, we hear again an abbreviated version of Paul's story, and it is his transformation, his freedom from his past, that is his witness:

*I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup>The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.* (I Timothy 1:12-16)

God is at work in you, in me, in our families, our friendships, our church, our city, our world. God is in the transforming business. We must always be on the lookout for that transformation, and then "work



out our salvation,” exercise it, put it to work for God’s glory. It is that transformation that is a powerful witness to the world.

### **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.

**Revelation:** Greek *apokalypsis*

In Galatians 1:12, Paul says he received the gospel, the good news he is sharing with the Galatians and others from a **revelation** of Jesus Christ. The word in Greek literally means an unveiling or uncovering; a revealing of something that was hidden. The image is the uncovering of a bride who was completely hidden by a veil before meeting her groom. It is used 18 times in the New Testament, mostly by Paul.

Paul uses the word to speak of three different kinds of revelation:

- One of Jesus to him on the road to Damascus (Gal. 1:12)
- One of Jesus to the entire world at his second coming (Rom. 8:19)
- One of Jesus to individual Christians with the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:26)

In Galatians, one of Paul’s primary concerns is reminding the church that his gospel, of salvation by grace through faith, came directly from Jesus. He did not receive the good news from Peter or James; rather, it was unveiled to him in a one-on-one communication with Jesus. It is for this reason that Paul even counts himself as an apostle: just as the original twelve had the gospel revealed to them by Jesus in the flesh, so did Paul have the gospel revealed to him by Jesus in the resurrected body on the road to Damascus.

Similarly, the last book of the Bible, the **Revelation to John** begins with “*The apokalypsis (revelation) of Jesus Christ...to John.*” It is to be seen as an unveiling of things to be, a peek behind the curtain at the conflict of spiritual forces.

Finally, we sometimes use the term “revelation” to refer to any of the ways that God is made known to us. We say that Jesus himself is the “revelation of God.” The Bible is revelation. The Holy Spirit guides revelation.

**Glorify:** Greek *doxazo*

Paul says in Galatians 1:24 that the churches “glorified God” because of him. To glorify means to bestow glory on. *Doxo* means splendor, a holy glow, and so *doxazo* means to put the holy glow on someone, or to wrap that person in light. When we glorify God, it can mean in very basic terms that we give God the credit for good things happening in and through us. But the word has more visual power when we understand it fully. It can mean that we wrap God in light, or it can mean that we make God shine, that we reflect God’s glow or light onto others. Sometimes, to stay away from Sunday School words, I like to

replace the phrase “glorify God” with the phrase “let them see God shine.” The term is used 62 times in the New Testament.

In the context of Galatians 1, Paul is saying that the churches in Judea glorified God when they had heard that a notorious church terrorist had become an accomplished church planter. Note that the people did not ascribe glory to Paul because of Paul’s actions but they ascribed glory to God because of what God did through Paul. Through Paul, God has been made brighter. Jesus says it this way: “*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 5:16)

## **Conclusion**

Your story matters. You are not who you used to be. You are not a captive of your former life. You are not a prisoner of your mistakes. You do not have to be held hostage by the traumas of your life. But they are a part of you. And in the midst of the ups and downs of your life, God has been at work in you, to change you, and has set you apart and called you for a purpose. That change and that calling is your story, and it is the power of your witness to the world.

Frederick Buechner talks the importance of this storytelling...

*“But I talk about my life anyway because if, on the one hand, hardly anything could be less important, on the other hand, hardly anything could be more important. My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours. Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself known to each of us most powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly, but also spiritually.”* (Telling Secrets, page 30)

You have a story to tell, about your past and your freedom from it, about your present and God’s work in the midst of it, and certainly about your future. For my sake, for our sakes, for your sake, and for God’s sake... tell it.

## **Discussion and Reflection Questions:**

1. Does Paul defend his ministry because of his doctrine or his experience of Christ?
2. Where is modern-day Galatia?
3. What is Paul's general mood as he's writing Galatians?
4. Why do you think it's important for Paul to remind the Galatians that he didn't consult any of the apostles before he began his ministry?
5. What did you think of Pastor Tom's story of his coming to faith to Jesus? Do you share elements of his story with yours?
6. Why is sharing our faith stories important for others and for ourselves?
7. Do you struggle to share your story of faith with others? Why?



## **Week 2: Freedom from the Past**

### **Daily Readings**

#### **Week 2: Day 1 - Colossians 2:8-15**

**Commentary:** This week we're talking about freedom from the past. Paul, or a later author writing in the tradition of Paul, is reminding the church in Colossae of the hard break from the past that is Christian baptism. The New Testament traces the lifespan of the Christian in three stages: pre-baptism, baptism, and post-baptism. The pre-baptism life is the life of the past, subject to the spontaneous whims of the flesh and the cruelties of the "rulers and the authorities" of this world. But for the baptized, the powers of the flesh that do not lead to Christ-like habits are buried with Christ, and the powers of the world that work against the Kingdom are also buried with Christ; that person is no longer under their dominion; Christ has set that person free. Paul is encouraging his friends to live like the post-baptism people they are.

**Reflection Question:** What is different about your life before and after your baptism? If you don't remember your baptism, what do you think your life would be like had your parents not made that decision?

#### **Week 2: Day 2 - John 8:3-11**

**Commentary:** This story, found only in the Gospel according to John, provides the final answer to the question: "Who gets to judge a person's past?" The answer is, "Jesus and Jesus alone, and Jesus forgives." Yes, the old law does command death by stoning for adulterers, both men and women (Leviticus 20:10; note that the male side of the equation is conspicuously absent). Had Jesus understood Leviticus to apply in this situation, word for word, then he might have joined the angry mob and hurled a stone at the woman cowering before him. But Jesus sees things differently: he sees Himself as the sole judge of what this woman has or has not done. No text gets to decide her fate; that job is given to Jesus, and Jesus just happens to be a forgiver of pasts. Such a claim is validated by Jesus Himself only a verse later when he

says, “I am the Light of the world” (8:12). It’s not that Leviticus has no use anymore; it’s that Leviticus must be read in a new Light.

**Reflection Question:** When have you seen forgiveness at its best? When have you seen forgiveness at its worst?

### **Week 2: Day 3 - Isaiah 43:14-21**

**Commentary:** The prophet Isaiah is writing to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. All these people know is Babylon. They were born there. It’s been seventy years since their parents or grandparents saw Jerusalem destroyed and were forced to leave their homeland. But there’s a new king now, and he has allowed the exiles to return home.

But the exiles are hesitant and afraid. Sure, they realize they are free now; they know a new and better future has been opened up for them, but when all you know is how things were, it’s hard to imagine how things could be. If you’ve spent your entire life in fear, it’s hard to know what courage is. If you’ve spent your entire life being abused, how can you know what love is? And so here is God comforting the exiles about to leave for home: “I am doing a new thing in your life. Let the past go. Don’t let the past keep you in the past. Let it go, and come with me.”

**Reflection Question:** What from your past do you need to let go, so you can follow God into a better future?

### **Week 2: Day 4 - Psalm 51:1-12**

**Commentary:** Confession is good for the soul.

Psalm 51 is traditionally read on Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent. Lent is the season of spiritual boot-camp leading up to Easter; the forty days of Lent are intended to exercise our soul muscles, getting us ready for yet another year of adventurous resurrection ministry. Confession is one of the spiritual exercises.

The writer of this psalm is traditionally understood to be King David after he realizes the gravity of his sin against Bathsheba. David puts his confession on paper; it’s more real that way. For many people, confession like this is too hard of a challenge. We don’t like to relive our wrongdoings, and even more we shy away from articulating them, giving them voice and words. Sin becomes more real when you speak of it. We can hide from our past as long as we don’t speak of it, but as soon as we give words to the past, we must deal with it.

But that is why confessions like Psalm 51 are good for us: we must deal with the dark sides of our past. If we don’t, we let the darkness win, and forfeit a bit of our freedom to the sin we will not face. But confession sets the soul free. Confession breaks the chains the past has on the present, and makes the future easier to face.

**Reflection Question:** What do you need to confess right now in this app? All entries will be kept confidential.

## **Week 2: Day 5 - Exodus 20:1-4, 7-8, 12-17**

**Commentary:** God gives Moses the Ten Commandments in a one-on-one encounter at the top of Mt. Sinai. The rest of the camp of Israel (they are literally camping out in tents and will do so for forty more years in the wilderness) is waiting at the bottom of mountain. They see the top of the mountain cloaked in dark thunderclouds. They hear claps of thunder and the shrill of trumpets. But Moses hears the words of God, which he inscribes in stone tablets.

God intends the Ten Commandments to keep the Israelites from slipping back into slavery. They have recently escaped from slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh and his armies lie at the bottom of the Red Sea, so there is no danger of slavery there. But there is still, and will always be, the danger of slavery of the heart. There are some prisons you carry with you, and some prisons you make for yourself. Murder is a prison you make for yourself. Adultery is a prison you carry with you. Idol worship is a form of slavery to things that cannot give what only God can. Sabbath keeps us from being enslaved to our work. God is saying, 'If you follow these ten rules, then your past will stay in the past, and you will be slaves no more.'

There is always the danger of slipping back into the people we were but don't want to be anymore. But if we keep holy habits, if we obey the way Jesus lays out for us and put his teachings into practice, we will not slip backward and we will keep moving forward.

**Reflection Question:** What is a holy habit that you need to be making time for?