

Paul's Burden

We can safely say that Paul knew the Hebrew Scriptures. He didn't merely know their contents, as if they were just so much information. He understood exactly what God's intent was in those texts. And his burden was to make those texts, that is, God's intentions, a reality. What texts?

"Behold, here is my Servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations . . . he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth . . . This is what the Lord God says, 'I will make you to be a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness . . . new things I declare'" (Isaiah 42:1-9).

"And now the Lord says . . . 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Isaiah 49:5-6).

"The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10).

"And I . . . am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory . . . they will proclaim my glory among the nations" (Isaiah 66:18-20).

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people . . . and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:28ff).

"In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths. . . "' (Micah 4:1,2).

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation . . . He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea" (Zechariah 9:9,10).

"The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day, there will be one Lord, and his name the only name. . . Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 14:9,16).

"My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun . . . my name will be great among the nations,' says the Lord Almighty" (Malachi 1:11).

There are many other such texts. These will suffice. Although God had chosen the people of Israel to be His own, it was always His desire that all the people on earth, creatures whom God loved, would know Him and be blessed. Although Israelites missed that truth in their contempt for the pagan Gentile peoples, the prophets got it and Paul got it from the prophets. I'll go further and suggest that Paul understood that he was to be like Jonah, albeit an obedient one, and take the knowledge of the Lord to Israel's hated Gentile enemies, in the expectation that they would repent and be saved from the wrath of God at the coming terrible Day of the Lord. Paul wanted to see God's love for the Gentile people realized, and that by faith in Israel's Messiah-King.

But there's more. As I understand soteriology in the O.T. era, Israelites believed God, believed His word, believed the truths He revealed and His promises, and then responded with love, trust, fear, commitment, and obedience. The Law was given to instruct believing Israelites in how to live righteously as well as to identify as the elect people of God. (There was more to the Law, but I'll leave a comprehensive understanding of Law for another time.) But, although Gentile God-fearers, those who attended synagogue meetings, may have known some Torah, for the most part pagan Gentiles didn't have or know the Law. They didn't have the holy Scriptures. Those who responded to Paul's salvation message had only the knowledge of a Jewish Messiah who died a shameful and horrible death on a cross and rose from the dead with forgiveness of sins and eternal life on offer to all who believe in Him. Paul's burden therefore was that their character, their desires and thinking, their entire lives should be transformed. They were to be no longer saved pagans, but holy children of God. They had to be sanctified. That's why the letters to the churches.

In his letters, Paul responds to issues that erupted in the churches he planted or was responsible for. And Paul's letters overflow with the blessings of salvation. He teaches wonderful positional truths, which we

delight in. But Paul's great concern in these letters is deeper. It's the very transformation of the lives of his readers. Let's look, for example, at the Letter to the Galatians.

Paul opens with this: The will of God was that Christ gave Himself for our sins **"to rescue us from the present evil age"** (1:4). This means they were to be no longer participants in the wicked pagan world that they knew but to be, rather, separated from it. They were to participate instead in a new world, a new creation, the "new thing" that God was doing (Isaiah 42:9b and 43:19). This letter is going to deal with this "new thing" of God, the Messianic Kingdom; what it means to be *in Christ*.

God **"was pleased to reveal His Son"** in Paul (1:16a). And we can assume that Paul intends that we, imitating him, likewise reveal the Son. Astonishing! In this new era, God doesn't merely reveal Himself in His Word, but in persons, human creatures, who are so transformed that they are the reflection or image of the living and holy God Himself. We are the express image of the Son who dwells in us and thru us reveals Himself to others.

Paul alludes to **"the freedom we have in Christ Jesus"** (2:4). This isn't license to live as we please, but freedom from the grievous demands of the Law. The demands Paul refers to were necessary for Israelites in their unspiritual state, and not for believers who are in Christ. We are to live for God. The risen Christ lives in us. The life we now have is pursued "by faith" in Jesus (2:19-20), which is an altogether radically new way of living. We have received "the promise of the Spirit" (3:14b).

"The whole world is a prisoner of sin" (3:22) and so, it's only by believing in Jesus that we not only escape but are delivered into a new world of the Spirit, a new union with Christ, a new existence in a new kind of creation with a new identity as a son of God (4:1-7). The need for the Galatian readers was that Christ be formed in them (4:19). This means that the positional truth (their new identity) has to be converted into a reality, have real expression in their lives. They were to be transformed, that is, sanctified.

The Galatians were being persecuted (not merely misled) by Jewish false teachers claiming that Gentiles had to convert to Judaism—and probably to Pharisaic Judaism at that—in order to experience salvation. Paul is using this Letter to demolish that claim, for such a claimed path to salvation is false and absurd. But he's doing far more than that. He's exhorting his readers, indeed, Gentiles believing in Jesus everywhere, to experience the real salvation, which is life in the Spirit, **"faith [in Jesus] expressing itself thru love"** (5:6).

Paul acknowledges **"the offense of the cross"** (5:11b). To the natural (unregenerate) man, the cross represents the epitome of shame. Yet the eternal Son embraced that very shame as the ultimate expression of transcending love. Evangelicals today aren't offended by the cross when they're in church; but outside . . . I suspect that many find discussing the cross with others so awkward they'd rather avoid it. It means that the cross really still is as offensive as ever. It means that sin still controls our thinking, that the love of Christ doesn't really control us as it should, that we're not transformed as we should be.

Paul climaxes this letter with the last few paragraphs of Chapter 5. To pursue life gratifying the desires of the sin nature is deadly. In contrast, life, true life, is expressing the Spirit, which means bearing spiritual fruit. Thus: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5:22). The Spirit enables the transformed or sanctified person who is in Christ to desire to be this kind of person and to be this kind of person. There is a law that believers are to obey, the Law of Christ. In short, it's the law to love.

The two ways to live are deliberately starkly contrasted in Chapter 5 (i.e., the vice list vs the fruit of the Spirit). It's how we live that reveals what kind of person we are. Ontology always expresses itself truthfully in how we live. Of course, God knows our inner spiritual state (see Psalm 139!). I hear this too often from people who should know better: "It doesn't matter how I live. God knows my heart that I love Jesus. That's all that matters." Wrong! All of Scripture screams at us that how we live profoundly matters. This very letter by Paul is because how we live matters deeply. The imperatives in the letter, the argumentation, the exhortations, all these are here precisely because how we live matters. Almost all of the New Testament was written as an extended exhortation to live godly, because it's so exceedingly important. There's very little in the Synoptic Gospels or in the Letters about how to enter into salvation; it's almost all about sanctification of those who have entered into it. To be saved entails responsibilities, chief of which is to live as one fit to be in God's holy presence.

Paul concludes with a dire warning (6:7-10). There are two and only two ways of life: by gratifying the sinful nature, which leads to eternal death; or by the Spirit, and only by the Spirit can one have eternal life. **“A man reaps what he sows.”** Paul couldn’t be more compelling. The Galatian readers had believed in Jesus, but they must go on in the faith to spirituality, to mortification and sanctification, to separation from the world (being **“crucified with Christ”**). Or else.

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Can we get into Paul’s mind to understand his thinking? Let me try, although what I offer is, admittedly, conjectural. A crisis clearly occurred at Sinai (Exodus 19-24). The Exodus generation of Israelites refused to ascend the mount to meet with their God. They demanded a mediator so that they wouldn’t have to be in the presence of a terrifyingly holy God. And so in grace, God gave them Moses as their mediator for that generation’s duration, and the Scriptures (Torah) for subsequent generations. Torah was instruction how a people were to live in a way that was appropriate for having their God dwell among them. They were to know and love their God, and trust and obey Torah, and thus to be holy as He is holy, and righteous as He is righteous. But Scripture did more. By means of festivals, rituals, types and prophecies, it instructed Israel that a better existence was to come. They would be “saved” (justified) by their response of faith and love, and their response would be expressed by obedience to Torah. Torah was, in other words, primarily for their sanctification.

The Pharisees understood none of this. So Paul needed to counter their false understanding of Torah, their misunderstanding of justification, and that surfaces in Romans and Galatians. But this controversy is a separate issue! The greater issue that concerned Paul in Galatians and elsewhere was sanctification of the Gentile believers in Jesus, most of whom were crass pagans. The incarnation of the eternal Son, His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension changed *everything*. Believers were united to Jesus, His Spirit joined eternally to the spirit of the believer. The Spirit of Christ indwelt believers so that they were always in God’s presence; it was as if they were continually atop Mount Sinai *with God*. So believers in Jesus didn’t need Scripture as their mediator in the way that Israelites did. But they *did* need to be holy.

Now, the Spirit works with and thru Scripture. Do we get this? Scripture is holy, the product of the Holy Spirit. So Scripture serves to teach us righteousness, and the Spirit enables us to obey it and so to live it. In this way, we are sanctified. And we *must* be sanctified. Why? Because we live continually *coram deo*, that is, before the face of God. He dwells within us and we in Him. Union with Christ requires that we be sanctified.

Believers in Jesus are not free of law. To the contrary, they are under an even more demanding law, the Law of Christ. That’s the law to love. God’s kind of love, that is, a selfless, self-sacrificing kind of love. A love that gives of oneself, generously, regardless the risks or consequences. It’s love for God, and love for others, especially for other believers. Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels and the Apostolic Letters expound this kind of love. If we’re united to Jesus, we’ll express this love.

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The prophetic writings had revealed the will of God for the Gentile peoples of earth. They too were invited to enjoy being in the presence of Israel’s God and so to be eternally blessed. Paul grasped that, for that to be a reality, the Gentile peoples needed to believe in Jesus the Jewish Messiah-King as Savior and so, by the empowerment of the Spirit, to be transformed into holy people, those who were just like Jesus. And so fit to be with God.

I submit that Paul’s great over-arching vision for the Church, as I glean it from all his Epistles, is that followers of Jesus reveal the Creator God to the Gentile nations of the world by being themselves godly, that is, sanctified and serving. Why? So that all the elect from among those Gentile peoples believe in Jesus, abandon their paganism, and also become godly. In this way, God reveals that good defeats evil. God loves all His human creatures and desires that they all be blessed, but the blessing hinges upon exalting the eternal Son. The ultimate issue therefore is God’s glory.

Dear Reader: I hope and pray that you are not just another passive church attendee, another of the myriads of cultural Christians that make up most of America’s churches today. Be a participant in God’s great cosmic project instead. There’s no greater privilege anywhere on offer.