



*"... reaching forth unto those things which are before ...  
toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus "*  
(Philippians 3:13-14)

## WALKING IN A STRAIGHT PATH

*(Studies in the epistle to the Galatians)*

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# 1. REVELATION

MANY think that this letter to the Galatians was Paul's earliest contribution to the New Testament. Like all of his writings, this is not a treatise but a missive with a direct, personal message. It was written to meet an actual situation of need, written not to provide material for theologians but to show men that straight path of the gospel from which their feet were straying. Its writer remembered all too vividly how Peter, Barnabas and many others almost forsook that path (2:14); he realised the danger that the Galatians were in (5:7); and he wrote, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in order that the whole 'Israel of God' might be rightly guided in their Christian walk (6:16). This is the guidance which I propose to seek, using various headings which roughly correspond with the six chapters. They are: Revelation, Resurrection, The Holy Spirit, Sonship, Liberty and Fellowship. Our first study, based on chapter one, concentrates on the matter of revelation.

It is impossible for me to give you revelation. Indeed it is impossible to describe how to get revelation, for revelation is a miracle from God. The first public interchange which the Lord Jesus had was with the learned doctors in the temple. He was only twelve years old at the time, but He surprised them all with His wisdom. They marvelled at His words and no doubt discussed the matter after He had returned to Nazareth; but none of them had any revelation of who He really was. Then the last public interchange which Jesus had before His death on the cross was with a man who had little education and no instruction in divine things but, as he himself hung on another cross, this man had a flash of revelation. He perceived what even the well-taught disciples could not see, that Christ was the divine king who might be willing to make a place for him in His eternal kingdom. Even in those excruciating last moments, the Lord must have thanked the Father for performing this miracle of revelation to one of those least likely to be able to receive it.

TO Saul of Tarsus had come a much greater revelation as to the person of Christ, as he was able to testify; and his intention in writing was that his readers should also have a similar inward illumination. He wrote, therefore, not about ideas but about the Lord Jesus, His person, His cross and His resurrection. And he prayed before he wrote, continued praying as he wrote, and went on praying as the Galatians received his letter; with the one objective that Christ should be revealed in them too (4:19). There was nothing formal about this praying, it involved spiritual birth-pangs. In other parts of the letter he addressed them as 'brothers' but in this connection he spoke to and prayed for them as his 'little children'. They were getting far too conceited in their imagined cleverness and he longed that they might abandon all this false doctrinal dexterity and become again those 'babes' to whom the Father loves to reveal His Son. Paul was on sure [87/88] ground when he prayed like this, for his prayer was in line with God's good pleasure. This was the explanation of his own inner revelation -- "It pleased God to reveal His Son in me" (1:15). It was as though God had watched this religious fanatic, trying to serve Him and yet pursuing a course completely contrary to the God whom he wanted to worship. He had longed to show him the truth -- not just true ideas but the living truth as it is in Jesus -- and would have been glad to have had the chance to enlighten him with the knowledge of His Son. Then God's moment came: the inward revelation became a reality. This brought great pleasure to the persecuted Church; it brought even more pleasure to the transformed Saul; but the greatest pleasure of all came to the Father Himself, who likes nothing better than to give men an inward revelation of His Son.

It is clear that revelation is much more than mere information. Saul the Pharisee possessed much information about Christianity without having any vital revelation of Christ. He knew many Scriptural facts, but they did not help him; in fact he fought them. We also may be enraged by divine truths, or we may perhaps be happy about them, but until something is done in our hearts by God's illuminating Spirit, it is just information and nothing more. When the initial enlightenment has occurred, though, then information can bring great benefit. Think of what happened to Saul when he was in Arabia. We have no certainty as to the exact time spent there, nor are we told how he was occupied, but the implication of his words is that he went there to be alone -- alone with God. What did he take with him? His Bible. Whether he took the actual parchments or not, he had an unrivalled wealth of Scriptural truth stored up in his Pharisee's mind and memory. When such knowledge was only in his head it did him more harm than good, but once the first miracle of revolutionary revelation had happened, then what was in his head could go down into his heart. He had a new Bible. He did not spend that valuable time in Arabia just going over and over his momentary experience of illumination but, having found the key to the Word of God, he was able to open it in the Lord's presence and find ever more unfolding light upon the Lord Jesus. Previously, if he had prayed at all, it would only have been for more understanding of the text, but now his constant petition must have been that the Spirit would unveil the Lord Jesus to his heart as well as to his mind. And if it pleased the Father to give Saul of Tarsus that first inward revelation, how very pleased He must have been to enlarge and deepen the revelation during the time spent in Arabia. Those must have been happy months. Saul, of course, would be thrilled as each day brought fresh light on the Word and showed him more of the Lord Jesus, but how happy God would be - and always is -- to be giving fuller revelation of His Son.

What happened after this? Paul tells us that he went up to Jerusalem. On the road to Damascus he had met Jesus personally; in Arabia he had made rich discoveries of Christ in the Old Testament; but he still hungered and thirsted for the truth and, as he himself later wrote, "the truth is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:21). It is striking that he used the plain name, Jesus, in this connection, so stressing the earthly manifestation of the Son of God. Truth is only to be found in Jesus. It was most important, therefore, that having identified Jesus as the Christ of the Old Testament, he must now learn New Testament facts about the coming in the flesh of this Christ. There is always a peril of our revelation being spoiled and distorted by our imagination. I sometimes meet Christians who claim that Christ is in them, and I have no reason to doubt this fact, but I must confess that they have ideas and procedures which do not seem to tally with what I read about Jesus in the Gospels. Surely we can only avoid our revelation being spoiled by imagination if we check everything by God's standard of truth, which is Jesus. Paul seemed to be of this opinion for he tells us: "Then after three years I went up Jerusalem ...". What for? "... to visit Cephas" (v.18 R.V.). The word here translated 'visit' is only used on this occasion in the New Testament and it is the Greek word from which we get our word 'history'. Fifteen days of history with Peter! Who better than he to give Saul the information he sought, for Peter had lived through those marvellous years of the history of the earthly ministry of Jesus and was able to describe them.

PAUL here states most emphatically that he did not get his revelation from Peter. Also that he did not get his commission as an apostle from Peter. We know that he did not get his education in the Old Testament from Peter. What did he get, then? Obviously, Peter's personal account of the things which Jesus had said and done, and how He had said and done them. Day after day, and into the night, the two men must [88/89] have gone over the historic details of those gospel years. To this new Saul, captivated

by the Lord Jesus, it must have been well worth going to Jerusalem for that. One other man he did meet, so he tells us, and that was James. This seems to confirm my point. We would know, of course, that James was an elder in Jerusalem; its president at the Church conference there; and the author of a letter to the dispersed tribes. What we would not have known, apart from this reference to him in the Galatian letter, is that this was the same James who was half-brother of the Lord. Who, then, better placed than he to give Saul more historical facts about the home at Nazareth where he had lived in the closest contact with the Jesus in whom all the truth is to be found? It is impossible to imagine the profound effect on the apostle Paul of those two weeks in Jerusalem. But we need not envy him. We have much more. We have the rest of our lives which can be spent in learning more of Jesus by means of all four Gospels. You may say that you thought that the Gospels were meant for the unconverted, or that they contain elementary truths which should be left behind as one passed on to the Epistles. This is a fairly common mistake, but mistake it is, for whenever we read in the Epistles something about the Lord, we need to turn back to the Gospels to understand what is being referred to. I read, for instance, that Christ liveth in me, and then I need to get fresh light on how He lived, to know what this involves. I am told that I am to walk even as He walked, to suffer as He suffered and to love as He loved; but only the Gospels can inform me as to the true significance of such a walk. Is it too much to say that those fifteen days in Jerusalem produced a further revolution in Saul's thinking? If they were days of revelation they must have done so, for real inward revelation always produces transformation. So if you do not want your life to be turned upside down, then do not read the Gospels. But by not doing so you will not only rob your own life of spiritual value but deprive God of His great pleasure, which is to reveal His Son in you.

NOW, perhaps, we should go back a little and speak of the preparation for revelation. There is no question about God's wish to reveal His Son: the question is not 'if' but 'when' -- "when it pleased God to reveal His Son in me". Two points are stressed in this verse. One is that "He called me by His grace", and the other is, "who separated me from my mother's womb". Before the revelation, there was the call, and before the call the separation. Paul could truthfully tell Agrippa that the Lord called him by name, and spoke to him in his own language (Acts 26:14). Thank God that He knows our name and He knows our language. Saul of Tarsus had been under divine scrutiny for thirty years or more. From his birth God had planned to reveal His Son in him, and had ordered and overruled all his life to this end. Later the apostle may well have wondered why God had waited so long. There must have been times when he asked: 'Oh Lord, why did You not show me this earlier? Look at the years I have wasted! Look at the follies I have committed! How I wish that I had been given this revelation earlier.' If Paul did not complain like this, you and I are often tempted to do so. There is a simple answer. It is that Saul was not ready. God had to do a preparatory work in him, and the main feature of that work of preparation was one of disillusionment. He had to be disillusioned about his own efforts to please God. He had also to be disillusioned with his imagined understanding of the Word of God. He faced disillusionment even over his own praying and, hardest of all, disillusionment with himself as a man. When he had come down to that level, then God could meet him and show him Christ. The same applies to us. Are you full of ideas about what is divine truth? Are you convinced of the rightness of your own ways and the value of the sacrifices you are making for Him? Then, my brother, you are not yet ready for revelation. Perhaps the work of preparation is going on. It may be that you have now reached the moment of complete disillusionment with all else and, most of all, with yourself. This seems to be a necessary prelude to revelation.

And since revelation must be a continual process, it may be that new experiences of self distrust have to keep recurring. I notice at least two such crises in the life of Paul himself. The first was at Corinth. Paul had always felt a burning desire to evangelise Jews. At Corinth he was disillusioned. At Corinth he had to shake his raiment in repudiation of the synagogue, and turn to the Gentiles. He had no hesitation in doing this but it must have been a keen disappointment to him, so much so that the Lord decided to appear afresh to him, to assure him that many believers were to be gathered in Corinth, though they would not be Jews. He told the downcast Paul: "I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:10). It may be [89/90] that the Lord was saying to His servant: 'Forget your own desires and ideas in your work for Me, and keep on with My ideas. This is how we will go on together and you need have no fear.' So for Paul the night of disappointment became a night of new revelation. The Lord had appeared to him. The second occasion was connected with his appearance before the Jerusalem council. He had the brilliant idea of defending himself by claiming to be a Pharisee and so precipitating discord among them. His strategem worked, for Pharisees and Sadducees were soon quarrelling so violently that the Romans had to remove Paul from the council chamber. But Paul later felt, as many of us have done at times, that his cleverness was not what God wanted at all. We get a bad reaction when we take things into our own hands in this way. It is a bitter experience to realise that in spite of all our blessings and spiritual growth we can be betrayed into some expression of our old nature which gets us off the straight path of the gospel. It may well be that Paul was passing through some such experience of self-disillusionment, for that night the Lord again made a special appearance to him. The Lord did not discuss Paul's failure. He seldom does. He waits until the consciousness of them has shocked us, and then He comes and says: 'Be of good cheer. We will keep together and finish the work which we set out to do' (Acts 23:11). It is when you are most disillusioned with yourself that you are ripe for a fuller revelation of God's Son, for the whole secret of the Christian life is 'Not I, but Christ'.

IN conclusion we note that revelation is meant to produce ministry -- "... to reveal his Son in me that I might preach him among the Gentiles ...". So revelation is given not that I may sit at home and meditate on it, not that I might write some poems about it, and not even that I may tell other Christians about it. No, it is given so that I may go out and meet people who have never received it, and convey something of Christ to them. God gives people the revelation of His Son, but He usually needs a human agent to make this revelation actual. The book of the Acts describes three men who illustrate this fact. The Ethiopian eunuch had the Scriptures, but he needed Philip to interpret them to him. Cornelius was visited by an angel, but the angel insisted that Peter must be called to communicate God's message of revelation. Saul of Tarsus met Jesus on the way to Damascus, but he had to wait for Ananias to complete the work begun by that vision. None of the three agents wanted to do the work. Peter and Ananias said so very emphatically, and we presume that Philip must have been most reluctant to leave Samaria and go off into the desert. None of them preached a sermon. Philip and Ananias just talked. It is true that Peter did start preaching, but he was soon interrupted by the intervention of the Spirit, and did not get very far in his sermon. So even if we do not feel very willing, and even if we have no preaching gifts, we are still needed to be both recipients and ministers of the revelation of God's Son.

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## 2. RESURRECTION

IN the spiritual life nothing is valid and nothing is lasting unless it is in the power of resurrection life. It was this kind of life to which Paul referred when he described how he now lived "in the flesh" (verse 20). Such life defies explanation. Indeed how can any man define life? I can neither describe it, nor can I produce it. I can, alas, easily contradict it, and bring death into my own spiritual experience or into that of the fellowship of my church. The reason for this can be simply stated. I have an old nature which is so inveterately corrupt that it always leads on to spiritual death. God's answer to this problem has not been to change that nature but to crucify [104/105] it, so making way for the new life which comes by faith in Christ, and which is therefore resurrection life.

This becomes quite clear when we think of our eternal future, for its blessedness will result from the fact that there will be no 'old man' there. Death will have delivered from its blighting influence. So death conquers death? It does indeed, so long as the first death is that of the Lord Jesus. We expect to live in the fullness of life in the future because of Christ's miraculous death-conquering death and life-giving resurrection. This chapter, however, is not occupied with the after-life in heaven but with the daily circumstances of God's people here on earth. Even so it finishes with Paul's claim to be enjoying a foretaste of heavenly experience right here and now. He had found relief and deliverance from self in the cross of Christ, and so was able to assert that he was proving the marvellous reality of Christ's risen life even as he lived here on earth. It is the cross which makes this possible.

Now it is a sad fact that we can believe in the cross of Christ and yet contradict its implications. This is precisely what was taking place at Antioch, as Paul's narrative reveals. In his book of the Acts Luke made no mention of this sad incident, and indeed it was not a pleasant story to recount. Paul, however, evidently felt constrained to put it on record in his earnest endeavour to warn the Galatians, who -- like Peter and the rest -- were themselves straying from the straight path of the gospel. He probably did not consult Peter about making the disclosure, but I feel confident that had he done so, Peter would have consented, for a spiritual man is always humble enough to realise that a frank account of his failures can often be of more practical help to people than the recitation of his successes.

ANTIOCH, as we know, was a miracle church, brought into being by God's sovereignty and characterised by an unusual degree of divine grace. One day, though, spiritual death threatened to corrupt the purity of its gospel testimony and so menaced its very existence as a true expression of Christ's body. Many failed to recognise the peril, for it needs real discernment to perceive spiritual blight when it first approaches. Paul had such discernment. In Jerusalem he had refused to permit legalism "no, not for an hour" (verse 5) for he knew how calamitous its effect would be on gospel truth. Now, as soon as he saw the church at Antioch dividing up into two separate groups, around separate tables, he denounced those responsible in the strongest terms. To him it spelled death. The clever gentlemen from Jerusalem would doubtless have given it a more attractive name; Peter, who had taken the initiative, would doubtless have had a different explanation; but the man of the Spirit had no hesitation in calling it by its right name. He actually employed the term 'deceit' to describe their behaviour. He did this because in moving away from Jesus they were moving away from the truth, since "the truth is in Jesus".

By this act of separation among God's people in Antioch there was a contradiction of the cross, and apparently the main responsibility for it devolved upon Peter. By so doing he brought in spiritual death, just as any of us will do every time we move away from the ground of the cross. He brought it in not by

bad sinfulness, and not simply by wrong doctrine, but by just reverting to what he was by nature -- by building again the things which he had destroyed (v.18).

We have no need to resort to guesses as to what it was in Peter's nature which had caused the trouble, for we are explicitly told that it was fear: "he drew back and separated himself, fearing ..." (v.12). We remember that at the time of the crucifixion he had been so overcome by fear that he had denied his Lord. He could not help doing so: this was his nature. There may well have been some explanation for this fear in his heredity or upbringing, but this I will leave to the psychologists. I only know that what you are, you are, and Peter seems to have been constitutionally a fearful man. Of course he shouted loudly at times. Fearful people often do. He waved his sword and talked in rather aggressive ways, but this is common enough in the case of the fearful. At this point some will want to interject that Peter was completely changed at his conversion, and may well assert that there never was a more remarkable case of transformation than that of Peter. All his fear seemed to have gone. He became a bold and courageous witness to Christ. All this is true, but it does not mean that Peter's 'old man' had been changed, but only that he was delivered from himself by the cross of Christ. The essential type, with its physical and psychological characteristics remained, just as a rock remains when the waters [105/106] rise and cover it. In his case the waters were the new life of Christ, but at this juncture in Antioch it seems that the level of that water was temporarily lowered, revealing that the rock had not melted but was still there. Our natural life is like the rock: it will persist as long as we are here in this body. If the life which we now live in the flesh is to be in accord with the will of God, it can only be so as our faith maintains the divine fact of our crucifixion with Christ.

NOW this was not an unknown doctrine nor an unexperienced reality in Peter's case, but it appears that at Antioch something happened which made him take his eyes off the Lord. We do not know exactly what it was, though we are told that he was afraid of the visitors from Jerusalem. But what was he afraid of? Was it of losing his position, for after all it had been generally acknowledged that he had the ministry to the circumcision (v.7). He and Paul had shaken hands on this very matter and, although their agreement had given recognition to Paul, it had also confirmed the status of Peter. Perhaps Peter feared for his position. If so he may have been the first but he was certainly not the last. How many assemblies are divided and weakened because in them there are men who are afraid of losing their responsible position. And women too! This concern for one's own place is a very deep thing in the human heart, natural enough, but disastrous to the spiritual life of any church. Peter may have been rather offended by the procedure of some of the Gentile Galatians. It is never difficult to discover faults in others when you take your eyes off the Lord. We do not need to speculate on details, for we know that the main cause of the trouble was Peter's old nature. The cross was no longer setting that aside and so he reverted to his Jewish instincts.

This had two results. The first I have already mentioned, namely that Peter -- the openhearted Peter -- became involved in "dissimulation", or hypocrisy. He may not have realised this, but Paul could see it very plainly. The other result was that he influenced others to do the same. A man acting in the flesh can often do this, and the greater the prominence of the man, the more powerful is the influence. Peter therefore became a man who was not only allowing spiritual death to invade his own life but was spreading its deadly effect upon others. You may think that I am being hard on Peter, but I simply follow the reasoning of Paul, who certainly must have seemed hard at the time. Notice, though, that if he

started speaking to Peter personally he soon passed over from the 'thou' to the 'we' (v.15). Frankness made him speak in this way to Peter, but common honesty made him admit that we are all the same. And we are! My nature may not be the same as Peter's, but whatever it is it will always introduce death into the realm of spiritual things unless it is countered by the cross.

THE other main character in this story is Barnabas. Clearly it was an even greater shock to Paul that Barnabas should get himself involved in this departure from the straight path of the gospel, for he writes: "*even* Barnabas". Now Barnabas was certainly not a fearful man. He was not afraid of anybody. He was not afraid of the Twelve, for it was he who took Paul to them. Later on he showed that he was not afraid of Paul himself, and ready to quarrel with him. Clearly, then, he had not the same nature as Peter, and yet he was just as much an offender and no less a factor in the menace to the truth of the gospel. Can we perhaps get any hint as to how the old nature of Barnabas helped to bring in spiritual death? I think that we can in the words: "... even Barnabas was carried away with ..." (v.13). The operative word here seems to be 'with'. Barnabas was a nice man, sympathetic with everybody and easy in nature. Luke gives him the most unusual compliment of saying that he was "a good man". One might well say of him that he had such a good nature that it could not do harm, but it is not for us to say whether what we are by nature is nice or nasty, since we are told that the old man "... waxeth corrupt ..." (Ephesians 4:22) and must be "put away".

This Scripture reminds us that the old nature in man is really only one, just as the new nature is one. The New Testament does not talk about this matter in the plural, but always refers to the old man -- that is, the fallen nature which we all have. It may be Peter's old man -- he is fearful. It may be Barnabas' old man -- he is very agreeable. Or, of course, it may be Paul's old man, since he is the third character in this incident. We know what he was like by nature, determined even to the point of being aggressive. He himself says: "I advanced in the Jews' religion beyond many of my own age among my countrymen, [106/107] being more exceeding zealous ..." (1:14). How came it, then, that he so strongly resisted this Jewish legalism? And if he changed his viewpoint, how came it that he did not act in his old high handed aggressiveness?

It seems to me that if he had acted according to his own nature he could have done one of two things. He could have turned Peter and the others out, saying: 'We will have no two tables here. This is the table of the uncircumcision to whom I am the acknowledged apostle, so you can take your table somewhere else.' That would have been a dreadful tragedy, but it is the kind of thing which has often happened in our days. Or he could have walked out himself, which is what believers so often do. He did not need Antioch. God brought many other churches into being through his ministry. They thought the world of Paul in Thessalonica. Philippi would have received him with open arms if the church there had existed in those days. But again, what tragedy would have been represented by his walking out impatiently in this way, as so many others do walk out and then go around proclaiming why they could not stay in such a carnal community.

Paul did neither of these things, and he gave the explanation of why he did not by saying that his natural life had gone to the cross with Christ (v.20). Now at first sight his words may sound a little boastful, as though he were saying: '*I* was different, because *I* know what it is to be crucified with Christ', but it is certain that it was not in this spirit that the words were spoken or written. There was no 'ego' in his

statement, for the words actually read as though he had said: 'With Christ crucified (I)', the emphasis being on the first two words: 'With Christ'. It is impossible to reproduce this in English, but we can content ourselves with the knowledge that the only two occurrences of 'ego' are: "I died ..." (v.19) and "yet not I ..." (v.20). If therefore we ask about the natural life of Paul, the answer is that his 'ego' died and that he now lived on the basis of 'yet not ego'. Is not this what the Lord Jesus demanded, that those who were to be His disciples should say 'No' to their ego? "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). This is the secret of new life. A man is crucified with Christ and yet he is very much alive, for he tastes the reality of Christ's resurrection. It may well be that Paul needed to say no more, for Peter well knew the words of Christ and the blessed reality of union with Him through the cross.

NOT that Paul dared to say: 'We have been crucified with Christ', nor did he say: 'You ought to remember that you have been crucified with Christ'. As we saw in chapter 1, spiritual truths only have power when they come to us in terms of divine revelation. I cannot assure you that you have been crucified with Christ, any more than Paul could say the same to Peter and Barnabas, although theologically it was and is perfectly true. What is needed is more than information, it is revelation; and we may well believe that at this point the living truth came home with power to the hearts of Peter and Barnabas, for they, too, could say: "I have been crucified with Christ ... yet no longer I, but Christ ..." and this would resolve all the difficulties at Antioch -- or anywhere else for that matter.

Observe that Paul does not recall the outcome of his protest. This suggests the spiritual stature of the apostle. Had he not been a truly crucified man he could not have resisted recounting to the Galatians how Peter and the others had conceded that he was right and that they were wrong. Most of us are all too anxious to prove that we were right after all, and that the others were wrong and had to admit it. It is as though Paul's response to Peter, if he did make any apology, would have been to say: 'Dear Peter, we are all wrong. Only Christ is right.' This, surely, is why he passed so quickly from the 'thou' to the 'we' (verses 14 & 15). We are all of us sinners. None of us has any standing, apart from Christ. The old man in anyone of us is a terrible menace to the purposes and work of God. This is why we must always be glad and ready to accept the verdict of the cross, so that there can be a manifestation of the one new man in Christ. How can one man sit at two tables? And all believers are truly one man in Christ Jesus, as chapter 3:28 affirms.

How thorough had been the work of crucifixion in this former Pharisee! From his boyhood Saul of Tarsus had been taught to say a daily prayer which included the words: 'I thank Thee, O God, that Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman'. This makes all the more [107/108] wonderful his assertion that within the sphere of this new man which has emerged by way of the cross, there is no room for Jews, freemen or males, any more than for Gentiles, bondmen or females. Paul's new prayer was to thank God that the cross had put him right out of the picture, leaving the only significant factor in his life the glorious truth that Christ lived in him. God takes it for granted that Christians accept this verdict of the cross: "They that are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh ..." (5:24).

WE return to verse 20 of our chapter to remind ourselves that God requires faith from our side to make this matter operative. We cannot raise ourselves; but nor for that matter can we crucify ourselves. We do not need to. The work has been done for us. Call Paul a theologian if you like, but this was not so

much theology as effective testimony. To have been crucified with Christ, to receive resurrection life from Christ, this was a matter of vital faith to the apostle every day. Not every day was a day of crisis, but when the crisis came he was in faith communication with his Lord and so was able to foil a satanic attempt to divide and destroy the church in Antioch. For us, too, not every day is a day of crisis, but the crises will surely come, and they will make evident whether our apprehension of the cross is merely doctrinal or whether it is the secret of a triumphant spiritual life of resurrection power. When we get to the end of this letter we will discover that Paul had no regrets about this daily experience of union with Christ in His cross. On the contrary, he was able to say: 'I glory in the cross. It smites me every day. It wounds me again and again. I die daily. But hallelujah for the cross, since that is the secret of true life -- the wonderful resurrection life of the Lord Jesus.'

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### **3. SPIRITUALITY**

OUR consideration of chapter 3 will centre on the matter of spirituality. By this I do not mean what is often called spirituality, that is refinement or other-worldliness, nor merely the presence of the Spirit in a life, but rather what is expressed by Paul's own words to the Galatians: "If we live by the Spirit, by the Spirit let us also walk" (5:25). The Galatians had eternal life, so they lived by the Spirit, but they had been duped into departing from the upright path of the gospel and were not walking by the Spirit, so they were failing in this most important quality of life, spirituality.

Firstly, though, we must remark on the rather surprising fact that it is only in the third chapter of this letter that the Holy Spirit is so much as mentioned. Paul had written a great deal about himself and his own experiences, and he was a man of the Spirit if ever there was one. He had introduced into his narrative two other men, Peter and Barnabas, who had elsewhere been specifically described as "full of the Spirit". It may seem hardly credible that until now he had failed even to allude to the Holy Spirit. But why should it be? What would have been unpardonable would be if he had failed to make reference to the Lord Jesus. There was no fear of that, and so far he had spoken twenty times of Christ before he referred to the Holy Spirit. This suggests to us that the main emphasis of the spiritual man is Christ Himself. It is a feature of the Spirit's gracious presence that He does not draw attention to Himself but centres us on the Lord Jesus.

At this stage, however, Paul clearly felt impelled to call the attention of his readers to their resolute need of the Spirit's power and authority, so he set to work to disabuse

their minds of any idea that they could become spiritual by their own efforts. We will try to follow through his reasoning. In the last verse of chapter 2 we find what appear to have been his final words to Peter. The import of these seems to be that if you can do the will of God in your own strength, then it is a pity that Christ died. If any man can find a way by human efforts to reach man's true destiny, then it is a tragedy that the Lord Jesus shed His blood to make that way. We know what Peter would respond to that. In chapter 3 Paul began by saying essentially the same thing to the Galatians. Christ became a curse for us so that we might receive God's promise of blessing (v.14). Anybody who imagines that this blessing can be obtained other than by the free gift of the Spirit is really implying that it would have been all the same if Christ had not been crucified. The Galatians were 'foolish' but whether they were 'so foolish' as that, depended on the heed that they would give to this letter.

THE Galatians had been born of the Spirit. The same God who sent His Son to die for sinners had sent the Spirit of that Son into the hearts of believers, so that they could rightly claim God as their Father (4:6). So they had "begun in the Spirit" (v.3). We are not left to guess how this happened. When he first visited them, Paul had been enabled to preach the gospel so graphically and so effectively that it was as though they had actually seen Christ dying on the cross for them (v.1). Paul does not merely say that he explained to them the meaning of [10/11] the cross, but that they had had a personal and revolutionary encounter with the crucified Saviour as they listened to his preaching. Would to God that there were more preaching of the gospel like this in our day! It is not only the doctrine of the cross that men need but the Spirit's communication of the power of that cross through the preached word. On that occasion the Galatians were privileged to have such a messenger and such a message. They looked to Jesus; they opened their hearts to Him: and He came into them by the life-giving presence of His Spirit.

It is important to notice that Paul took it for granted that the Galatians had received the Holy Spirit (v.2). He never for one moment suggested that having received the Lord Jesus they should now receive the Spirit as a subsequent act. It is true that they were most unsatisfactory Christians, and that Paul had grave questions about them (4:20), but nowhere is there any indication that he doubted their indwelling by the Spirit. When they heard the gospel message, they received Christ. You become a Christian when Christ enters your heart. But how can He enter your heart when He is

at the Father's right hand in heaven? Surely only by the Holy Spirit. There is a sense in which the Spirit of Christ is Christ's other Self. He is, of course, a person, just as much as the Lord Jesus is a person. He is such a wonderful, divine person that He has not left the Father by coming to us. He lived in Jesus throughout the years of the earthly ministry, but He did not leave the Son at the ascension or at Pentecost. The Spirit is with the Father, He is with the Son, and He is with us if we have eternal life.

WE are not only told that the Spirit had given eternal life to the Galatians but also that He was actively working among them. It seems clear that signs and wonders had been witnessed among them, and that these were continuing (v.5), though how many of the Galatians were actually gifted in this way we do not know, for Paul's statement only mentions what was happening 'among' them. They were no strangers to the presence and powerful working of the Holy Spirit, and yet it seems that they were in danger of taking 'spiritual' things into their own hands, wrongly imagining that their own efforts and ideas would lead them along the road of God's will to their final goal. Spirituality, however, involves an ever-growing dependence on the Holy Spirit -- it demands not only life but walk, the walk of faith.

And faith is the key to this whole matter, as it is the key to the letter. That is why we find such emphasis being given to the word 'promise'. This is a lovely word, for it shows us God's desire to send His Spirit to be our guide and helper. We saw in chapter 1 that it brought pleasure to the heart of God to reveal His Son in Paul, and now we notice that He finds pleasure in giving us His Spirit. He does not say that if we study more, or pray more, or agonise enough, we will be rewarded by the Spirit's presence. No, the Holy Spirit is not a prize but a promise. The Jews new, of course, that Abraham was the man who had the promises, but in their case they had many erroneous ideas as to what those promises involved. To us the promises are all included in the one marvellous promise of the Spirit. So do let us throw off those tensions and disputations which are so often associated with the subject of the Spirit's fullness, and let us be filled with joyful expectation that God is well able to implement His promise to us in Christ. The condition, clearly, is faith on our part. You Galatians began by trusting Christ, you proved God's miraculous power by trusting Him; now get back on to the straight path of simple trust and you will move on towards spiritual maturity. You have been deceived into trusting men, trusting things, trusting theology, trusting yourselves. Trust Him! If you submit yourselves anew to the Scriptures you will be appalled to realise your own hopelessness, but

you will also find that you can trust God for the fullness of His provision in Christ (v.22). The Spirit has come not only to give us life and not only to bestow on us gifts but to make us heirs according to the promise (v.29).

SO we see that to walk in the straight path of the gospel we must learn to walk in the Spirit, to be led by Him. What is the truth about the Holy Spirit? Well, the truth is in Jesus (Ephesians 4:21), so perhaps we should turn back from this letter to the gospel story and focus our attention on the experiences of Jesus. He began His public life of walking in the will of God at Jordan. And it was then that in a visible way the Holy Spirit came upon Him. Luke tells us that this happened while He was praying. What was He praying for? Surely it was to be guided in the will of the Father, as seems evident by the fact that we are at once told how He was led of the Spirit into the wilderness. He had been [11/12] born of the Spirit; for thirty years He had lived by the Spirit; and now in a more definite way He was to be led by the Spirit, to walk in the Spirit. His prayer was answered. Even the observers were able to see the visible expression of the Holy Spirit coming from the Father to the Son, and John tells us in his Gospel that the Spirit not only came but stayed. The other Gospels tell us in what form He came -- it was "like a dove".

We are expected to take note of this dove-like appearance of the Spirit. What did it signify? Undoubtedly that there was something gentle about this descent of the Spirit. We remember that for the disciples the Spirit came with "a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" (Acts 2:2). Some people evidently need that kind of visitation, but it seems that the Lord Jesus was not one of them. To Him the Spirit came in unostentatious gentleness. But probably there were other reasons for this form which the Spirit adopted. Might it not be connected with the directness as well as the gentleness with which He proposed to guide the earthly steps of the Lord Jesus. Doves are members of the pigeon family, and homing pigeons are remarkably skilful at finding their way home without any guides or signs. Without outward indications or helps, they fly in a straight path, and in this are typical of the directness of the Spirit's movements. In Ezekiel's prophecies we are given a description of beings who provide a living expression of God's movements, and it is said that they had "straight feet" (Ezekiel 1:7), but they also had "straight wings". The only way to have straight feet for the path of God's will is also to have straight wings. That path is not marked out by external, legal guidelines and signposts but by the inward urge and government of the Holy Spirit. The living creatures in Ezekiel are

said to have gone straight forward. And the Lord Jesus always went straight forward, because the Spirit so led Him. His path did not appear straightforward to the Pharisees; it did not seem right to His own family; there were times when it did not seem sensible even to His disciples; but it led accurately and unerringly to the divine goal. Those who are led by the Spirit in God's straight path must be prepared for misunderstanding, sometimes even by those who are closest to them, but they can find comfort by looking off unto Jesus who has walked that path before them by the enablement of the dove-like Spirit.

How did the Spirit lead Christ? He led Him by the way of the cross. He was really leading Him to the glory, but the way to glory is always the way of the cross. This is why He was first led into the wilderness to meet with fierce temptations. We are told that there He suffered (Hebrews 2:18). It is always suffering to say No to self and Yes to the will of God. But we are also told that He emerged from those temptations full of the Holy Spirit's power. It is always like this. The Spirit leads us to an experience of the cross which is painful to our flesh but, if we accept it, the result is a new release of His power in our lives.

IF Peter had taken less notice of the Judaizers and kept his Lord in mind, he might not have made that dreadful mistake at Antioch. Seeing that Jesus spent two days in Samaria, it is most likely that He ate with Samaritans there. That whole story is a wonderful example of how Christ walked in the Spirit. The cause of His journey into Galilee was the fact that publicity minded people were drawing attention to the larger numbers coming to His baptisms than those who were going to John. We are not told that the Lord had any special revelation from heaven that He should leave Judea. He did not need it. Enough that the gentle Spirit should make Him sensitive about self-advertisement, for Him to come at once to such a decision. Again we are not told why "He must needs pass through Samaria" (John 4:4). Most Jewish travellers took the longer road on the eastern side of Jordan. Was this the result of some special guidance given to Him, or was it just because the man of the Spirit will not waste his own time (and God's) by unnecessary conformity to human conventions? In any case the two days which Jesus saved by taking the shorter route were well spent in His stay with the Samaritans. If there were a settled time for Him to arrive in Galilee, then He reached there on time, but He did so having used the days so much better than by taking the customary circuitous route. It was more costly. It involved tiredness and thirst. But we are never to expect that walking in the

Spirit will be the easy or comfortable way.

I have already suggested that Jesus may well have eaten with the Samaritans. He certainly ate with some most unlikely people, though whether the unrighteous or the self-righteous were the most repugnant to Him is left to our conjecture. He did not allow Himself to be governed by [12/13] personal likes or dislikes -- He walked in the Spirit. Peter, however, was unspiritual enough to recoil from eating with some of his own brothers and sisters in Christ. Thank God that he responded to Paul's challenge by putting this matter right. And he did it where we all get put right, that is at the cross. For it is a mark of the man who is being led by the Spirit that he is constantly coming back (and down) to the cross. Right through His earthly life our Lord had to keep saying 'No' to His own wishes and preferences in order to respond to the direct, though gentle, voice of the Spirit. In the end the Spirit did actually lead Him to the cross and there enabled Him to make His unique sacrifice (Hebrews 9:14).

SO it was that the Lord continued in the straight path of the will of the Father right to the final climax of spiritual maturity. This is God's goal for us all. The Corinthians and the Galatians needed to know -- as we do too -- that spirituality is more than witnessing striking operations of the Spirit or exercising His passing gifts; it means lasting conformity to the will of God in terms of character. This is the path, the straight path of the gospel. But how can we keep to it? It is a well-known fact that a human being cannot walk straight, but will go round in circles if left without landmarks to counter this natural tendency to veer away from the straight line. Well, we have landmarks to help us, for we have the perfect example of a Spirit-filled life in the Gospel description of our Saviour. But more -- much more -- than this, we have the same Spirit who led Him, who is able and willing to lead us. With the Word in our hands and the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we too may become spiritual people and make good progress in the straight path of the gospel.

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## **4. SONSHIP**

THE transition from chapter three to chapter four is a very smooth one, for sonship represents the objective of the Spirit's work in us. We are told that if we are Christ's then are we "heirs according to the promise" (3:29), and then we are given a clearer view of what this promised inheritance involves. It is here called: "the adoption of

sons" (4:5). This introduces a most important subject, but it would be a great pity if we allowed the matter of sonship to be treated merely as a Scriptural theme, and an even greater pity if we allowed it to become a point of controversy. For this is something very dear to the heart of God whose eternal purposes have been centred on making redeemed sinners into mature sons.

This wonderfully satisfying relationship has begun now, but for the full inheritance we must await the day of our public placing as sons, which is what the New Testament seems to mean by its use of the word 'adoption'. The actual time of such an adoption is decided by the Father (4:2), who doubtless finds much satisfaction from it. We must not be misled by the word to imagine that God has to admit into His family those who are not inherently members of it, but only given the standing of sons although they have not really been born of the Father. This is not the Scriptural idea at all. In our society there is something kind and attractive about an act of adoption whereby a couple take charge of a baby who is not really theirs, give it their name and treat it as their own. They presumably do this either because they have no child of their own or because they do not have enough children. This can never apply to God. He has plenty of children -- they are being born every day -- so He has no need to adopt other people's babies and call them His <sup>[30/31]</sup> own. That is not what the New Testament means by 'adoption'. By the cross and by the Holy Spirit God is constantly bringing to birth those who are truly His children, with every right to call Him Father, and these are they whom He has predestined unto adoption as sons.

The word 'adoption' is used five times in the New Testament. One of the references is to Israel, and we do not need to consider it here. Another concerns all of us who are "the faithful in Christ Jesus", and it informs us that God has "... foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Ephesian 1:5). So this was what God had in mind from the beginning. This is the particular emphasis of predestination. This is the end of the straight path of the gospel. It obviously represents a supremely important moment in the history of God's relationship with men. His Holy Spirit keeps our attention focused on this great fulfilment of God's purposes and promises: "For we through the Spirit by faith wait for the hope of righteousness" (5:5). Surely the hope of righteousness and the inheritance refer to the same event, for which we need the Spirit's aid if we are effectively to wait for it. It seems that the New Testament reserves its use of the word here translated 'wait' for the supreme occasion of the

coming of Christ. "For our citizenship is in heaven; from whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20) is a typical example. The reference in Galatians 5:5, however, speaks not only of the person of Christ as our hope, but also alludes to what we are to share with Him at His coming. This is the inheritance.

Surprisingly enough we are told that the creation is waiting for the same great occasion: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only so, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit the redemption of the body" (Romans 8:22-23). From all eternity God has longed to have sons, truly born of Him and able to share in His concerns and interests. When we were first Christians we did not realise this. We may not have realised it yet. Certainly the Galatians had no clear understanding of its significance. But God had it in mind from the beginning. That is why He chose us. And called us. And blesses us. The end which He has always had in view has been our adoption as sons. Through Christ -- the firstborn -- He has made possible the realisation of this longing of His Father heart. He, as well as we, eagerly awaits the day of possession of the inheritance. It is true that our inheritance may be enjoyed in varying degrees even now, but the full realisation of it must await the day of adoption.

THE fact that we have been told that we are all sons of God (3:26) must not obscure or negate the underlying warnings of this chapter. God's statements are meant for the appropriation of faith and not as dead truths. The Galatians were not allowed to take anything for granted in this matter of sonship. "Did ye suffer so many things in vain? if it be indeed in vain" (3:4). What does this signify if not that there was a possibility of some lack of fulfilment in their Christian life? Again, Paul voiced his fears concerning them by telling them: "I am afraid of you, lest by any means I have bestowed labour on you in vain" (4:11). Did he mean that he was afraid that they had never received eternal life? This is impossible, for he frequently addressed them as brothers, and by this he meant that they and he had the same heavenly Father, being born from above. Yet although they were his brothers he evidently feared that something might have been lacking in their growth towards maturity. He continued: "Yea, I could wish to be present with you now and to change my voice; for I am perplexed about you" (4:20). We have already remarked in our previous study that Paul had no doubts about the Galatians having received the Holy Spirit, yet here he seemed to have been worried and mystified about their lack of progress along the

straight path of the gospel. It is not quite clear as to what he meant about changing his voice. It may imply that he hated to speak harshly to them and longed to visit them and be reassured that this was no longer necessary. Or it may be that if he had been there he would have left them in no doubt that the matter was serious, that he would have felt it necessary to pass from those simple assurances of the certainties of the Christian life, which we all enjoy, and challenge them with the possibility that they were in danger of missing the way to God's full purpose in their salvation. He evidently feared that such straight speech would be unacceptable to self-complacent Christians. Already tension was building up [31/32] between him and the Galatians. "So then am I become your enemy because I tell you the truth?" (4:16). It is sad when Christians turn away from those parts of the Scriptures which do not accord with their own set way of thinking, and even sadder when they become hostile to God's messenger. Sometimes the truth is hard to receive, but you must remember that the truth is in Jesus. By all means reject anything which is contrary to Him, but do not treat with enmity the man who conveys to you the challenges of the gospel as well as its comforts. This straight path of the gospel is essentially a spiritual pathway and it has a spiritual destination, even the glory of God. This is something more than mere safety in heaven. Thank God that the Galatians were saved, and so are we if we are in Christ. But saved for what? For sonship. This includes our own happiness, but is especially concerned with the satisfaction of God. His Father heart is set on having those who are His heirs -- "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" -- and for this we are reminded: "if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him" (Romans 8:17). The only explanation of God's strange dealings with many of His faithful, aged servants is that right up to the end of their lives He is dealing with them in the light of future sonship.

NONE of us has yet arrived at spiritual maturity, but this is the destination to which God is seeking to bring us as He proceeds with His work of conforming us to that perfect Son of His. Unhappily there are some parents who have the sad experience of finding that their child will never mature into a full and healthy adult life. The deficient child will be called a son. He may be dearly loved. But he can never be claimed as one able to share family responsibility with his father, and can never give to that devoted father the response of love and understanding which would make him a true heir. In human life this is an unavoidable mishap. In spiritual life it need never happen. Spiritual maturity is never left to chance nor is it affected by any kind of circumstantial disadvantage. It is the responsibility of every son of God to allow

the Holy Spirit to lead him on to the divine destination, to walk in the Spirit and to walk by faith. This explains the apostle's reiterated appeal to the Galatians in the matter of faith. It is by faith that we wait for the hope, faith working through love being the one essential (5:5-6). Paul not only reasoned with the Galatians, he prayed for them; and his prayer was a father-like travail of heart concerning their inner spiritual needs.

For this whole matter of sonship is neither decided nor helped by anything outward. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love." Circumcision was the traditional outward sign of separation to God. Its equivalent in modern times are those outward traditional customs and procedures which seem so essential to the legalistically minded. To God they are virtually irrelevant, for they make no real contribution towards spiritual maturity. It is to be noted, though, that the mere discarding of them counts for nothing with God, since uncircumcision of itself is no sign of sonship. What does matter supremely is faith, the faith which springs from love and is expressed by love. In true Biblical fashion, Paul emphasised his point by repetition: "For neither is circumcision anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (6:15). Circumcision was what you belonged to, and moreover what you were proud of belonging to. 'That,' said the apostle, 'is of no value at all in this essentially spiritual matter of sonship.' Presumably uncircumcision meant taking pride in the fact that you did not belong to anything. Some of us may be surprised to hear that God is not greatly interested in that, either. The one thing important to Him is that the vital energy of eternal life shall be working in a man so that Christ may be formed in him. For such there can be none of those man-made divisions which so hinder spiritual progress. "I beseech you, brethren, be as I am, for I am as ye are" (4:12). God's people are not rivals in a race but fellow pilgrims on the pathway to the inheritance.

WE have already referred to the Spirit's activities in this area of sonship: "... ye received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). A similar mention of this Spirit is to be found in this chapter: "Because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (4:6). This requires further consideration, especially in the light of the fact that these are the only two occasions on which believers are spoken of as addressing our heavenly Father in this conjunction of two languages. The best [32/33] commentary on the Bible is always the Bible itself, so we turn to the only other occasion on which we find the

cry: "Abba, Father". It is conceivable that Mark was even present to hear the Saviour's agonised words in the garden of Gethsemane: "And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; remove this cup from me: howbeit not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36). Some suggest that the Lord Jesus had always prefaced His prayers with 'Abba, Father'. There is no evidence of this. In John 17 we find Him praying: "Holy Father" and "Righteous Father", but then that was a different kind of prayer. The garden prayer was a cry of agony, the agony of one who was finding it a most costly matter to be a worthy Son of such a Father. But because He was such a Son, this was how He prayed. He repeated the prayer three times -- "not what I will, but what thou wilt". If the prayer prompted by the Spirit of adoption is connected with such a use of the words: 'Abba, Father' then it commits the one who is praying to make a similar renunciation and submission. If the Galatians can pray that prayer, then all their deviations and failures, and all Paul's fears for their future, can be left behind, and they can continue to make good progress in the path to sonship. Those who have grace to pray that kind of prayer, and to keep on praying it, need have no concern about their arrival at the appointed destination of glory. This is the prayer of a true son. It is costly; but it is Christlike. Just as Paul told the Corinthians that no man can effectively call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit, so he might well have told the Galatians that no man can pray Abba, Father, except by the Holy Spirit. Thank God that he could tell them -- and us -- so positively that God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts so that we can pray it, and go on in the spirit of that prayer, even though the path leads us to the cross.

The chapter closes with an allegory which refers to Abraham's experience of the crucifixion of his own desires and will. For him, the repudiation of Ishmael was extremely painful (Genesis 21:11); he must have had a Gethsemane experience when he accepted the will of God in place of his own will. He who had prayed: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before thee" was made to recognise that this offspring of his own efforts was a menace to the realisation of God's spiritual purposes of sonship, and found his natural affections in conflict not only with Sarah but with God Himself. So he "rose up early in the morning" and did what God had told him to do. His example must be followed by all of us who are his spiritual seed. "What saith the Scripture?" It says that God's full purposes in sonship demand a complete repudiation of that which is according to the flesh.

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## 5. LIBERTY

WE continue straight on from our previous consideration of sonship, and are not surprised that Isaac is brought before us as an example of the true son. He was born of the free woman, and so he was free. Liberty, therefore, is the outstanding theme of chapter 5. We are reminded that we were "... called for freedom" (5:13) and told that "the Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all" (4:26). Furthermore we are urged to stand in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and to help us Isaac is presented as our example of what it means to be a free son.

Isaac was free. He had a half-brother, Ishmael, and those who looked on might well have judged that he was really the son who was free. Abraham, his father, never told him what he should do and what he must not do, but let him run wild. Before Ishmael's birth his mother had been told that he would be like a wild ass. This, however, was a false freedom, an empty freedom, as the so-called freedoms of this world always are. We look at the true son, Isaac, walking with his father to Mount Moriah, arriving there and building an altar, and then finding himself bound and placed on that altar. Is this what we call liberty? Well no, it is not what the world calls liberty, but it was in fact an expression of Isaac's true liberty, for his was the liberty of love. He had liberty to go with his father, liberty to submit to the father's good pleasure, even if it meant an altar. The natural mind would have called it a fight for freedom if he had struggled with his father, overpowered him, escaped from going on the altar or else climbed down off it and run away. And Isaac could quite well have done any of these things, for he was big and strong enough. But he was a son, and as such had the liberty of a son to be wholly committed to the father's wisdom and love. In a sense this was the climax of Isaac's life.

In Isaac's story we have an illustration of the Lord Jesus. He had liberty to stay in heaven. He had liberty to choose the best house in Jerusalem in which to be born. He had liberty not to die, or else to live first in a palace and walk from the palace to the cross. In this way He could have shed His blood for sinners, and indeed might have done it in a way which was calculated to appeal to men's idea of heroism. God is not looking for heroes: He is looking for [51/52] sons. And because the Lord Jesus was a Son He had liberty to go with His Father to the cross. The onlookers suggested that He should come down from the cross, but He was a Son, so He stayed there to complete the Father's will. So it was that when He was raised from the dead, the

Father proclaimed "Thou art My Son ...". And that was the great day of liberty for Him, and for all of us who trust in Him. So quite clearly, the world's ideas of liberty and the true liberty of the sons of God are two different things.

We read in John's Gospel of men who claimed to be Abraham's sons and who were very offended when the Lord Jesus offered them liberty because they claimed to be free already (8:33). They were not very truthful about this matter. Abraham's family had spent many years as slaves in Egypt. Abraham's descendants had been taken away as slaves to Babylon. Even as these men spoke they were in an occupied country under alien rule. So it is that men so easily deceive themselves, claiming to have liberty and yet living in manifest bondage. We notice that the apostle appealed to the Galatians not to use their liberty as an occasion for the flesh (5:31). I am not sure how this can be done. To me it sounds like the talk about using the gifts of the Spirit in the power of the flesh. I really cannot think how this is possible. Probably what the apostle really meant was that the Galatians should not wrongly imagine that theirs was the true liberty of the sons of God, but rather recognise it as a false, and fleshly, liberty. Which brings us to the great contradiction of false liberty, of those who claim to be free and imagine that they are free, when in fact they are still slaves. What are symptoms of false liberty?

### 1. A Wrong Attitude to God

Those who indulge in false liberty have a mistaken attitude towards the Lord Himself. May we return to the scene of the two meal tables at Antioch? Before Peter sat down at his table of the circumcised I feel sure that he offered thanks to God. And yet it is clear that this table made for a situation which was in direct opposition to the revealed will of God -- it was a grave mistake. It seems strange that people could sit down together at a table and offer God thanks, when in fact they were displeasing Him. Yet the Old Testament abounds in examples of those who used and quoted God's name although they were disobeying Him. King Saul, for instance, still continued to invoke God even in his worst days of rebellion against God's will. The old prophet who beguiled his 'brother' from Judah to disobey the Lord, even had the effrontery to quote God for what he said. Such use of the Lord's name in the pursuit of our own ways is all too common, but it is a wrong kind of liberty. Indeed, it can better be described as 'taking liberties', which is a very different thing.

The whole subject of legalism -- of trying to make God come our way instead of humbly accepting His way -- is aggravated by the fact that those concerned vainly imagine that theirs is the life of liberty, whereas everybody else can see how they are becoming "entangled again with the yoke of bondage". Then again, we take liberties with God when we glibly assert that God has told us to do something, while to everybody else it is evident that He did no such thing. It is a fault of preachers that they tend to pontificate as to what God will do and how He will do it, only to be proved wrong by facts and events. Any so-called liberty is not real if it is not of faith, for supremely our spiritual liberty is expressed by our humble faith in God.

## 2. A Wrong Attitude to Others

False liberty also involves a wrong attitude to our brothers and sisters in Christ. I hope that you are not weary of my referring to Peter at Antioch. I have a sense that if he were here he would say to me, as he might have said to Paul, 'You have my full permission to tell the whole story if it can be of any help to them and glory to our Lord'. It seems to be a fact that our mistakes sometimes help people more than our achievements, provided that we are humble enough to accept rebuke and to put things right with the Lord. It seems clear that the two different tables at Antioch implied that in God's family there are first-class brothers and second-class brothers. What else could they have meant? Like the rest of us, Peter would doubtless have claimed (or taken it for granted) that he was one of the first class. We all do that. The other people are the ones who belong to the second grade, though Peter might well have hoped (as we do) that ultimately these inferior brothers would attain to the 'first table'. In the meantime, however, his action betrayed a wrong attitude to some of his brothers. [52/53]

There are, of course, many degrees of spiritual growth in the Christian life; but there is no suggestion that believers can be divided into two -- or more -- groupings. It is a wrong kind of liberty, this readiness to criticise and classify God's people. The 'emancipated' Christian sometimes feels qualified to put others right, but he should first consider how seldom the Lord Jesus did this to His disciples. It is true that He had liberty to say at any time: 'You are wrong, Peter' or 'You are wrong, Andrew', for they often were wrong, and He was always right. He had a greater liberty; the liberty to keep silent. Such liberty as that is all too rare. We usually prefer to have -- or take -- the liberty to tell people how wrong they are. Now the Lord Jesus did correct His

disciples from time to time, but it is clear that He only did this when He knew that it would help them. We reprimand people because it makes us feel better, and we even say to ourselves at times: 'I have given them a piece of my mind; I have told them where they are wrong; and now I feel better'. The Lord Jesus had no wish to feel better Himself: what He wanted was to help his disciples. On one occasion He said: "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

So He had the liberty to be silent. Alas! our liberty is often to hurt and wound. Let us see what these Galatians, these sons of Abraham who claimed to be so superior, were doing. They were biting and devouring one another (5:15). Paul warned them that if they went on in this unbridled way it would only result in destruction. Things have not changed much. God's people are still behaving in this way, hindering and spoiling His purposes while they boast of a liberty which is really quite false. Our liberty is to keep silent. Our liberty, when we do speak, is to speak in love. Our liberty is to build up, not to pull down. False liberty is just the opposite. It divides up God's people. It almost happened at Antioch. It was happening in Galatia. And yet in both places those concerned imagined that they were upholding a divine truth. In our day the same things are happening, and for the sake of a 'truth' Christians denigrate and almost devour one another.

Divisions are never caused because believers think that they have an error, but always because they stand for a truth. They may even have several truths, but more often it is one special truth. It may perhaps be a very precious truth, like the Second Coming; it may be a traditional truth or a special doctrinal stress; but isolated truths which are not held in balance seem always to divide and not seldom to produce bondage among those who concentrate on them. It is only as any truth is given its place as part of the whole truth that it is a healthy truth. And of course the truth is in Jesus. Truths, as such, may make us slaves, but the Truth has liberating power. That is why the Lord explained His statement; "The truth shall make you free" with the additional words: "the Son shall make you free" (John 8:36). Such freedom ensures that a Christian will always have a right attitude to his fellows.

### 3. A Wrong Attitude about Oneself

I still have a third point about this false liberty; it not only makes you wrong about God and about your fellows, but also makes you wrong about yourself. I do not know

whether Paul had a sense of humour, but imagine that he must have chuckled when he wrote: "If a man thinketh himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself" (6:3). Is there anything more ridiculous than a nobody thinking that he is a somebody? If only he could laugh at himself!

The name Isaac means Laughter. At first Sarah had laughed because she disbelieved God's promises, but afterwards she came to laugh with joy about her son, and I think that she must have been laughing at herself. Isaac was a free son, free to laugh and so freed from self-importance that he was able to laugh at himself. This may not sound very spiritual but it is a healthy state of mind to have. Sometimes -- like the legalist -- we have thought that we were somebody or were competent to do something, and then the grace of God has made us realise how absurd we were and helped us to laugh at ourselves. Others were laughing at us all the time, but we took ourselves so seriously until the Lord delivered us from self-deception so that we knew that we are nothing. Surely it is a mark of true liberty, to be able to laugh at yourself.

I can imagine that once Peter had recovered from the sting and shame of his actions at Antioch, he would laugh at his own folly. He had been a great man for God. The Lord had done mighty things through him, but He had [53/54] done them because of Peter's awareness that in himself he was nothing. "Why look ye so earnestly on us ...?" he had asked, after his first miracle (Acts 3:12). "Who was I ...?" he demanded of his critics (Acts 11:17). Those were wonderful days when Peter knew that he was nothing and nobody, and God worked mightily by means of him. Then he came to Antioch, to a church the founding of which owed nothing to him, and acted as though he was a somebody. Perhaps he even feared that he might lose his position, and folk might not realise who he was. It was a false liberty, as mercifully he later discovered. His letters reveal him as a man who made no claim to do anything and was consequently living in liberty. He did not care what people thought about him. He did not fear what they would do to him. He knew that he was nothing and that Christ is all, and that is the secret of true liberty.

The Gospel of Luke tells us how two children of Abraham were emancipated. There was a woman who was nominally a daughter of Abraham (13:16) but in fact had lived eighteen years of contradiction under Satan's bondage. We do not know how old she was, but feel sure that she was more than eighteen, so that she had not been born in

this condition. She had been born free in this respect, just as all true Christians are born free. But at some point her freedom had been taken from her. We have no need to apportion blame, but only to be reminded that those who are born free -- whether in Galatia or anywhere else -- can get themselves involved in some bondage which makes them a pitiful contradiction of their new birth. This was Satan's work. And note that it was accepted by the ruler of the synagogue, who was such a slave to legalism himself that he begrudged the liberty which Christ offered. The Galatians were in danger of having a similar spirit. They wanted to observe days and seasons, so that all who entered their church would be bound down earthwards instead of being able to look up boldly to heaven. Is this what the Church is for? To impose burdens, to lay down procedures? To put people in the wrong? No, it should be the place where the Lord has liberty to give liberty. As the Lord set her free He pointed out that as a daughter of Abraham this was her birthright.

The other story concerns a man. The Word of God is very wonderful. Had there been two daughters, we might have drawn the wrong conclusion; and had there been two sons, the women might have felt left out. But no, there was a son of Abraham. He lived in Jericho among a crowd of priests and Levites, but his was an even worse bondage than that of the woman in the synagogue. He was evidently very rich, but he does not seem to have had a friend, until Jesus invited Himself to spend the day at his house (Luke 19:5). Satan had also bound this man, bound him with the love of money, and love of selfish ambition until nothing but the grace of Christ could set him free. It must have been a dramatic moment when Zacchaeus stood up and publicly announced his emancipation. It was very practical; it touched his pocket; it transformed his whole way of living. What all the legalistic inhabitants of Jericho could not do, what they really did not even want to do, what Zacchaeus could not do for himself, Christ did in one single interview. The Lord's only comment to the disgusted legalists was that this should be the experience of every son of Abraham -- he should enjoy the full liberty of the gospel.

This is what Galatians 5 told the Galatians. It tells us the same thing. You don't work towards freedom; you don't fight for freedom; you take it as a free gift from Christ, and you use it for His glory.

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## 6. FELLOWSHIP

OUR consideration of the pathway of the truth of the gospel now brings us to think of the destination of the journey. We have already described this as the manifestation of the sons of God. It is important that we should understand that such sons are not only committed to filial union with God but to brotherly union in God's family. It is with this in view that the last chapter stresses the active and understanding participation due from members of this "household of faith", and on this note the letter ends. Earlier on, the apostle had explained that all believers -- whether they had previously been Jews or Gentiles -- have the Jerusalem which is above as their mother. He continued this emphasis on the corporate relatedness of the Church by describing it as "the Israel of God" (v.16). The sons of God are many, but they are of one household; there are a multitude of believers but there is only one new man (3:28). Hence the supreme importance of Christian fellowship.

Now it is possible to argue that the expression of this unity can only be realised in heaven, and that here on earth it cannot be enjoyed. When I pointed out that the public investiture with the dignity of sons is essentially future, I urged that even now the Spirit of adoption should be working in us and producing continual spiritual growth. The same is true with regard to fellowship: its full realisation awaits the dawn of eternity, but it should be finding practical expression here and now. If Paul was appalled at the idea of two separate tables in Antioch, what would he now feel about the multiplicity of rival groups of Christians in any given area today? If he so violently condemned those who excused their divisions by claiming that they were of Paul, what would be his indignation if he could hear the way in which modern Christians call themselves by names of outstanding leaders of more recent centuries and think poorly of others who do not wish to be of any party? He might well exclaim again: "I am afraid lest by any means I have laboured in vain" (4:11) and might even ask: 'Don't those people ever read my letter to the Galatians?'

Happily the apostle is resting from his battles now. As a matter of fact he had found a basis of heart rest by the time he finished writing this letter. "Henceforth" he wrote, "henceforth let no man trouble me" (v.17). He no longer sought to please men: the marks on his body clearly showed that he belonged to nobody and nothing except to Christ Himself. When we get to the glory the Lord's name will be stamped on our foreheads in glad recognition of His sole ownership. There would be much more

glory in the Church now -- yes, and more freedom from tensions too -- if we could look one another in the face and see there nothing but the unique seal of His lordship. It is true that Paul may have been referring to some special scars of battle which were to him the marks of Jesus. There is no need, though, to limit his words to such scars for it was he who later wrote to the Ephesians to the effect that every believer has been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise as a purchased possession. Those who carry the marks of Jesus need never be troubled by those who base their claims on lesser considerations. There is peace for those who walk by this rule (v.16), the rule which refuses to be governed by outward distinctions, adhering to the divine reality of the new creation in Christ. God's new Israel, born of the Spirit and called to the heavenly kingdom, is one united people. This is God's rule and those who walk by it are delivered from internal strife.

SO this is what chapter six is all about -- the fellowship of believers. But make no mistake about it, a vital share in this fellowship will mean suffering persecution for the cross of Christ (v.12). Satan's focus of attack is always the spiritual reality of the household of God. Why did they have all that trouble at Antioch? Why was there such a threat to harmony and progress in the churches of Galatia? Why do tensions arise among God's people now, even in lands where one might imagine that the very oppressive circumstances would ensure unity? The answer is simple, though rarely appreciated. It is that unity among God's people is Satan's prime target. You and I as individuals never threaten [61/62] the gates of hell, but Christ's Church does. The devil cannot pluck one single believer out of the Saviour's hand, but he can and does tempt Christians to throw off the loving restraint of that hand which would hold them together in unity. This is the explanation of why Peter failed, why even Barnabas was carried away and why the Galatians were in danger of being bewitched. It explains why this matter of keeping fellowship represents our greatest area of conflict. The real battle is not between different individual Christians but between Christ's Church and the gates of Hades. The Lord Jesus indicated that it would be, and so it is. He also clearly predicted the outcome. This victory is clearly described in the book of Revelation. But whether we study this epistle to the Galatians or the book of the Revelation, what we really need to know is not theology or theory but what practical contribution we in our day can make to that cosmic victory. The answer is summed up in the word 'fellowship'.

The first contribution we must make is a spirit of meekness (v.1). This is Christ's

priority. And it must be meekness in action, meekness in the practical sphere of our life together. Any brother may slip up, may be overtaken in a fault. This may be serious, though not necessarily intentional. His error will become a test of the spirituality or otherwise of the rest of the assembly. Will they pounce on him, denounce him, try to exclude him? Or will they prove their true spiritual discernment of the issues at stake by humbly seeking to carry this burden, being more careful to fulfil the law of Christ than to take sides with "the accuser of the brethren"? "Bear ye one another's burdens", so that the happy result may be healing and restoration in the body of Christ. Why is it that evangelical Christians seem at times to take delight in exposing, accusing and attacking other Christians who offend them? Sometimes this is even done in the name of loyalty to Christ, and yet it is in direct opposition to His royal law. A further contribution to fellowship is made by a proper sense of proportion. A sure way to jeopardise such fellowship is when you are deceived into thinking that you are a specially important factor in God's household, when it would be more correct and more seemly to accept the humble position of a nobody (v.3). By all means let a man properly assess the value of his own activities and get whatever justified satisfaction he can from his assessment, but let him not arrogantly set himself up to judge others, imposing burdens on his brothers instead of helping to bear them. The man who walks by the Spirit avoids the conceit and provocation which destroy fellowship (5:26), and seeks to prove that he is a son of God by being a peacemaker (Matthew 5:9).

But someone may protest that it is surely our duty to expose and denounce all who may be in error. It is certainly our duty to proclaim the truth. But in our dealings with our fellow believers we do well to heed the divine order: "Touch not mine anointed ones" (Psalm 105:15). The law which must govern all our relationships with our brothers is the law of Christ. Dr. Yu, a Chinese Christian, was once faced with the need for a sudden decision in such a matter. He was an elder in a large Shanghai assembly, who later died in tragic circumstances when, under communist interrogation, he refused to be disloyal to Watchman Nee. My story relates to a time long before this when the Shanghai assembly had one of its meetings disturbed by a brother who stood up and in an excited voice began to disclose publicly the alleged sins of a fellow member of the church. Dr. Yu's reaction was swift and decided. He walked over to the speaker and in the name of Jesus Christ commanded him to be silent. The man collapsed without another word. The godly Mr. Yu and his fellow elders found that in fact this 'inspired' denunciation was the work of a deceiving

spirit. Without at that moment considering whether the charges were true or not, Dr. Yu knew that the man's impulsive speaking could not be the work of the Holy Spirit, for He would never depart from the course laid down by the Lord Jesus in such matters, which is that possible offences should be thoroughly dealt with in private and that there could only be public condemnation when all other efforts had failed (Matthew 18:15-17). There are other spirits who know men's inner histories, as well as the Holy Spirit; and these are all too ready to find some human instrument through whom they can make their disclosures and act as 'accusers of the brethren'. It brings especial gain to the kingdom of darkness and confusion among the fellowship of the saints if such accusations can be made under the guise of piety or spirituality. "Ye that are spiritual" will prove yourselves to be so by your ability humbly to heal fellowship, and not by helping to break it up, as this story from China shows. [62/63]

IF Paul's letter saved the Galatians from biting and devouring one another, and induced them to seek wisely and humbly to bear one another's burdens, then it was worth all the large letters which he so painfully wrote in its composition. His next point was that each individual must carry his own burden (v.5). At first sight this may seem to contradict what has already been said about bearing one another's burdens but it would not have so appeared to its first readers, for the word here translated 'burden' is quite different from the one used in verse 2. The 'burden' which each must bear for himself is rendered by the word which the Lord Jesus used when He offered heart rest and stated that His burden is light. It seems to represent the weight of responsibility which the Spirit has apportioned to each individual believer, and this is a personal burden which each one must wholeheartedly carry. Again we are told of a contribution which we can make to functioning fellowship, and this time it is to exercise one's own gift, to do one's own divinely appointed job to the full without wrongly trespassing into another man's sphere. It is all a question of the Spirit's anointing. The Church is desperately weak because individual members are failing to do the one thing which only they can do. The Church is also greatly confused because some of its members are not content to devote themselves to their own personal calling in God, but aspire to carry responsibilities which do not properly belong to them. If my gift is connected with preaching the Word I shall probably be a clumsy failure in other equally important matters. If my brother, who is gifted in practical matters, is always wanting to have a chance to do my preaching, instead of faithfully carrying out the tasks for which God has fitted him, then our

church will be the poorer and there will be a hold-up in the harmonious progress of the work of Christ. Each of us should find his burden light. So if some spiritual 'burden' is crushing me with its weight then it is unlikely that I am truly walking in the Spirit, for the Lord Jesus is never wrong and He said that it would be light. I must take care to fulfil the ministry given to me and avoid trying to do work for which I have no calling and therefore no spiritual anointing.

There are, of course, some people whose spiritual activities preclude them from earning a living in the normal way. If God so calls them then they have nothing to be proud of, but equally nothing to be ashamed of, for this is all provided for in the household of God. Clearly if they are God's servants then He must provide for their financial needs, but He has made it plain that He places the stewardship of His money fairly and squarely on the shoulders of His people. "But let him that is taught contribute towards the livelihood of his teachers" (v.6). This is immediately followed by the passage concerning sowing and reaping, as though God includes financial giving in the methods by which men are to sow to the Spirit. I personally believe that one of the explanations of why God's people are not reaping as they might expect to do, may be found in this area of the adequate support of His servants. The Lord will not be fobbed off by our excuses; we are not to deceive ourselves into thinking that such matters have no close connection with spiritual life, and we must not allow ourselves to be put off or lose heart but keep steadily on with our sowing to the Spirit. That this sowing involves actions rather than mere words or prayers is demonstrated by the fact that the reference is both preceded and followed by exhortations about practical activities -- "Let him communicate" (v.6), and "let us work that which is good" (v.10).

THE verses about sowing to the Spirit are often used as a gospel text: there is a certain amount of validity in that respect, but it is limited. For example, I did not sow to the Spirit, but I have eternal life -- I received it as a gift. I did sow to the flesh and no doubt deserve to reap the fruits of my folly. Thank God that I will not do so, for Christ's sacrifice has delivered me from the threat of corruption. So these verses apply not so much to the unconverted as to the daily walk of the Christian and particularly, I think, to the relationships of Christian fellowship. We reap what we sow. We may put on a show; we may deceive ourselves even; but we can never deceive God. The sowing of selfishness, of discord, or lovelessness, of critical gossiping, of personal pride or jealousy will bring its inevitable harvest and put a

blight on any assembly or church. It is vain for God's people to long for blessing or to pray for revival when this kind of 'sowing' is going on. The sowing to the flesh may be hidden from men but it is seen by God and will surely produce the visible outcome of decay and disintegration. Thank God that the opposite is also true, namely that when the Lord's people make it their constant concern to show Christlikeness, when they are careful to sow seeds of [63/64] His grace all around, then the harvest of a fresh fullness of life can be surely expected.

This "sowing of the Spirit" is a very individual and personal matter. Several times in these first eight verses reference is made to 'man' in the singular. Each one has a responsibility. We may wonder what difference a single individual can make, but we remember that it was the action of this one man, Paul, which saved the situation at Antioch. Things were very critical then for the whole household of God. Those responsible were all being swept away in a wrong direction. It would have been easy for Paul to have washed his hands of them and walked out. But then it would also have been easy for the Lord Jesus to have done just this with the twelve when they were quarrelling about washing one another's feet on the very eve of His crucifixion. He could have quitted that upper room, walked down the outside stairs of the house, and knocked at the door of the owner whose manservant had carried the waterpot. Either the owner or the servant would have been thrilled to have had the privilege of washing the Master's feet. It would have been the easier way -- to walk out. It often is. The Lord Jesus took the harder way; He stayed in, sowed to the Spirit by doing the menial task Himself, and so preserved the little community from breaking up. It mattered to God that they should be together. And it mattered to God that the saints of Antioch should stay together. They were kept together, all because one man sowed to the Spirit, displayed the mixture of frankness and patience which is essential to all true fellowship, and saved the situation for God.

We are one undivided household, the household of the faith. We are God's own household which is most precious to Him and most important to His eternal purpose. The book of the Revelation shows us this house coming down out of heaven from God and bright with His glory. There is, of course, another kind of glory, as indicated in verse 13, but this is man's glory. It is inadequate: it does not last. Those who were introducing legalism into the Galatian churches, imposing on God's people their own ideas of rule and procedure and using even the Scriptures to do so, were in pursuit of glory, but it was glory for them, not for God; the glory of the flesh. If it had

succeeded it would have given them material for boasting. This was an earthly glory which Paul determined to avoid at all costs (v.14).

So we terminate these studies by noting that the straight path of the gospel is really the way of the cross. There is no other basis for true and sustained fellowship among God's people than that each member -- like Paul -- should be willing to be crucified. This is often painful, but it is never inglorious. It is the great glory of the cross that it can hold men together in living, loving fellowship and lead them on in the straight path of the gospel.