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Galatians

TL;DR:

The path to freedom and abundance isn't anything in this world. The path is to follow Jesus, counting on the Spirit to empower and transform us. And this true freedom thrives in community. Here's a video summary of the whole book.

Where's That Stamp From?

Galatia is a province of the Roman Empire in Paul's time, and he is from Tarsus which is in the province. Today it's roughly the modern country of Turkiye. The people there are descendants of the Gauls, who invaded from western Europe over several hundred years before settling down - so it's more like Gaul-atia.

What Does It Say?

Paul had planted many of these churches some years before. After he left, others came in to lead the churches who taught that you had to believe in Jesus and also follow all of the Old Testament laws, including circumcision. Paul is pretty upset about this false gospel, and doesn't mince words, because this is a life-or-death matter. Paul wants people to have an abundant, free, and eternal life, and the message he is arguing about is enslaving people, misplacing their hope, and belittling Jesus. If you have some time, read the whole letter. For our discussion, we'll focus on Galatians 5:1–6:10. The sermon passage we used was Galatians 5:1, 13-26.

What Does It Mean?

1. In our reading, there is a list of the things that the world tells us are liberating and empowering, except Paul lists them negatively. Take a moment and think about the world's more positive spin on each of them. Does this give you a different outlook on Paul's being upset at people who want to put their faith in what they do?

2. And there's another list in there too. One about spiritual gifts. Can you see how people whose attitude is twisted by the first list might mock the people whose lives are overflowing with things from the second list?

3. How full is your life today with this second list - and what do you want more of?

4. Paul is pushing back against two worldly extremes (your translation may say the word "flesh" a lot). On one hand, are the folks who have clear expectations of what proper godly living looks like, and they are emphatic that you need to do it all right. On the other hand, are the folks who say, "we're free in Christ … so anything goes!" Both of these groups are being influenced by popular philosophies of their day (which still are popular today). Stoics says we need to control what we say and do and how we react. Epicureans are very much about enjoying every moment and living our best life. Where do you see the influences of these ancient philosophies on your life?

5. Paul says the way of Jesus is the proper path to be on. We are freed from something and freed to something. What have you been freed from? And what do you think you might be freed to?

6. In the lists, some items point to us and some point to how we relate to others. In the rest of the text, Paul points in both directions as well. What would your neighborhood, our church, and our community look like if everyone was "living by the Spirit"? Take a moment to imagine how this week would have looked for you in this "live in the Spirit" world.

7. What keeps you from living fully in the Spirit, practically speaking?

PS

What else stood out to you in the reading?

In the rest of the letter?

If you were to pass this on to someone else, what would you tell them as you handed them Paul's letter?

Ephesians

TL;DR:

The way of the world always takes more than it gives. In the long run the house always wins and we're left alone. The way of Jesus always gives more than it takes. In the long run we and the whole world win, and we're included in God's family. Here's a video summary of the whole book.

Where's That Stamp From?

Ephesus was a city on the coast of what is today western Turkiye. In Paul's day it was a bustling metropolis and home to the famous Temple of Artemis. Paul had spent a long time with the church there, and had many close relationships. He likely wrote this letter from prison. It's also likely that this letter wasn't only sent to Ephesus, but went to other churches in the area at the same time, or made the rounds through those churches in a circuit.

What Does It Say?

Paul is explaining to the Christians in and around Ephesus who they are becoming in Christ, and then giving them some practical applications of how we live that out through Christ. This was (and is) important, because we live in the world. Our whole experience is in our body, in our surroundings, in our group, in our society. That makes it natural to find our identity in those things, experiences, and people. But Paul is reminding them that they've been included in something way more than that. They've been included in Jesus, and we have been too, if we trust in Jesus. And that IN is central to who we are and what our reality is (even if we don't always notice it). When we find our identity and meaning in Jesus, we are transformed, and the world changes. If you have some time, read the whole letter. For our discussion, we'll focus on Ephesians 1:15-2:22. The sermon passage we used was Ephesians 2:1-18.

What Does It Mean?

1. Paul opens by praying for us to have a crystal clear understanding of our reality, not just intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually too. What are some of the aspects that Paul wants us to understand? Why does that understanding matter?

2. Based on his words, who does Paul believe Jesus is? Based on your life, who do you believe Jesus is?

3. Where have you seen “the house always wins” at work in your world, where getting ahead comes with costs or strings or worse?

4. Zoom out for a second and look again at our reading. Do you see the patterns Paul is painting about how Jesus connects us to God and one another? What does dead → alive look like in your life? How about far → near? What about strangers → neighbors → family?

5. Why does it matter that Paul says “dead” and not just “sick”?

6. Temples were important to people in the ancient world, including one in Ephesus that was maybe the fanciest of the day. It celebrated the Greek goddess Artemis and was a center of both devotion and commerce. A temple was important to God's people too - the one in Jerusalem - in part because it was the one place on earth that God guaranteed to be present. What might it mean to tell those folks that as believers, they were being built into a temple, along with other believers, the apostles, the prophets, and Christ? What does it mean to you?

7. Who do you know who needs to hear the invitation to be part of God's family?

PS

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Colossians

TL;DR:

Jesus is a wise teacher, right? Has some good things to say that we should probably listen to. But there are other smart people in the world, so we should listen to them too. Or should we? Jesus is so much more than the world says he is, and gives us more than we could ever comprehend. Here's a video summary of the whole book.

Where's That Stamp From?

Colossae (pronounced col-Ah-say) was a small city in what is today Western Turkiye. It was about 100 miles from Ephesus, and overshadowed by nearby Laodicea as well. The church there was not planted by Paul, though it's clear from his letter that he had a relationship with the church leaders. The city itself was a mix of cultures and religions, and that's the source of the issue.

What Does It Say?

Paul reminds the Colossians (and us) of who Jesus is, and what a life of following Jesus should look like. Why? There was a problem in the church that though people had heard the Gospel of Jesus and were taught to follow his way, they had come to doubt important parts of what they had originally believed. Doubt is not the problem, however. The real problem is how they had filled in the holes left by their doubt. The worship of the God of Israel came to be seen as just one practice among many in the city. People in the church began to believe that it should be combined with pagan rituals, mysticism, asceticism (extreme self-denial), and even gnostic teachings that salvation should be sought through secret, spiritual knowledge rather than the Gospel they had originally heard. And Paul doesn't try to convince them that they are wrong, but rather reminds them of how right they had known Jesus to be. Paul uses the language of thankfulness to God rather than debating with the people or criticising their practices. If you have some time, read the whole letter, because it's not that long. For our discussion, we'll focus on Colossians 1:3-2:19. The sermon passage we used was Colossians 1:15-23.

What Does It Mean?

1. Paul mentions prayer several times in our reading. Take a look at them. What part do you think prayer should or does play in your life in making sure that you're staying faithful to the way of Jesus and following where he leads?

2. Some folks say that part of Paul's message in Colossians is "if you want to know what God is like, just look at Jesus." What did you already know about God that stood out to you in the reading? What new things did you learn?

3. In reading the Bible, it can help if we think about what Paul is arguing against, and what is going on behind the scenes. If we read this letter carefully, we might begin to see through the text and into the day-to-day faith life of the Colossian church members. What is not in the text that Paul is pushing back against? Where do you see those same things in your life?

4. Based on his words, who does Paul believe Jesus is? Based on your spiritual practices and prayer life, who do you believe Jesus is?

5. Paul does not just talk about who Jesus is, but also mentions some things that a life of following Jesus should bring. Which of these stands out to you? Why?

6. As he did in Ephesians, Paul uses the language of apart → together in describing how Jesus treats us. This time he uses words about reconciliation. Where have you seen this pattern play out in your life of faith?

7. Who in your life might benefit from hearing how Paul describes Jesus and the life of following him?

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Philippians

TL;DR:

Unity doesn't mean uniformity. It means alignment with one another. Joy doesn't mean having enough. It means knowing that Jesus is enough. How do we get there? This letter, and an early creed of the church, might just point the way. Here's a video summary of the whole book.

Where's That Stamp From?

Just like interstates run through downtown Louisville, so Philippi was a transportation hub, with the Via Egnatia connecting Rome to Byzantium (modern day Istanbul Turkiye) through downtown Philippi. It was the site of the famous battle where Mark Antony and Octavian (who later became Caesar Augustus) defeated Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar. It was a place where many Roman soldiers retired. Even though it's located in Greece, Philippi was treated specially under the law as if it were part of Italy. To say there were close ties with Rome would be an understatement. People in the city took great pride in those ties, and they were deeply patriotic for the empire. Paul had planted a church there on his second missionary journey and had maintained a close, personal relationship with the people there.

What Does It Say?

Paul writes this letter from house arrest in Rome, and it contains all sorts of personal updates as well as instructions for believers and the church. On the personal side, Paul talks about how he is faring, and also about his plans to send Timothy and Epaphroditus (who had apparently come from Philippi with a letter for Paul) to Philippi to continue the correspondence. For the church, Paul sends what some people call the Hymn of Humility, which might have been an early hymn or creed used by churches. Some think that Paul wrote this himself while others think he was sharing a favorite that they may have said/sung together when he was there. For the faithful, the letter has threads of unity and joy running through it, as Paul urges them to fully embrace the way of Jesus, who prayed for unity and joy for his followers even as he was heading to the cross. If you have some time, read the whole letter. For our discussion, we'll focus on Philippians 1:27-3:11. The sermon passage we used was Philippians 2:1-11.

What Does It Mean?

1. Paul uses all sorts of different words to urge people not just to work together, but to be unified. He doesn't say that they all need to be *uniform* though. Where have you experienced unity in the church even though the people were very different? Where have you seen disunity even though the people were all basically the same? What would Paul say about each circumstance?

2. Why does Paul make such a big deal of humility? How does humility figure into unity? What does this suggest to you? Who needs to hear this?

3. Paul seems to care about his legacy, but not the way the world does - he wants Jesus to be pleased with the work Paul has done. What do you want your legacy of faith to look like to Jesus?

4. Paul talks a lot about “the flesh” (some translations say “the body”). The life of faith is not just about our spirit, but about our body too. What stands out to you about your body based on Paul’s letter? Why?

5. Life was harder then than it is today, and Paul was writing to people in a city where saying “Jesus is Lord” rather than “Caesar is lord” could get you in trouble. Have you ever had a setback, been rejected, been ridiculed, or had to pass on an opportunity because of your faith? Why or why not?

6. Is there someone in your neighborhood who needs to hear something from your reading or what you’ve taken from it?

7. Do you think Paul is being humble about himself and his work as he’s facing the end of his ministry (and his life)? Is he unsure? Are doubts creeping in? Is it something else? What can you take away from this?

PS

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2 Corinthians

TL;DR:

There's a lot to 2 Corinthians, and we're going to focus on a small part of the whole - Paul's collection for the church in Jerusalem. When I give, it means I have less and someone else has more. But does it? What has God given to you? Does it mean God has less because you have more? God's supply is limitless. God is inviting us into this radical flow of generosity so that we can experience the joy of Christ in the process. Here's a video summary of the whole book.

Where's That Stamp From?

Corinth in Paul's day was a major city in southern Greece. It had been rebuilt as a Roman colony and was a center of commerce. It was a city where people took pride in their accomplishments, their status, their wealth, their education, and their business. People there strove to better themselves and improve life for them and their children. And Corinth was full of opportunity, drawing people from all over the Mediterranean.

What Does It Say?

There were at least 3 or 4 "letters to the Corinthians" and probably more, and this one is definitely not number 2 in that series. And this correspondence was not one-way, as the two we have from the dialog both answer questions sent to Paul from Corinth. The relationship was very up and down between Paul and the believers in Corinth. He had spent time there years ago, but then there had been a falling out as other apostles and evangelists came to Corinth. At some point, the Corinthians had rejected and even mocked Paul. This letter is, at least in part, trying to repair the relationship. In the section we're looking at, Paul is asking the church to make good on donations they had promised, but he doesn't guilt them into it or send them a collection notice. Instead he's pointing to God. If you have some time, read the whole letter. For our discussion, we'll focus on 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. The sermon passage we used was 2 Corinthians 9:6-11.

What Does It Mean?

1. In what ways is faithful Christian generosity different from humanitarian charity? Why does it matter?

2. Wealth was as important in Corinth as it is in Kentucky. Paul seems to have a very different way to measure wealth though. How does Paul's view impact your view of your wealth? How about your view of other people's wealth?

3. In what ways have you treated your faith-based generosity as a transaction, and what have you expected to get for what you give?

4. Paul points out generous examples that every believer should be familiar with, the manna in the wilderness and Jesus coming in the form of a poor baby. What examples from the Bible would you pick? What examples from your past would you point to?

5. The "sowing and reaping" metaphor has been abused many times, in many ways. How might we look at it with fresh eyes today? What would trusting God in this promise look like in your life?

6. If your calendar, your bank account, and your internet history were the only evidence, what would they say about your experience of God's overwhelming gift that Paul talks about?

7. How is our generosity an act of worship?

PS

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In the rest of the letter?

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1 Timothy

TL;DR:

People need leaders, teachers, and guides to make sure that everyone else is ready, willing, and able to follow Jesus well. And God gives gifts to people to help them lead, teach, and guide and to raise up the next leaders, teachers, and guides. Here's a video summary of the whole book.

Where's That Stamp From?

Timothy is in a leadership position in the church in Ephesus, where Paul had encouraged him to go. Though they are apart, Paul thinks of Timothy as a son and is doing a combination of encouraging Timothy and continuing his on-the-job training. We should remember that Paul knows the church of Ephesus well and cares for them deeply, but also knows the challenges of living in that city and ministering in that community.

What Does It Say?

Timothy is facing all sorts of challenges both within the church and out in the community. As we saw in other letters, there are false teachers around, trying to gather followers and influence, and willing to lie to win. There are folks in the church who think Timothy might be too young to lead. And Timothy himself is not super confident that he can do it. However, Paul knows that if Timothy builds on the foundation of Jesus and he protects and proclaims the truth of the Gospel, then the church will thrive. In other words, Timothy needs to help people to know Jesus, just like Jesus would, by staying connected to Jesus. If you have some time, read the whole letter. For our discussion, we'll focus on 1 Timothy 3:14-4:16. The sermon passage we used was 1 Timothy 4:1-16.

What Does It Mean?

1. In our reading, Paul sends what is probably an early creed to Timothy (similar to what he did in Philippians). Perhaps Paul and Timothy said this together when they worshipped, or maybe it's something that the church in Ephesus said when they met. Wherever he got it, there must be a reason Paul's including it in this letter. Do you share a favorite Scripture passage or saying with someone? If they sent it to you in a letter, how would you feel?

2. What might happen to a community if a local church fails to live out the Gospel?

3. The Spanish Inquisition used 1 Timothy 4:1-4 against Jews and Protestants, and, somewhat ironically, Protestants used them soon after against the Pope and the Catholic church. That's not, by far, the only times they've been pointed at people. Yet we who have read other letters of Paul probably see some connections that help us understand what Paul might have meant. What in the other letters helps you understand this passage? Why is that important?

4. And why is it important to listen closely to the Holy Spirit and learn to sort out the Spirit's nudges from our own preferences?

5. Our society talks a lot more about physical training than training in godliness. What are some of the effects of this upside-down priority order?

6. When have you felt unprepared, underqualified, or inadequate for some spiritual task, some event in your life, or some opportunity to serve? What might you do when you feel that way?

7. Who in your life is distracted by, as Paul says, “godless myths and old wives’ tales” or anything else that’s not of God? How might you come alongside and lead, teach, or guide them, even if you feel a bit like Timothy?

PS

What else stood out to you in the reading?

In the rest of the letter?

If you were to pass this on to someone else, what would you tell them as you handed them Paul’s letter?