

## WELCOME 5<sup>th</sup> May 2024 – 6<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN EASTER '24 B

Galatians 4:8-9 & 5:1-15

**Welcome!** It's great to be together again today! Even though Pastor John is still away on holidays you have **Growing Praise** inserts **Bible Study Qs** are there to equip you so God can lead you deeper into His word/work in your life, & so you can share that with someone else. *Zoom Bible Studies will resume when John gets home to Wagga.*

### **As we move into this week...**

On April 8<sup>th</sup> this year, millions of people flocked to a small corridor in North America to view **this**...a total eclipse of the sun. Pastor John's 94-year old Mother was treated to a spectacle she had never seen with her own eyes as 95%-plus of the sun disappeared behind the moon right over her head. She wore the goggles her granddaughter bought & watched the darkness come...then go...*it was awesome!*

It makes you wonder though...How many times in life does darkness come...and **stay**? How many times does a rupture in a relationship become permanent? How many times does that little "thing" become something that drags you down? How many choices lead to more choices lead to a downward spiral from which there's no end? And how many times...do people find a place of "light," hope & freedom, only to return to the dark...captivity...despair? Choose dark instead of light?

That's today's question for the Galatians & each of us...**Why** go back? Why choose darkness? **Why** walk away from the light? Why compromise freedom & abundant life in Christ for that which can never satisfy your heart or bring rest or fullness to your soul?

*For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers & sisters.  
But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature.  
Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in **love**.*

Freedom in Christ is always & only freedom to be used for someone else. Every chain Christ breaks for me links me to you in self-giving self-offering love.

*What is important is faith expressing itself in **love**.*

We'll experience & share that faith active in love today...Let's pray together...

## PRAYER OF THE DAY

### **Psalm 106:1-5**

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.  
Who can list the glorious miracles of the Lord?  
Who can ever praise him enough?  
Remember me, Lord, when you show favour to your people;  
come near and rescue me.  
Let me share in the prosperity of your chosen ones.  
Let me rejoice in the joy of your people;  
let me praise you with those who are your heritage.*

Gracious God, you called us as your own through your Son, & grant strength for your will by your Spirit. Equip us today by your Word for whatever is required in your world. Let us know the joy of those gathering your harvest. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Let's sing Be Unto Your Name & then we'll hear God's word from Paul to the church in Galatia & Wagga Wagga*

### **FAITH CHAT:**

1. How do you define freedom? When in your life have you felt most free?
2. How does your trust in Jesus increase your sense of being free?

## 6<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN EASTER '24 B – LIVING EXCLUSIVELY...IN FREEDOM

Researchers in Canada made an interesting discovery...people will lie if they gain from someone else believing & acting upon their **lie**. I'm not sure who paid for that research, but God bless the guys who GOT PAID because I reckon any one of us could have told them that for free. People will lie if they profit from it. Went like this... They put people in pairs & person A had to help person B guess how many "things" were in a jar because person A got a better look at the jar. A had more info than B. Simple enough. The pairs were rewarded based on how close person B got to the right number with person A's help. But then they twisted it...person B would still get rewarded for accurate guesses, but person A was told they'd get a bigger payoff if they led person B to guess high...to overestimate the amount of "things" in the jar. Lying would be rewarded. You'll never guess what happened...

Person A started lying...at first by a small margin. Then they put person A under various brain scans while they worked with person B. Early in the lying the reactions of the liars' brains were pretty significant. (as if their brains were screaming "You don't tell lies! Stop that!") But as their rewards for lying grew & they told more lies, their brains reacted less strongly. The more they lied, the easier the lies came. They became habituated liars. The first lie was the hardest. Slowly, though, it got easier. What does this have to do with Galatians...?

Christians were being led astray one small step at a time until they were becoming unrecognizable again from the world around them...Like sheep nibbling themselves one clump of grass after another out of the paddock & onto the road or off the edge of a ravine, Paul sees followers of Jesus walking off into the very darkness from which Christ had freed them...going backwards in their life in Christ to the very things that would have led them to death in the first place.

Remember two themes run through the whole of Galatians: 1<sup>st</sup> - **the** default mode of the human heart is self-justification. We desperately want to prove the value worth & significance of our lives. We want to be self-made stand-up-on-our-own-2-feet sorts of people. We want God & the people around us to notice what incredible people we are & we'll do anything toward that end. 2<sup>nd</sup> – there was a conflict within the church: Jewish Christians insisted to their non-Jewish fellow Christians that Jewish religious observance was essential as either a PREREQUISITE TO or a CONFIRMATION OF **faith**... as if trust in Christ alone isn't enough...as if Christ's sacrificial gift of life in him wasn't sufficient for his disciples....people like us.

And as soon as you start down either of those paths...you're in danger. Paul writes...

*Before you Gentiles knew God, you were slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist. So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you), why do you want to go back again & become slaves once more to the weak & useless spiritual principles of this world? So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, & don't get tied up again in slavery to the **law**.* In the first 3 verses today Paul calls out both of those dangers... Look at the first one. When our sense of ourselves...our identity worth value or purpose in life is rooted in anything other than a relationship with God the Father through faith in Jesus' death & resurrection, we're setting ourselves up as practical pagans. It's clear as Paul describes it...there's Jesus or there's nothing.

You can bang chakra bowls like a Buddhist guru, burn incense to a elephant-headed Hindu deity, run through the smoke of an indigenous ceremony, surrender yourself to the ideology posing as faith called Islam or wrap your life around the latest Tik-Tok influencer...it's all the same. Whatever you are devoted to, model your life on, look to for every good or cling to in time of need **THAT** is your god/God. It's either Jesus or there's nothing... *so-called gods that do not even exist*. Jesus or nothing. This is not simply an argument for 1<sup>st</sup> century believers or for the church of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. 21<sup>st</sup> century example...Barbie...yeah...I'm sorry to go pop culture on you...BUT...

In the Barbie movie...one of the lead characters laments the lot of being a woman (guys listen to what she says & see if it doesn't ring true for you at some level) Like, we [women] have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we always do it wrong. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people....You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard! And nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! You hear it...We have to prove we're good enough or no one takes us seriously...but you're never good enough because someone else is always better. We desperately as fallen human beings want God & others to applaud us or appreciate us...but that dog never catches its tail...

But once, in Christ, you know the freedom from the dog-chasing-its-tail of gods that have no power because they don't exist...the perpetual "am I doing it right?" "am I doing it enough?" "am I good enough?" Why would you substitute one slavery for another? Because being meticulous in slavery to the Old Covenant Law gets you exactly the same result: nothing. Slavery to fake deities is the same as being a slave to a Law that cannot save you from but only reinforce the bars of your prison. To validate yourself – to justify or prove your significance or worth OR to use your moral uprightness as a requirement of or proof of your "salvation" simply leads you away from Christ & back to prison. Pastor/author John Stott says true freedom is "Christ setting me free from my silly little self in order to live responsibly in love for God & others."

Paul knows...likely because he was as vulnerable as any of us...he certainly saw it in the churches...freedom can also be a threat. In freedom, I can use the Law or some other list of rules requirements & regulations to show God what a good little boy I have become my freedom leads me neck deep into pride **OR** I can take that freedom & assume it means I'm free to do as I darn well please. In my freedom I can run roughshod over everyone around me or live a life that brings no one any honour or in fact dishonours the name of Christ. But that's not the freedom in Christ Paul has in mind...he would write to Titus...

*For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people. And we are instructed to turn from godless living & sinful pleasures. We should live in this evil world with wisdom, righteousness, & devotion to God, while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God & Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed. He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, & to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds. – Titus 2:11-15*

Or here...*But we who live by the Spirit eagerly wait to receive by faith the righteousness God has promised to us. For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love.* We live in freedom realizing chiefly what we have to lose & what we have to gain. You see...in Christ, freedom gains me my neighbour...where I have full freedom to reveal my trust in Christ by love. As Luther said, "God does not need my good works, but my neighbour **does.**" If you haven't read Luther's Small Catechism lately, find one or I've got a few I can give you & we can order more...but for each commandment Luther reframes them as ways we can love those around us...8<sup>th</sup> Commandment. **You** shall not bear false witness against (lie to harm) your neighbour. Anybody remember...**We** are to fear & love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbour; but defend them, speak well of them & explain their actions in the kindest way. *What is important is faith expressing itself in love. (next 3 same slide)*

*For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers & sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.* Paul calls us to live our freedom in Christ with care...because what begins so deeply rooted in God's grace – his free gift of life love eternal assurance & present hope in Jesus Christ can quickly become a burden of do this now this now this tick-box legalism: "...for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. Do not scoff at prophecies, but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil. Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, & may your whole spirit & soul & body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful." – 1 Thess 5:19-22

God's desire is that his Spirit work in & through all we are & all we do to shape & fashion us more & more into the image & likeness of Jesus...this is God's work from beginning to end & it will not be complete in this life but God will not stop until it is complete...and God will use every experience in this life for his purpose for he who calls you is faithful. **For** *the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."*

**For** *you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers & sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.*

Freedom in Christ is always & only freedom to be used for someone else. Every chain Christ breaks for me links me to you in self-giving self-offering love. Last week we said that our status as God's children means simply this we are... **LOVED** like the Son who gave his life for **us**...**REJOICED OVER** like the Son who called us to die & rise with **him**...**SENT** in the Name & mission of the Son who came to this world to reclaim it in love & compassion for the **Father**. For that kind of freedom Christ set you free & you know..."*if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.*"

#### **TAKE IT HOME-**

What will you do with your freedom in Christ this week to serve someone in love?

How will you explain your actions to them so they know it was Christ in you serving them?

*Let's pray with that in mind...*

*O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*