

How to Read the Bible

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February 21-22, 1998

The Book of Galatians Series

Galatians 3:6-22

Let me begin with a little story. This kind of experience has probably happened to many of you who have gone hiking in the woods without a background in the Boy Scouts or for those of you who don't have your Eagle Scout Badge yet. Once, when I was in college, there was a picnic for our Christian Fellowship Group. This friend and I decided that we would take a little hike in the woods around the picnic grounds. We both suffered from directional dyslexia. I should never go out in the woods without a trail of breadcrumbs and a rope around my waist that guides me back to where I came from. Marlene has to point the way out of big parking lots to me.

Anyway, the two of us directional dyslexics were walking through these woods and the trail kept branching and winding and curving. Unfortunately, you couldn't see any directional markers. There weren't any natural markers like a stream or a road or a mountain or big tree that we could key off of and say, "By that tree over there..." So we turned ourselves around about four different times and kept walking by the same scrubby looking pine tree until we realized we were hopelessly lost.

I was a young Christian. I asked Christ to come into my life when I was 18. And so this was shortly after Christ came into my life. I said to my friend, "I am going to pray and ask God to guide us out of the woods." He wasn't as full of faith as me. In fact, he got really mad at me. He thought I was being very naïve and simplistic and that the God-Guidance Method would result in us starving out in the woods, being eaten by some wolves.

But I was back then really stubborn, unlike my present very flexible self, so I said, "You can stay here if you want, but I am going to pray and then I am walking." The amazing thing was that in about five minutes I stumbled on the right path and it led me right back to the picnic grounds. My friend, of course, was trailing right behind me the whole time telling me that we weren't going to find our way back.

Have you ever gotten lost in the woods? You know, I think that for many people the experience of reading the Bible is like a lost person wandering through the woods. Fighting through the underbrush. Getting stuck with prickles. Doubling back on the same trail. Completely confused. We don't have a trail map or a compass. Many people who read the Bible like to say, "okay, I am going to read it like any other book." They start at the beginning of Genesis and they read a bunch of interesting stories that make for enjoyable reading. They read about Noah and his ark; Abraham and God's calling to him; Joseph and his coat of many colors – but how it all fits together and why these stories are there, folks don't have a clue about. It gets worse when they hit the last 10 or so chapters of Leviticus and feel like I am half my way through the underbrush and what is all of this about the grain offering and the priests' garments, the weaving together of the curtains around the tabernacle, the regulations about various colors of discharge.

At that point, most people who are incredibly determined completely give up on their Bible reading plan and just end up dipping into the Bible in their favorite places—familiar little promises. I think I will turn back to Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd...yes, I like that one.” And I certainly like Psalm 121, “I will lift up my eyes to the hill from whence cometh my help. My help comes from the Lord.” Yes, I will just read those two Psalms for the rest of my life.

The problem of understanding the Bible begins not with the Bible but us as readers. The reason why we get confused about the Bible, the reason why we argue with each other about the proper interpretation about the Bible, the reason why it feels like we are winding our way through the woods on an unmarked path begins with who we are. We are finite. And it is hard for a finite person to grasp the huge truths of the Bible and to gain the whole big picture of the Bible. We are finite and an infinite God is communicating us to.

We have problems understanding the Bible because our minds are limited and the truths are enormous. We have problems understanding the Bible not only because we are finite, but also because we are sinners. We insist on reading the Bible through our own egocentric lenses. If we were honest with ourselves, why is it that we read the Bible when we read it? Why do we read the Bible at all?

Well, the reasons we read the Bible tend to be very egocentric. We read the Bible to gain an emotional experience. So we judge our devotional times based on whether we had an emotional experience, whether we are happier at the end or more excited. Certainly we read the Bible egocentrically every time we think, “This will show God that I am really disciplined.”

You say that you don’t do that. You don’t read the Bible to gain God’s approval. I will bet that you do. I will bet that there are many times that you are just trying to show God that you are really disciplined and committed.

Sometimes we read the Bible to be thought of as brilliant and for knowing so much of the Bible. Wow, you are really smart. You really know a lot of the Bible. You are really valuable.

Sometimes we read the Bible just so we will have something to teach on. We have problems grasping the message of the Bible because we are sinners and we tend to go to the Bible egocentrically trying to use the Bible for a purpose other than that which it is designed for, just as we sinners misuse everything. We misuse sex. We misuse marriage and try to find in marriage something that it wasn’t designed to produce. We misuse friendships. We misuse work. So we misuse the Bible.

The reason to open your Bible in the morning is not to prove that you are a disciplined person or to get an emotional experience or so that you can show someone else that you are really smart or to be the answer man. The reason to open your Bible in the morning rather than your newspaper is because through the Bible you can hear God’s voice. You open the Bible so that through it you can hear God talk to you. God wants to speak to every one of you. And the chief way that God wants to speak to you is through the medium of the Bible. We ought to open the Bible to hear God’s voice.

The Bible is a confusing book because we are finite. The Bible is a confusing book because we are sinners and the Bible is a confusing book because we are Americans living in the 1990’s. And just like every other group of people who has ever lived, we Americans living in the 1990’s read the Bible through our own cultural lenses. And the

cultural lens is that we Americans in the cultural 90's read things through is the lens of "Do I like this. How does what I am reading right now make me feel? Is it entertaining or exciting? If it is not entertaining or exciting, I am not sure I want to keep reading. God, you have a responsibility to hold my attention, otherwise I will channel surf onto some other more interesting reading."

How does it make me feel? Do I like it? Do I not like it? Not that it is true, but do I like it? The bottom line as Americans we constantly are asking "Is it consistent with what our culture teaches?" If not, I disregard it. See, we're not looking to hear God's voice very often; we're looking to see if it is consistent with the culture. Is what we're reading acceptable and politically correct with my little sociological grouping? Is it what white, conservative, free-market Republicans want to hear? If not, those peace verses and turn the other cheek verses and share your goods with the poor verses, those verses about care for immigrants and orphans – forget it."

If you are left-leaning, diversity minded, egalitarian Democrats, those respect the government verses, those wives submit to your husband verses, forget that. We will just pretend those verses aren't in the Bible.

The Bible is a confusing book to us because 1) we are finite; 2) we are sinners; and 3) we are Americans living in the 90's.

Now, what I want to do today is to help us find a way through the tangle. To have some markers to guide you through this huge book called the Bible. And especially if you are unacquainted with the Bible this is going to be an important talk for you to hear. But even if you have been reading the Bible for years you may not see the big picture of the Bible. There is a message that God wants to communicate. Because while there are many human authors and 66 books in the Bible, there is one divine author, one God who inspired the Bible's writing and one God who is speaking a consistent message from beginning to end. And so the individual stories, individual verses and individual books all have to be fit into God's big picture.

Sometimes we are like folks in a museum with our noses pressed up against the painting. You see this splotch of brown and you say, "What is that?" Or this little funny pink line that it is only when you step back and see the whole painting you can say, "Oh, that splotch of brown is shadowing under the person's eyes. And that pink line is helping to define the person's mouth."

I will help you today to step back and see the big picture of the Bible. I want to give you some trail markers. If your taste runs to classical music, I remember when I was in grade school and they took us to an Italian opera. As a child you watch these rather large women singing in Italian. People were racing on and off the stage, crying, shouting, and dancing. It was really nice to read the program, the Libretto, so that we could figure out why this large woman was crying or dancing.

Today we are going to see that Paul is giving us the libretto, a program guide, the trail markers, the big picture. I have called today's talk very simply, "How to Read the Bible." Let's pray.

Galatians 3:6-22: "Consider Abraham, 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

The apostle Paul was saying something really significant here as a general principle – that Abraham is going to be the lens through which you ought to read the whole Bible. The way God related to Abraham is the way that God intends to relate to the whole human race. Abraham is the lens. Abraham is the paradigm. Paul says, “Consider Abraham...” If you want to get the big picture of the Bible, start with Abraham.

The Jews started with Moses. They thought the foundation for their relationship with God was Moses and they read Abraham through the lens of Moses. But Paul says, “No, the way to read Moses is through the lens of Abraham.”

The way to understand the gospel is through the lens of Abraham. Because Abraham is so significant then, I want you to turn back with me to the original encounter that God had with Abraham in Genesis 12 where we read, “The Lord said to Abram [this was before Abraham’s name was changed], ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse. And all the people on earth will be blessed through you.’”

We start in Genesis 12 with the question, “Who is the Lord that is speaking?” The Lord that is speaking is the same God who created the world back in Genesis 1. The reason that is important to keep in mind is because there is this great tendency when people think of the Lord in narrow terms, as if the God who called Abraham is the God of Israel, some local Deity. The ancient Canaanites had their God and the Malachite’s had their God and the Hittites had their Gods and the Babylonians had their Gods. And the Jews had their God and that is the God who called Abraham.

The Bible says, “No. It wasn’t just the God of Israel that called Abraham. It is the God who made everything. It is the God of the universe. The one God. The supreme God.” The message to Abraham is the universal message by the one God who is over everything. There is such a tendency in the 90’s to make Christianity one of the world’s religions and to talk about the Christian God and the Christian Bible over against the Muslim God and the Buddhist God and the Hindu God. There is no such thing as the Christian God. There is just the Lord who is God over all – the universal God who has a universal message for every nation, every people group, and every color of man and woman.

And why did the one God who is over everybody call Abraham? Why did he call Abraham and tell him to leave his country and household and go to the Promised Land? Why did he do that? Because the universal God got fed up with dealing with the nations. Because the one almighty God said, “I am sick and tired of all these pagans and I have nothing to say to them anymore and I have no message for them. I am going to focus only on one person, Abraham, and one people group, Abraham’s children, the Jews. And the rest of the world can go to hell in a hand basket, as far as I am concerned.” Why did God choose Abraham? Why did God choose the Jews? Why does God choose anyone for salvation?

Here is one of those markers that can lead you through the confusing trail of the Bible. God’s choosing and God’s blessing always was and always continues to be for the purpose of blessing others. Let’s look at verse 2. “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great [and you can circle this or underline this in your Bible] and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you

and whoever curses you I will curse. And all the people on the earth will be blessed through you.” One of the principles that are operative throughout the Bible is that God blesses people so that they might be a blessing to others.

John Wimber, the late President of the AVC, used to talk about getting it to give it away. We don’t just get blessing to get it and get it and get it. We get blessing to give it. We get it to give it.

And so Paul, in thinking about Abraham being the model of God’s dealing with us, says in Galatians 3:8, “The scriptures foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham, ‘All the nations will be blessed through you.’”

Here is the problem of the Jews in Paul’s day. They dammed up the blessing of God. They said, “Yes, we see the chosenness of Abraham, the calling of Abraham, the blessing on Abraham and that blessing is just for us. We are so grateful to God that he has let us know him. We are so glad that we know God’s will and that we have his love. But that just means that we are special. That means that we are better than others. That means that God has communicated his principle that he is not interested in the rest of the world.” The Jews distorted the blessing of God into a distorted “Bless me” mentality. Rather than we are blessed in order to give the blessing away, it was we are blessed and forget about everyone else.

You see so much of that in the church today, don’t you? We know how to raise our children. We are glad that we have the principles of the Bible. And we have been privileged to hear good solid Bible teaching about parenting and child raising. We have been to all the seminars and heard all the tapes and read all the books and listened to all the radio shows. All that means is that we need to keep our children away from all those other pagan children. We need to draw the hard line and keep the circle close. Dam up the blessing.

We are just like the Jews in Paul’s day. In some charismatic churches we have “bless me” meetings where people go time and again for bless me, bless me, pray for me, pray for me. It is right to want to receive prayer. It is wrong if it just stops with you. It’s right to want the Spirit’s touch. It’s wrong to keep the Spirit’s touch just for yourself. We get it to give it. It is right to want to learn the Bible and to want to learn God’s principles for living. It is wrong when it stops with you, when you are a cup instead of a funnel. God wants a lot of funnels.

You know something; the reason why God calls us to give away whatever we have been blessed with is not because there is a big obligation on us. It is not a debtor mentality in which we say that God had done so much for you, you ought to do something for someone else. The reason why we give away what God has given us is because that is the way we increase our own joy.

There was a German poet who once said, “Joy that we share is doubly joyous.” We get doubly blessed everytime we receive God’s blessing and also when we give the blessing away. What ever you have, give that. If you have the gift of hospitality, you just really enjoy cooking and opening up your home, you are a good decorator, you are a welcoming person, and you have the gift of hospitality. Give that, double your joy. Increase the blessing. Invite an international student over. We have connection with International Friendships (IFI), here. You can contact IFI and find out about international students who are here in this country and don’t know many Americans and

would love to become a friend of an American and practice their English. Invite an international student over for a meal.

When you see people in church raise their hands for a tape, how about you who are welcoming going over after the service and greeting the person telling them, "Welcome, we are glad you are here." Some of you with gifts of hospitality, why not go over to people raising their hands and say, "If you are not doing anything for lunch, would you like to come over? Can we set a time for you to come over for dessert?" You folks with gifts of hospitality are so important in increasing the friendliness factor of this church. You either dam up your gift or you release it here.

There are retired people, students, some of who are homemakers, you might say, "What do I have to give? I don't have very much money." How about time? In your bulletins every week under the section called "A Church That Works" is a whole list of things that need to be done here. How about releasing your gift of time and service to the body?

You give what God has given to you. If God has given you a good job and a good income, rather than being like the guy in the Cadillac commercial who says, "You have worked hard. You deserve your luxury. One of the little ways you pay yourself for all your years of studying is with these nice leather seats." We get it to give it.

God has blessed many of you with the knowledge of Him. We share that knowledge of Him with people around us. There is a great blessing of evangelism that is given away. Our purpose statement as a church is "The purpose of the church is to produce mature, reproducing Christians." We don't just get it to get it; we get it to give it.

You know your Bible. You have been listening to the Bible taught for 25 years. You have studied the Bible. You have all kinds of Bible study books in your house. I would like to challenge 20 of you to give Danny or Penny Meyer a call. Danny oversees our co-ed small groups and Penny oversees our women's groups. I would like to challenge you, whether you are a man or woman, to give one of them a call and say, "I want to start a Bible study. I have all of this Bible knowledge." It is not just for you. It is to be given away.

Certainly, there is a strong message of world missions that was communicated to Abraham from the beginning and is communicated to us Christians at the Columbus Vineyard Church Fellowship in particular. It is wonderful that we have a great big church that God is blessing us here, that we get to worship God, that we get to fellowship here with each other. Here is the road sign throughout the whole Bible. God's blessing always was and continues to be for the purpose of blessing others and that means that we need some of you to be open to the possibility that God doesn't want you permanently living in Columbus. He may want to send you out on a short-term mission trip to other countries, to people groups unreached. God's blessing is always for the purpose of blessing others -- principle number one throughout the Bible.

Now the second principle that we read from these verses in Galatians is the way of blessing always was and continues to be faith. "Consider Abraham: He believed God. It was credited to him as righteousness. Understand then that those who believe are children of Abraham. The scriptures foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham. All nations will be blessed through you. So that those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham the man of faith."

The way of blessing always was and continues to be faith. The Jews thought that the way to get connected to Abraham was to be born a Jew, one of the natural descendants of Abraham's. Or to be circumcised, to become a Jew by circumcision. Paul says, "No. The way of blessing has always been faith." The connection to Abraham is you believe like Abraham believed. And that is what brings blessing and acceptance by God.

I want you to understand how faith works. There is this thread throughout the scripture that what brings blessing to us, what brings acceptance with God is faith. Abraham is the lens through which we read the Bible because Abraham is the man of faith. I want you to understand how faith works. Turn back with me to Genesis 15. The reason we are doing some flipping in the Bible today is because my topic is "How to read the Bible." I want you to see how all of this connects up.

Now, Genesis 15, "After this the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your very great reward. But Abram said, 'O, Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus. Abram said, 'You have given me no children so a servant in my household will be my heir.'"

Here is where faith begins. It begins with us being in a tough spot. There is a situation that creates anxiety for us, a circumstance that we feel overwhelmed by – finances, health problems, a religious problem. And for Abraham the tough spot, the situation, was childlessness, which in the ancient world meant the extinction of your name. People's hope for any kind of future was bound up in having children. That is how your name continued. Abraham was an old man by this time.

We start by being in a tough spot. And the tough spot in terms of the gospel, of course, is we are sinners. We have blown it. We are guilty. What is the way out of our tough spot? To trust the promises of God. It says, "Then the word of the Lord came to him, 'this man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.' He took him outside and said, 'Look at the sky. Count the stars, if indeed, you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'"

The way out is a promise from God and God placards the promise in the sky. He gives Abraham a visible picture. Look at this. I am going to publicly display to you what I am going to do. And every time you look up you can see that I am going to multiply children for you.

Tough spot? Promise from God and the promise is given a visible demonstration – a placard. Well, the apostle Paul said that is the same way it is with the gospel. You are in a tough spot regarding sin, God placards, and he demonstrates what he is going to do by hanging Jesus on a cross for all the world to see. So that every time you feel guilty, you look at a cross and you have a visible reminder of the promise of God to forgive your sins. Not just a verbal promise, but also a picture; something to focus your attention on. Look at the cross. Paul says, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was publicly displayed, placarded, something to hang public notices on, the same word, in the square so that everyone can read it." If you want to know how God is going to treat you, if you want to read God's relationship with you, stare at the cross. We have a promise of God that is placarded. The promise is about something very improbable. You are going to have children, Abraham. God is going to forgive you.

What does Abraham do? Verse 6, "Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness." Abraham doesn't just weigh out the improbableness of the fulfillment of the promise. He casts himself on the faithfulness of God and trusts God to keep his promise how ever improbable it is. And God declares Abraham righteous as a result.

Let's apply all of this to our lives. You and I daily face tough spots and you know as well as I that there are lots of things that we can do in our tough circumstances other than trust God. For example, you might lose a job and after being fired from a job, you could sink into despair convinced that God will never open up another job for you or give you another job again. You might be over extended in your family budget and decide to cut back on your giving saying, "God is not meeting our needs, so I am not going to give a full tithe." You might have a broken relationship and say, "Well, I don't think that God is going to answer this prayer to heal the relationship, so I am not even going to try to reconcile." You might be asked to do a teaching and say, "Well, it doesn't seem to me that just teaching the Bible alone is really going to pull people in and so I will just tell a lot of jokes and that will hold people's attention."

You might have a tough term paper and not much time to do it. You might say, "Hey, I'll copy some stuff from a book and plagiarize someone else's paper, make up some footnote; no one will know."

Life constantly challenges us and tests us to push us away from trusting God. And behind life and tough circumstances, the enemy is hard at work with one plan in mind, to get you to not trust in the Lord. We say, as Christians, "O, you just need to trust in the Lord," but this is the one area that Satan is constantly seeking to destroy in your life, the one thing that God is constantly looking for. Will you trust in me in this tough spot? See, Satan doesn't care how many mistakes you make, how many errors or sins. That is not his ultimate goal. His ultimate goal is to destroy trust in God and in you.

And God doesn't care about all the different things you are doing and whether you read your Bible and do this and that if it doesn't lead to building more trust in God for tough circumstances. Do you want to measure your spiritual growth? Ask yourself, "Do I trust in God more in difficult circumstances now than I did six months or a year ago?"

Trusting in God is the beginning and end to the Christian life. If Satan can get you to trust in your money or your wits or your friends or your government, your scheming, your teachers, or the church or anything other than God, he has won. And you are constantly being whispered to with this one little whisper: You can't trust in God now. He won't meet your need. You have to solve this problem on your own. This is one time you have to lie your way out.

Let me give you a little illustration of what faith is like. I want you to imagine that you are standing on the edge of this cliff that has a 10,000 ft. drop. A friend says to you that there is an invisible staircase right off the edge of the cliff. If you step off the cliff, that staircase will lead up to God's presence. How easy would it be for you to step off the cliff? You might want to put your toe out to feel the staircase and all you feel is air. Your friend says, "O, no, you can't feel the staircase until you totally step off the cliff. You literally have to jump off the safety of the earth and then you can find the staircase, otherwise forget it."

You say, "Well, okay, I will jump, but before I do I am going to tie a rope around my waist just in case that staircase doesn't hold me."

Your friend says, "You won't find the staircase that way. You better jump, no ropes attached."

I know this sounds like the leap of faith that the philosopher Kirkegaard taught and some of you might come back and say, "Faith is not just stepping off a cliff onto an invisible staircase. Faith is based on lots of historical proof and fulfilled prophecy and evidences and testimonies." I agree, we would check out my friend's credentials and we would investigate and there are a lot of phenomenally good reasons to trust this book called the Bible. But after you have evaluated all the proofs and after you have heard someone preach and they are credible and you have checked Christianity out thoroughly, you watched whether it works in other people's lives, there does come a point, a moment of truth if you will, where you actually have to step off the cliff.

Trust has to be constantly exercised. And God uses life to constantly bring us to the edge of the cliff. He says to us, "In this situation, will you trust me or will you trust your .357 Magnum, your bank account, your burglar alarm, your charm, your relationships?" C.S. Lewis once said that relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing had been done.

Here is the second principle in terms of reading the Bible: The way of blessing always was and continues to be faith.

We move on in Galatians 3:10, Paul writes: "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law. Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith.' The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, 'The man who does these things will live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

Here is the third principle in the Bible: The law never was and never will be the way to gain acceptance with God.

Back in Paul's day, the Jews believed that blessing and acceptance with God was found through the keeping of the law. There were sayings of the Rabbis that said if you kept God's statutes and God's ordinances, you would by them achieve everlasting life. Eternal life came by obeying God's law. But Paul lays out here two great alternatives. One is the way of law and the other is the way of faith. Paul essentially says that the way of law brings a curse. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse. And on the other hand, there is a way of faith, which brings blessing, and the promise of the Spirit. Two radical alternatives.

The way of law says I am accepted with God because I am relying on my own obedience. Verse 10, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse." The way of faith says, "I am relying not on my own obedience, but on God's goodness and mercy."

The way of law says, "I can manage life by myself." The way of faith says, "I can't manage life without God."

The way of law says, "You need to do and perform in order to be accepted by God." The way of faith says, "All you need to do is believe."

The way of law says, "Look at yourself." The way of faith says, "Look at God."

The way of law says, "There is still more to do and you are never quite satisfying God." The way of faith says, "The work is done and it has been done by God."

The way of law, the apostle Paul says, is a dead end. All it brings is cursing and destruction for everyone. Paul quoting the Old Testament finds this theme, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.' Why does the law bring cursing? Because the law condemns the lawbreaker and anyone who breaks any of God's laws is a lawbreaker. If you think that your acceptance with God turns on whether you have met a certain standard of performance, you are constantly living under a curse. The curse might be a continual sense of shame before God and a constant sense of failure. As a young monk, Martin Luther spends six hours wracking his brain trying to confess the sins he might have committed the previous day. He wrote, "Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I constantly felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I could not believe that I pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punishes sinners, I loathed him. I was a good monk and kept my order so strictly that if ever a monk could get to heaven by monastic discipline, I was that monk. All my companions in the monastery would confirm this and yet my conscience would not give me certainty. I always doubted and said, 'You didn't do that right.' 'You weren't contrite enough.' 'You left this out of your confession.'"

It doesn't matter what the standard is that you think you need to step over to be acceptable before God, the only thing it will breed in you is a sense of failure and shame and a curse on your life. You either look to what you do or you look to what God has done in Christ. It is either you need to do and do and do, or Christ has done and done and done. Christ's work is finished.

Why the law? If it brings a curse, why did God give the law? The apostle Paul tells us that the function of the law in verses 19-22. "What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not. For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe."

The reason why God gave us the law was to show us our need for salvation. It was added because of transgressions. In other words, to underline for us that we are sinners and we need to be saved. The function of the law was not to give us salvation, but to show us that we needed salvation. The Jews in Jesus' day tried to prove themselves holy by God's law when God intended that his law would show us that we are sinners. The main work of the law is to expose sin and to get people to be aware of sin. The law is like a mirror to show us how dirty our face is. The law is like a thermometer. It measures our temperature and shows us that we have a fever.

Paul shows the inferiority of the law by showing that it came through intermediaries. We have the law coming through angels and then Moses and then to us. Where as the way of faith comes directly from God in Jesus Christ to us. The law never was and never will be the way to gain acceptance with God.

And the fourth point that we need to consider that the distinguishing mark of the Christian always was and continues to be the presence of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 3:14, "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

The distinguishing mark of the Christian always was and continues to be: The presence of the Holy Spirit.

So much of religion is about setting up identifiable markers to determine whether a person is in or out. There are these boundary markers marking you off, stamping you with acceptability with God and separating you from the rest of the world. Scholars tell us that in New Testament times 90% of the Pharisees concern as expressed in their writings and debates was about food laws and Sabbath keeping and circumcision. What kind of food you should eat or not eat and how to keep the Sabbath and circumcision. If you asked the average Rabbi in Paul's day, "Rabbi, what is the most important thing in God's law?" they certainly wouldn't say, "Well, food laws, circumcision, or Sabbath keeping. Wash your hand three times before a meal." In fact, they would give the right answer if you said, "What is the most important thing?" They would answer the way the Rabbi answered Jesus in Mark 12:32, "You are right in saying God is one. There is no other but him. Love him with all your heart and your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. These are more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices." The rabbis knew what was the most important thing in the law. But they still focused virtually all their attention on these boundary markers – what distinguished Jews from other people.

Every little sociological grouping focuses on boundary markers. You can walk around Columbus and gangs have their colors and handshakes and turf and slogans. We like these identifiable markers because they tell us who is part of the gang and who is not part of the gang. When I was growing up in New York you had to absolutely wear the right kind of sneakers. Back then in our little group it was white Converse high tops. If you were caught with Keds or PF Fliers, forget it. When I was in high school, if you had a crew cut, you were asking to be beaten up.

And certainly, religious groups take these little boundary markers. If you go among the Amish, you can only have certain colors. You can't use zippers. You have to only use certain kinds of clasps. What is considered holy is what they would have worn in 18th Century Switzerland.

If you go to certain churches, the way we determine who is in and who is out is what kind of Bible you carry. Is it the Schofield Bible, the Ryrie's Study Bible? You have to have the right Bible with the tabs and the little carrying case. In other places, if you hair is too long for a man or your hair is too short for a woman, if you are wearing too much makeup, if you don't have the right clothes on, you are not one of us.

But Paul says that the Christian has a totally different distinguishing mark than these things that other people can see – whether you are wearing the right clothes or have the right length of hair, carry the right Bible or say the right prayers or use the phrase "Praise the Lord" every 14 seconds in your conversations. Paul says that the distinguishing mark for the Christian is the same distinguishing mark that God's people have always had to distinguish them – that is the presence of the Spirit of God.

If you want to understand the book of Exodus in the Bible, it can be summed up under this phrase, that the thing that distinguishes God's people is the presence of the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of the book, Moses has an encounter with God. He has an encounter with the Holy Spirit at the Burning Bush. And then God leads the people by the Glory Cloud, the presence of the Spirit, through the wilderness. And then the cloud of God, the Holy Spirit, comes and visits the people of God at Mt. Sinai. And then the people of God disobey the Lord and so the Lord says, "I am not going to go with you anymore." And here is the key verse in the book of Exodus, this is the theme of the book, and in many ways one of the major themes of the Bible, Exodus 33:15, "Then Moses said, 'If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with your people and me unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?'"

The thing that distinguished the people on the face of the earth is not some outward thing, clothing, hair length; it was that the presence of God was with them.

Tell me what marks your life. Is it that you carry the right Bible, that you have the right clothes, that you know a lot? Or is it that the Holy Spirit is with you?

You know, outward signs can create a sub-culture and so many Christians have abandoned their faith because they have been trained in all the outward identifiable markers. But they don't have the one distinguishing mark, the presence of the Spirit of God. There was an English Reformer in the 19th Century who approached treating the mentally ill. Back in the 19th Century the mentally ill were chained to walls in asylums and beaten. So this one guy, Samuel Tuke, taught the mentally afflicted how to behave at tea parties at churches. He dressed them the way everyone else was dressed. He told them how to hold their finger up to drink tea and how to dip their cookies and all of that. On the outside, they looked fine. But on the inside, they were still mentally ill. They were still suffering and no matter how they behaved, there was still something desperately wrong inside.

That is the way it is with a lot of churchgoers. They have all these identifiable markers outside, but inside they are not changed. Because the distinguishing mark of the Christian is I'm being changed and the Holy Spirit is changing you.

So let me ask you some questions.

First, are you giving away the blessing God has given you? What do you think God wants you to give?

Second, Is there an area of your life where God wants to give you faith? Maybe it's with your children or your spouse. Maybe it's with your singleness or your job. Maybe it's with your finances or your health.

And finally, what marks your life as a believer?

Conclusion.