

Liturgical Readings for June 2017

[Actually a treatment of St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans* which occurs as a second reading over the next few weeks]

Background:

Assistance to Jerusalem

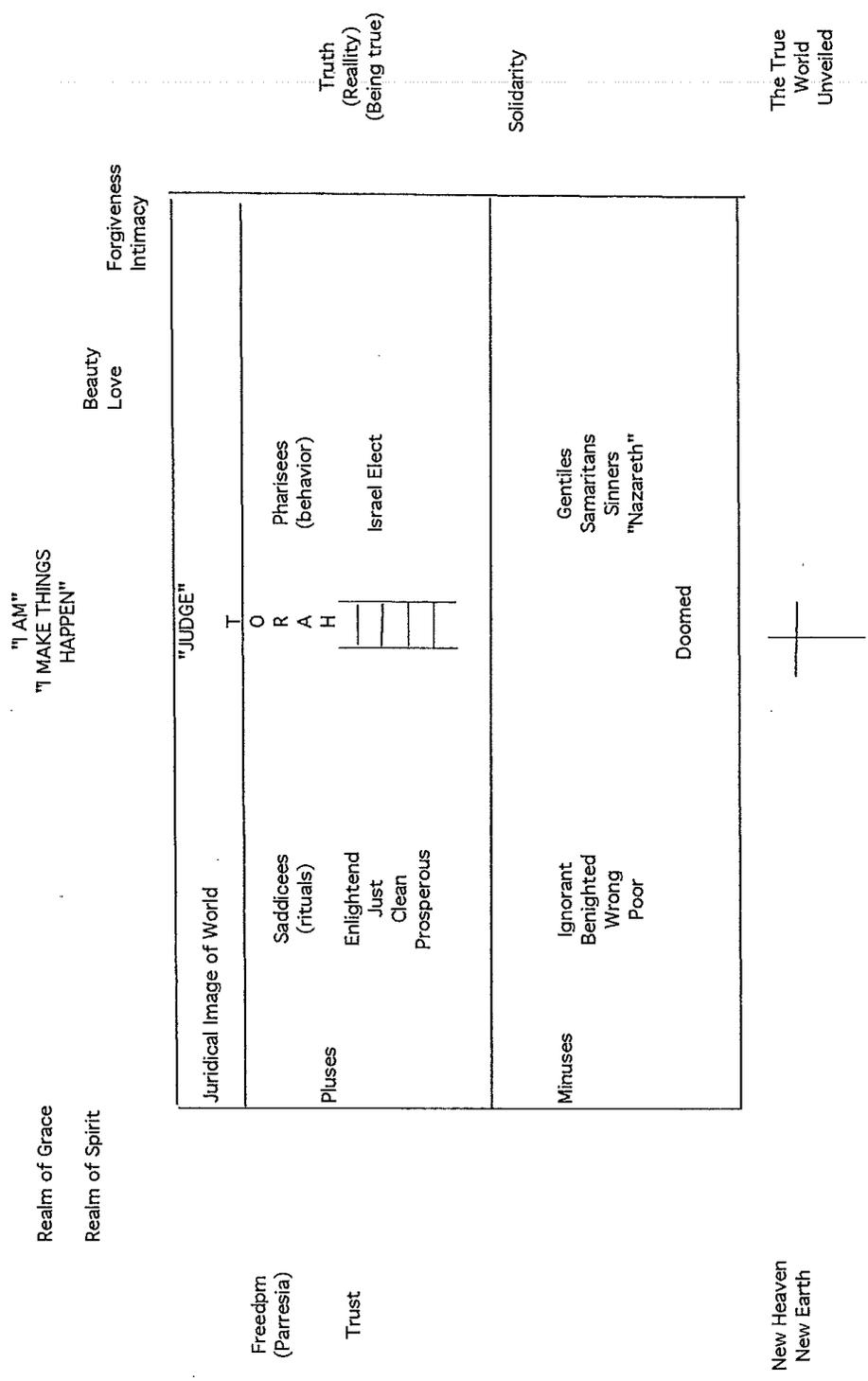
In 58 AD St. Paul was finishing a long visit to Corinth where he had helped set up a Christian community a few years earlier while on his second missionary journey out of Antioch. Right now he was completing his third journey, reinforcing the faith of the churches he had established on earlier trips and he was about to sail back to Jerusalem with donations received to help Christians there who were in tough straights as the political situation was building up to a war with the Romans that would disrupt the entire Jewish establishment in that city – by 70 AD.

So now he takes this opportunity to write a letter to the Christian church in Rome itself, because after he delivers these collected funds to the leaders in Jerusalem he plans to extend his missionary ambitions to reach as far as Spain itself. Having worked over the eastern Mediterranean, he wants to preach the Good News in the west and would like to make Rome his base of operations just as he made Antioch his base for his journeys in the east.

The nature of the universe as religiously perceived

Paul (known as Saul at the time) as a devout young Jew had lived quite zealously within the attached model of a universe divided between the elect people of Israel and the rest of the world – Gentiles, Samaritans, sinners, pagans, people who were unenlightened regarding the true God of Israel and his Torah (Law) – his moral and ritual requirements. And therefore the latter lived in darkness as minuses relative to the chosen people as plusses. For Israel knew the transcendent God of Moses and Abraham, received his Law, had access to his blessings whereas others were ignorant of all this, even rebellious.

So it was a plus versus minus universe and the tendency was to see God as the source of reward and punishment, depending on how faithfully people kept his laws.



The impact of the Gospel universe upon Paul prior to his conversion

To Paul it seemed then that this new Christian movement was a heresy, upsetting a polarized view of the universe, declaring God to be a God of universal and persistent grace and healing, a tremendous lover, embracing prostitutes, tax collectors (Roman collaborators), Samaritans (heretics), even Gentiles, claiming that observance of the Law was more likely to create hypocrites instead of saints – and that this God of Love could make lovers of us all, in which case the requirements of the letter of the Law would be more than taken care of, swamped by the tidal wave of love that could lift us to new heights of humanity, humaneness and universal solidarity.

The Law as useful, enlightening behind an image of God as a judge might have some moral effect but all of this fell short of revealing the *ultimate nature* of God as pure Love and Grace and personal Intimacy aimed at the whole human race, inviting all whom the system of Law and a judgmental God divided into good guys and bad guys, to come to know true God as a gracious God and join him beyond the constant friction of human conflict in his wide open realm where his Spirit, the breath of Love, Forgiveness reigns.

This was too much for young Paul, too naïve and too dangerous a vision – threatening to dismantle the foundations upon which human survival depended. So concerned was Paul/Saul about this so-called Good News that he became the prime ecclesiastical cop to stamp it out – until his Damascus Road experience – when scales fell from his eyes. He somehow awoke to the Gospel vision of the world, an ever-expanding world – as if he were invited to come out of his former world as from a tomb, out of darkness into light. He lay exhausted for days – as sometimes happens after a severe shock that leaves your past a closed chapter and only today and tomorrow loaded with interest, yourself amazingly re-energized, life as a perpetual awakening.

Reaction, opposition

Paul was so explicit, even vehement about his recovery of his sight (in more than the physical sense) that Jewish Christians – who still clung to the familiar set up of a split world and were reluctant to question the Law and Ritual of their tradition or get too close to Gentiles – thought he was going too far. No circumcision? no strict dietary laws? Consorting with non-Jews? Entering the Temple precincts as if it were their holy place as well? They began to counteract Paul's influence, joining synagogue Jews in denouncing his interpretation of Jesus, spreading rumors about his teachings even as far as Rome.

So Paul writes to the Roman Christians

Paul therefore, as he leaves Corinth, dispatches this letter to the Romans – 58 AD – in anticipation of running into opposition when he gets to Rome later. The Letter is an attempt (a Manifesto) to lay out his full understanding of the Gospel and the difference between himself and his conservative critics, both Synagogue (of the Pharisaical party) and conservative Christian Jews who oppose him.

Romans – chapters one to eight:

After the usual preliminary greetings Paul declares: *I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is all about the power of God influencing everyone who has faith, who **trusts** him (who has the confidence to relate to God candidly and not warily as if God were an enigma) – whether Jew or Gentile. Because this Gospel reveals, unveils God's way of correcting this system (see visual). Strictly spoken it says: Because the Gospel reveals the justice of God.*

What do we mean by God's justice?

For us justice is a scary word. Luther said that if that's all the Gospel reveals, namely God's justice in the sense of the justice that metes out reward or punishment dependent on how many brownie points we have acquired - i.e. something no different from a human legal system – then *I wish I had never heard of the Gospel* because all it does is keep me in a constant state of suspense, because (knowing my weaknesses) how can I ever please my divine, just judge and avoid the back of his hand?

But if you look at that word *justice* as it applies to God in many a Hebrew text, it is usually used parallel to the word *fidelity*. God's justice is the equivalent of his fidelity. In other words God is just, when he is faithful to us, faithful to his covenant, the deal he has made with us to save us from ourselves, to lift us to eternal life. Then he is justly doing what he promised to do, save us.

We may ignore him, be unfaithful to him, but he will be just to his promises, faithful to us no matter what. That's a different kind of justice than you will get in any human court of law. Its alternative name is grace, compassion, mercy – the mercy of a father who is true to his child no matter what – as illustrated in the father of the prodigal son.

Mistake God, mistake everything else

So first off, Paul pulls a little rabbinical device. He takes the position of Pharisee (same as his critics) within this familiar juridical universe. He poses as an elect Jew in front of other Jews and describes how decadent is the Gentile world amid

which Jews (the people of God) live – and which, he says, is experiencing the wrath of God – in other words, falling apart morally, intellectually, violently.

He points out that our usual world avoids the truth about God and settles for worshipping man made idols. And because they refuse to recognize the true, transcendent nature of God, they (the Gentiles) slip a notch all the way down the line – morally and intellectually – they sin (*hamartia* meaning off-target). He says: they boast of their wisdom but make fools of themselves, exchanging the splendor of immortal God for an image shaped like mortal man, images of beasts, creeping things. And they *become* what they worship. So there is serious slippage in their perception of things.

As another effect of falling short of true God, falling for false images of the divine and clearly because homosexuality was an acceptable practice within the Greco/Roman/East Asian world, Paul uses that practice as *another* example (maybe not one you would use today) of mistaking the true nature of God leading to people mistaking things in general. For instance, a man looks at a man and sees something feminine and the same among female relationships. (This could be disputed today; a person may simply see someone he or she truly loves.)

Paul has been slammed, the richness of his overall theology ignored, because of his use of homosexuality to illustrate the consequences of the Gentile world's mistaking idols for true God, but he was a first century Jew, the descendant of generations of Jews who lived amid wide open sexual practices even at temples, places of worship to enhance the fertility of family, clan, tribe, agriculture and commerce – enjoying themselves while assisting the fertility gods' sexual, generative influence. And I repeat, the sad thing is, many contemporaries (even well educated) get stuck on those lines of Paul spoken in an environment of two thousand years ago and thereby abort the potent vision he otherwise promotes.

But to continue . . .

As a consequence of such slippage into this split universe (see handout) the Gentile world, the non-Jewish, polytheistic, in many cases stoical, skeptical world falling short of true God, it becomes a world of moral chaos in every form. Indeed we live in a litany of vice:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity in the dishonoring of their bodies . . . because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served creatures rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen [so everything is out of whack]. *And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind . . . They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness (greed), malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity; they are*

gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve (applaud) those who practice them.

The Pharisee agrees

Well you can just hear Paul's Pharisaical, strictly legalistic listener or conservative Christian saying, *Right on Paul. I couldn't have described those infidels and miscreants better myself.* Which gives Paul an opening to make his basic point by turning to face his righteous audience which occupies this upper, plus, elect region and has the Law of Moses and the Temple and his transcendent monotheism – all these benefits, these keys to righteousness, and says:

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you the, the judge, are doing the same things. We know that the judgment of God (within that split universe) rightly falls upon those who do such things. So, do you suppose, O man, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume upon the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to metanoia (a change of heart)? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for your self . . . when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will render to every man according to his works (right?): to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality he will give eternal life, but to those who are factious and do not obey the truth but only obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury (right?). There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, Jew first and also the Greek (right?) but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, Jew first and also Greek (right?) For God shows no partiality.

Upsetting the self-righteous

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the Law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed in the Law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and truth – you then who teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? For it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

Regarding signs of righteousness – like circumcision - Paul says *he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a*

Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God.

His opponent is taken aback

So an opponent says, Golly, Paul – the way you talk you will dismantle our whole tradition. *What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? What's left of our heritage?* And Paul applies the brake to his critique, he protests: *Much in every way*, and he admits God's oracles were made to his Jewish people for the sake of the world . . . But finally he brings his whole argument to a grand finale that breaks beyond such detailed give and take, (which manner of discussion leads to no conclusion but only perpetuates an intellectual tennis match – and maybe intentionally to forestall any conclusion).

The point

He comes to his ultimate point, his ultimate conclusion: *What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written* (and now he does what rabbis do, he calls up a list of biblical verses, kind of a catalogue, quotes from psalms and prophets designed to make an overall biblical theme or point):

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one. (Now note the anatomical arrangement from head to foot) Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way (path) of peace they do not know. There is no respect for God before their eyes.

It does not matter whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, up in the higher elect category or down in the lower half of this split world. Everybody is caught in a gravitational pull of ignorance, sloppy thinking, hypocrisy: *Now we know that whatever the Law says it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be stopped . . . For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the Law, since through the Law comes consciousness of sin.* [The very existence of the Law confirms the fact that we are sinners and are stuck in it.]

We're not only falling short of true humanity but behaving in mutually destructive ways – so that if this is the way things are and God is a Judge and the Law absolute in its demands – **we are all doomed**. There are no winners. We must face the fact that somewhere along the way we have hit bottom and can't get up. The Law is not a ladder after all. It is more a directional signal pointing to minimal levels of morality (don't kill, don't steal, genuflect) that themselves often seem light years away from where we are stuck.

But now independently of the Law . . . Good News

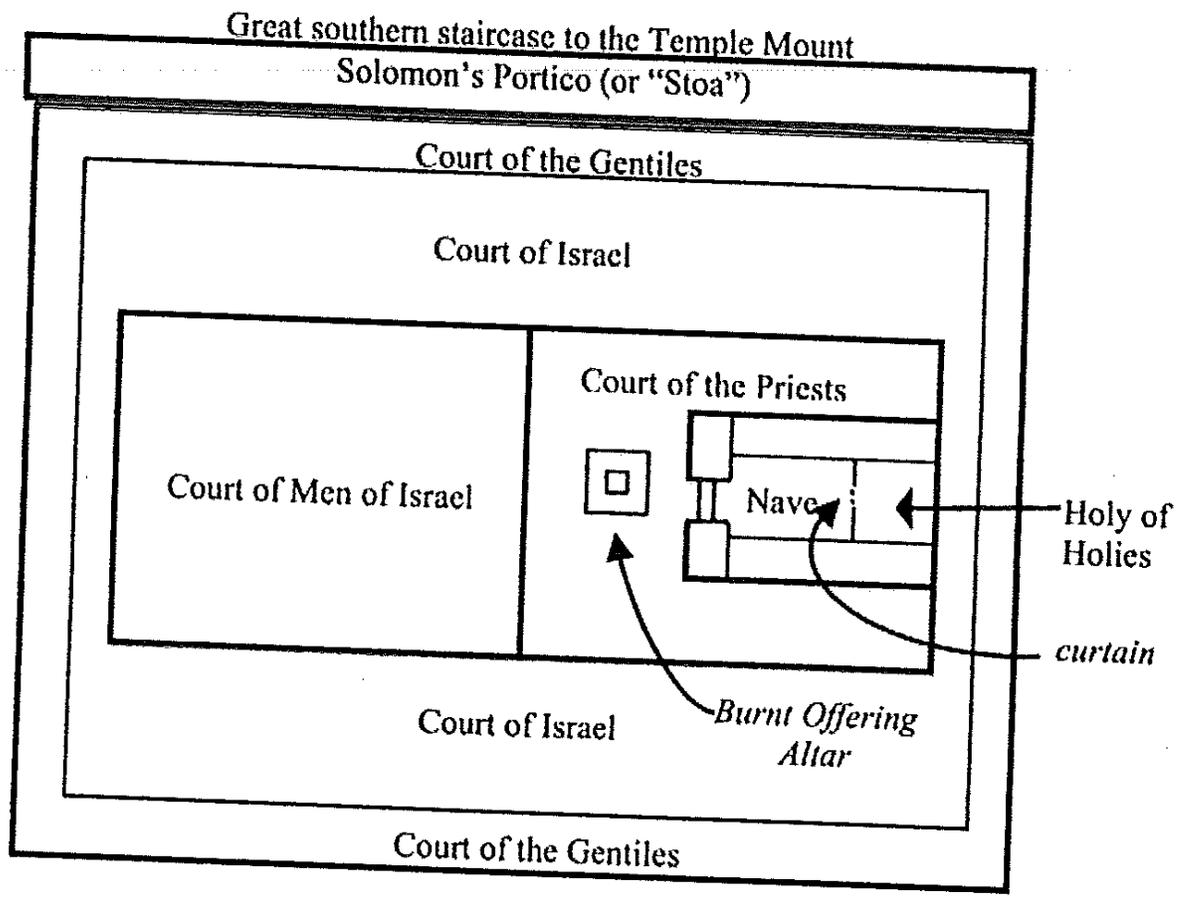
To this point in his letter what has Paul done? He has been setting us up for a huge surprise – the revelation of the real world, the real God Christ displayed for us.

*Now independently of the Law, God's justice has been brought to light (justice in the sense of God's fidelity to his promises, his commitment to us, his love which is of his essence – again like the father of the prodigal son, the love of spouses for each other). The Law and the prophets did provide hints of this. The coming of Christ was insinuated down through the Hebrew Testament (for instance as Isaiah's Suffering Servant, the Book of Job) – the hint that true God was less a judge and more a redeemer, willing to bear the brunt of the Law himself, die for us, shed blood for us, his blood, undergo ridicule like some homeless person, yet maintain his persistence to forgive (as in *Father forgive them for they don't know, they are so ignorant what they are doing*. Read the tweets!*

Abraham as the model of faith, prior to any Law

To those who are scandalized by Paul's reference to the Law as ineffectual suggests his disrespect for that climactic moment in the Hebrew Testament when God, amid thunder and earthquake, delivered to Moses the Law on Mt. Sinai. But Paul appeals to chronology; he brings up Abraham – who antedated Moses and Sinai by some 600 years – well before the Law took over Israel's attention. Was Abraham justified by adherence to the Law or by faith?

The promise to Abraham of progeny that would inherit the world did not come through the adherence to any Law but through . . . faith . . . *In hope he believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, "So shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised . . . That is why faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness."*



Access – prosagoge – a key word

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No; but on the principle of faith (trust in God). For we hold that a man is justified by faith, trust, apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one . . . Do we then overthrow the Law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the Law (because experiencing God as grace releases us also to be gracious and not fearful and capable of so much more than the Law demands!) . . .

And now says something that changed my life. He continues: *Justified by faith, we now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access (prosagoge) to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.* There is so much packed into these few words. Paul uses the word prosagoge meaning access which Fr. Lyonnet, my teacher in Rome, said refers technically to that Temple ritual, where the high priest *once a year* enters the forbidden Holy of Holies on the day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) to obtain another year's forgiveness of sins. *Only he has such access once a year to enter into the invisible presence of God in that chamber and only after much purification.*

Paul says, thanks to Christ's death and resurrection we all have access to that presence. The descending courtyards, the walls that isolate priests from laymen and laymen from women and women from Gentiles – the spaces and categories into which we are fixed – precincts of diminishing holiness – are blown away; we can break free, go straight into the presence of our once so aloof, forbidding God in and beyond his Holy of Holies – and dwell with him without apology, as family.

A taunt: “Say Paul, if God likes bestowing his grace on sinners, may we not sin all the more that God can bestow even more grace on us?”

*What shall we say then? Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were baptized therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was **raised from the dead by the glory of the Father**, we too might walk in newness of life.*

How badly are we stuck?

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the Law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law

of my mind and making me captive to the law of Sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death (this tug of war)? Thanks be to God (or the Grace of God) through Jesus Christ, our Lord. . . . There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? [of what use is this cosmic courtroom?] Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Related Texts: Galatians and Philippians

Paul was followed by critics who questioned his vision of God and God's being a God of grace – not ultimately of Law, of fear – a divine threat *unless . . . !*

Paul often reacted to these perpetuators of a split universe, of judgment, winners and losers.

Galatians 1:6 ff. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.

Galatians 3: 1 ff. O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? . . . Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? [That's what moves you, changes you . . .]

Galatians 4:1 ff. I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us, when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the Law to redeem those who were under the Law, so

that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters. And because you are sons and daughters, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter and if so then an heir. Formerly when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are not gods; but now that you have come to know God or rather to be known by God how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days, and months and seasons and years. I am afraid I have labored over you in vain.

Philippians 3:4 Look out for the dogs . . . If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh (a system which presents good conduct badges), I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the Law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the Law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as "so much garbage", in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own based on the Law but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.