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Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

An Overview and Contemplation on Long-Suffering

Overview of the Epistle

The Galatians, as a people, originated from Germany. From there, they invaded many lands and plundered towns and cities until they came to Macedonia. From there they went to Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). With respect to their religion, they had lived in the darkness of idolatry until the sun of the Gospel shone upon them. Saint Paul preached in Galatia, baptizing and establishing the church there. This wild warlike race was now producing saints. Unfortunately, some fanatic Jews who were enemies of Saint Paul began to spread their teachings in Galatia. They slandered and made false statements against the apostle and began to shake the faith of the Galatians, telling them that in order to be saved, it was not enough to believe in Christ, but that they had to be circumcised and to keep all the commandments of the Mosaic Law.

When Saint Paul heard that the Judaizers were spreading their false doctrines, he wrote to the Galatians. Saint Paul expresses his deep sorrow because the Galatians were carried away by these false teachers and believed in a gospel that he did not preach to them. Saint Paul even goes so far to say, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8-9).

Saint Paul emphasizes the universal and eternal character of the Gospel of Christ. This teaching and Christ's salvation is for all people, and does not discriminate among the nations. He emphasizes the fundamental truth of our faith that we are not saved by our own natural powers or by laws and orders by faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ. He gives the example of Abraham who was not saved by the Mosaic Law which came about 500 years after him, but by faith. The bonds of sin have now been broken. We who were once slaves are now freed beneath the cross of Christ. "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14).

While we may not see Judaizers threatening our church today, we see many carried away by other false teachings and following philosophies that are contrary to the Gospel of Christ. Let the words of Saint Paul ring in your ears, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1).

Contemplations on Long-Suffering

In Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, it is well known that he writes about the nine fruits of the spirit: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23).

The fruits of the Spirit are interrelated. Certainly, the person who has love, will also have joy, peace, and long-suffering. As we are created in the image and likeness of God, we were created to attain patience and long-suffering, following the example of God, Himself. Long-suffering is a virtue found in a person who is patient, large-hearted, compassionate, and merciful.

There are many who believe that God is not long-suffering, and think that, according to the Old Testament, He is vengeful and a destroyer. On the contrary, there are more examples of God's patience with His people, and He only destroyed those who absolutely and consciously refused His will.

David, the prophet and the king said, "*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy*" (Psalm 103:8). Likewise, God was very patient toward the people of Nineveh until they repented in sackcloth, and consecrated a fast. God was long-suffering toward the generation of Noah, waiting six hundred years and sending rain for forty days waiting for their repentance. God sent ten plagues to Pharaoh and over the land of Egypt, but because of Pharaoh's constant resistance, He hardened the heart of Pharaoh in order to carry out the salvation of the people of Israel.

Among the countless examples of the New Testament, we see the long-suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ with his disciples, and how He taught them to be long-suffering, so that they might preach the same compassion and demonstrate the same patience to others. For instance, as our Lord sent messengers before Him to a village of the Samaritans. When the Samaritans did not receive Him, James and John suggested that they command fire to come down from heaven and consume them. Our Lord taught them, "*You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them*" (Luke 9:55-56). This lesson must have penetrated their hearts, as Saints James and John would write in their epistles about love and kindness toward one another.

Likewise, Saint Paul, a persecutor of the early church experienced the long-suffering of God, and recounts his conversion in the epistle to the Galatians. This leads us to chapter 6 of this epistle, as Saint Paul instructs us how to be long-suffering and patient with one another. As God showed mercy on Saint Paul, Saint Paul now advises us to be merciful and patient with one another.

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For each one shall bear his own load (Galatians 6:1-5).

Saint Paul encourages a spirit of gentleness. He does not say, "If a man commits any trespass," but rather, "If a man is overtaken." We should not be quick to condemn. Blessed Augustine tells us that a person may have sinned without seeing at the time that it was a sin, or out of human weakness, sees that it is a sin, but is still overtaken by the sin.

Saint John Chrysostom says:

[Saint] Paul does not say 'punish' or 'pass judgment' but *restore*. Nor did he even stop there, but showing that he strongly desired them to be patient with those who stumbled he adds *in a spirit of gentleness*. He does not say 'in gentleness' but *in a spirit of gentleness*, showing that this also is the will of the Spirit and that the capacity to correct another's faults is a spiritual gift.

Indeed, it is the Spirit who guides us to truly forgive and correct as God forgives and corrects; not according to human weakness which may forgive outwardly, but inside still holds grudges and remembers another's faults.

Saint Jerome instructs us:

The Spirit-led person should correct a sinner gently and meekly. He must not be inflexible, angry or aggrieved in his desire to correct him. He should stir him up with the promise of salvation, promising remission and bringing forth the testimony of Christ.

Blessed Augustine says:

There is no surer test of the spiritual person than his treatment of another's sin. Note how he takes care to deliver the sinner rather than triumph over him, to help him rather than punish him, and so far as lies in his capacity, to support him.

God's long-suffering and compassion toward us is not an occasion to take advantage of His mercy and to continue in our sinful ways, but rather, we ought to use the time for repentance and struggle, and to thank Him that He gives us the opportunity to repent and does not quickly judge, condemn, or punish us. In the same way, we ought to do the same for others.

Why should we be long-suffering with this Spirit of gentleness? Saint Paul tells us to consider ourselves lest we also be tempted (v. 1). Also, we ought to not think that we are something, because this would be a deception against ourselves (v. 3).

Saint Jerome says:

Maybe [Saint] Paul is saying that you should identify with the sinner in order to do him good. This is not to imply, of course, that one should seemingly commit the same wrong and pretend that one is also subject to it. No, in another's wrongdoing one should think of what might befall oneself. Help the other with the same compassion that one would hope to receive from another.

Saint Jerome also says:

...Even if the righteous one has prevailed, knowing with what difficulty he prevailed over his own temptations, he should rather be ready to extend pardon to the sinner Overcoming or not overcoming is sometimes in our own power. But being tempted is in the power of the tempter. The Savior Himself was tempted. So who of us can be sure that he might cross this sea of life without any temptations?

We are called to bear one another's burdens in order to fulfill the law of Christ (v. 2). The Savior bore our burdens and our iniquities and invites us to take up the light yoke of virtue. Fulfilling the law of Christ through love means to weep with those weep, to share in our neighbor's weaknesses, and to count another's sins as if they are our own (Saint Jerome). The law is summed up in the command to love God and to love our neighbor. This law is fulfilled through the love we express to one another by bearing each other's burdens.

In verse 4, Saint Paul tells us that we must examine our lives. Even if we have done something good, we ought to examine whether we have done it through vanity, or through necessity, or with animosity, or with hypocrisy, or through some other self-centered motive (Saint John Chrysostom).

Is Saint Paul encouraging pride when he says, "...and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another" (v. 4)?

Saint John Chrysostom explains:

He says this not by way of command but by way of concession. It is as though he had said, "It is absurd to boast, but if you must, do not boast against your neighbor, like the Pharisee." The person who learns this lesson will also soon give up boasting altogether. Thus Paul's reason for conceding this was to drive out the larger malady by small steps. For the one who is accustomed to boast with regard to himself alone, and not against others, will soon reform this fault also. If he does not think himself better than others – for that is the meaning of not looking to the other – but is chastened by examining himself by himself, he will later stop this boasting too.

Even in this verse, Saint Paul demonstrates long-suffering and patience as he corrects his children and brings them toward the practice of virtue.

Does verse 5 contradict what we have said above about bearing one another's burdens?

Saint Jerome explains:

This seems to contradict the words above. . . . But one must see that he was there telling us, as sinners in the present life, to support one another and be a help to one another in the present age. Here he is speaking of the Lord's judgment of us, which is not based on the sin of another or by comparison with others but according to one's own work.

Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches. Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:6-10).

In our hope for everlasting life, let us not grow weary in continuing to do good works. Let us be patient and not lose heart. Saint Paul asks that we show goodness to all. Saint John Chrysostom tells us that in using the words "sow" and "reap" and "not lose heart," Saint Paul is telling us to do with zeal and perseverance. As long as we have the opportunity, let us take advantage of it, so that we are not shut out as the five foolish virgins, or as the rich man in the parable of Lazarus. Under grace, even if we sow in tears, we will reap in joy (Blessed Augustine).

See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand! As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Galatians 6:11-18).

The fact that Saint Paul has written with his own hand demonstrates his deep personal concern for the Galatians. Again, he refutes the Judaizers who have been spreading a false message about circumcision and have questioned the apostolic authority of Saint Paul. Saint John Chrysostom tells us that in writing the epistle with his own hand, he proclaims the authenticity of his message. In other epistles, Saint Paul may have composed them, but others actually wrote it. Here, Saint Paul says, "Although I do not write well, I have nonetheless been compelled to write for myself, so as to silence those who slander me."

Saint Jerome tells us that the Jews received special protection under the Roman Empire and were permitted throughout all the land to live by their own code and practice

their ancestral ceremonies. Therefore, whoever was circumcised, even if a Christian, was considered a Jew by the Romans. But anyone who was not circumcised was therefore not a Jew, would be persecuted by both Jew and Gentile (for not worshipping the emperor either). So, the false teachers of the Galatians were persuading them also to be circumcised in order to protect themselves. This is what Saint Paul is referring to when he says that they wish to boast in your flesh (v. 13), and that they compel the Galatians to be circumcised in order to avoid persecution for the cross of God. Saint Augustine, instead, says that these Judaizers desired to boast to the Jews about the number of proselytes they made.

It is here that Saint Paul proclaims that he does not boast in anything except the Cross of Christ! To non-believers and the world, the cross appears reprehensible, but for us, it is the highest glory and a cause of boasting. Many mock simplicity and the commandments of God, whereas we receive our liberty in practicing virtue through the power of the Cross. We have received our freedom in our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified and we to the world. The world here refers to the affairs of this life. The world has become dead to me, and I to the world. This new life and freedom comes neither by circumcision nor by uncircumcision, but a new creation in the waters of baptism in which we are co-buried and co-raised with Christ. For Saint Paul, who once persecuted others for the sake of circumcision, now lets circumcision fall to the level of uncircumcision (Saint John Chrysostom). The Israel of God is this new creation. Those who bore the name Israel are no longer of Israel for they no longer pursue this new life in the Cross of Christ. The true Israel is the Church that lives according to the grace of the Spirit.

Saint Paul says, “Let no one trouble me.” Saint John Chrysostom says that this is not because he is tired or demoralized. After all, we have been speaking of long-suffering. How could the one chosen by God to bear and do all things for his disciples give up now? Saint Paul says this to give direction to lazy Christians by helping them see how serious their situation is, to reinforce the teachings he has given and to refuse to let them abandon it.

Saint Paul bears the marks of Christ, not because of circumcision, but because he has endured much suffering and persecution through the power of Christ. By concluding this epistle with the word, “with your spirit,” Saint Paul once again reminds the Galatians to look away from corrupt and worldly things to the benevolent work of God and to remind them of the grace they have enjoyed (Saint John Chrysostom).

Glory be to God Forever. Amen.