“***For Freedom***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, June 30, 2019

**Acts 9:1–18**

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” 5He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.6But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”7The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision 11 . . . “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. . . .” 17So Ananias went and laid his hands on Saul . . . . 18And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.

**Galatians 5:1, 13–16, 18**

1For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . . 13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . 18But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law [of Moses].

The story in Acts is about Paul when he was still known as Saul of Tarsus. Saul was the name of the first Hebrew king. Tarsus was where present-day Syria and Turkey meet, on the Mediterranean. It was a prosperous Gentile city with a Jewish minority.

The story is intriguing. We learn *nothing* about what went on in Saul’s mind, or why he suddenly cooperates with Jesus after having persecuted his followers. Even later, when he had taken on the name “Paul,” a Latin word meaning “small,” he does not explain any of this, or share his thoughts about his experience. The story we have here is written not by Paul but by Luke, who also authored a gospel. It is hugely important to Luke, who tells the story three times, adding new details each time.

It must be important to Paul, too, but we are left to wonder how the apostle himself understood his experience, and his earlier life as a Pharisee. The story begins with Saul “breathing threats and murder.” What would Paul have said about this time in his life, if he were to reflect upon it? Imagine . . . .

“Looking back now, I realize how ignorant I was then. But I just didn’t know any better. I was raised to worship God and obey the Torah. When some members of the synagogues started saying that the Messiah, or Christ, had come, my rabbi told me that they were leading people astray. He said I would be doing a service to God and Torah by getting these Messianists kicked out of the synagogues.

“So I did that. But I didn’t really know what I was doing. How is it possible that an honest son of the covenant, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, could serve the Torah, and yet be completely ignorant of the harm his actions were doing?

“When I was knocked off my donkey and blinded by the light I lay helpless and blind for three days. But in fact, I was already blind *spiritually*. It was my hostility and ignorance that did that to me. I was blind to who the Lord really was, and yet, when Christ appeared to me, I knew immediately who he was, and I knew that I was going to serve him. He didn’t have to convince me. He just made a very personal remark, ‘why do you persecute me, Saul?’ Do you know what it’s like when a close friend criticizes you? It hurts a little, but you really listen. Well, this cut straight to my heart, but I knew it was for good, and not for harm.

“It was instantly clear to me: I *was* a persecutor, even though I had not raised my hand against anyone. But I was there in Jerusalem that day when Stephen, the deacon, gave his speech, and was stoned to death by the crowd. They flung their cloaks at me to hold onto, while they stoned him. I was shocked. I had not come to kill anyone, only to get some of these Messianists arrested, so we could set them straight. I know *now* that this event wore on my conscience, although I blocked my feelings about it then.

“I was on my way to Damascus to banish more Messianists when I was struck by the vision, and left speechless and blind. Then, when the scales fell from my eyes, I was healed in two ways, but it was the *spiritual* healing that was greatest. I had been blinded by my hostility, but now I was set free. Of course, I eagerly received instruction in the way of Christ.”

After this reflection on Paul’s experience, we come to the passage in Galatians where he says “For freedom Christ has set us free . . . . only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence” (Gal 5:1, 13). What do you think it means?

☼ ☼ Here is how I relate it to the whole movement from Old to New Testament. Freedom was not a particularly strong value during the centuries after Moses. Even the prophets emphasized justice and compassion, not freedom. But freedom is a *premier* value in the Christian system. Jesus has set us free from fear and given us a way to live loyally and spiritually, motivated by a *renewed heart* rather than by fear of God. “Living by the Spirit” means more freedom *and* more personal responsibility. The focus is more personal than was the old way of simply being loyal to the law. We have been given freedom, and we need to be mature enough to use it correctly. He to whom much has been given, from him much is expected.

The Jesus way carries a new emphasis on maturity and freedom—and on their *inseparability*. Freedom without maturity causes recklessness and disaster. Maturity without freedom is a kind of rigid legalism that can be corrupted, as the Pharisees’ legalism spiraled down into evil plotting. So we need maturity, freedom, responsibility, and love—not just dedication to principle, but hearts for serving others—not just loyalty to a law, but minds that are open to new revelation. If the Spirit is within you, there will always be new revelation coming. Are you free enough, are you mature enough, to receive it?