



# FAITHFULNESS TO FAITHFULNESS: THE COMPASS OF SPIRITUAL READING IN THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL<sup>1</sup>

SHELDON TABILE

TITUS BRANDSMA INSTITUTE, RADBOUD UNIVERSITY

NIJMEGEN, THE NETHERLANDS

stable@sanbeda.edu.ph

*This paper is intended for the spiritual reading of St. Paul's Letter. It investigates the dynamics and movements in the relationship between Divine and human reality. For the Divine reality, it investigates God's Heseid in the covenantal promise, particularly with Abraham, and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who will come on the last days. In human reality, the Shema and commandments are explored together with Emunah and Hineni as the human response to God's faithfulness. Also, it investigates the tradition of zealotness for God, having no idols, and living a moral life. The key to human reality is conformity to Jesus Christ and having faith like that of Jesus in the Father, through which there is justification and participation. Maranatha is the human disposition to the parousia of the Lord. Finally, the paper investigates the eschatological dimension of One God, One People, and One Future: the new creation, new heaven and earth, new mind, and new ways of relating called the Church.*

Keywords: *Spiritual Reading, Letters of St. Paul, Faithfulness, and Scriptures*

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## Introduction

Many scholars have studied the Letters of St. Paul not only from the lens of Biblical hermeneutics but even from the disciplines of philosophy, politics, and economics, to name a few.<sup>2</sup> The Letters of St. Paul have drawn interest among Christians, especially those who came from the Protestant tradition, making the letters of Paul, specifically Romans, the key letter. It is not a surmise to say that the Pauline letters are one of the most studied books in the New Testament. The intent paper is part of the ongoing project of utilizing spiritual reading<sup>3</sup> in understanding the spiritual text, in this case, the letters of Paul. As we look at the letter of St. Paul, the dynamics and movements in the reciprocity between God

and the human person are given close attention. Central to reciprocity are the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of the human person. We shall investigate the dynamics of faithfulness as it is related to Jewish prayer, the coming of the promised Messiah, the road to Damascus, and the letters of St. Paul.

## FAITHFULNESS IN ISRAEL

Emunah (הַנּוֹמָא) and Hineni (הִינֵנִי דַע) capture the tradition of faithfulness in Israel. These terms bring us back to Abraham, in whom we find the peak of the covenant in the Old Testament. The first appearance of Emunah is in Genesis 15:1–6. Obeying God’s commands, Abraham brought his family in the direction of the land that God promised. The book of Genesis narrates that Abram had a vision of God reassuring him, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”<sup>4</sup> Here, Abraham asked God since he remains to have no offspring. Abraham is still without children, so what is the value of a great reward if there are no offspring to inherit it? God then takes Abraham outside his tent and instructs him to gaze at the sky and try to count the stars, explaining that his descendants will be as many as the stars. How does Abraham respond to this new promise? *Vehe’emin* וְהִימִין, Abraham trusted in the Lord, and it was considered righteousness by Him.<sup>5</sup> Abraham’s question comes from a trusting heart. So when God responded to him, exceeding his human understanding, he gave his heart to God, full of faith. And the book of Genesis tells us that because of Abraham’s faith in God, he was made righteous. From the beginning, righteousness did not come from human capacities and efforts. Rather, through one’s faithfulness, God acts on the person, making him righteous, or, in the

<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of the ongoing research project on interiorization with the Titus Brandsma Institute, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright., Paul. A Biography. SPCK Publishing: United Kingdom, 2018, 350.

<sup>3</sup> What is spiritual reading? “Spiritual reading is oriented to the dynamic of relationships in the spiritual text. The focus is on the movements, moments, and layers that are taking place. Discernment of the text is necessary to see the dynamics in the text. Attentiveness to the dynamics paves the way to reciprocity, which is the central paradigm in spiritual reading. God gives himself, and the human person strives to give himself too. God, in a reciprocal relationship, takes the initiative to reveal Himself, and His interior life is made known to the human person. Revelation is fundamentally God’s desire for his creatures, specifically the human person. In God’s revelation, he becomes present. God’s presence comes through the lived experience of protection, security, sustenance, deliverance, surety, liberation, freedom, stability, restoration, peace, stillness, rest, courage, fortitude, strength, completion, satisfaction, fullness, light, life, and love, which are gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. The reciprocity of the human person in a reciprocal relationship comes in three layers: receptivity, responsiveness, and responsibility. Receptivity is receiving what God intends to give the human person. To receive God is contemplation, and for John of the Cross, pure contemplation consists of pure receptivity. Without receptivity, the human person cannot be in a reciprocal relationship. Receptivity includes the various layers of openness, listening, and addressability. How are we able to receive God? Receptivity entails opening oneself to God and listening to His revelation. This brings us back to the key in the covenant relationship: “Listen, O Israel!” is an invitation to receptivity, to make our inner lives a space for God, to be addressable by God. When there is receptivity, there is responsiveness. The first layer of responsiveness is availability for God. God addresses the person, and the person makes himself available to God by saying, “Here I am!” In that responsiveness, the giving of one’s entire self to God ensues. God addresses the human person; the human person makes himself available to God; and the human person gives himself to God. Then, what comes after is the inworking of God, letting the divine light, life, and love overflow from the person to others. This is a responsibility. The person becomes responsible as God’s light, life, and love overflow as a result of the grace of one’s receptivity to God. One does not become responsible for the other person’s sake, but because one has become so receptive that God’s love fills him and God’s indwelling overflows to others. Responsibility is then the action of God in us and through us in His mission.” Sheldon Tabile, “Phenomenological and Dialogic Thinking in Spiritual Reading: Spiritual Paradigms of Selected Biblical Figures.” *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 12, no. 1 (March 31, 2023): 70–84. Accessed March 13, 2024. <https://scientia-sanbeda.org/index.php/scientia/article/view/147>.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 15:1.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 15:1–6.





words of St. Paul, justified. In this verse, Paul echoes his letter to the Romans and Galatians, explaining what justification is.

Abraham's Emunah *הנומא* and Hineni *דע יייה* find their peak in the offering of Isaac.<sup>6</sup> The request from God to sacrifice Isaac is absurd. It was God who gave Isaac as a gift, and now He abruptly takes it away. Abraham's being tested to offer his son as a sacrifice to God obscures God's understanding of love. However, in the tradition of Israel, this Abrahamic covenant is a high point in terms of God's covenant with his people. Abraham's willingness to offer his son is a response to God's 'absurd' request. The Angel of the Lord called him twice, "Abraham, Abraham." Abraham uttered the words "Here I am, Lord." Hineni is total attention and disposition before God. The receptivity of Abraham is chiefly characterized by availability, addressability, and total self-donation.<sup>7</sup>

Further, Isaac, like his father, was able to speak in the silence of his heart and mouth, "Here I am, Lord." Isaac also showed holy generosity through his total self-donation. He did not protest upon knowing that he would be offered. He did not make any negotiations. He did not manipulate his father or the will of God. Rather, he surrendered himself in the silence of his heart and spoke, 'Here I am, Lord.' Isaac was a gift from God to Abraham. Now, he becomes a gift from his father to God. That eternal movement of God as the beginning and end of all gifts seals the covenant relationship of Israel with God. Their devotion comes to the full in their total willingness to offer all they have for God. In turn, God blessed them, particularly Abraham,

with "descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants will gain possession of the gates of their enemies. All nations on earth will bless themselves by your descendants because you have obeyed my command."<sup>8</sup> In Paul's letter, on numerous occasions, he will make Abraham an example of faithfulness in the Old Testament. Such showed not only the depth of Paul's understanding of the Torah, Nevim, and Ketuvim but also the ability to weave together what is old with Jesus Christ as the fullness of all.

### FAITHFULNESS AND PRAYER

Prayer is fundamentally linked to Shema Israel.<sup>9</sup> "Listen, Israel!" Prayer is attentively listening to God. Shema has a fourfold movement: hearing, heeding, obeying, and doing God's instructions. Prayer requires the ability to hear. It is not merely a long list of intentions but does involve listening to God and embracing His voice in one's life, which leads to obeying His commands. Here is the crucial question: How can I effectively hear God's voice? Through the Scriptures. By reading the Scripture, one listens to God's voice, and one is doing the Shema Israel. In other words, to hear the voice of God, one must read the Scriptures. Active prayer involves interpreting the Scriptures as

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 22:17.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase "Shema Yisrael" is a foundational declaration and prayer that conveys a deep faith in the unique and matchless God. Shema requires a deep and steadfast commitment to God. God's invitation is defined by an absolute and all-encompassing love that surpasses the constraints of time, place, or circumstance. This love is all-encompassing, affecting every aspect and condition without exception. Individuals must focus their thoughts, express their ideas clearly, and obey God's laws. The Shema commands the Israelites to show complete and sincere dedication to God. Shema encompasses listening, heeding, obeying, and doing. 'Shema' is the exclusive term in Hebrew for recognizing and following God's precepts. This prayer encourages individuals to connect with God, leading to a feeling of fulfillment and unwavering trust. When a person prays the Shema, they become aware of God's *Hesed* and *Hakkadosh*. Sheldon Tabile, "Phenomenological and Dialogic Thinking in Spiritual Reading: Spiritual Paradigms of Selected Biblical Figures." *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 12, no. 1 (March 31, 2023): 70-84. Accessed March 13, 2024. <https://scientia-sanbeda.org/index.php/scientia/article/view/147>.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 22:1-19.

<sup>7</sup> Here I am Lord' is one's self-giving that makes one holy. It is holy generosity. And it was not only Abraham who was made holy; his offering, his very own son, was made holy too. Abraham was saying, "If God wants my son, I will generously surrender to Him." Although the angel told him not to continue with the killing of his own, the sacrifice was already made when Abraham agreed to offer his son to the Lord. To be attentive, disposed, and receptive to God is to make our offerings holy.





God's communication, revealing God's will, and seeking His will. Such prayer is articulated in the Lord's Prayer: 'Your kingdom comes, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'<sup>10</sup> To hear from God, essentially, one must engage in reading and reflecting on the Scriptures. This is Shema Israel.

In Deuteronomy 4, Shema includes the ten Commandments, אֲשֶׁרֶס הַבִּידוֹס, אֲשֶׁרֶס הַבִּידוֹס, which emphasize love for God and love for one's neighbor. To put it simply, obeying the Commandments is a crucial aspect of prayer as it demonstrates one's faithfulness to God, the love of the one and true God, and the love of neighbors. Shema involves not just listening, reading, and contemplating the word of God but also following God's commandments in daily life. Not adhering to His commandments indicates not only an immoral life but also a life deficient in prayer. He was doing the Shema in the Jewish tradition, reciting the Shema with openness and listening to God, studying the Scriptures, meditating on God's word, and obeying His Commandments. Engaging in this action signifies genuine prayer. St. Paul is well-initiated in the Jewish tradition of prayer. As a zealous Jew, he carries it rigorously and even to the extent of rigidity.<sup>11</sup> The tradition of prayer

<sup>10</sup> Our Father is an example of Jewish prayer. Our Father exhibits notable conceptual and word-for-word similarities in Jewish liturgical tradition and originated from Jewish liturgy. The content of the Lord's Prayer is equivalent to the essential Jewish liturgical notion of וְיִבָּא מַלְכוּתְךָ (Avinu Malkenu), which translates to "Our Father, Our King." Every aspect of the Lord's prayer revolves around either the paternity or kingship of God. "Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom has come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors. Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Mathew 6:9b-13a.

Furthermore, there are direct similarities in wording between the Lord's Prayer and many Jewish petitions like "Our Father, Our King," "Amidah," and "Morning Blessings".

וְיִתְחַנֵּן לְפָנֶיךָ חַטֹּאתֵינוּ וְיִסְלַח לָנוּ. Our Father, our King, forgives and pardons all our sins.

וְיִקְדֹּשׁ שִׁמְךָ בְּעוֹלָם וּבְעוֹלָמוֹת עוֹלָם. We will sanctify your name in this world, as it is sanctified in high heaven.

וְלֹא תִּלְוֵנוּ לַאֲשֶׁר לֹא, וְלֹא תִּלְוֵנוּ לַאֲשֶׁר לֹא, וְלֹא תִּלְוֵנוּ לַאֲשֶׁר לֹא. Lead us not into sin and transgression, iniquity, temptation, and disgrace, so that evil will not rule over us.

<sup>11</sup> Galatians 1:13-14. "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors."

that Paul strived to keep in his life is significant in interpreting Paul's so-called conversion on the road to Damascus.

What does one listen to while reading the Scriptures? God's promise. In the fall of Adam and Eve, humanity shared in the transgression and defiance of God, yet in the mysterious love of God, He initiated and pledged to renew and reconcile us with Himself. Every time the scripture is read, one consistently encounters God's promise of protection, sustenance, nourishment, liberation, freedom, stability, and restoration.

During the Second Temple period, the Israelites came back from Babylon. Upon their return, they were still subject to foreign governance, thus not attaining freedom and remaining in a state of servitude, akin to captivity and exile. Isaiah prophesied the coming of a new Exodus.<sup>12</sup> God informed them that they were enslaved and in exile, but He would set them free. During the era of the second temple, the Israelites anticipated the new Exodus, a divine rescue in the vision of Isaiah, together with Daniel<sup>13</sup> and Ezekiel.<sup>14</sup> The Israelites believed that the awaited figure would possess governmental authority and liberate them from external domination. With this, it comes as a total shock, particularly for St. Paul and Jesus as the crucified messiah.

## FAITHFULNESS AND THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH

Early Christians believed in the imminent arrival of a new celestial realm and a new terrestrial realm, where heaven and earth would converge. The event began at the Resurrection

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 52:11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ezekiel 20.





of the Lord. The new heaven and earth<sup>15</sup> are not new creations but rather recreated and renewed versions of the original. The previous heaven and earth were destined for destruction. The old earth and heaven shall perish. In the resurrection of the Lord, all shall pass through death, but it will no longer have power over the person.<sup>16</sup> In one's faith, like that of Jesus to the Father, one share in the Resurrection of Jesus, bringing about a complete transformation.<sup>17</sup> The Resurrection, referred to as the second creation, is a continuous process. The renewal will culminate in the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Christians anticipated the return of the Lord.<sup>18</sup> In the liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest together with the faithful prays for this after Our Father: "Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of Your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." The focus is on the anticipation of Jesus' return—"the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

In the case of the Jewish people, they also held belief in the arrival of the Messiah. It is faith manifested through hope. The Jews anticipate the arrival of a figure who they think has not yet come, unlike others who hope for a different individual to arrive. They are still awaiting him. How do the Jews anticipate the arrival of the Messiah, and what actions are they expected to take to facilitate and support the coming of the Messiah? Prayer.<sup>19</sup> The promise of a Messiah

arose due to the ongoing exile and lack of freedom experienced among the Israelites. What actions were required of the Israelites for the Messiah to arrive? First, they follow God's commandments faithfully as Jews to bring about the arrival of the Messiah. Idolatry and immorality must be avoided, as they could impede the arrival of the Messiah. The Jewish people were required to adhere strictly to the law. They enforced stringent adherence to purification procedures as they believed these practices were connected to fidelity, monotheism, and ethical behavior. The Messiah will only come if these prerequisites are met. The Jews must adhere to their faith. They endeavored to be faithful by praying, following the Commandments, contemplating God's word, maintaining a single-minded devotion to God, acknowledging God as the one and true God, and leading a virtuous life. The devoted Jews believed they should do certain actions because, according to their calculations, the Messiah was expected to arrive, but there was a delay.

St. Paul persecuted the Christians because he believed they were engaging in idolatry by following and worshipping Jesus. He believed that they lived an immoral life due to their association with sinners, tax collectors, adulterers, and others. That was unethical. He believed that these obstacles were preventing the Messiah from coming, and thus, they should be persecuted, removed, and killed to allow the Messiah to come.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the connection between the Torah and the temple.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 65:17–19, 66:22; 1 Corinthians 13 and 15; 2 Peter 3:13; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 21:1–2, 11–14; 18–21–27.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 6:8–11 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22.

<sup>17</sup> Philippians 3:10; 1 John 5:11–12.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:26; Ephesians 4:30; Philippians 1:6, Philippians 3:20–2; Colossians 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:8; Titus 2:11–14; Hebrews 9:28, Hebrews 10:24–25; James 5:7; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:8–10; 1 John 2:28, 1 John 3:2–3; Jude 1: 14–15; Revelation 1:7–8, Revelation 3:11, Revelation 20:11–15, Revelation 22:12, Revelation 22:20.

<sup>19</sup> There is a specific prayer for the coming of the Messiah coming from the Amidah: The heart of Jewish prayer life consists of a prayer known as the Amidah (18 blessings). Often said three times a day, while praying

with others, this prayer becomes the cornerstone of each prayer service. The following prayer is included in the daily Amidah.

The offspring of your servant David, may you speedily cause him to flourish and enhance his pride through Your salvation, for we hope for Your salvation all day long. Blessed are you, Hashem, who causes the pride of salvation to flourish; and Yigdal: As a part of the daily morning prayers said in many congregations, the Yigdal prayer is often sung or chanted. This prayer focuses on the 13 Articles of Faith that the Rambam (Maimonides) says every Jew should believe in. The 12th principle is stated as "I believe with complete faith in the coming of Moshiach (Messiah). And though he may tarry, I shall wait to anticipate his arrival each day.





During the period of exile, when the temple was destroyed and the Israelites had nowhere to worship and make sacrifices to God, the Torah was a mobile sanctuary. Reading and contemplating the Word of God, particularly in the diaspora, allows the spirit of God to reside in them. The Torah might be considered a portable temple. The Temple holds great importance for Israel as it serves as the meeting point between heaven and earth where individuals seek to connect with God.

When the Messiah arrives, the Israelites believe he will appear in the temple.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it is essential to maintain cleanliness and to purify it consistently. Corruption, defilement, and desecration could impede the arrival of the Messiah. Two obstacles preventing the arrival of the Messiah are: first, the prevalence of adultery and immorality among the people; and second, the impurity of the sanctuary. That is why the purifying ritual took place. The priests maintained the temple's purity by preventing sacrilege and contamination. Also, it is for this reason that Jesus drove away all those making commerce in the temple of God, not just because He was angry but because of the necessity for the temple to be clean.<sup>21</sup> For soon, the messiah, in His person, will appear as the new temple. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."<sup>22</sup> In the crucifixion of Jesus, He becomes the new temple. Through His cross, a connection between heaven and earth is restored.

### FAITHFULNESS ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Generally, the event on the road to Damascus is seen as the conversion of St. Paul. However,

<sup>20</sup> Jesus was carried to the Temple, where Simeon saw Him and sang the famous Nunc Dimittis, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Luke 2:29–32.

<sup>21</sup> John 2:13–18.

<sup>22</sup> John 2:19.

the term "conversion" implies a change in the object of worship. Paul persisted in worshipping the God of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In that respect, nothing has changed. Such God, whom he strived to be faithful to, has now revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> What St. Paul experienced was a continuing experience, a developing narrative, a time when the God of St. Paul, whom he intensely prayed for, revealed Himself to him.

There are three accounts in Acts (namely, chapters 9, 22, and 26) of St. Paul's so-called conversion. The stories have consistent dynamics, with St. Luke narrating Acts 9 and Paul himself speaking in Acts 22 and 26. As St. Paul went to Damascus, he was armed with three things: a letter from the high priest, his zealotry for the one and true God, and the Torah.

Without question, the journey was lengthy, which caused some to engage in a debate on whether Paul was riding on an animal (a horse or mule) or going to Damascus on foot. However, the more important question is, with the long-winded travel, what was Paul doing? There is no direct evidence for this, but with the characterization of St. Paul as a zealous Pharisee, one thing comes to mind: he was praying. Like any faithful Jew, St. Paul was praying Shema, meditating on God's word, and, more importantly, praying for the coming of the Messiah.<sup>24</sup>

During the Second Temple period, Ezekiel 1:1–28<sup>25</sup> was a well-known scripture text used to pray for the arrival of the Messiah and the

<sup>23</sup> Colossians 1:15–20 and Hebrews 1:2–3.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, 14–58.

<sup>25</sup> The haftarah on the first day of Shavuot is a highly revered section of the Bible. The text, titled *Mirkevot Yechezkel*, relates Ezekiel's revelation, where he witnessed a wide range of supernatural beings in what he referred to as a "chariot." This literature is the main source in the Tanach for the mystical aspect of the Torah, referred to in Jewish terms as Kabbalah. The Talmud and early Jewish texts describe Kabbalah as *Maaseh Merkavah*, which translates to "the workings of the chariot." This is recited on Shavuot, the day the Torah was given because the Sinai event revealed not only God Himself but the entire divine realm.





figure seated on the throne. In this text, God's glory was revealed as He manifested Himself. The image of light reflected the magnificence of the Lord's glory. And upon the sight of the glory of God's light, Ezekiel said, "I dropped to the ground and heard a voice say." Take note of the important elements: Ezekiel witnessed the radiance of God and fell upon hearing a voice speaking. Interestingly, Acts 9 contains the same elements. God's light in the account of creation in Genesis, which was hidden after the fall of man in Genesis, is once again revealed for St. Paul to see. Similar to Ezekiel, St. Paul also stumbled and heard a voice. St. Paul inquired, "Who are you?" and there was an immediate response, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."<sup>26</sup> The conversation of St. Paul with the figure of a man wrapped in light is prayer. St. Paul received what he was praying for. He was praying for the coming of the Messiah, and the Messiah revealed Himself to him.

Interestingly, there were no other questions apart from "Who are you?" Not only is it not the very character of St. Paul, but more importantly, he is now placed within Israel's tradition of faithfulness. Like Abraham, once God replies, there are no more questions; the response is *Vehe'emin* (וְיִמְרֹן), faithfulness. Paul had a revelation of the Lord while traveling to Damascus. Paul's later teachings were derived from his contemplation of the revelation he received from Jesus. As read in the first chapter of the Letter to the Galatians, Paul's teachings were not received from the apostles but from God Himself.<sup>27</sup>

## FAITHFULNESS IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

The revelation that Paul received revealed that Jesus Christ, who was crucified, had risen from the dead and that the salvation brought by the Risen One was meant for all people. Paul wholeheartedly placed his trust (*Vehe'emin* וְיִמְרֹן) in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, considering all his previous achievements as insignificant compared to Christ. "More than that, I regard everything as a loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, so that I may gain Christ."<sup>28</sup> I consider everything a loss compared to the superior worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his benefit, I have willingly given up everything and considered them worthless so that I can attain Christ and be united with him. Paul fully committed himself to Christ to encounter Christ's power of resurrection and share in his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, to rise with Him to eternal life.

For this rising with Christ to take place, faithfulness is necessary, which comes through conformity to Christ. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own."<sup>29</sup> Conformity is the path leading both away from and back to God. For Paul, gaining Christ means being discovered in him by God<sup>30</sup> and achieving the prize of the heavenly call of God.<sup>31</sup> Knowing Christ is not the goal, but rather a process of conforming to achieve transformation in God.

Paul uses the phrases "to be in Christ" and "to be in the Lord" to describe the process of conforming to Christ through transformation in

<sup>26</sup> Acts 9:5.

<sup>27</sup> Galatians 1:11–12: "For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, [a] that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

<sup>28</sup> Philippians 3:8.

<sup>29</sup> Philippians 3:12.

<sup>30</sup> Philippians 3:9.

<sup>31</sup> Philippians 3:14.





God. These phrases appear 80 times throughout Paul's letters. It encapsulates the essence of Paul's faithfulness to God. Paul asserts the truth in Christ,<sup>32</sup> finds grounds to brag before God in Christ Jesus,<sup>33</sup> and acknowledges that God always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.<sup>34</sup> He exhorts his followers to think of themselves as being completely united to God through Christ Jesus and free from the influence of sin.<sup>35</sup>

The phrase, ἐν Χριστῷ, in Christ, is understood as the true identity and belonging in Christ of all those who followed Him.<sup>36</sup> Jesus Christ is considered the messianic embodiment of the church<sup>37</sup> as we become one in faithfulness to God: "All of you are unified in Christ Jesus."<sup>38</sup> St. Paul's 'being in Christ' is a reciprocal relationship where Christ is present in every Christian and the Christian church: "My children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you."<sup>39</sup> Test yourselves! Are you not aware that Jesus Christ resides within you?<sup>40</sup> Faithfulness, according to Paul, finds its climax in this declaration: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."<sup>41</sup>

For Paul, conforming to Jesus Christ in the manner that He is faithful to God is not only the path to God but also God's way of reaching, coming, and acting out to us. Paul considers everything worthless compared to gaining Christ and being found in God through Him.<sup>42</sup> What matters most is being discovered by God through Christ. God reveals himself through Christ, in whom we have our being.

<sup>32</sup> Romans 9:1.

<sup>33</sup> Romans 15:17.

<sup>34</sup> Corinthians 2:14.

<sup>35</sup> Romans 6:11.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:30, Romans 8:1, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Galatians 3:28.

<sup>37</sup> Romans 12:5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>39</sup> Galatians 4:19.

<sup>40</sup> Corinthians 13:5.

<sup>41</sup> Galatians 2:20.

<sup>42</sup> Philippians 3:9.

Paul emphasized that central to conformity to Christ is the understanding of God's desire and will for us,<sup>43</sup> receiving God's grace,<sup>44</sup> becoming a new creation,<sup>45</sup> partaking in the Spirit of God for help in our weaknesses,<sup>46</sup> and having the Spirit pray within us<sup>47</sup> calling out, "Abba, Father!" In Christ, we have the "freedom of the children of God"<sup>48</sup> and are made free.<sup>49</sup> Through Christ, we have life. "The consequence of sin is death, but God offers eternal life as a gift through Christ Jesus, our Lord."<sup>50</sup> Being "in Christ" entails undergoing a conversion to conform to Him, following His example of faithfulness to the Father, and following His guidance into one God, one people, and one future.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

What is the fundamental dynamic and movement in the letters of Paul that can be used to read his letters spiritually? Paul's letters emphasize the need to conform to Jesus Christ, becoming faithful to the Father as and through Him, accomplished through the grace from God bestowed on the human person that caused his justification as children of God and participation in the reign of God in the ongoing new creation.

### *The Faithfulness of God*

God is the Merciful One, the Holy One. His love is faithful, unending, and reliable. This God's love was revealed in the different covenantal relationships: Edenic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic. In each covenant, God made a promise that He would fulfill. Particularly, He promised Abraham to have generations,

<sup>43</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:4.

<sup>45</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:8; 1 Cor. 2:12; and 2 Corinthians 1:22.

<sup>47</sup> Romans 8:26.

<sup>48</sup> Romans 8:21.

<sup>49</sup> Galatians 5:13.

<sup>50</sup> Romans 6:23.







land, and blessings upon his descendants. This is important because the generations that would come after Abraham were the future Church and the promised land as the new heaven and new earth in the new creation inaugurated at the resurrection of the Lord.

Jesus, the Messiah, is the new Adam. At the coming of Jesus, God inaugurated the new creation. All is new.<sup>51</sup> The freedom of the Israelites was brought to fulfillment as they were freed from the yoke of the law. The new covenant is no longer through the tablets of law but through Jesus, as the new David, the new king. He governs and rules in both heaven and earth, where the new temple will come down and dwell.<sup>52</sup> Jesus made the world new and different. In his incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection, all were recreated, restored, and transformed in and through Him.

Even when humanity was unfaithful, God's unwavering faithfulness led them back to a restored relationship with Him, which is evidence of His righteousness. Through this, the renewed people of God participate in the ongoing process of renewal that the Lord's resurrection started. In the new creation, all are going into the eschatological reality of the one and true God, one people without distinctions or divides, and one shared future as God's will for humankind, made possible "through the resurrection of the Lord."<sup>53</sup>

### *Faithfulness in the Human Person*

Taking St. Paul as an example, he remained faithful to God until the end. He worshipped the one God whom he worshipped and was zealous for, but now revealed fully in Jesus Christ. His faithfulness is in the tradition of the children

of Abraham, through whose faithfulness God reckoned righteousness for him. Abraham best exemplified this through his self-donation of his son Isaac. However, in Israel's history, instead of faithfulness, their response was infidelity to infidelity.<sup>54</sup> With this, there is always a strong invitation to be zealous for God. It is not just passion without direction. It is a passion that leads to being oriented and faithful to God. Someone who resolves to be faithful to God has this zealotry, such as that of Elijah, Phinehas, and Judas the Maccabee. Zealotry is related to trust and faithfulness to God. Zealotry is the resolve to be true and faithful to God. How is this shown in the life of Israel? Prayer. It is the singular act of becoming faithful to God. Shema and commandments are essential, for through them, one is helped to love the one God with all his heart, mind, and strength and to love one's neighbor. Zealous persons live the Shema and follow the commandments, walking in the path of righteousness, though often falling short. In personal and communal righteousness, there is cleanliness and purification, and humankind becomes ready to receive the Messiah.

Through the action of God in Jesus Christ, one becomes faithful to God because of the grace given to us, which justifies his involvement in the relationship. The righteousness of God is that even if humanity has become unfaithful, God remains faithful and brings us back to our relationship with Him. This enables us to participate in the ongoing new creation that God began with the resurrection of the Lord.

### *One God, One People, and One Future*

The human-divine relationship interacts in reciprocity, heading toward one God, one people (no more distinctions and divisions), and one future—the plan of God for us. This is the

<sup>51</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>52</sup> Revelations 3:12.

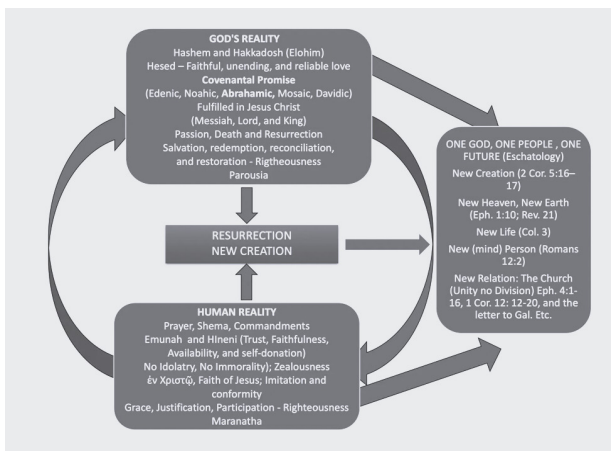
<sup>53</sup> 2 Cor 5:16–17.

<sup>54</sup> Chronicles 36:14.



eschatological dimension. This is a new creation. In the resurrection of the Lord, everything was renewed.<sup>55</sup> In Jesus Christ, everything is made new. There is a new creation, a new heaven and earth, a new mind, and a new way of relating to each other. We are a new people with new minds.

God's people are transformed into united people, becoming a community and family of God. This is the righteousness of God justifying humanity to become His children, to become heirs of God's kingdom, and to treat each other as brothers and sisters. According to St. Paul, Jesus' willingness to give His life in submission to the will of the Father served as evidence of His faithfulness, which enabled salvation. Becoming a child of God is not determined by one's actions but by the righteousness of the Father through Jesus Christ. This is what is read in the salutation of St. Paul's letters: *Grace from the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ*. This grace given, when received, justifies and enables everyone to become children of God and take part as a member of His body and in the ongoing new creation until its fullness in the second coming of the Lord. Thus, part of the faithfulness is Maranatha—Come, Lord Jesus—waiting with persevering faith in joyful anticipation of the Lord's second coming.



<sup>55</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16–17.

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