

EXCERPT



Traveling Light *Galatians and the Free Life in Christ*

August 15, 2023 | \$25, 224 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-0820-1

Urging us to listen to Paul as an expert on freedom, Eugene Peterson calls us to embrace change, exploration, trust, love, and much more on the open path forward. Now with a new study guide, share the work of pursuing real rescue and relief through Peterson's abiding wisdom.

A Way of Life Developed in God's Freedom

There are moments when a single truth seems to cry out for focused proclamation. For me one of these moments came in the early 1980s; freedom in Christ seemed the truth in need of focus. The end of a millennium was in sight. It would soon be two thousand years since Christ lived and died and rose again. The world had seen a succession of political and social revolutions that had featured the word *freedom*. Especially in the Western world, but hardly confined there, aspirations to freedom were very strong. But when I looked at the people I was living with as pastor—fairly affluent, well educated, somewhat knowledgeable about the Christian faith—I realized how unfree they were. They were buying expensive security systems to protect their possessions from burglary. They were overcome with anxieties in the face of rising inflation. They were pessimistic about the prospects for justice and peace in a world bristling with sophisticated weapons systems and nuclear devices. They were living huddled, worried, defensive lives. I wanted to shout in objection: Don't live that way! You are Christians! Our lives can be a growth into freedom instead of a withdrawal into anxious wariness. Instead of shouting I returned to my regular round of work—preaching and teaching, visiting and counseling, praying and writing, encouraging and directing—but I was determined to seek ways in which I could awaken a hunger and thirst for the free life among people who had lost an appetite for it, and then, having awakened the appetite, to find the food and drink that would satisfy it. The more I did this, the more I became convinced that the experience of freedom in the life of faith is at the very heart of what it means to be human.

No truth is ever out of date, and none should be promoted at the expense of the whole truth, but there are occasions when particular truths must be emphasized. Is this such a time? Just as the fourth century required an emphasis on the deity of Christ, and the sixteenth century an emphasis on justification by faith, perhaps these last years of the twentieth century need an emphasis on the freedom that comes to maturity in a life of faith in Christ. Maybe living out this Christ-freedom is a gift we can offer the world as it passes its millennial milestone. So that is what I set myself to do.

In the process of doing this work I encountered difficulties. For instance, there was the matter of terminology. The word *freedom*, once a vessel light and swift, has become barnacle-encrusted with slogans and cant, sluggish in the waters of discourse, unresponsive to nuance or insight. For centuries philosophers and theologians and poets kept the word clean in the service of truth. But in recent decades it has been appropriated by people who want to sell ideas and things for a profit, quite apart from any interest in truth.

Political propagandists and advertising copywriters have a monopoly on the word. If someone wants to use it to say something carefully and truly about persons or God, who has ears to hear? The word is immensely attractive and awakens such deep longings in us that it is no wonder that those who want us to buy their goods or enlist in their projects make promises of freedom.

The word *freedom* is used with deliberate cynicism by many to disguise operations that are enslaving. It is also used carelessly and thoughtlessly by others so that it has long since lost connection with truths that root experience in reality. Shouting the word *freedom* does nothing to bring about its reality.

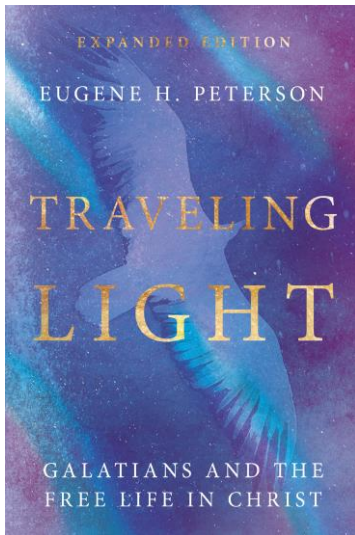


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"Christian theology lived is indeed, as Peterson says, 'a dancing, leaping, daring life.' These pages will show you the way."

—Karen Swallow Prior, research professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *On Reading Well*, from the foreword

Labeling thoughts or actions as free does not alter their actual nature. Freedom is not an abstraction, and it is not a thing. It is a gift and a skill. It is a gift that another provides; it is a skill that must be exercised by each person within the learned limits of reality. If we would understand freedom, we must be taught; if we would acquire freedom, we must be trained.

I found my best help in doing this in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. Among the writers of Scripture, Paul is the specialist in matters of freedom. This can be seen in the frequency of Greek words for freedom found in Paul's letters (28 instances) in comparison with the rest of the New Testament (8) and the Apostolic Fathers (6). And in Paul's writings the words for freedom occur more frequently in his letter to the Galatians (10 times) than in any other letter (7 times in Romans; 7 times in 1 Corinthians).

Through the Christian centuries this letter has often been used by God to restore vigor and passion to the life of faith and to confront the world with the realities of a free life in Christ, a life that is free for all: given freely to all of us, making all who receive it free; enabling us to live freely in relation to God and all others. The truth of the Galatian text is documented in the lives of free persons. It is possible. The experience is valid. We are not in realms of fantasy. We are not reduced to necessity. Free in Christ, we are free for all.

So I set myself deliberately between Paul's words in Galatians and the words of the people I lived with in church and in the world. I tried to listen in both directions and let the words interact with each other. I pondered and I prayed. I taught and I preached. I encouraged and I directed. I attempted to keep both elements in tension in my imagination and in my ministry—the element of Galatians, churning and surging with the energy of freedom, and the element of people who have given up on freedom and who live apathetically or fatalistically.

I wanted to stay immersed in the complexities of a full life, to accept all the necessities of a responsible life, and still to live freely. This book is an interim report on the continuing work of training and being trained in a way of life developed at God's initiative and in relation to his freedom. It is not biblical exposition or commentary in any classic sense; it is more like prayer—a continuing conversation that searches after understanding, sometimes digressing, but returning again and again to the word of God in the text to listen, to reflect, to answer, and to learn.

The development has not been orderly. Sometimes I am puzzled by Paul, sometimes exasperated by people, sometimes dismayed at my own slowness of heart to believe. I am put in numerous situations, both personal and pastoral, in which I feel there is little or no freedom. There are other times when I am with people who, even while they experience the entrapments that life springs on them, still go their way with a light step and graceful mien. Every time this happens it is a marvel. Together, over a period of years, we experience the detailed rightness of what it means to live as free persons, traveling light.

—taken from chapter one, "Free for All"

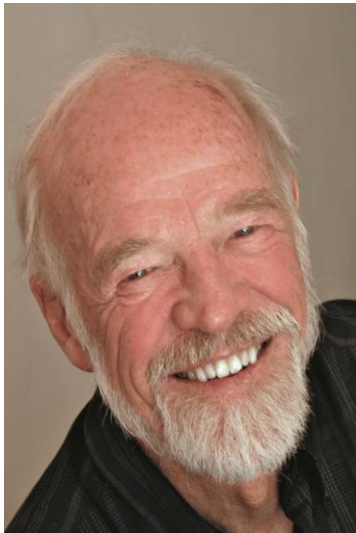


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"Like a skilled eye doctor, Eugene Peterson turns the lens that clears our vision and enables us to discriminate between reality and fantasy, to see what satisfies and what leads to bondage."

—Rebecca Manley Pippert, author of *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*

A Life of Long Obedience

"Eugene Peterson wrote Traveling Light amid a time of cultural upheaval. This was his Scripture-saturated response to his profound concern for how Christians were growing distrustful of their neighbors, taking on tribal identities, withdrawing from the world's pain, and holding more loyalty to some vision of America than to the kingdom of God. Eugene believed we were consumed by a constricting, heart-gripping fear—and that we were desperate for a fresh encounter with God's liberating freedom. Apparently, Eugene was also writing for us, right now."

—Winn Collier, author of *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson*, translator of *The Message*, and director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination

Eugene H. Peterson (1932–2018) was a pastor, scholar, author, and poet. He wrote more than thirty books, including his widely acclaimed paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, his memoir, *The Pastor*, and the bestselling spiritual formation classic *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

Peterson was founding pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, where he served for twenty-nine years before retiring in 1991. With degrees from Seattle Pacific, New York Theological Seminary, and Johns Hopkins University, he served as professor of spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, until retiring in Lakeside, Montana, in 2006.

Peterson's *Message* paraphrase and writings on spirituality inspired leaders and Christians around the world. His popularity even reached U2 frontman Bono, and they formed a friendship around their common interest in the Psalms. [Watch the film that highlights a conversation between Bono and Peterson](#) at Peterson's Montana home.

Read tributes to Peterson from [Christianity Today](#) and [Religion News Service](#).

For further information and a complete biography, see the IVP press release: [Eugene Peterson, Beloved Pastor and "Long Obedience" Author, Passes](#).

[Read tributes from friends and colleagues.](#)



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