

## Freed by Grace

Today, we are starting our study of the letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia. Now, you may wonder where Galatia was, so let's show a map. <Arrow>

You might recognize this part of the world with the Mediterranean Sea and Cyprus and Syria in the bottom right as they are today basically. And all the colored areas are modern day Turkey and you see the green area in the top middle section which is called Galatia. This map also shows the route of Paul's first missionary journey from Antioch in Syria to Cyprus, then to Pamphylia and then to these various cities in Galatia like Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. And Paul together with Barnabas preach the gospel in these cities and they basically retraced their steps. You can read about their trip in Acts 13 & 14.

Now, soon after Paul gets back to Antioch, they were on the road some 18 months, he gets back and receives a report that there is a problem in the churches that he and Barnabas had started in Galatia. Specifically, a group of Jewish believers had come in and they were teaching the Gentile believers that they had to become Jewish first and the men had to be circumcised. And they had to follow the Jewish customs along with believing in Jesus to be saved. They also questioned Paul's authority as an apostle.

Now, if you were with us when we studied the Acts of the Apostles, you might have remembered that in Acts 15, at the council of Jerusalem the church took up this first big controversy in the church. And some historians believe that this letter that Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia was written some months before this council took place which would be around 49 A.D. If this is correct, then Galatians would likely be the earliest letter that Paul wrote. Other historians put it a few years after this Council of Jerusalem, but it would still be one of the earliest letters.

Now, one of the things that I do to prepare for teaching is to sit down and read the whole letter in one sitting. This was a letter and it was intended to be read in one sitting. It isn't so long; you can easily read it in 30-45 minutes. And when I got done; I sat and reflected for a moment and the first thought that came to my mind was "Paul is really pissed off here! And I wondered why he was so angry."

Let me point out a few examples. Firstly, in every other one of Paul's letters he has this pattern of starting with a greeting, which he did here, and then giving some thanksgiving for the believers. But Paul doesn't do that, instead he says, <Arrow>

*I am astonished (I am shocked) that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!*

That phrase 'let them be under God's curse!' is really strong language and he repeats it twice. To give you a sense for this, he is basically saying 'tell them to go to Hell!'

It's ugly. And I have to think that perhaps this really was Paul's first letter because after reading this the church in Galatia probably wrote back and told him to tone it down a little, you're scaring people. And all his other letters start out much gentler, so I think he got the message. Now, to give Paul credit, he does give thanksgiving for the churches there in Galatia, but it isn't until chapter 4. Now, here's a few more examples that show us that Paul is hot. <Arrow>

*When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*

This is the 'rock' of the church and Paul confronts him to his face in front of all the believers and tells him off due to this same issue type of thing with Jewish believers that happened in Antioch. Here's more. <Arrow>

*I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*

*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?*

You fools! Can you imagine the poor guy who had to read this letter out loud in the church? And Paul's also a little sarcastic here. *Tell me just one thing.* And you see this throughout the letter. And this next one, I remember the first time I read this years ago hardly believing this was in the Bible. <Arrow>

*Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*

Again emasculate doesn't bring it home here. He's saying, those guys who are preaching circumcision, which involves cutting off the male foreskin with a very sharp knife, If they think cutting is so holy, I wish they would just keep on cutting and castrate themselves! To cut their own testicles off!

I can imagine the scribe listening to all this and saying back to Paul, are you sure you want me to write that? And Paul says, 'every single word.' And in fact, at the end of the letter, Paul picks up the quill and finishes the letter in his own handwriting to prove that it was He who said dictated this letter.

OK, I think you have an understanding that Paul was upset to say the least. But perhaps, it is more important for us to understand why. And as a parent, I think I can begin to understand one of the reasons for his anger. He was protecting his children.

Remember, Paul and Barnabas started these churches. They were his babies. He was their spiritual father and Paul believed some false teachers had come in and had started to derail their faith. And you get hot when that happens.

I remember when our daughter moved to the US and had started school and she got involved with this group that were Christians, but they all had a common business

interest and both Kathy and I felt that this was a bad combination that would potentially derail our daughter's faith in the end. And our daughter heard one thing from us and another from this leader of the group, so she set up a 3-way Skype call and this guy thought he could actually convince me it was a good idea. And I told him straight to his face what I thought of mixing business and Christianity and why I thought it was dead wrong. Needless to say, he and I were not going to be friends after that Skype call which ended quickly. But our daughter knew that we truly loved her and when she saw his reaction, when she saw his true colors, then she knew that she had to listen to us.

And I get the feeling that this is what Paul wanted to happen in the church because this letter would be read aloud and the guys promoting circumcision would be sitting right there in the first row. How did they react to Paul's letter? This letter was not intended to build bridges. Paul pours gasoline on this fire. Would they trust in Paul and the gospel that he shared with them or would they trust in these other men?

Apparently, there are some things that you absolutely cannot compromise over. And for Paul, the gospel message was one of those things that you go to war over because if you compromise this, you lose everything. It is something important to keep pure. And you may know that about 1500 years later, it was this letter that sparked Martin Luther to begin the Reformation of the church. And Martin Luther showed this same tenacity in defending the purity of the gospel of God's grace when he confronted the Pope at that time. Let's start now with the first few verses. <Arrow>

Paul starts out by defending his authority as an apostle, which apparently is being challenged by these false teachers. And Paul makes quite a bold claim, I wasn't sent by men but by Jesus Christ and God the Father directly. And these guys have a point, remember after Judas killed himself, in Acts 1 we read that the apostles picked another to replace him and it had to be someone who was with them from the beginning and Matthias was chosen. Where was Paul? <Arrow>

Well, Paul tells us that he was busy persecuting the church. If you are interested in reading more about his story of conversion, read Acts chapter 9. He was basically going door to door hunting for Christians and putting them in jail. And if some of them

got stoned to death, that was OK for him too. But then God stepped in and miraculously revealed himself in Jesus Christ to Paul and it changed his whole life. It would sort of be like one of the ISIS commanders, a terrorist, today being converted to Christianity overnight and becoming the leading evangelist in the Middle East. It was that drastic of a change. And he ends chapter 1 giving God the glory. <Arrow>

*I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.*

Paul's life reminds us of a few truths about the gospel. Conversion is a pure miracle that depends on God alone. If God had not acted, Paul would have never come to faith and Paul never forgot that. This is a tricky doctrine that I don't have time to get into today, but the more I understand myself and the more I talk to people whom I love and whom just don't believe, I am convinced that, and I pray that, God will save them in spite of themselves; just like he saved Paul and just like I have more and more the sense that He saved me. Conversion is a pure miracle that depends on God alone.

The second truth that Paul's life teaches me is that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. I mean if God can save a man like Paul; He can save absolutely anyone on this earth. We should be praying for the ISIS leaders. God can change anyone's heart. And it gives me hope for those whom I know and love and pray for. There is always hope for everyone.

Third, the worst sinners often make the best saints. We see this in Paul's life and I have seen this also. The people who have the deepest understanding of their own sinful natures are the ones who have the deepest appreciation for the love that Jesus had for us when he died on the cross for our sins and who, in turn, love others the most. They are the greatest saints.

And this is not by their own power. They know that they are totally dependent on God for salvation, so they turn to Him as their source of hope and power to be transformed like Paul was. They don't rely on their own strength because they understand the best that you don't earn your salvation.

And unfortunately, I think the opposite is true for many who come to church. The least of sinners make the worst saints. Let me explain. Many people come to church and they like the fellowship and they want to fit in, but they never really admit their own sinful nature. They never come to Christ out of desperation to save them from their sins. So, they try really hard to do the ‘right’ thing and to earn God’s favor, but it’s hard because they don’t have the power of the Spirit, which we will look at in a few weeks in chapter 5. And people like this end up getting frustrated because the Christian life is not only hard; it’s impossible without God’s power. And in the end, they walk away from the faith because it’s just too hard. And the problem is that they never really started in the right place. The gospel always starts with our acknowledgement that we are sinners in need of a Savior. If you remember during our study of Romans, the first few chapters are all about this; it starts with the Bad News: you are a sinner and there is no hope for you when you come face to face with a Holy God which everyone of us will do one day when we die. But God doesn’t leave us with bad news; instead He comes and gives us the Good News or the Gospel. And Paul starts out with this.

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*Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.*

This is the simple message of the gospel that Jesus Christ died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins in order to rescue us from the present evil world that we live in. You don’t earn your salvation by doing good works or performing some ritual like circumcision. That is a different gospel and really no gospel or good news in that. Right? Do you really want your salvation dependent on your own good works? The older you get the more thankful you get that your salvation is purely dependent on the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross and nothing else.

Now in this day and age of tolerance, and diversity, and pluralism; that statement that there is 1 gospel and only 1 is not popular. In fact, I would expect that it makes some of you a little uncomfortable or even upset. But the Christian faith is one that claims to have the absolute truth. Jesus said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

And Paul points to one of the core pieces of evidence that this is the Truth. And that is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jesus not only performed many miracles and lived the most beautiful and perfect and godly life ever seen on earth. He also proved that he was God by coming back to life from the dead.

I read this recently that back in 2002 an Oxford professor of Philosophy named Richard Swinburne used one of the latest probability formulas known as Bayes's theorem to calculate the probability that Jesus was raised from the dead. Did anyone hear about this? So, this professor weighs the evidence for and against the Resurrection, assigning values to factors like the probability that there is a God, the nature of Jesus' behavior during his lifetime and the quality of witness testimony after his death. And he does the math and does anyone know the answer he came up with? 97%. He calculated that there is a 97% probability that Jesus did rise from the dead. This is an Oxford professor.

And I have read the stories of several people, and especially lawyers, who started out trying to disprove Christianity only in the end come to faith purely based on the strength of the evidence including and especially for the resurrection.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is true. There is no other gospel by which we can be saved. This is the gospel of grace, which means the undeserved favor of God towards man. We don't earn our salvation. You can't add anything to what Christ has done on the cross. It does not depend on your own goodness. God has forgiven you by His grace, and there is nothing you can do to earn pleasure before Him, because He is pleased in you based solely on your identification with Jesus Christ.

And during our study of this letter by Paul to the Galatians, we are going to learn about the true gospel of grace in Jesus Christ and about the two errors that people make. One error that people make is to add to the gospel with good works which is also called legalism. The other error people make is to say that because we are saved, we don't have to live a holy, good life. And Paul confronts primarily the first error in this letter, but I think the second error is much more common in our day and age and we'll see him speak to this one as well. Let's stop here and Pray.

## Galatians 1:1-24

Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— and all the brothers and sisters with me,

To the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.

Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.