

TO DELIVER US FROM THE PRESENT EVIL AGE

Galatians 1:1-5

Introduction:

In the Living Insights Study Bible, Chuck Swindoll introduces the book of Galatians with this story:

It happened on a Wednesday. The date was January 20, 1981. As a matter of fact, it happened at the same time an inauguration of a new President of the United States was taking place. For the first time in history an inauguration was upstaged by something happening far away. A group of American citizens sitting in an airplane on a runway in Iran (many of whom had been hostages for well over a year) were about to be released from captivity and restored to the joy of freedom in America.

While the President was delivering his inaugural address, the released hostages entered into the air space called "freedom," and then they claimed that freedom personally. We saw them restored to dignity and set free. As I watched their arrival into Algiers on the news that evening, I thought of the patriotic lyrics Samuel Smith had written over 150 years ago: "Let music swell the breeze and ring from all the trees, sweet freedom's song."

Can you imagine, in your wildest dreams, any one of those people wanting to go back into bondage and become a hostage again? I came across an article in the Los Angeles Times (January 24, 1981). A budget officer at the United States Embassy in Tehran who had been brought out of captivity was asked whether he might someday want to go back to Iran. He replied, "Only in a B-52." It's absurd to think that someone once in bondage and now set free would ever want to go back into captivity.

The letter of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians is a letter of liberation. It is a call to all who have been set free in Christ to live in that freedom, to fight for that freedom and to defend that freedom. Galatians is a forceful pronouncement of freedom based on grace. It is a letter celebrating the freedom we find only in Jesus Christ—not freedom to do whatever we please, but freedom from sin and freedom to obey and serve our Savior.

I believe there is a great deal to be learned from the little book of Galatians. We often think of Galatians as a negative kind of book, as Paul deals with some serious theological issues in the churches. But in many ways it is a powerful book pointing us to Jesus Christ.

The Scottish minister, P.T. Forsythe, said, "The secret of the Lord is with those who have been broken by his cross and healed by his Spirit." John Piper uses that quote and then goes on to say, "Galatians exalts these two things: the cross of Christ as the only way a person can get right with God, and the Spirit of Christ as the only way a person can obey God."

I hope that as we go through the book of Galatians in the coming weeks that we will truly see Christ for all that he really is and that you will not allow anything to come between you and the cross of Christ, or the Spirit of Christ.

This morning we are going to look for a few moments at the first 5 verses of this letter, but before we do, we need to take time to define the setting and background of this little book.

Introduction to Galatians

This letter was written by the Apostle Paul. He identifies himself in the very first verse. Over the centuries, even the most critical of scholars have never seriously questioned the Pauline authorship of this letter. The timing of the writing is not as clear although it is generally accepted that this was the first of Paul's letters, written around AD 48, shortly after Paul's first missionary journey.

The other significant question is: who are the churches of Galatia to whom Paul was writing. Let me quote from the ESV Study Bible.

There was a people group of Galatians who lived in the northern part of what is now Turkey, but there was a Roman province called Galatia that extended into southern Turkey. The Galatians in the letter are probably those in the Roman province, especially the southern part, because Paul did much less in the way of missionary activity in the north, and he usually refers to places by their Roman imperial names.

If this is the case, and I believe it is, then the churches Paul is writing to are probably the churches he founded on his first missionary journey in places like Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, all of which are cities in that Roman province of Galatia. (See Acts 13-14) That also fits well with the timeline. It took only a few months after Paul left those churches for false teaching to come in and begin leading people astray. (See Gal. 1:6)

The theme or purpose of the letter is to confront a crisis which has developed in the churches there in Galatia. In a matter of months they have been drawn away from the truth by Judaizers who were trying to draw them into the world of Judaism with its emphasis on the Law and circumcision. Paul wrote this letter to point out the error of these false teachers and to draw his readers back to a focus on Christ and the freedom they and we have in Jesus Christ. It has been called, by various people, the Charter of Freedom, the Magna Carta of spiritual liberty, the Christian's Declaration of Independence. It has been branded as the battle cry of the Reformation.

The Heart of Paul's Message

With that background in mind, let us look at the first 5 verses of this letter – read them. These verses, even though they are technically the introduction or the greeting of this letter, are really a summary of the entire content of the book. Let me first summarize these verses, then we will look at a bit more detail. (Credit John Piper and John MacArthur)

In v. 1 Paul identifies himself as an apostle, called and accredited by God himself. We will look at his apostleship in more detail in a moment, but for now we see his claim. In v. 2 he points out that his authority is endorsed by his fellow ministers.

vv. 3-5 focus on the content of his message. There are two aspects to Paul's message – grace and glory, and in between we see the chord that brings these two together in Jesus Christ.

Quote from John Piper, sermon on Galatians 1:1-5 – "Therefore, even though 1:1-5 is formally a salutation or a greeting, Paul has already gotten down to the main business at hand: verses 1 and 2 claim authority for his message; verses 3-5 give a summary of that message. So the greeting of the letter itself is a preview of the whole letter. Paul takes these two things (the authority and content of his message) and unfolds them in that order (cf. 1:6-2:10; 2:11-6:18)."

Now we need to look at these things in a bit more detail.

Paul's Authority as an Apostle

In v. 1 Paul calls himself an apostle – the word means one who is sent, a messenger. The term is used in a couple of ways in the NT.

There is a general sense in which one is sent as a messenger or representative of a church or individual. In Philippians 2:25, Paul calls Epaphroditus "...your messenger and minister to my need..." The word used is "apostolos". He is your apostle. Again in 2 Cor. 8:23, Paul refers to his fellow workers saying, "And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ." Again that word "messengers" is apostolos – apostle.

But in our text, Paul makes it very clear that he is not calling himself an apostle in this general sense. Read v. 1a – He is very clear that he was not appointed as an apostle by the recommendation of men, or by some church or council. There is a more specific sense in which the word is used also in the NT.

Quote from John MacArthur – "To be an apostle, a man had to have been really in company with the resurrected Christ, he had to have seen the resurrected Christ, and, secondly, he had to have been chosen by the resurrected Christ. So an apostle was one who saw Jesus Christ alive after His resurrection, and the apostle was one who was chosen directly by Christ, appointed, called out, and set apart unto service."

Paul's statement in v. 1 of our text means that Paul was more than just the representative of a church. In 1 Cor. 9:1, he says, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? In 1 Cor. 15 Paul recounts the appearances of Jesus to various ones following his resurrection. In v. 8 he says, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

Paul was very clear about his authority as an apostle. He goes on later to defend and explain his apostleship even more. We will look at that in future messages, but for now we need to understand that Paul spoke with the authority of one who had seen Christ, and been called and appointed by Christ as one of those original band of men known as apostles of Jesus Christ.

So what does that mean for us? One of the things that is easy to miss is the truth that Paul spoke with the authority of Jesus Christ. His authority did not come from men and his message did not come from men or from his own mind or thinking. When we read the words of Paul, the apostle, we are hearing and reading the words of Christ. Again I would like to refer to a quote from John Piper:

“O how many of us are tempted to cry out to Jesus for some message, some revelation, some dream or vision, but make almost no serious effort to understand the deep things of Scripture, the very Word of Christ. How many times have Christians come to me in search of counsel for some problem, but when I ask if they have searched the Scriptures relating to the issue, they get nervous and begin to make excuses. There really isn’t a lot of disciplined submission to the apostles’ Word in the contemporary church. We treat the Bible mainly as a kind of spiritual hypo to boost our emotions. But the practice of submitting all our ideas and attitudes and habits day by day to the scrutiny and absolute authority of the apostles is very rare.”

In v. 2 Paul adds another thought to the authority and the truth of his message. All of the brothers and sisters with him endorse his message. Even though he claims special authority as an apostle appointed by Jesus Christ, he does not claim to be all alone in proclaiming the truth. As one commentator says, “His authority distinguishes him from other men; his message binds him to them. Paul does not boast in being the odd man out. He is glad when his teaching is shared by others.”

Paul’s Message of Grace and Glory

We need to quickly look at vv. 3-5 and note the content of Paul’s message. Read these verses again. This is the message of the gospel in a nutshell.

In v. 3 we have the offer of grace and peace extended to the Galatian believers (extend right hand as a symbol of this offer). They are no different than us—sinful people, who need God’s grace.

In v. 5 we have a doxology—an expression of worship to God – “...to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Extend left hand as a symbol of worship.)

In between we have the truth that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. Do you see the cross in this? The cross supports this offer of grace and peace. It is only because Jesus died to bear the penalty of my sins can Paul extend to me the offer of God’s love and favor and peace. The cross supports the gospel. And since that great sacrifice and the deliverance it achieved was all according to God’s will and plan, we in turn worship God, who is worthy of all praise and glory. Piper says,

“The center and foundation of all gospel (the right hand extended) and all worship (the left hand lifted) is Christ crucified for our deliverance according to God’s will (the body). Galatians gives grace to man and glory to God because it preaches Christ crucified for our deliverance from the present evil age.”

So what does it mean to be delivered from this present evil age? This age in which we live is characterized as an evil age because sin has so taken hold of our lives and the organizations and institutions of our society and the world is enslaved to the power of Satan.

But for the believer there is a liberation that has begun. In Colossians 1:13 we are told that, “He (God) has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son...”

Hebrews 6:5 tells us that we “...have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the **age to come**.” That is why, as believers, we have freedom from the sin and greed and fear of the age or world in which we live. The new age—the age to come—with new powers and new ways, has broken into this evil age to deliver us from the present evil age.

Paul told us in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world (age) but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” Being delivered from the present evil age means being free to not think like the present evil age.

That is Paul’s message—a message of grace and glory. Grace to you and glory to God. And all because Christ gave himself to deliver us and set us free from bondage to this present evil age. And that message of freedom rings throughout this epistle.

Conclusion

Freedom – “For freedom Christ has set us free...” – Gal. 5:1. That is the message we will be hearing over the coming weeks.

But my challenge to you today is this: Remember that Christ died to cover all your sins so that a holy God could come upon you with gracious power and free you from the evil of this age. Live every moment by faith in him, and you will not think or feel the way the world does.

Grace to you and glory to God... all because of Christ’s sacrifice.