

PAUL, GALATIA, AND THE MESSAGE OF GRACE
GALATIANS 1:1-5

INTRODUCTION

Gary was the kind of person that every pastor likes to have in his congregation. When I knew him, he was about fifty years old and single. He was a regular at church and church services. If someone needed help in moving, he was there. It was my first pastorate, and after almost every service, he would wait patiently to talk to me. Then he would just briefly tell me some positive thing that he got out of my message.

Gary was also an evangelist. He invited me to play pool with him once or twice. He showed me around his favorite pool hall haunt and introduced me to everyone who was hanging around. On the side he told me about the spiritual status of each one of them. He had shared the gospel with all of them.

By career Gary worked for the railroad. He laid track for the company. It was a physically demanding job. As he was getting older, he decided to renew his earlier interest in teaching. He finished up his college degree and got his teaching credentials. He applied around the country and landed a job in Texas, I think that it was in the Fort Worth area.

I later heard from a teacher that he was well liked by the other teachers. But Gary had a tough time keeping order with the middle school kids in his classroom. After one year he quit in frustration and headed back to Minnesota. On his way home he stopped in a park and shot himself in the head. All of us who knew him were shocked. It was the first funeral I led for a suicide victim.

There are various ways in which I have considered this tragedy. Today I look at it through the lens of grace. Gary was a very gracious guy. He was gracious toward me. He was gracious toward other people. But somehow he was not gracious toward himself. Apparently he felt like a failure. Apparently he felt shame. Perhaps he sensed that other people would not be gracious toward him. Somehow I think that he didn't quite sense and experience the tremendous grace which God had toward him.

Our world is always in need of grace. I am in need of grace. You are in need of grace.

There was a British conference on comparative religions years ago, I believe at Oxford. Experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They considered various possibilities. The incarnation of Jesus? Other religions had various stories about the gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again there are stories from other religions about return from the dead. The debate continued until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. He asked, **"What's the rumpus about?"** His

colleagues informed him that they were talking about Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, **"Oh, that's easy, It's grace."**

After continued discussion, the conferees agreed that Christianity was unique among world religions in its offer of salvation apart from human merit. All of the other religions which they considered had some requirement of merit, effort, or human contribution. Only Christianity spoke about God's unconditional love. Only Christianity offered a relationship with God on the basis of grace. (Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace*, p. 45)

Having concluded our study of the Old Testament Book of Daniel, I thought that it would be appropriate to return to the New Testament. Our subject is the Book of Galatians. I have not preached on this book before. But its message is always timely. It has a big emphasis upon grace. Grace is a foundational element of the Christian life. We shall explore what Galatians has to tell us about it.

I.

So we are going to jump right in with vv. 1 & 2 of Galatians #1 as we consider THE AUTHOR OF GALATIANS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE AUTHOR OF GALATIANS) The book begins, **"Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the brothers who are with me..."**

The form of this book follows the basic structure of a normal letter that was sent in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. The author begins by identifying himself. The thing which is a little different is that he not only identifies himself as an apostle, but he also proceeds to elaborate on that. This suggests that the recipients of this letter have been exposed to some kind of challenge to Paul's authority as an apostle.

So we shall begin by reviewing what we know about this guy Paul. Toward the end of Paul's life he is arrested in Jerusalem and charged with causing a riot in the temple. He gives a brief defense of his life before a large crowd of Jewish pilgrims and describes some of the key events which he had experienced. This testimony occurs in Acts #22. (ACTS 22:3) In v. 3 he begins his defense with these words: **"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day."**

So Paul was raised in Asia Minor, in what we know today as Turkey. He was Jewish, and he was very religious. He got the most prestigious training that was available in the Jewish world. It was like going to Harvard. He went to Jerusalem and studied under the most famous Jewish rabbi of the time, a guy named Gamaliel. Gamaliel and his students were Pharisees, which meant that they were the strictest Jewish group of the time. They tried to follow the Old Testament law carefully. They also had added many rules to the Old Testament law to make their way of life even stricter.

In the next verse, verse 4 of Acts #22 (ACTS 22:4), Paul adds, **“I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women...”** “The Way” was the term which these Jews used to describe the Christians. Paul was convinced not only that these Jewish Christians were wrong in their view of God but also that they were evil. They were a threat to the Jewish faith, and they needed to be exterminated.

Paul continues his story (ACTS 22:5B) in v. 5: **“From them [the council of elders--- the Sanhedrin] I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished. (ACTS 22:6) As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. (ACTS 22:7) And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ (ACTS 22:8) And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’”**

So Jesus tells this persecutor of the Christians that he has to change directions and follow Him. Furthermore, he is to bring the story about Jesus to Gentiles. That was a tough challenge for a kosher Jew. For Jews like Paul were taught that it was defiling to even enter the house of a Gentile. Gentiles were unclean. Now Paul is supposed to hang out with them.

So did Paul get this job because of any merit or good in him? No! He had been opposing Jesus. In 1 Timothy #1 v. 15 (1 TIMOTHY 1:15) Paul would later write, **“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”** Paul may not have been a drug addict or an alcoholic or a womanizer, but he was a killer of Christians. He was an enemy of Jesus. The job which he was given and his status as a follower of Jesus was a result of something called “grace.” It was unmerited favor. Paul had done nothing to earn or merit his situation as a follower of Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul calls himself in v. 1 of our text “an apostle.” The original Greek word means “one who is sent.” As we see from Paul’s own testimony in Acts #22 he was sent on a mission by Jesus Himself. He was commissioned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

The word “apostle” is used differently in the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to people who were sent on a mission by the church. Sometimes the twelve disciples of Jesus are called apostles. Paul is claiming a position and an authority in the early church equal to that of the twelve disciples. He claims this position because He was directly commissioned by the risen Christ.

The fact that Paul is elaborating upon this commission in v. 1 suggests that some in Galatia, or some who have come to Galatia, are questioning his credentials. Maybe Paul is an apostle only in the sense that he was sent to Galatia by the church in Antioch. Maybe Paul was sent by one or several of the twelve disciples to go to Galatia. If that is the case, then his authority is not quite as great as the original twelve disciples.

In v. 2 of our passage Paul indicates that he has the support of other brothers who are with them. The probability is that he is writing this letter from Antioch in Syria and that he has the support of the church leaders there.

II.

We move then to the second part of v. 2 and THE CHURCHES OF GALATIANS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE CHURCHES OF GALATIANS) Paul follows the typical pattern of a first century letter by next addressing the recipients: **“To the churches of Galatia...”** Later in #1 Paul will provide a more detailed description of his life following his conversion. But now he focuses upon his audience.

About ten years after his conversion Paul was doing his preaching and evangelism thing in Antioch of Syria. (ANTIOCH) Antioch was a large city to the north of Israel in the Roman province of Syria. The church there included a number of Gentiles as well as Jews. God directed Paul and his friend Barnabas to undertake a missionary trip into Gentile territory. Acts #13 describes their itinerary.

(FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) On this first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas left Antioch of Syria and headed west across the Mediterranean to the island of Cyprus. After that couple of stops there they went north across the Mediterranean to Asia Minor. They proceeded inland and visited the major cities of southern and central Asia Minor, what we know today as Turkey.

The pattern of Paul and Barnabas was to first visit the local synagogue and preach there about Jesus, claiming that Jesus fulfilled what was prophesied about the coming of the Messiah. Eventually they would get kicked out of the synagogue, and they would then focus on the Gentiles. Churches would get launched in the process.

Acts #14 vv. 1-7 describes the pattern that was followed in one of these cities, a place called Iconium. What happened there is typical of the reception and strategy of preaching followed by Paul and Barnabas. Here is what these first seven verses of Acts #7 tell us:

“Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. 3 So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. 4 But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. 5 When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, 6 they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, 7 and there they continued to preach the gospel.”

These cities were in the part of Asia Minor known as Galatia. Originally “Galatia” (GALATIA 1) was the term used to describe the northern and central part of Asia Minor.

It acquired the name because this area was settled centuries earlier by people from Gaul, what we know today as France. But when Rome gained control of this region, it created a province which it called Galatia (GALATIA 2). The Roman province of Galatia stretched to the south to include many of the cities that were visited by Paul and Barnabas during this first missionary trip.

After this trip, which lasted a year or two, Paul and Barnabas returned to the church which sent them out in Antioch of Syria. Shortly after that it appears that Paul got news that other Jews who had some involvement with Christianity came into Galatia and started teaching things that were not consistent with the message which Paul and Barnabas had presented. Thus we have the motivation for this letter. It is intended to counter some kind of wrong teaching.

III.

We come then to vv. 3 & 4 of #1 and THE NEED OF GALATIANS. (III. THE NEED OF GALATIANS) What is the need expressed in this short book? Paul writes, **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father...”** The primary need is for grace.

Paul again follows a typical form for a Greek/Roman letter by sending a greeting. Greeks did speak of grace. Jews more often spoke of peace. Paul will go on to explore the deeper meaning behind these words. He notes here that the ultimate source of both of these things is God the Father and Jesus Christ.

The original Greek word for “grace” is *charis*, from which we get the word “charismatic.” The Greek word *charismata* is translated into our English “gift.” So there is about “gift” in Greek the idea of grace. Grace has about it the idea of unmerited favor. The gift involved is undeserved.

“Peace” for the Jews was a word which is traced back to the Old Testament and Hebrew word *shalom*. It meant more than the absence of conflict. For the Jews it included the idea of wholeness and general well-being. It implied a proper relationship with God and with fellow human beings.

The order of grace and peace in these verses may have significance. Theologically we need grace before we can experience peace. We need to have grace from God before we can have peace with Him and with our fellow human beings. Also we lose our peace when we depart from grace. We will see this problem with the situation among the Christians in Galatia.

Verse 4 makes brief reference to the gospel message. Jesus gave Himself for our sins. He did that by dying on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. God is holy. We humans are sinners. Sin demands punishment. Jesus died on the cross in our place. He was our substitute.

The need and the promise of this substitutionary sacrifice was prophesied in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. (ISAIAH 53:4). In vv. 4 & 5 of Isaiah #53 the prophet wrote, **“Surely he has borne our griefs/ and carried our sorrows;/ yet we esteemed him stricken,/ smitten by God, and afflicted. (ISAIAH 53:5) But he was pierced for our transgressions;/ he was crushed for our iniquities;/ upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”**

Verse 4 in our text elaborates upon this situation of “giving Himself for our sins” by adding that Jesus “delivered us from this present evil age.” Was Jesus referring only to his particular time in history? I don’t think so. (PROJECTOR OFF) If you turn over a couple of pages in your Bibles you will find a description of this present evil age in # 5 vv. 19-21. There he writes, **“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** Most of us would recognize that these “works of the flesh” were not limited to the time in which Paul lived. We need deliverance from these things today as well.

Does this mean that the age in which Paul lived and the age in which we live is totally evil? No. God created a beautiful universe. Psalm 19 declares that the heavens declare the glory of God. Yet even the physical world is affected by the Fall, the entrance of sin into the world, described in the Book of Genesis. For we also have to deal with droughts and hurricanes and earthquakes and tornadoes.

The Bible also tells us that we humans are created in the image of God. We have great value and worth. There is much about human life which is good. There is family and love and creativity and beauty and meaningful relationships. Yet there is also death and disease and evil.

Evil is evident in the world around us. Most Americans in recent survey say that our country is headed in the wrong direction. Crime in our cities is on the rise. Suicide rates are up. Mental health challenges are on the increase. Educational standards in our public schools are declining. Kids are being told, and sometimes encouraged, to change their gender. Marriages and families are too often broken. Deaths by drug overdose are on the rise.

Much of the problem can be traced toward our human bent toward selfishness. We Americans have run up a \$31 trillion national debt. We expect future generations to somehow pay this off, not us. Medicare and Social Security will run out of money soon, but we avoid even talking about dealing with it. A Christian writer by the name of Trevin Wax cites national polls claiming, **“Eighty percent of Americans believe enjoying yourself is the highest goal of life.”** Who cares about future generations? Live for yourself. Live for now.

So it is that we humans need deliverance. That deliverance must begin on the personal level today, just as it did in the first century with the Galatians. The Apostle Paul explained our responsibility a bit more clearly when he later wrote to the Ephesians (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8-9). In #2 of Ephesians in vv. 8 & 9 he wrote, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** Here again is grace. This salvation is called a gift. The apostle explains that it is not received on the basis of works. The only responsibility is faith. We are to trust in Jesus.

There are many offshoots of Christianity which stray from this understanding of grace. For example, the Book of Mormon in Second Nephi #25 v. 23 says, **“It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.”** The Bible does not say that. If we have to do something, if we have to do all that we can, then it is not by grace, it is by works. Then we have reason to boast. There would also always be uncertainty about whether we have done all that we can do. Paul says in this passage that we are saved after all that Jesus did.

Americans, even those who call themselves Christians in some fashion, have a hard time grasping that. In 2014 a Christian outfit called Lifeway Research conducted a nationwide survey and found that 71% of American adults agree that **“people must contribute some effort toward their own salvation.”**

The idea of eternal salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus seems too easy to many. If I go to heaven simply by believing in Jesus, what will keep me from living how I want to live, from eating, drinking, and being merry? There are several factors to consider. First, v. 4 indicates that believing in Jesus connects us with God the Father. He truly becomes our spiritual father. Any good father disciplines his kids when they get out of line. When we Christians stray too far from the right path, our Heavenly Father has his ways of getting our attention, of getting us back on track.

Secondly, the Bible indicates that the Christian life is the best possible life which we can live. The analogy which many of you have heard me use is that the Bible is like an owner's manual for a car. The owner's manual tells us how we can get the best possible use out of our vehicle. We can ignore the maintenance guidelines for a while. We can get away with not changing the oil and keeping up the fluids and maintaining the right tire pressure. But eventually we are going to have big problems. So it is in the Christian life. If we ignore the directions of the Bible, we are eventually going to experience negative consequences.

Thus vv. 3 & 4 describe the deepest need which the recipients of the letter to the Galatians had and the deepest need that we humans have. It is rescue from the often evil age in which we live. Jesus provided that means of rescue by His death on the cross. Our responsibility is simply to believe Him and what He did for us. It is a story of grace.

IV.

Finally, in v. 5 we come to THE DESIRED RESPONSE OF GALATIANS. (IV. THE DESIRED RESPONSE OF GALATIANS) How does the Apostle Paul want the people in the churches to whom he is writing to respond? As we go through the letter, we shall find that there are various responses which he desires from these Christians. But overall he wants his readers and listeners to glorify God. He finishes a sentence in v. 5 saying, **“...to whom [speaking of God the Father] be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”**

The word in Greek for glory is *doxa*, from which we get our English term “doxology.” “Glory” is variously defined. One definition or description is **“the visible display of God’s character and fame.”** In the context of our passage that fame and character is related to His rescue of us from this present evil age.

Like the Apostle Paul, Amy Tracy hated Christians. Amy grew up on the New Jersey shore in what she calls “a house of chaos and violence.” In high school she blossomed from an awkward, unpopular girl into an athlete. In fact she turned out to be the school’s superstar at track and field competition. She also won her father’s approval.

“One of my most vivid memories is of falling into my father’s arms at the end of a race,” Amy says. **“I was muddy and exhausted, and I felt his long, tweed-wool coat against my cheek and smelled the crisp November air. His big sleeves blocked out the noise of the crowd, and I felt peace and safety.”** But when she began losing races to stiffer competition she lost her father’s approval.

One of her sadder memories from losing a race was this: **“As I finished behind the pack, I looked up to see my dad’s back as he headed toward the parking lot.”** After high school Amy went off to a women’s college, seeking the kind of approval she had briefly known from her father. She chose a major in health and physical fitness. Her program was dominated by lesbian professors.

She decided that she herself was also gay. In her senior year she went to an abortion-rights march. She was motivated more by curiosity than ideological conviction. In this march in Washington, DC, she sensed that she had found a cause worth living for. She said, **“It filled my soul with a sense of purpose, and I decided to commit my life to women’s rights.”**

A few months later Amy was hired by the National Organization for Women. She traveled around the country, helping to organize rallies and protests. The Christians present at those events left her with a poor impression. **“They showed up at clinics with their condemning signs, eerie songs about God, and robotlike determination to close clinics. I didn’t believe they really cared about babies--- they only wanted to oppress women.”**

Yet the grace of God began to work on her life. She says that she felt a profound sadness for something she could not identify. She was aware that joy, purity, and peace were missing from her life. Somehow she felt a longing for God.

She moved to Seattle with her girlfriend and continued her work for women's causes. Yet she began to be disillusioned with that cause. She says, **"I realized that I had grown into a person I didn't respect. I was hard, burned out, and hateful. My loathing of Christians expanded into a dislike of people in general. I began to daydream about having a normal life."**

She found herself drawn to the Bible and to Jesus. She started sneaking into the back of a church for a Sunday evening service. The message resonated with her. She was drawn to Jesus. She decided to put her trust in Him.

The next few months were tough. Her girlfriend rejected her. Her friends were upset with her change of direction. Amy held tight to her new faith. **"Sometimes I could actually feel his grip on me,"** she says. She could also feel her hardened shell melting away.

For six months Amy avoided thinking about the social issues she had once supported. But then one day she was reading through the *New York Times* and saw several stories about issues that were once dear to her. She realized that her position on those issues had changed.

Shortly afterwards she heard someone on the radio explaining how abortion grieved God. Amy was suddenly saddened to think about how abortion kills babies. The radio program she listened to was James Dobson's "Focus on the Family." She wrote a letter to him, describing something of her background and how Jesus had changed her life. She ended up getting a job for him. (AMY TRACY) Today she is a senior writer for Focus on the Family.

It was the grace of God that touched this woman who was once an enemy of Christians. **"Nothing compares to the freedom I have found in Jesus Christ."** Amy says, **"I used to think freedom was loving who I wanted, and smoking what I wanted, and living as I pleased. What I discovered was that true freedom is doing what deep down inside you know you ought to do. True freedom is found in the grace--- there it is--- the grace and love of Jesus."** (*Christianity Today*, 1/10/2000)
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Such is the grace of God which is available to all of us through faith in Jesus. Such is the proper basis for a relationship with God.