

**A GOSPEL GREETING  
PART 6**

September 21, 2008

TEXT: Galatians 1:1-5

**REVIEW:**

In his greeting, Paul gives 6 important affirmations concerning the apostolic content of his Gospel. Thus, these first five verses are far more than a simple, formal greeting. As we have seen, they contain a summary of everything that follows in this letter.

In our previous study, we looked at the resurrection, the second vital aspect of the Gospel. We saw how the resurrection served to:

- a. Authenticate Paul's calling as a true Apostle of Christ;
- b. Vindicate Christ's voluntary and substitutionary life and death;
- c. Transform Saul the Persecutor into Paul the Preacher of free grace;
- d. Demonstrate the necessity of the resurrection for our justification.

This leads us to a third affirmation of the Gospel, which Paul gives in these opening verses, specifically the purpose of the Gospel.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Paul, in Galatians 1:4, says that the purpose of Christ's death was to deliver sinners from this present evil age.

In an article entitled, *Legalism and its Antidotes*, Dominic Smart writes,

“Deliverance is a wonderful thing. When a Christian is delivered from an oppressive burden that has weighed him or her down for years, then it's especially wonderful. For such deliverance brings release into the joy of the Lord. There's a sin which takes a peculiarly Christian form in churches. It is burdensome, lethally plausible and, tragically, it's rife. It would be one of my greatest delights if through my years of ministry believers and fellowships are delivered from it to the glory of God. It's legalism. It's a sin. It always has been and always will be,”  
([http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/bigger/ds\\_legalism.htm](http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/bigger/ds_legalism.htm)).

Such is the sentiment of the apostle Paul toward the Galatians. Legalism is evil (v. 4b). Christ, Paul writes, died in order to deliver sinners from bondage to this evil for the glory

of God (cf. v. 5). Paul's greatest delight was to see his Galatian converts trusting in Christ and His atoning work alone for their acceptance before God. On the other hand, Paul's deepest burden was to see the Galatians cut off from Christ, turning to a different gospel (cf. Gal. 1:6; 4:19).

The Galatians were failing to understand the profound significance and sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross. However, Paul will show that the death and resurrection of Christ were of momentous and epic proportion and cosmic in scope.

In Galatians, Paul states that this vital aspect of the gospel (along with the resurrection) is to be seen as the climactic fulfillment of redemptive history.

All the Scriptures (i.e., OT) point to Christ and His atoning work (Lk. 24:27; Rom. 1:2; Gal. 3:8).

For example, it was to Christ and their eternal inheritance that all the patriarchs (e.g., Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses) were looking to and longing for by faith when they died (Heb. 11:13-15). Jesus, speaking to the Jews, said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad," (Jn. 8:56).

In the greatest Bible lesson ever given, Luke records how Jesus informed the two disciples on the Emmaus Road that all the prophets spoke about Him (Lk. 24:25). And in v. 27, Luke writes, "Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in *all the Scriptures*," (emphasis mine).

In all ages, the crucified and risen Christ will remain the central focus of all the redeemed. John, in Revelation 5:9 writes, "And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." So momentous was Christ's death (and resurrection), Paul says in v. 4 that it ushered in the dramatic and climactic in-breaking of the "age to come," in this "present evil age." We will discuss this in more detail later on.

For now, the important point to note is that for Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ marked a decisive turning point or transformation in history (i.e., "ages").

Because of our sins, we were all slaves (4:3-5) held captive to this present evil age. But, through Christ's death and resurrection, a new age has dawned. He has rescued and freed us from our captivity to this present evil age.

We are no longer slaves but rather adopted sons. Grace and peace are ours from God who is now our Father because of Jesus Christ our Lord who is our Rescuer.

In light of the nature of the Gospel, grace and peace (cf. 1:3), Paul directs his readers to consider the earth-shaking, age-transforming implications of His loving favor toward them.

## LESSON:

### C. THE PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL: DELIVERANCE FROM THE PRESENT EVIL AGE, v. 4A, B

The phrase in v. 4, “to deliver us from the present evil age” expresses the gracious purpose for which Christ gave Himself for our sins. There are four important observations about the verb, “deliver,” in the context of this letter that will be helpful to consider.

#### 1. *The theme of deliverance*

The verb, “deliver,” emphasizes one of the major themes of this letter, freedom!

In chapters five and six, Paul will discuss in greater detail the believer’s life of freedom through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

However, at the very beginning, in germinal form, Paul anticipates the theme of freedom of which he culminates in his great statement in 5:1, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

J.B. Lightfoot commenting on the significance of the verb, *deliver*, writes, “... ‘deliver’ strikes the keynote of the epistle. The Gospel is a rescue, an emancipation from a state of bondage,” (J.B. Lightfoot, *Galatians*, p. 73)

Again, Martin Luther noting the importance of this phrase writes,

“By these words...’That He might deliver us from this present world,’ Paul showeth what is the argument of this epistle; to wit that we have need of grace and of Christ, and that no creature, neither man nor angel, can deliver man out of this present evil world. For these works are only belonging to the Divine Majesty, and are not in the power of any either angel or man,” (Luther, *Galatians*, pp. 15-16).

This verb carries with it the idea of deliverance, rescue and emancipation. The gospel, as we will see, announces the rescue mission of Jesus. The gospel brings about emancipation from slavery. It brings freedom to those held captive in the prison of sin. The gospel is the believer’s great Emancipation Proclamation!

#### 2. *The aim of deliverance*

The book of Galatians announces that Christ died to deliver/rescue sinners from a state of bondage in order to bring them into freedom, which consists of being brought into union with Christ (cf., 2:4; 4:3, 9, 24-25; 5:1).

The verb, “deliver,” is in the middle voice, which suggests that Christ, who delivered us, has an interest in the result of His own act (Hogg/ Vine, *Galatians*, p. 21). In other words, Christ delivered us so that we might belong to Him (cf. Titus 2:14)!

By His death, Christ rescues us from the power of this present evil world and brings us into union with Himself. Thus, one could paraphrase v. 4 as, “Who gave Himself for our sins, in order that He might deliver us out of this present evil age so that we might belong to Him,” (Hogg/Vine, p. 21).

The purpose of Christ’s deliverance brings to mind God’s great covenantal promise, which runs throughout the Old Testament, “I will be your God and you will be my people,” (cf. Gen. 17:7 w/ Gal. 3:6-14).

Commenting on the concept of freedom, the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* notes, “God sets his people free to live in covenant relationship with him. In Scripture freedom is always a qualified concept: God’s people are set free in order that they might serve... Christ, righteousness, etc...,” (p. 503).

Thus, where we once belonged to this evil world through the Fall, we are now brought into union with Christ who by His death purchased us to be His own property (i.e., adopted sons of God, Gal. 4:4-6; cf. John Calvin, *Galatians*, p. 26).

In comparison, the Judaizers, by their false gospel, were leading the Galatian believers away from Christ, out of the freedom of grace and the Spirit back under the bondage of the Law.

For Paul, such a thing was unthinkable because bondage was not the aim of the Gospel. Paul declares that Christ “gave Himself for our sins” so that as captive sinners the Galatians could be set free!

### 3. *The significance of deliverance*

As previously noted, this is the earliest written statement in the NT about the significance of the death of Christ. Further, it is the only time Paul uses this verb in reference to the work of Christ in the NT.

The significance of his including this phrase in the greeting is made clear in light of the occasion of the letter.

Paul, as you recall, wrote to the Galatians because false teachers maintained that faith in Christ for salvation was not sufficient and thus were leading the Galatian churches astray.

The false teachers insisted that the Galatian believers had to supplement their faith with obedience to the Jewish law (i.e., circumcision) if they were to be right with God (i.e., counted as true members of God’s covenant people, true sons of Abraham).

Typically, at this point in his greeting, Paul would be giving thanks for his readers. However, due to the grievous nature of the problem facing the Galatian churches, Paul inserts a phrase, that perhaps was well known to his readers, which summed up the gospel (cf. Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 75).

Paul's inclusion of this verb hammers home the truth that deliverance and freedom come only through Christ's voluntary and substitutionary death on the cross, not through one's law keeping.

Lenski summarizes the significance of this verb "deliverance" when he writes,

"The great point that the Galatians are to note is the fact that grace and peace are ours through the merits of Christ's self-sacrifice alone. All is due to his death for our sins. We are able to add nothing by any work of ours. We are not delivered by any observance of law. The whole epistle is aimed at this error; the foundation is laid already in the greeting,"  
(*Galatians*, p. 29).

What is the nature of this deliverance? What does it consist of? From what does Christ's death rescue?

#### 4. *The nature of deliverance*

This phrase has both a judicial and ethical aspect.

##### a. *Judicial: Deliverance from the condemnation of sin*

When we think of Christ's deliverance in light of the overall context and purpose of this letter, our thoughts are directed first to the way of acceptance with God in the present life (cf. Burton, *Galatians*, p. 15).

So, Christ's deliverance first speaks to our present judicial standing before God (cf., Gal. 3:10). It is "our sins" that made the cross necessary and for which Christ died.

What then is sin?

In brief, sin is the breaking of God's law.

The Westminster Larger Catechism asks:

"Q. 24. What is sin? A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature."

John, in 1 John 3:4, writes, "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness," (cf. Gal. 3:10-12).

Even the slightest outward or inward violation from the absolute standard of God's law is a sin.

Note as also in Galatians 1:4 that Paul uses the plural, "sins." We are guilty of multiple violations of God's law. The full seriousness of law breaking is evidenced by the fact that Christ died in order to deliver us from our multiple violations of God's law.

Now, if there is anything characteristic of "this present evil age" it is lawlessness. Lawlessness has marked this present evil age ever since the Fall.

In the Garden of Eden, God exercised His rule over creation by His word. He only had one law for Adam and Eve, which was to abstain from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (cf. Gen. 2:16-17).

However, by listening to the distorting lies of the devil, Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation, disobeyed and broke God's law (Gen. 3:6). They usurped God's law and sought to establish their own laws and freedom. Such has been the nature of sinful man ever since.

One of the most observable characteristics of modern man is the rejection of God and the assertion of self. Fallen man seeks to usurp God's law and establish his own rules and freedom. As the famous poem, *Invictus*, written by William Ernest Henley, reads,

"I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul."

However, Calvin noted, "So long as man lives to himself, he is altogether condemned," (*Galatians*, vol. XXI, p. 27).

No one perfectly conforms to the requirements of God's law. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," (Rom. 3:23). Everyone in this present evil age stands guilty and condemned before God, thus incurring the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10).

Take for example the 9th Commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," (Ex. 20:16). What exactly does this commandment forbid as well as require?

Listen to the Heidelberg Catechism's explanation (Q. 112.),

"I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard. Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath. In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth, speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation."

It is clearly evident that no one has ever kept this commandment perfectly. The 9th commandment forbids any type of sins of the tongue whether it be lying, gossip, slander,

critical speech, insults, harsh words and demeaning comments, etc... And on the flip side, it requires that we only speak words of edification, love and grace (cf., Eph. 4:29).

We know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of slander and gossip. Moreover, we know the pain that we have caused to others by how we have spoken to or about them (and undoubtedly to our spouses and children!).

The tongue is a faithful revealer of our hearts. Listen to Matt. 12:34b, "...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Our tongues will betray the sin in our hearts every time.

Thus, David prayed, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer," (Ps. 19:14).

And so, based upon one commandment alone, it is perfectly clear that all of us are law-breakers (cf. James 2:10).

But, the Good News is that Jesus died to rescue us from the condemnation and curse of the law (3:13). We have been rescued from the wrath that is coming upon this present evil age of lawlessness (cf. 1 Thess. 1:10). We now have freedom to live as adopted sons of God, no longer in bondage as slaves fearful of God's wrath (3:23-4:7).

## **CONCLUSION:**

As we consider Christ's great rescue from the condemnation of sin and the ensuing freedom that it brings let us draw out a few lessons from all this.

*1. True freedom does not consist in living independently from God.*

Paul says that we are not delivered from our sin so that we can establish our independence and live on our own. This was the sin of Adam and Eve.

Initially, man was created to live in a perfect covenant relationship with his Creator. Adam and Eve lived under God's rule and thus enjoyed God's blessings and perfect freedom.

Yet, when they sought to establish their own rules and independence, God's blessings and freedom were exchanged for curses and bondage.

And so Christ, through his death and resurrection, came to reverse the effects of the Fall.

Christ came to restore His kingdom once again (Mk. 1:15). He came to set the oppressed free (cf. Lk. 4:18; Rom. 8:21-23) so that He might gather together a people for His Name (Acts 15:14).

Through Christ's death and resurrection, God would redeem a people who once again willingly submit to His rule and reign.

Thus, true freedom consists in being delivered from our sins so that we might belong to Christ (cf., Chapters 5-6; Rom. 1:6, “you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,” ESV).

2. *Because of Christ’s great rescue, we may boldly approach our heavenly Father no longer dreading His sentence of condemnation.*

God threatens eternal punishment upon every single person who fails to perfectly keep all the stipulations of His law.

As Paul writes in Galatians 3:10, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them,” (cf. Deut. 27:26).

Once a man violates God’s law, the law holds forth no promise or good news for the forgiveness of sin. Instead, the sentence of condemnation is imposed upon all law-breakers.

This is where Christ’s rescue mission comes in! Everyone who belongs to this present evil age stands condemned as law-breakers.

Yet, according to Paul in Galatians 1:4, the Good News is that guilty, law-breakers are rescued from the sentence of condemnation imposed on this present evil age!

In Romans 8:31-34, Paul writes,

“<sup>31</sup>...If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup> Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Charles Wesley, in his great hymn, *And Can It Be That I Should Gain?*, captures this astonishing, joy-filling truth with the following words:

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach th’eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

In the Gospel, God gives freely what He demands in His law. The Good News is that Christ, through His death, “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree,” (Gal. 3:13).

By His voluntary, substitutionary death, Christ has delivered us from this present evil age, which stands condemned before God. We have received grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:3).

Christ gave Himself so that we might be delivered from this present evil age and receive adoption as sons (Gal. 1:4; 4:5). Therefore, we are no longer condemned slaves, but free sons, heirs through God (Gal. 4:7)!

Through Christ guilty law-breakers have been given the freedom to enter in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:8).

As we increasingly grasp the Gospel truth that we are no longer slaves condemned by God but rather fully accepted, redeemed sons, we are moved in the depths of our being and filled with joy, wonder, amazement and thankfulness!

With Peter we declare, "Though we have not seen him, we love him. Though we do not now see him, we believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory," (1 Pet. 1:8)!

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