



## DISTORTION AND DESERTION

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Galatians 1:6-10

Second Message

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The Book of Galatians, in essence, is a declaration of independence. It is a call to freedom. In our last study we saw that the apostle Paul defined that word as the freedom to be what God intended us to be. In his salutation he said that Christ's death and resurrection has delivered us from this present evil age. We are free from its power and domination. Why then do so few Christians experience that freedom on a day-to-day basis? Listen to one man's honest confession:

There was a day when my whole life caved in—when the edifice that I had painstakingly erected over many years came tumbling down like a house of cards. I had been born into a Christian home, carefully nurtured in Christian schools. Surrounded by a Christian environment, and enriched by many Christian teachers and friends, I had early made a confession of Christ, and had grown year-by-year in Christian knowledge and teaching. I had also committed my life to Christ, received excellent Christian training in a good Bible College, and been commissioned as a missionary to Thailand under a reputable Christian mission board. Life had seemed wonderful. In so far as I was able, I had gone all the way with Christ, and I was looking forward to the challenges and rewards of a lifetime of missionary service.

And yet...after years as a missionary in Thailand, I found myself at the end of the road. I had what they call a nervous breakdown, and became totally unable to go on. Instead I had to return to the United States with my tail between my legs, so to speak. All my hopes and aspirations were shattered, and all the skills that I had acquired through the years of preparation became unusable. For I soon found myself unable to preach, unable to teach, unable to read my Bible, unable to pray, unable to face the least spiritual challenge or duty without the threat of personal disintegration. I was of no use to God, to my wife, to myself, to anyone. I had been reduced to absolute zero, and somehow I had to find a way to put my life back together and learn to live all over again.

This is not the place to tell about the long, slow, climb back to life, hope, and wholeness; but I do want to tell you about one thing that has been crucial in this process—a new understanding and appreciation of the grace of God.

Not that I was totally ignorant of the grace of God before. I had always believed it and prized it as a central part of my faith. I had carefully studied Paul's teachings on the subject, especially as developed in the book of Romans and Galatians; and I had frequently preached and taught these same truths. But at the same time, on a deeper level, I had lived most of my life with a legalistic, ungracious God. Only as I began to see how profoundly I had been living under the shadow of such a God, and

to see the meaning of His grace on the heart-habit level, was I able to begin to work my way through to a life of greater freedom and fulfillment.<sup>1</sup>

Many Christians identify with those words. They long to come out of that shadow and live in the warmth and freedom of God's grace. That is the issue to which Paul directs his passionate plea in the final verses of his introduction to Galatians.

Paul does something here that he does not do in his other writings. In his other letters, following his initial greeting, he goes on to pray for his readers, to praise them or thank God for them. He expresses a word of affirmation, commendation or love for them. To the Christians at Philippi he says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you" (Phil 1:3). To the church at Rome he writes that he is thankful for their faith, which "is being proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Rom 1:8). Even to the church at Corinth, which had so many problems that had caused him much grief, he says that he thanked God always for them. But he doesn't say any of that in Galatians. He immediately and urgently dives into his theme. His words are emotional. He is upset.

**I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:6-10 NASB)**

Paul is doing three things here. He is expressing bewilderment at the fickleness and insecurity of the Galatians; he is speaking against the false teachers who were disturbing their churches; and he is uttering a terrifying curse upon anyone who would dare to change the gospel. What caused the apostle to have such a strong reaction, using words that don't sound Christian at all?

Acts 15 helps us here. When Paul visited these cities of Iconium, Derbe and Lystra, he went to the Jews first as was his usual custom. He would visit the synagogue, wearing his rabbinic robes, and as a visiting rabbi

would be invited to address the congregation. Usually his words received some positive response, but often-times what he said would lead to a confrontation, forcing him to leave the synagogue. He would then go to the Gentiles and preach to them. He would share the great, liberating passages from the Old Testament that prefigured the coming of Christ. He would preach about the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many, not only Jews but Gentiles, believed his words. The Gentiles, with no background in Judaism, were unaccustomed to the culture and procedures of the Jews. Hearing the good news for the first time, they were responding to it. They were being set free from this "present evil age." Hundreds and possibly thousands were coming to Christ, turning from idols to serve the living and true God.

But after Paul had left others would arrive, probably from Jerusalem. The apostle calls them "troublemakers and agitators." These men were disturbing the church and distorting the truth, throwing the church into a state of turmoil. People were being confused, and divisions created. The Council at Jerusalem, which probably met right after Paul had written this letter, used the same word in their letter to the churches in Acts 15:24, "We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said" (NIV).

These agitators probably were wearing their rabbinic robes too. They attacked Paul's authority, claiming that he wasn't one of the original apostles. Then they attacked his teaching. These Judaizers as they were called began to teach these new converts "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1 NASB). They weren't denying that Jesus was the Messiah. They taught that people needed to believe in Jesus, but that wasn't enough. They were convincing these Galatian believers that they had to be circumcised and keep the law as well. It wasn't the entrance requirements but the maintenance requirements to the faith that was at issue. They said that Moses must finish what Christ had begun. They must add their own works to the work of Christ. They had to believe in Christ, but they also had to keep the rules. Human achievement must accompany sincere faith before they could be certain of their salvation. That is legalism. Any theology that rests on human performance is not good news. And that is what has infected and polluted the church since the very beginning.

In her book *The Liberty of Obedience*, Elizabeth Elliot tells the story of a young man who was eager to grow, to forsake all and follow Christ. He asked a spiritual leader in the church what he should do. The teacher responded: "Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot...take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against Him who created us, to attempt to improve on His work."

"Doesn't this answer sound absurd?" asks Elliot. Then she writes: "It is the answer given in the most celebrated Christian schools of the second century! Is it possible that the rules that have been adopted by many twentieth-century Christians will sound as absurd to earnest followers of Christ a few years hence?"<sup>2</sup>

Steve Newman who was a pastor at PBC many years ago used to tell a story about a group of Dutch Lutherans visiting the U.S. They were distressed at what they thought was gross carnality, because American Christians were so free and casual in their worship. They were upset that people laughed out loud in the service, that men didn't wear coats and ties, and that they drove expensive cars. When they returned home they called their church leaders together and shared their concerns. As they spoke they began to weep, and the tears ran down their cheeks and off the ends of their cigars and into their beer!

Certainly, God wants us to change, but he changes us from the inside out as his grace begins to work. He conforms us into the image of Christ. He has so much more in mind for us than mere externals. He is making us into beautiful, glorious people who reflect his character

Notice that Paul doesn't say to the Galatians, "You are deserting me." What he says is, "You are deserting God." The Greek word translated desert means "to transfer one's allegiance." It was used of soldiers who revolt or desert. When you fall away from the principle of grace, you fall away from God. It isn't just a matter of leaving a theological position. You are abandoning a personal, loving God; you are believing lies about God. Nothing in life is more important than what you believe about God.

Imagine that you are married and that your spouse loves you unconditionally. Nothing you do affects the way your spouse feels about you. But there is a problem. You are completely unaware that that is how your spouse feels about you. Someone has convinced you that you have to work hard to be accepted and loved. So you are never free to enjoy your spouse's love. You feel guilty all the time for not being "good enough." What a tragedy that would be!

But this is what can actually happen in our relationship with God if we allow ourselves to be placed under law. God loves us very much, but at times we are seduced into thinking that he expects certain things from us in return. Imagine how sad God must feel when we trade Christ for living under law. Living under grace as sons of God is Christ-centered; living under law is self-centered.

Paul says, "You are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all." He means that there is only one gospel. Any gospel other than the one the apostles preached is really no gospel at all. When you turn away from grace, it is no longer good news, it's bad news. As John Stott writes, "The true gospel is... what Paul called it in Acts 20:24, 'the gospel of the grace

of God.' It is good news of a God who is gracious to undeserving sinners. In grace He gave His Son to die for us. In grace He calls us to Himself. In grace He justifies us when we believe...all is of grace. Nothing is due to our efforts...everything in salvation is due to the grace of God."<sup>3</sup>

The apostle is adamant that to turn away from grace is to turn away from God. That is why his reaction is so stern. He denounces those who add law to grace, because the stakes are so high. He issues a somber warning, not once, but twice. The judgment pronounced on anyone who distorts the gospel is, "let him be accursed." Anathema speaks of absolute rejection. In the O.T. it referred to the curse of God that rested upon anything or anyone devoted to divine destruction.

When you preach grace you will always face opposition. Paul goes on to say in verse 10: "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ." Apparently these false teachers had accused Paul of being a people pleaser who changed his message depending on the audience. But Paul was no man pleaser. If he were out to please people, he would put himself under law to win their approval. In fact, legalism thrives because people hunger for the approval of others rather than God. We long to be accepted, so it is easier to conform to what everybody else is doing. Legalism is attractive! It's reassuring to know what the rules are. And, as we will see later in the book, that appeals to our pride. We may not be able to pay the entire bill but we can leave a tip. If someone says we have to be baptized in order to be saved, well, that's something we can contribute to Christ's work.

Whenever grace is taught someone is sure to say, "That's not right. Keep teaching like that and people are going to keep sinning." But that's not true. No one who understands grace can live that way. Paul tells Titus: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Tit 2:11-12 NIV).

Grace never makes lawless beings of us. When we learn to live in grace we will be well on our way to becoming the kind of people that God intends us to be.

Let me leave you with two ideas:<sup>4</sup>

### **1. The origin of the Gospel is the apostles.**

The only true gospel is the New Testament gospel. There are no other apostles. The standard by which all

opinions and teaching are to be tested is the gospel which the apostles preached. Oftentimes we are dazzled by another's gifts, or personality, or education. But, as John Stott reminds us, "We judge them by the gospel; we do not judge the gospel by them. As Dr. Alan Cole expresses it, 'The outward person of the messenger does not validate his message; rather, the nature of the message validates the messenger.'"<sup>5</sup>

### **2. The substance of the Gospel is grace.**

As Paul declares in Acts 20:24, it is "the gospel of God's grace." Both our salvation and our sanctification totally depend upon God. God's grace is the only way to grow. Peter says, "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 3:18 NIV). Draw near to God. Get next to him. Focus on him. Love him. Grow in the intimate knowledge of him. Not head knowledge. Paul is talking about a heart that is given over to Jesus Christ in worship and devotion.

Grow in knowledge and grace. Cooperate with what God is doing in your life. He will point out areas that need to change. Don't be afraid of that. You can admit these. Don't hide them. We all struggle, we all fail, we all fall short. We don't have to play games with each other. A lot of work still needs to be done. But God is changing us. Little by little, from glory to glory, attribute by attribute, he is changing us into the likeness of Christ. And it is grace that accomplishes that.

You can't have a little grace and a little law. The moment you add even a little law, then it all depends on you. It doesn't depend on us, how much time we spend in the word, how many verses we've memorized, how regimented we are, or how consistent our quiet time. Those are all good things, but they are merely the means of grace. They help center us on grace, to lay hold of more of God's grace. If we slip up on those, it doesn't set us back. The important thing is to center on him, to rely on him, because he is the source of power in our lives.

1. Joseph R. Cooke, *Celebration of Grace: Living in Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

2. Elizabeth Elliot, *The Liberty of Obedience* (Waco: Word, 1968), 32-33, quoted by Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 62-63.

3. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1968), 22.

4. For these two points I am indebted to Stott, *Galatians*, 27.

5. Stott, *Galatians*, 28.