



THE PRESSURE'S OFF

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Galatians 1:1-5
First Message
Gary Vanderet
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The Book of Galatians has been variously called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty, the Christian declaration of independence, and the charter of freedom. Galatians was the battle cry of the Reformation. We could say that the Reformation began because Martin Luther wrote a commentary on this book. Galatians enflamed Luther's heart. In his "Table Talks" he said, "The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle. To it I am as it were in wedlock. Galatians is my Katherine."¹ Luther loved this book because at one point in his life he was trying to find God, trying to be good, but failing. When he read Galatians it dawned on him that he didn't have to be good. God didn't expect Luther to clean up his act and try to be better. God wanted to do that for him. That was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Freedom is the theme of Galatians. But freedom means different things to different people. It has taken on a new relevance in our post 9/11 world. Some of you have loved ones serving overseas, fighting to defend and preserve our freedom. But the apostle Paul uses that word to refer to the freedom to become what God intends for us to be. In terms of that definition our world is conspicuously lacking in freedom. Living in the land of the free has not made us free in this way.

Certainly, no one is born free. We come into the world totally dependent on our parents. As we grow we develop new dependencies, things like peer approval, money, power, prestige, academic and athletic achievements and reliance on material things to give us a sense of worth. As we get older we may turn to alcohol, drugs, pornography, sexual or food addictions. We find we are controlled by external things. We don't have any freedom at all. We are tied up in knots. We're inhibited, obsessive-compulsive, uptight, and fearfully defensive. Something inside us tells us the kind of people we ought to be, but we can't pull it off because we don't measure up. The Book of Galatians tells us how. This is the book that Paul wrote to set us free.

The apostle introduces the text with a summary:

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), (Gal 1:1 NASB)

"Paul, an apostle..." Paul isn't merely claiming a title, he is asserting a fact, which he will go on to develop in the first two chapters. He insists on the fact that he is an apostle. And he goes on to say that the source of his apostleship is not any man. No man commissioned him.

No group of men who recognized God's call laid hands on him. Paul belabors the fact that he is an apostle, because his apostleship was under attack. False teachers followed him around, saying that he was not one of the regular apostles. Their motive was to discredit his message by destroying his authority. But Paul strenuously insists that he is an apostle.

And what is an apostle? Mark says in his gospel: "And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14). Our English word is an anglicized form of the Greek word *apostello*. *Stello* means "sent," and *apo* "away from," so it means "to send away, to send out." The word had the same meaning in both the Jewish and Greek worlds. It's used in Greek classical literature of the commissioning of a ship. The Jews used this term of men sent out by rabbis to teach in their name and with their authority.

The New Testament is clear that this group was unique, select, and small in number. There were twelve originally; later a few others were added. These men were called into a relationship with Jesus Christ. They were taught by him and disciplined by him, and then sent out with his authority. Apostle was not a general word which could be applied to every Christian, like the words believer, saint or brother. It was a special term reserved for the twelve and a few others. That is why there can be no apostolic succession. The apostles were unique. Paul claimed to belong to this group, because the Lord commissioned him on the same basis as he did the other apostles.

Paul was on his way up to Damascus with letters in hand giving him authority to persecute Christians when he was arrested by the risen Lord and commissioned to be his apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus gave Paul all the authority that he himself had, so that what he said and wrote he did with the same authority as that of the Lord Jesus himself. That is why he could write to the church at Thessalonica: "we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess 2:13).

What an audacious claim! Paul fully understood his authority. It was important that he establish this point to the believers in Galatia. He wasn't inflated with personal vanity. No, he is adamant at this point, because the gospel was at stake. If Paul were not an apostle of

Jesus Christ, then men could and no doubt would reject his gospel. Because what he spoke was Christ's message on Christ's authority, he defended his authority in order to defend the message. This is an important concept in our postmodern world. Paul expects the Galatians—and us, too—to listen. When it comes to the essentials of the gospel, disagreement is no longer merely dialogue, it is heresy.

and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: (1:2)

The people who first became known as the Galatians originally settled in what is modern-day France. Known as the Gauls, they also migrated east into what is modern-day Turkey, settling first into the northern part of that area next to the Black Sea. That is where the Romans found them when they were expanding the empire. They conquered them, and made them a part of the empire. Eventually this northern territory was incorporated into a much larger territory that extended south almost down to the Mediterranean Sea, known as the Roman province of Galatia.

There is much debate over whether Paul wrote to the churches in northern or southern Galatia. The energy devoted by scholars to this point seems out of proportion to its importance. Personally, I think the letter was written to the churches in south Galatia, in particular those in the four cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, the places that Paul visited during his first missionary journey (see Acts 13-14). This would be a good assignment for you to read this week in preparation for studying this book.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. (1:3-5)

As I mentioned, these opening verses are a summary of the book, which is made up of two elements: Paul defends his apostleship in chapters 1-2; and he argues for grace in chapters 3-6. Here he picks up the idea of grace. Although this is a typical greeting in his letters, he is saying something far more meaningful than "Hi, how are you?" Grace is given to heal our worthlessness, and peace is given to heal our restlessness. Grace is the source and peace is the result. This is the major theme of the book. Grace is a wonderful word. It is much easier to convey than explain. Grace is God's unmerited favor bestowed upon those who don't deserve it. Hannah Whitehall Smith says of grace, "To say that it is free, unmerited favor only expresses a little of its meaning. It is the unhindered, wondrous, boundless love of God, poured out to us in an infinite variety of ways without stint or measure; not according to our deserving, but according to His measureless heart of love."² That's grace!

God loves to give. Many people have an erroneous concept of God, developed not from the Scriptures but

from the world. They think that God is an irritable old relative who must not be upset. They say God has a lot of rules they have to obey in order to please him, and that he won't like them unless they're good. Paul wants us to know, and he will take great pains to teach us, that God likes us whether we are good or not. He likes you just the way you are. Grace teaches us that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more—no amount of spiritual calisthenics, study, knowledge or crusading on behalf of righteous causes. And there is nothing we can do to make him love us less. He already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.

I can identify with Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary, who wrote in his book *Shame and Grace*, "Guilt was not my problem as I felt it. What I felt most was a glob of unworthiness that I could not tie down to any concrete sins I was guilty of. What I needed more than pardon was a sense that God accepted me, owned me, held me, affirmed me, and would never let go of me even if he was not too much impressed with what he had on his hands."³ And because of God's grace we are at peace: at peace with God, at peace with men, at peace within.

God's love and grace is epitomized in the phrase, "who gave Himself for our sins." The cross demonstrates that God loves us. There is one event in history that establishes that fact, and that is the cross. There our Lord died for us and revealed his love for us. This is the great historical event in which God's grace was exhibited and from which his peace is derived.

God put our guilt upon the Lord Jesus and he bore our sins in his own body on the cross. Paul says later that Christ became a "curse for us" (Gal 3:13). He paid for our sins so we don't have to. He took the rap. He bore the consequences. Someone had to pay for sin. God did not want to send us to hell, so he sent his Son to hell so that sins could be paid for and we could be redeemed. On that cross, all of our sins, past, present and future, have been paid for.

The Bible says that there is nothing we can do in ourselves to deal with the problem of sin. God must do it all. And the wonderful declaration of the gospel is that he has done it all. There is nothing we can do to add to his finished work. That is what we sang this morning: "I'm forgiven, because you were forsaken. I'm accepted, you were condemned. I'm alive and well, your Spirit lives within me, because you died and rose again." In "Surprised by Grace," an article summarizing his life, J.I. Packer describes the secret of his life and ministry in these words: "I am a shy, freaky, bookworm-type person whom God has taken and set upon a rock. My stability comes from an ever-fresh realization that God is my Father and I am his child. Adopted. Assured. Therefore I'm living in a less nervy, more relaxed way."

But the gospel doesn't end with forgiveness. God loves us just the way we are, but he loves us so much that he doesn't want to leave us that way. Paul goes on

to say that the purpose of Christ's death was to "deliver us out of this present evil age." The apostle doesn't use the word *cosmos* for world; he uses the word translated age—the world system. God delivers us from the influence of the world system around us. According to Biblical thought, there are only two ages. There is the age to come, which is under the control of our Lord. Then there will be no more war, no sexual abuse, no divorce, no cancer, no heartaches. That is coming. In the meantime we are living in this present evil age that is under the control of the evil one. That is why so much of what the world says and does is just an echo of the philosophy of the evil one. It influences us from the cradle to the grave. It preys upon us. It tries to convince us that what the devil has to say is true, in contrast to what God has to say. Paul says that God, through Jesus Christ and his work on the cross, has delivered us, rescued us from the influence, the control, of this present evil age.

That word deliver is interesting. This is the only place in the New Testament where it is used metaphorically. Every other place it is used literally. In Acts it is used of Peter being rescued from prison and from Herod (12:11), of the Israelites being delivered from their slavery in Egypt (7:34), and of the apostle Paul being rescued from a lynch mob (23:27). And here it is talking about our spiritual rescue, being delivered from the control and the domination of this age. That is what it means to be set free. The gospel is a rescue, a deliverance, an emancipation. This is what all of us hunger for. But this is the one thing that we cannot do for ourselves. We can accumulate wealth and power and fame, but we cannot deliver ourselves from this present evil age.

Some time ago I refereed a basketball game. One of the players has, to put it mildly, an anger management problem. If he thinks he was fouled and the call isn't made, he can turn into a wild man. On this night he was dribbling his way to the basket. He might have been fouled, but he didn't get the call. He got hotter and hotter, and then stomped his feet and screamed at the top of his lungs, "Make the call!" When I took him aside afterwards I was touched by his words. He said, "I'm really not a bad guy. I just can't control myself sometimes."

We all can identify with those words. Theologically speaking, we are all bad people, but still, there is a yearning in our hearts for goodness. We really want to do what's right. But the question is, How do we do it? Even though we have good intentions we wind up do-

ing bad things. Who will deliver us? That was Paul's question. The answer is, the Lord Jesus, who gave himself to deliver us from this evil age. God desires that every one of us experience this freedom. It was done, says Paul, "according to the will of our God and Father," or, as Eugene Petersen translates it, "God's plan is that we all experience that rescue." God planned it and implemented it—and he has never failed at anything he set out to do.

to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. (1:5)

Overwhelmed at this notion of grace, Paul offers up praise to God. The apostle never got over the wonder and power of that grace. Grace became his invocation, his benediction—and everything in between. Grace is what brought him to his knees over his sin, and grace is what took his sin away. He hated Christians. He hated Christ. On the Damascus Road the Lord stopped him and expressed his love for him. It was grace that knocked Paul down that day. Grace was the light that blinded him, and grace was the power that took the scales away.

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!*

John Newton, the writer of that hymn, was a slave trader. A few years ago, a number of us ministered with Gus Marwieh at a refugee camp for Liberians in Ghana. We visited the castles on the coast where slaves were kept before they were sold. It was a very moving experience. About sixty million Africans were captured in raids and wars against other tribes and brought to these castles. There they were chained in stockades and sold as slaves. Only about twenty million of them survived that terrible journey. John Newton, who commanded one of those English slave ships, was one of those slave traders. When he was confronted with the gospel, he could hardly believe that God could love a wretch like him. That is why he penned those words: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me!"

As we begin this study in Galatians it is my prayer that each of us taste and experience the transforming power of God's amazing grace.

1. Quoted by John MacArthur, *Liberated for Life* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1976), 5.
2. David H. Roper, "Last Words," Idaho Mountain Ministries.
3. Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1993), 80.

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