

<Read text: Gal 1:1-5>

The letter to the Galatian churches begins much like all of Paul's letters, which is itself an adaptation of the style common to the day. He identifies himself and his recipients and offers the common words of greetings for the day. The usual Greek word of greeting, "charis" (grace), and the usual Hebrew word of greeting, "shalom" (peace). But he uses these words in a new way, with a new twist of sorts that elevates them beyond idiomatic well-wishes that was their common meaning. Rather than simply saying the word "charis!" or "shalom!" much like we would say, "hi!" he instead brings in the *meaning* of these words, by directing the grace and peace *to* his recipients and identifying exactly where they should expect these blessings to come *from*, that is, from God himself.

He even takes it one step further and shows us exactly how we should expect these blessings to come to us. It's not just well-wishes from God. He describes exactly *how* God's grace comes to us and makes it clear the peace that will result. It's the central truth of scripture that we all gather around. It's a truth so amazing, and so profound that we can never seem to properly express the effect it has on us...and yet it can be stated so simply and so briefly here. There are various ways to state it, but as Paul puts it here, that Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.

There's the grace. The undeserved love and kindness. Christ gave everything he had, he gave himself. And for what? Because of our sins. Crimes against God himself. And not unwitting, ignorant crimes. Not minor technicalities. Our sins. Our crimes. Willful, intentional acts against a God who has only ever shown us love. And in the face of all that, Christ Jesus gave himself up for us. He handed himself over to destruction so that we could be taken out of this evil age. And not in some future sense. We are rescued the moment faith comes to us. When we learn and trust this truth we have eternal life. We become renewed, no longer a slave to our sinful self but new in Christ. We continue to live in this world but we are no longer chained to it, we are no longer a part of it. When it dies, we will not go with it.

Nothing we have done deserves this. That is the grace shown to us. And having it brings us peace. We know we are at peace with God himself from the sacrifice of Christ, and we can be at peace ourselves with the knowledge that our future is certain. Knowing what we do about eternity, we don't have to live this life as though it were our last. We can take that list of "things I need to do before I die" and just burn it. There's not a single thing you could put on that list that's going to bother you in heaven if you didn't get to it. So much that our society tells us we need to worry about or chase after becomes so unimportant when we know the truth. We have peace.

And all of this is made certain to us by the fact that it comes to us from God himself, not some human agent who would corrupt or ruin his message or his work. Paul was not sent from men or by man, but by God himself. The words we read every week in worship are not human words but God's message to us. It is the message and acknowledgement of our own failure and the truth that God has rescued us from the pit by his mighty acts. We are forgiven, fully and freely, through no action of our own. It is the "euangelion", the "good news". The Gospel. There is no message we treasure more, there is nothing of greater value. It is what we have learned, what we believe and what we must never let go of.

But that was exactly the problem in the Galatian region. After Paul has finished his deliberately loaded greeting, he jumps directly into speaking to the churches there. And unlike most of his other letters there isn't a word of thanks or praise for the faithfulness of the people there. Instead we get something quite different: <Read text: Gal 1:6-10>.

What had happened? Paul had started most of these churches personally. He had taught them the truth, the good news of Christ from his own mouth. He had been the one to see the joy in their lives as they learned of the grace and peace God had given them, of the freedom they now had from the present evil age. But as a missionary, he had to move on. And now what has reached his ears but that the people he cared so much about, who had so proudly confessed their savior before had so quickly abandoned the truth because someone else said something different.

Through the whole letter of Galatians we can piece together what the problem was. It seemed that there were accusations coming up against Paul. That he was "dumbing down" the truth in order to make it easier for people to accept it. No, the real truth, these people said, was that you had to believe in Jesus and then return to following the Jewish laws and customs, circumcision being the big one. You had to believe in Jesus, they would say, but you also had to do these other things in order to be saved.

Paul says this other "gospel" was no gospel at all. And it's not. Where's the good news there? It's not grace if you are responsible for part of it! It's not forgiveness if there's something you do to make it happen! Where's the peace? How could one rest comfortably if part of the solution depended on your action? Or even worse, if it was something you

were sure you did, then how proud you would be of what a great thing you did to earn God's favor! That's not grace, that's a bargain.

Some might be tempted to think that small matters aren't such a big deal. There were probably those at the time that said, "okay sure, we'll be circumcised too if you say that's necessary. Can't hurt." But what does Paul say about those who preach any message other than the certain truth of God's word? Let him be eternally condemned! Not, "may he repent of his ways." Not, "show him his error." No, for perverting the gospel of Christ and chaining souls down with a message that is no gospel at all, Paul calls out for condemnation! This is no small or slight matter. Knowing the truth of God or not is the difference between life and death. Those who would willingly teach something that leads people to death are not to be taken lightly.

And it's not like this was just a problem in Galatia. If anything, the problem is more pronounced today. How often have we seen it play out just like it did for Paul here? One of us is raised with the truth. Taught the truth. Rejoices in the truth of the good news of God. And then some circumstance of life keeps them away from that truth for a short time. Or they hear another whisper in their ear. Or society brings pressure on that person to act like the rest of them. And all too suddenly it seems, they abandon the only truth that matters, and exchange it for a pleasant lie. An appealing lie. But a lie. Whether it's another church body that teaches what itching ears like to hear, or, all the more likely today, giving in to the gospel of self-determination. The lie of our culture that I am in control of my destiny and I can fix all my own problems and I can do and have what I want!

And the results vary from the distressing to the grave. At the very least a church of mixed doctrine will rob a person of peace. Where the truth of God's word is corrupted, peace will be forfeit. As we've said, if even a small part of your salvation depends on you, then what will you obsess and focus on? Yourself. And your eyes are taken off of the source of peace, your Savior Christ. But that's the lesser of the two outcomes. At worst, faith is abandoned entirely for the lie of the world, and eternal life is lost in the process. If we are not vigilant, if we take this grace and peace for granted, then this will happen. This is not some boogeyman outcome to scare small children. This happens, people give up on God, and they die.

There is only one sure way to keep this from happening to you. You hold on to the truth. The truth from God alone. You keep that truth and you don't let anyone take it from you, you don't let anyone tell you a different truth. How can you do this? How will you know? You need to know that truth. You need to know it inside out and backward so that you cannot be deceived. You need to stand firm on what God says so that when someone says otherwise you recognize it without a second thought. You have the truth, printed for you in sixty-six books bound in a single volume. It is God's word. It is from him, not any human agency. His word is where we hear the truth of our salvation. His word is where we return to constantly hear the good news. And I'll let you in on a secret: You don't know it nearly well enough.

None of us do. Not even me. In fact, we don't even know the basics as well as we ought to. There's always more of God's word to learn better, and we never get to put a stamp on any of it and say "I know that, moving on." Study it. Dig into it. Read it on your own. Use a commentary or study guide to help you. Not sure which one to start with? Ask! Still get confused from what you read? Call me! We'll work it out together. And then gather with your brothers and sisters here to study together. To learn from each other's insights. Can't make it to the studies we offer? Say something! We'll find another way. But never think you're done learning. Never think you've learned any part of it "well enough." For one, you haven't. And for another, there's just too much riding on it to make that assumption.

This world will do everything in its power to tear the treasure of the grace and peace of God away from you and leave you holding a bag of garbage with a bow on it. And if you don't know what the truth looks like well enough, then you may not even notice the switch has been made. Dig into the good news of God so that you will never be fooled into accepting an imitation.

But even more than that, enjoy the blessings that pour out of that Good News. That's what it really is. The better your understanding and knowledge of the truth of God, the more you will appreciate his grace in your life, and the more complete your earthly peace will be. If you've never committed yourself to studying God's truths then you don't realize the regular comfort and joy you're missing out on. God pours out continual blessing on those who listen to him regularly. Hear time and again about the Christ who gave himself up for your sins so that you could be rescued. Listen with believing hearts to the one true Gospel. Amen.