

# INTRODUCTION

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**W**hen Paul returned from his first missionary journey, in about AD 49, he was distressed to hear that false teachers had been following him as he preached in southern Galatia. These false teachers were trying to undo the gospel impact of Paul's ministry. Paul was angry!

With a fire in his heart he wrote Galatians, his first epistle. The result is stunning. Galatians is a passionate defence of his own ministry and especially of the gospel. The letter to the Galatians can be described like C.S. Lewis' Aslan – it is neither safe nor tame, but it is so, so good. Why? Because it draws our hearts to the One who is good, to Christ, and to the wonder of living in fellowship with His Father, our good God.

Some might suggest Galatians is largely irrelevant today. After all, who would accept a preacher promoting circumcision, a key issue in Galatians? When Martin Luther wrote about Galatians he described both a black devil and a white devil. The first is all about sin as we tend to think of it – gross, immoral and hideous. The latter is when the enemy comes as an angel of light, couching his influence in very religious and apparently godly garb. For Luther, it was the white devil that was the greater threat to the gospel. The world at its best is really the world at its worst. We easily spot overt attacks on the gospel, but we are all susceptible when false teaching comes under the cover of godly religious instruction. The devil loves to corrupt our view of Christ and wreak havoc on our experience of the Christian life.

Paul was contending for the ongoing implications of the gospel for the Christian life. Luther wrote that, 'if we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose simply everything.'<sup>1</sup> The threat facing the young Galatian church is still alive and well today. Yet so is the glorious gospel Paul proclaimed. Luther also wrote, 'I know how often I suddenly lose sight of the rays of the Gospel and of grace, which have been obscured for me by thick, dark clouds.'<sup>2</sup> May our hearts be stirred as we study this powerful epistle together. May the rays of the gospel and of grace shine clearly in our hearts. And may our lives be transformed so that others will also be drawn to the wonderful gospel of God's glorious grace!



**G**alatians launches with a bang! Paul's ministry and message have been attacked. Is he a true apostle? Is his message the true gospel? Is Paul's gospel too good to be true?

To begin, Paul could have simply written, 'Paul, to the churches in Galatia: grace and peace.' Since Paul wrote more than that, let's be sure to notice all that he added.

In verses 1–2 he defends his ministry. He is a true apostle. He was not sent by other men, or even a specific man (i.e. a key leader in Jerusalem). No, Jesus Christ and the Father commissioned him. Also, Paul is not a maverick minister, for there are brothers with him.

In verses 3–5 he presents the truth of the gospel that he had preached among them. Notice four important ingredients in the gospel mix here:

1. Sin is very serious. Everywhere we look, everything is shot through with evil. We are all sinners and we need to be rescued.
2. What rescues us from this present evil age? It is the grace of God our Father and Jesus Christ who gave Himself for our sins. Paul could have chosen to expand on this: He came to earth, went to the cross, died the death we deserved, and rescued us from sin. The gospel is about the gracious plan of God the Father and

the Son working together to rescue sinners.

3. Notice in verse 5 that the grace of the Father and the Son working together results in all the glory going to God. The grace of God leads to the glory of God.
4. Look for our role in the rescue. Look carefully. What do you see? There is absolutely nothing about us! The gospel is God's grace at work. We don't earn it, deserve it, work at it, or add to it. In Paul's summary of the gospel we are simply recipients.

**The gospel is all about the glorious grace of God that rescues sinners from evil.** This was the message Paul preached in Galatia. His message transformed lives and established churches. Let's pray that this message also truly grips us!

## REFLECTION

*How much does the gospel you believe depend on the grace of God? How much does it depend on you?*

**G**alatians is a life-changer, but for many Christians it remains only a biblical curiosity – an ancient letter to a small region in central Turkey. Perhaps people think that the dangerous teaching Paul opposed back then poses no threat now. After all, if the problem was merely the promotion of circumcision, then we can relax. Believers with a Jewish background who were pushing circumcision would not get an invitation to most churches today.

Circumcision was certainly a feature of the false teaching, it was even used as the label for the false teaching, but the real issue was broader than just circumcision. It was an anti-gospel promotion of law-keeping.

This is what the false teachers were effectively saying, ‘to be truly born again, not just born a bit, then you need the law, that is, to be circumcised. And if you want to live Christianity to the full, then you need to strive to keep the law. Paul’s grace message needs balancing with law.’

Now at this point in a typical letter we would expect Paul to write, ‘I give thanks to God for you ...’ Not this time! Get ready for an explosion. Paul is indignant! Verse 6 is like a landmine waiting to go off if you poke around it for too long. ‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting ...’

After hearing the gospel and responding to it, now the Galatians were turning

away. They were not just turning away from a message, but were turning away from a person, from God Himself!

Here comes the explosion. How were they turning away from God? Were they diving into gross immorality? No. Were they leaving Christianity and signing up to some other religion? No. What were they doing? They were actually becoming *more* religious, *more* Jewish, and, they might say, ‘*more* biblical’, even ‘*more* godly’!

Is it possible that a greater personal commitment to keeping the law could mean turning from God? That is what Paul is saying. How is that possible? Because any change and any addition to the gospel of God’s grace in Christ Jesus is a different and distorted gospel. **Anything that takes our eyes off Christ and onto ourselves is really no gospel at all!**

Surely this can’t be right? Either Paul is pro-sin, or he must have a better solution in mind.

## REFLECTION

*How could a greater commitment to so-called godliness actually be turning you from God? Do corruptions of the gospel stir appropriate anger in you?*

**W**e live in an age where strong conviction is often discouraged. You can hold to what you believe as strongly as you like, but if you challenge what I believe, then I may label you an intolerant bigot. Somehow the idea that there might actually be true truth has gotten lost in the shuffle. Paul was clear on the importance of the truth, especially in respect to the gospel. **The gospel is worthy of indignant defence because it is all of God!**

Paul's meaning in verse 8 is, 'look, if I lost it and I came to you preaching a different message, or if an angel comes from heaven and preaches a different version of the gospel, (these things won't happen, but if they did): eternal condemnation – that's what I am calling for!' Paul was really strong in his conviction!

Verse 9 reinforces this statement. If anyone comes preaching a different message from the truth the Galatians received (which is exactly what was happening), then that person should be eternally condemned.

Some of us cannot help but want to neutralise any conviction we meet. 'Steady on, Paul, no need to be so strong!' we might argue. However, as far as Paul is concerned, if someone is trying to add law to God's grace, then eternal condemnation is what they deserve. He could not get any stronger!

The gospel is totally about God's grace. It has nothing to do with what we could do or will do. It is all about God's loving, self-giving grace. That's the gospel. Martin Luther wrote,

*I personally would like to keep both the righteousness of grace as that which justifies and the righteousness of the Law as the basis for God's attitude toward me. But, as Paul says here, confusing these means perverting the Gospel of Christ.<sup>3</sup>*

If you try to add law to the gospel, do you get more godliness? No, you actually get less. We will see that in chapter 5. If we add law and self-effort to the gospel, we will throttle the grace out of the gospel. In essence Paul is saying, 'No way! Don't go there! It will strangle; it will squash; it will kill.' How great must be the grace of God!

## REFLECTION

*If you were a Galatian, how would you feel to have an apostle fighting to protect you from false teaching? How important is the truth of the gospel for you?*

**A**fter the thanksgiving (but in this case, astonishment) section of an epistle, some biographical information would typically follow. Here Paul takes the opportunity to continue defending his ministry. As we look at Paul's life, let's celebrate a gospel-transformed life! In the next chapter he will return to the issue of his message.

At the same time, there is an important question to answer: is Paul's ministry trustworthy? This is important because thirteen books in our New Testament were written by him. If Paul got it wrong, or was imbalanced in his teaching, then we need to know. If Paul was a true apostle, then we can read his letters with confidence because they are God's word.

The false teachers who followed Paul around southern Galatia attacked his status as an apostle. They probably acknowledged that he was an apostle, but only a *deputy* apostle. The real apostles were the twelve in Jerusalem. Perhaps these had sent Paul out, but on the way to Turkey had he dropped half of their message out of his pocket?

In verses 11–17 Paul makes the source of his ministry clear. It was not from an apostolic seminar in Jerusalem, but by a revelation of Christ Himself. Paul had been a rising star in Judaism, a terrorist campaigning against the followers of Jesus. But God, by His grace, called Paul and revealed Jesus to him. He wanted to

make Paul a preacher. Paul did not rush to Jerusalem, but to the desert of Arabia – he needed time to rethink everything he thought he knew!

Paul was called, not by men, but by God; he was trained not by men, but by God; he was sent not by men, but by God. Paul could be fully trusted as an apostle.

In verses 18–24 Paul continues his story. After three years he did pop up to Jerusalem for a visit and stayed a couple of weeks. He met only two apostles. After that he left the region. The believers in Jerusalem only heard rumours but to the effect: 'The terrorist is transformed and is now preaching the faith!'

The Judean churches were all of a twitter. God's grace had transformed Paul, and now God was being glorified. **Paul's ministry could be trusted because he was transformed: called, trained and sent by God.**

## REFLECTION

*What is the greatest gospel life-transformation story you know? Thank God for the transformation of Paul and the letters we have as a result!*

**P**aul was a true apostle, but what about his message? Was Paul's 'God's-grace-only' gospel enough, or did it need to be somehow balanced?

In these verses Paul tells of a later visit to Jerusalem, fourteen years after his conversion, to show that the apostles fully endorsed his message. Paul went with Barnabas and Titus to bring a love gift to the church (see Acts 11:27–30). The gift was a public display of unity, a Gentile gift for suffering Jewish-background believers.

Paul was not there to get his message endorsed by 'more senior' apostles. He was convinced his ministry was from God, but he did want to make sure they were all on the same page, that their public unity was supported by private reality. So privately Paul arranged a little conference.

Paul laid out his message. Did the apostles fix, add to, or balance it in any way? The answer eventually comes in verse 6. First, Paul tells of an incident involving Titus in verses 3–5. While he was there the very issue of circumcision came up because some false brothers infiltrated the ranks and kicked up a fuss about Gentile Titus. The false teachers were strongly resisted and Titus was not circumcised. What was the bottom line as far as the apostles were concerned? They were fully with Paul, so he could say 'they added nothing to my message' (v. 6).

In verses 7–10 Paul makes this agreement even clearer. The apostles not only added nothing to the gospel Paul preached but also recognised him on a level with Peter. The leading apostles did give Paul something. What did they give Paul? It was not a lecture, nor a correction. They gave him a hearty handshake as he headed out to the Gentiles, leaving them to focus on the local Jews. **Paul's message of God's grace was the gospel of all the apostles.**

When the apostles heard Paul's message about the grace of God, they were excited to stand with him in his ministry. In fact, they asked him for a favour – please don't forget the poor. For the rest of his career, Paul was always concerned to bring gifts from Gentile churches to Jerusalem to show unity because there is one gospel and one church. It is a church built upon the gospel of God's grace.

## REFLECTION

*How does the gospel of God's grace stir you to give to others in need? Does the gospel motivate you to care for the poor? And for church unity?*