

October 4, 2026

THE OPENING OF A LETTER AND A REMINDER OF THE GOSPEL

Galatians 1:1-5

(1 of 19 in a series through Galatians)

Acts 13-14 tells us the exciting story of when the Spirit directed Paul and Barnabas to go out as church planters. A group at the church in Antioch were praying when the Spirit identified them as those whom he wanted the church to send. So the church laid hands on them, sent them out, and they went out on their first missionary journey. And one area they targeted was southern Galatia where they planted churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. You can imagine the joy that the church felt as Paul and Barnabas returned to tell them the good news of these churches being planted. But, sadly, things quickly began to take a turn for the worse.

A group known as the Judaizers came in and began unsettling many of the believers in these churches. To use Paul's words, they were "troubling" many of these Galatian Christians as they were "distort[ing] the gospel of Christ" (1:7). Specifically, they were telling the Galatians that it was indeed good and necessary to put their faith in Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord, but that wasn't all that was needed. Additionally, they needed to be circumcised and start observing some other elements of the law of Moses. In other words, they were denying that we are saved by faith alone and instead were suggesting that we are saved by faith and by doing some works commanded in the law of Moses.

Paul's response was to write these churches a letter to address this issue head on, warn them of the dangers of turning away from the gospel, and call them back to follow what he'd taught them. That letter is what we have in our Bibles as the book of Galatians. And this is what we'll be studying over the next few months. And my prayer is that it'll be as helpful as it was to us the first time we worked our way through this book back in 2009.

The reason I think it was helpful for us then wasn't because Cornerstone was made up of a group believing we had to be circumcised and celebrate the feasts and festivals commanded in the law of Moses to be justified by God. It was helpful because most—if not all—of us have a pull toward legalism in our hearts. Our hearts constantly tell us that our righteousness before God rests on what we do or don't do rather than on what Christ has done for us. Therefore, my hope is that this study will continue to help set us free from those shackles of legalism and free us to serve our Lord from a heart that rests in our approval before God through the work of Christ. And we're going to start our study this morning by looking at the first five verses of the book, which is simply Paul's greeting with which he opens the letter.

Typically, we may be tempted to rush past the greeting, seeing it as a mere formality. After all, Paul has to introduce himself as the author of the letter, address the Galatians as the recipient of the letter, and so forth. So we shouldn't try to load meaning into it, right? Well, I hope to show us this morning that Paul establishes some crucial truths in this greeting that the Galatians

needed (and we need) to understand to live in the freedom that God intended for them to experience.

In short, Paul opens the letter, knowing that the gospel he preaches (and the rest of the church preaches) was under attack, and so he lays out the foundational elements of the nature of the gospel that he had preached to the Galatians, which he will expound upon through the letter. Therefore, I want to identify five things for us that Paul says about the nature of the gospel he preached. First, we can say that the gospel Paul preached, he preached as an apostle of Christ.

The gospel Paul preached, he preached as an apostle of Christ

Paul opens the letter introducing himself by writing, “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (v. 1). Now, for it to make sense why Paul would begin this way, we need to make sure we understand what an apostle is. In the days of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he gathered a group of men around him whom he deemed “apostles.” And he told them that after he ascended back to the Father’s right hand, the Spirit would remind them of all that he’d taught them and would guide them into all truth. In other words, they were going to have all they needed to continue the work that Jesus had started the days of his earthly ministry. Then, after Jesus was raised, he appeared to them. They were all eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ, having—as John tells us—looked upon him and touched him with their hands (1 Jn 1:1). And so they were commissioned by Jesus as a special group to go forth and bear witness that he’d been raised and to communicate his words—which the Spirit would both bring to mind and teach them—to others. That’s who the apostles were—Jesus’ authoritative representatives after he ascended back to heaven.

Now, if you’ve read the gospels, you might say, “That’s well and good, but I don’t remember Paul being one of those who walked with Jesus or was with them when Jesus appeared to them in his resurrected body.” And you’d be right. But that doesn’t mean that the resurrected Christ didn’t appear to him and commission him to be an apostle just like he did the others. Luke tells us in Acts 9 that as Paul (whose name was then “Saul”) was on his way to track down and imprison Christians, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him in the sky, calling him to himself and commissioning him to be another of his apostles—specifically one who would preach his gospel to the Gentiles. And so, Paul became one of these specially commissioned apostles of Jesus Christ who would go forth and authoritatively proclaim his truth and preach the gospel as eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ.

But why is Paul bringing this up here as he opens his letter to the Galatians? There are no doubt a few reasons. But the most likely one is because these opponents of Paul, who had come in and troubled the Galatian believers by suggesting that in addition to trusting in the crucified and risen Christ for their salvation they also need to practice certain laws of Moses, are likely pressing back against Paul’s claim to be an apostle. Most likely, as they came in saying, “Paul wasn’t right that someone is justified by faith alone in the crucified and risen Lord,” and the Galatians countered by saying, “But Paul’s an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ,” they responded, “But is he really?”

After all, he wasn't one of the original twelve." Do you see? In order to undermine the gospel that Paul was preaching, they most likely were challenging Paul's apostleship.

Therefore, Paul starts out by noting first thing that he is an apostle. Moreover, he makes clear that he isn't an apostle because any mere human being commissioned him to be an apostle. He was commissioned as an apostle by God himself, through Jesus Christ, as he appeared to him in the sky. Therefore, what Paul is going to say to the Galatians is said with the authority of Jesus himself. That's why we don't differentiate between the words of Jesus in the Bible and the words of other biblical authors. All the words of Scripture are the words of Christ himself. So, Paul begins by noting his apostleship which affirms that the gospel he preached to the Galatians is the very gospel that Jesus himself proclaimed for Paul to preach. So that's the first note we see. The gospel Paul preached, he preached as an apostle of Christ. Second, we can add that the gospel Paul preached was also preached by other believers.

The gospel Paul preached was also preached by other believers

After Paul declares that he is an apostle appointed by God, he adds, "And all the brothers who are with me" (v. 2). Now, why mention that? I think because Paul wants the Galatian believers to understand that Paul isn't on his own in preaching the gospel that he preaches. Other believers affirm this same gospel. In other words, what these Judaizers are saying to trouble the Galatians is contrary to what many other Christians affirm. They may want to challenge Paul, but they're also going to have to go against many other believers if they do.

This is a reminder to us that the truths we espouse are not unique to us. In fact, if anyone comes along proclaiming something as true that hasn't been proclaimed by believers throughout history, then we should be suspect. When the Reformers, for example, broke away from the Roman Catholic church, they were intent on showing that they were in line with what those before them had preached. It was Rome who had lost their way. They weren't proclaiming anything novel but the gospel that is found in the Scriptures and that had been passed down through history. And so Paul bolsters his case against his attackers. The gospel he preached he preached as an apostle of Jesus Christ, appointed by God. And the gospel he preached, other believers preached as well. Paul wasn't some lone ranger who'd come up with some new truth to proclaim. Now, by this point, we're probably eager to get to the content of the gospel Paul preached, and Paul indeed gets to that next. So, we can say that the gospel Paul preached centered on Christ's work to deal with our sins.

The gospel Paul preached centered on Christ's work to deal with our sins

Paul has mentioned the Father and the Son in these first few verses, and each time he does so, he speaks of Christ's redeeming work to deal with our sins. First, when he mentioned being appointed an apostle "through Jesus Christ and God the Father," he added, "Who raised him from the dead" (v. 1). Then, in verse 3, Paul mentions "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" and then he adds, "Who gave himself for our sins."

So, he mentions Christ's death (i.e. "gave himself") and his resurrection (i.e. "raised him from the dead"). But why did Christ have to die and rise? The answer is that he did so "for our sins." In other words, the gospel Paul (and the rest of the apostles) preached identified man's problem as our sin and the answer to that problem in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our big problem in life isn't something *out there*. Our big problem is our sin and where that leaves us before our Holy God. If you ask the Bible what's wrong with man, the answer isn't that we're victims or the like. It's that we're condemned before a holy God because we're sinners, and, therefore, await the day his wrath is poured out on us in judgment. Any good news (which is what the word "gospel" means) must address this issue. And that's what the gospel does.

The gospel proclaims that God loved us enough, even while we were his enemies in rebellion against him, that he sent his Son to bear the punishment for our sins. That's what Paul is referring to when he says that Jesus "gave himself for our sins." He gave himself over to death in order that he might pay the penalty our sins merited. On the cross, the wrath of God that our sins deserved was poured out on Jesus so that he bore every drop of God's wrath for our sins.

Now, what I've just proclaimed is called penal substitutionary atonement. And that can sound like an overwhelming thing, but it's quite simple. Penal refers to the fact that Christ paid our penalty as sinners. Substitutionary means that he did it in our place as our substitute. And atonement simply means that he did it to reconcile us to God. In other words, think of "atone" as a combination of "at" and "one." We were enemies of God but Christ died so that we might be "at one" with God, reconciled to him, which we'll say more about in a bit.

But I bring up penal substitutionary atonement because it's all the rage to for so-called believers to push against this now. But we need to see that this is what the Bible teaches, and without it, we'll lose the gospel. So, let me just mention two ways people argue against penal substitution, and I'll show you how this text answers each of them. First, some caricature penal substitution by saying that it's a picture of cosmic child abuse. That is, for God to forgive us, he punishes his Son for our sins. That sounds bad, doesn't it? But notice that the Son dies willingly. Paul says of Jesus that he "*gave himself for our sins.*" Jesus *wanted* to die for us. He gave himself for us in love. In fact, Paul will later say that Jesus loved us and gave himself for us. Jesus gave himself for us in love.

Well, others will then say, "Well then penal substitution is a terrible picture where the Father is wrathful against us and the loving Son has to throw himself in the way of God's wrath so that we might be forgiven." But that's not the picture either. Notice, Paul tells us that Jesus gave himself for our sins "*according to the will of our God and Father.*" Our Father loved us and so sent his Son to die for us. In other words, there's no conflict in the one will of our triune God. The Father lovingly sends the Son to die for us, and the Son lovingly gives himself for us so that our sins might be dealt with. This is the only way for a just and holy God to pour out wrath for sinners and justify those very same sinners. It requires that Jesus, our representative substitute, bear the wrath of God for those very sinners.

And yet that's not all. Christ also rose. He laid down his life and took it up again. The Father gave him over to death and raised him from the dead. Paul's gospel is about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is going to be huge to recognize in Galatians. The gospel Paul preaches doesn't have its focus on what we do—our good works and effort. It's all about Jesus and what he's done for us. The gospel Paul preached was centered on Christ's work for our sins. What then does this gospel accomplish? Well, the gospel Paul preached graciously reconciles us to God and frees us from this age.

The gospel Paul preached graciously reconciles us to God and frees us from this age

I want to start by focusing on the word “graciously.” For Paul, the gospel is not about what we have earned or deserved but all about God's grace. Paul begins verse 3 saying, “Grace to you.” Now, Paul begins every one of his letters this way, but he doesn't do it without meaning. He's noting that everything good that has come to believers, enabling them to obey Christ's commands, comes by God's grace. Now, specifically when Paul says to the believers of the Galatian churches, “Grace to you,” this stands in contrast to the false teaching the Judaizers were proclaiming. They were proclaiming that you needed to add some works to be justified. According to them, grace plus works would lead to one being saved. But Paul will make clear throughout this letter that grace and works are mutually exclusive in terms of serving as the basis for our justification before God. He'll later write in Romans 11:6, “If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise, grace would no longer be grace.” The gospel is a gospel of grace. It is about God's generous gift to undeserving sinners. And we can add that the gospel graciously reconciles us to God.

Paul not only says, “Grace to you,” but he adds, “and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3). Now, again, this can be something we're tempted to skim over as a standard greeting, but this isn't something you can say to an unbeliever. Apart from Christ, we are enemies of God. Because of our sin, God's condemnation hangs over us. Paul writes to the Ephesians that we are all “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2:3). If left to ourselves, there would be no such thing as peace when we think of God. Rather, we would simply see God as our judge before whom we have no answers. We would live in dread of that day when we will stand before him in judgment.

But that's not where we are. If we're trusting in the crucified and risen Lord, we don't have to fear judgment. God's stance toward us isn't one of condemnation, awaiting the day he'll pour his wrath out on us as deserving sinners. His stance toward us is one of peace. He's saying, “Be at peace. Don't fear condemnation. I am pleased with you because of Jesus.” The gospel reconciles us to God, bringing peace. And the gospel frees us from this present evil age.

As Paul sums up the result of Christ's work for us, he notes that he gave himself for our sins “to deliver us from the present evil age” (v. 4). Now, we may not immediately think we know what that means, but if we think through the Scripture, I think it'll make sense. After Adam sinned, the world became what can be termed “enemy-occupied territory.” The Scripture speaks of this world as one where sin and death reign (Rom 5:14, 21), where Satan is called the “god of this

world” (2 Cor 4:4), and where people, dead in their trespasses and sins, are enslaved to their evil passions (Eph 2:1-3). In other words, because of our rebellion against the Lord, we’ve enslaved ourselves to the dominion of the devil, sin, and death. That’s what Paul is saying the gospel delivers us from.

If you repent of your sins and place your faith in the crucified and risen Lord, death no longer reigns over you. You and I will die, but we don’t have to see death as a penalty for our sins. That’s why Paul speaks of believers not as dying but as falling asleep. We simply close our eyes in this life and open them in the next. Nor does sin exercise dominion over us. There was a time when we couldn’t break away from sin, but that day is gone. The gospel frees us so that we can turn from sin and pursue righteousness. Never let the devil convince you that you can’t walk away from some sin you’ve been struggling with. You can because the gospel frees us from sin’s dominion. And so, you no longer have to obey sinful passions but—because the Lord has given you a new heart—you can obey Jesus. That’s what Paul means when he says that Jesus died and rose to free us from this present evil age. And finally, we can say that the gospel Paul preached brings glory to God.

The gospel Paul preached brings glory to God

As Paul ends this opening section of the letter, he speaks of our God and Father, writing, “to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (v. 5). We might feel like God would be honored by letting us earn our salvation. But God isn’t intent on saving us as we also try to save ourselves so that he might magnify the deserving nature of those sinners whom he saves. He wants to magnify his grace. He wants to magnify his work alone. He will share his glory with no man.

And that’s why the gospel abounds to God’s glory. It’s all about what God has done for undeserving sinners like us and not what we have done for ourselves. If we remember this, it will equip us to withstand the enemy’s attacks, who likes to accuse us by focusing us on our works (or lack thereof) instead of the work our Lord has done for us.

I hope that our study through Galatians is life-changing, and as we go through it these next few months we’ll focus on the gospel which Paul preached as an apostle, in line with other believers, proclaiming a message that is centered on Christ’s work to free us from our sins, reconcile us to God, and deliver us from this present evil age—all to the glory of God. Let’s remember that now as we come to the table. Amen.