

An Unusual Introduction

I want to begin today by helping you get a sense for how different Paul's letter to the Galatians is, in every way, from his other letters. We're going to be reading the words of an agitated man, who is upset and frustrated and angry with what's been taking place among people that he loves. We see it right from the beginning of the letter, so let's compare Paul's introductory remarks in some of his other letters with these ones in the letter to the Galatian Christians.

First, let's read from Ephesians 1:1-2:

This letter is from Paul, chosen by God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus. It is written to God's holy people in Ephesus, who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus. May grace and peace be yours, sent to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now, let's read the introduction to his letter to the church in Rome (1:1-7):

This letter is from Paul, Jesus Christ's slave, chosen by God to be an apostle and sent out to preach His Good News. This Good News was promised long ago by God through his prophets in the holy Scriptures. It is the Good News about His Son, Jesus, who came as a man, born into King David's royal family line. And Jesus Christ our Lord was shown to be the Son of God when God powerfully raised Him from the dead by means of the Holy Spirit. Through Christ, God has given us the privilege and authority to tell Gentiles everywhere what God has done for them, so that they will believe and obey Him, bringing glory to His Name. You are among those who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ, dear friends in Rome. God loves you dearly, and He has called you to be His very own people. May grace and peace be yours from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (or Messiah).

Very positive, very irenic, peaceful in his writing tone. Well, then, how about his introduction to the first letter to the believers in Corinth. The Corinthian church was having some tough times and Paul had to wade in with a lot of strong words. Here's how he opens his letter to the church in Corinth (1:1-3):

This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Sosthenes. We are writing to the church of God in Corinth, you who have been called by God to be His own holy people. He made you holy by means of Messiah Jesus, just as He did all Christians everywhere - whoever calls upon the name of Jesus Messiah, our Lord and theirs. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you His grace and peace.

Now, I'm going to read the introduction to Galatians and I'll use a different tone in my voice, but it's hard to imagine the readers of this letter "hearing it" much differently than I'll read it - 1:1-3:

This letter is from Paul, an apostle. I was not appointed by any group or by human authority. My call is from Jesus Messiah Himself and from God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead. All the Christians here join me in sending greetings to the churches of Galatia. May grace and peace be yours from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“This letter is from Paul, an apostle!” “I’m not just some guy with a message that you can take bits and pieces of and ignore the rest of what I say. I have an authority as someone appointed by Jesus Himself to proclaim His Good News among you.”

Do you feel it? Paul is fighting for these people and he’s not wasting time with a long introduction and all the appropriate greetings. “I’m not some guy serving a denominational committee - I was called by Jesus to bring His Good News to you.” That’s strong. That’s the response of someone who feels like his authority is being challenged, who is trying to prove himself to others. That’s not a measured, cautious response, but a defiant, in-your-face one.

Then, once he has made this declaration, he goes back to a more polite tone as he sends greetings from his companions and then grace and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Messiah. These are customary greetings - you probably noticed him wishing grace and peace to the believers in Ephesus, Rome and Corinth that I read earlier.

Then, in verses 4 and 5, Paul summarizes the gospel in a dense statement that acts as the opening of his argument against the troublemakers in Galatia. This is an important statement right off the bat:

Jesus died for our sins, just as God our Father planned, in order to rescue us from this evil world in which we live. That is why all glory belongs to God through all the ages of eternity. Amen. (Gal. 1:4,5)

Those words might strike us as familiar and basic and we can easily miss the force with which they address the problems that the churches of Galatia are having trouble sorting out.

The Jewish world was separated from the Gentile world by cultural markers, the things we mentioned last week, like circumcision, avoiding certain foods, Sabbath-keeping and observing other festive days. The Jews who did that would look over at Gentiles who were not doing that and would contemptuously think and speak of them as “Gentile sinners”. As every Jew would acknowledge, these Gentiles were idolaters, worshiping and making offerings to their household idols and the statues of the gods in the temples.

What Paul does here is to say that Jesus has dealt with the sin problem in all of us. It’s human sin that has caused a separation between us and God, and that’s much broader than being able to be identified as a Jew because of what you do on Sabbath or what meat you eat. Jesus dealt with all human sin by sacrificing his body on the cross. We

have to be careful that we never get tired of hearing this, that we never take it for granted or let it run past us with a, "Yeah, I've heard it all before," kind of attitude. This is the greatest human problem of all time and it has been overcome in a way that breaks down divisions among humans based on race or culture or social or economic status - the cross unifies people all over the earth by providing for the forgiveness of sins. This is going to be part of the radical teaching of Paul to the Galatians.

Then he says that this happened according to the Father's plan. This was His idea, His purpose. It wasn't a mistake of history, the great failure of God's plan for human beings. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was part of God's plan, His way of fulfilling His purposes for us, and it accomplished a very important thing which Paul deals with next. Here's God's plan:

"in order to rescue us from this evil world in which we live." (1:4)

There is, in Jewish thought, the present age and also the age to come. The present age is marked by sin, by the powers of darkness, by lives that fall short of expectations and hopes. The age to come will be marked by the victory of Yahweh, the deliverance of His people, the end of evil and the beginning of the age of peace and blessing. Paul is saying that God's victory has taken place already, on the cross. He's saying that the evil powers in this world have been judged and that we are rescued from their control.

One of the reasons this is so interesting is that the devout Jew would, in celebrating Sabbath every week, be anticipating this victory of God, enjoying a foretaste of the age to come. But Paul is saying that this foretaste, this partial coming of God's victory, can and should be the normal experience of the person who follows Jesus.

The question now becomes, "What does all that do to the concept of "Gentile sinners"? Messiah has died for their sins, as God long ago planned, and they (we, actually) are being rescued from the evil world in which we live. The idea of special status for those who have been born into the physical line of Abraham is obsolete. The practices of circumcision and Sabbath-keeping and avoiding certain foods and celebrating special days, while identifying a person's Jewish roots, has no relevance to one's standing with God - not any more. That's the point Paul will be making throughout this letter and he starts it off with this condensed version of the Good News here in verse 4.

At this point in Paul's letters, his usual practice will be to say some encouraging words, to tell the people he is writing to why he is so grateful for them, what he admires about their faith and their faithfulness to the Gospel. Not here:

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who in His love and mercy called you to share the eternal life He gives through Messiah. You are already following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all! You are being fooled by those who twist and change the truth concerning Messiah. Let God's curse fall on anyone, including myself, who preaches any other message than the one we told you about. Even if an angel comes from heaven and preaches any other message, let him be

forever anathema, forever cursed. I will say it again: If anyone preaches any other gospel than the one you welcomed, let God's curse fall upon that person.
(1:6-9)

Now that's what I call skipping over the small talk. Let's not miss anything that Paul is saying here; this is a loaded passage.

1. He calls their giving in to the agitators "turning away from God". God had called them in love and mercy to share in His gift of eternal life and they are turning away from that.
2. They have been deceived by the agitators. They have been told that this is good news, but it's not, according to Paul, the real good news that comes from Jesus. It's pretend good news, fake good news, and, it's actually really bad news.
3. The third thing he says is that their gospel is so bad that it deserves God's curse - and he says it three times; may these agitators be forever cursed.

Something has gotten Paul really upset and he can't hold back his dismay or even his anger at the cause behind it. But there's one more verse that we need to look at before we move forward, and that's verse 10:

Obviously, I'm not trying to be a people pleaser! No, I am trying to please God. If I were still trying to please people, I would not be Christ's servant.

Here's one of our first clear glimpses into what the agitators were saying about Paul - "he's a people pleaser. He's not a man who lives on the principles of true faith in God, but one who tries to make everyone happy.

There was a collection of writings that Paul and other people of Jewish background would have been familiar with called the Psalms of Solomon. One of those, Psalm of Solomon 4, condemns a group of hypocritical deceivers that the writer calls the "men-pleasers". Perhaps the agitators of the Galatian churches have used that writing to say to the believers in Galatia, "You shouldn't have anything to do with this Paul - he's a people pleaser and as such stands condemned by God! He's like the ones who are to be avoided and judged in the Psalm of Solomon."

You could imagine the kind of argument that the agitators would base this on. They would say that Paul is trying to make things easy on Gentiles who are coming to faith in Jesus Messiah. They would say that by teaching that Gentiles don't have to be circumcised and submit their lives to the laws of Moses, he's teaching cheap grace, making following Jesus look like it isn't hard, isn't demanding, and so softening the call to discipleship.

Paul's response to that challenge is interesting. "If I were still trying to please people, I would not be Messiah's servant." The Greek word there is *doulos* and can be translated as servant or as slave. Paul is saying that he is living his life for Jesus, that he is bound to Jesus as his Master, and that his interest in life is not pleasing people, but to please Jesus. As we work our way through this letter, this one theme will come up over and over again - Jesus is at the centre of history and the cross and resurrection are at the centre of anyone's life of faith. Anything else that we put in the

centre is misplaced and creates a grave danger to our spiritual health. Our Christian faith begins and is sustained by the centrality of Jesus Messiah - it's all about Him.

If we're wide awake and thinking about this passage, we should find it easy to put some pieces together at this point. The agitators in Galatia are adding something to the Good News that Paul preached to them. There's something that they are considering as just as important or maybe even more important than the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We will see quite quickly what those priorities are, but in these opening verses of the letter, what is most obvious is:

1. Paul has become really upset over the issue that is drawing the Galatian believers away from the gospel that he had preached to them. They are "already following" a different way, a way that Paul claims means that they have abandoned God. That's a huge claim! And Paul says that those who have deceived the Galatian believers into following this different message are under a curse. They have abandoned what is genuinely from God and have twisted and distorted God's Good News into something that's not good at all. The Galatians are in serious trouble and you sense Paul's pastoral concern for them.
2. His opposition in Galatia has adopted a strategy of undermining Paul's authority as an apostle. They have at least claimed that he is nothing more than a people pleaser, although we'll see that their attack against him is broader-based than that. Paul will not be in a position to simply argue his points; he will also have to defend his right to make those points.
3. The third thing we can't miss from these opening verses of the letter to the Galatian believers is Paul's summary of the gospel message. This is what is at stake for the churches of Galatia: *Jesus died for our sins, just as God our Father planned, in order to rescue us from this evil world in which we live.* Therefore, those who put their trust in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, are safe in God's care.
4. And number four is that there is a heavy judgment on those who are preaching a compromised version of the Gospel. Paul pronounces God's curse on them three times in these verses, and whenever something gets repeated three times in the ancient Near East, you can be sure that it must be taken very seriously indeed. Paul is literally shouting this out for his readers: "If anyone preaches any other gospel than the one you welcomed, let God's curse fall upon that person."

Now, let's conclude this look at the first fourteen verses of this letter with some applications for our own lives.

1. What strikes me is how important it is to be right about the most important things in life. The Galatians had found joy and freedom in the Gospel and then had given in to fear and lost their joy, and their freedom. At the very heart of Galatians is this message: knowing Jesus is all that any of us really need. But if we aren't content with Jesus and have to add things on to what He's done for us, we're in trouble. Is the cross enough? Is God's forgiveness of those who put their faith in His Son sufficient or do we think there's something more? In Galatia, they were being pressured into believing that to sustain the life of faith they needed to add something, and Paul said, "Let the one who teaches this be cursed!" We need to keep hold of the centre of our faith, and that is always and only Jesus.

2. The second thing I want us to think about in relation to our own lives is this business of finding labels for people we disagree with and then attacking the label. You see it done all the time in politics and by people who can't defend their positions in a reasonable way. If you have a disagreement with someone's position on an issue of the day, you're guilty of having some phobia that means that your argument can't be taken seriously. Here in Galatians Paul is accused of being a "people-pleaser" and, well, you know what Psalms of Solomon 4 says about them. Even if our culture falls into that, we can't. We need to hear people out, respect their views even if we disagree with them, and be ready to give an answer, a reason, for what we believe to be true. Someone in our Alpha course this week mentioned how persuasive some arguments seem to be - sometimes it's hard to have an answer ready. You don't have to. Just tell the person that you'll do some research and you'll come back with an answer. There are very few questions that have never been asked - and there are great resources with lots of good answers, especially to the most frequently asked questions.
3. The third application comes from Paul's mini-presentation of the Gospel in verse 4. He tells us that God has done, through Jesus, what was necessary to rescue us from this evil world in which we live. That means that we are not simply stuck in a world that defies God and lives daily in rebellion against Him. We are already citizens of a new Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, and our citizenship means that we will live forever in the presence of our Father. This is big, big news. We need to grab hold of this big truth and take it to heart. We need to live with the knowledge that our lives are hidden in Jesus and our future is secure because we trust Him. In short, we need to live with a confidence, and a peace, that enable us to deal with life's challenges. In so doing, we will bring hope to people who don't yet know the hope that is ours in Jesus. If they can witness how God has changed our lives, they might be willing to investigate what He has available for them as well.