

KNOWING GOD THROUGH GALATIANS

The year is AD 49. You are living in the ancient province of Asia, and your neighbors know that you are a follower of Christ. The church you attend meets in a private home. You look forward to meeting with people you regard as your spiritual family and life-line. Today the leader of your group reads a controversial, open letter from the apostle Paul. The author uses emotional words and extreme language to explain the absolute importance of relying solely on the grace of God for salvation and spiritual growth.

In the following pages, RBC senior research editor Herb Vander Lugt shows how Paul's letter to the Galatians can help us understand the wonderful truth of God's grace and the danger of following anyone who teaches another gospel. *Martin R. De Haan II*

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GRACE: MISUNDERSTOOD

A popular TV talk show, with its attractive blend of Christian, Judaic, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and New Age “spirituality,” reflects a conviction that no individual group has a corner on the truth. According to its host, “One of the biggest mistakes humans make is to believe that there is only one way. Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to what you call God” (*Christianity Today*, April 1, 2001, p.45).

In such an open-minded atmosphere, those guests or members of the audience who suggest that Jesus is the only way to God appear to be narrow-minded. If they say that salvation is received by grace through faith alone, they compound the offense.

It’s common in a setting like this to hear someone seriously ask, “How can it be right for a criminal who turns to Jesus late in life to die completely forgiven?” “Why should I be good if a simple act of believing will get me to heaven?” These objections, understandable as they are, flow from a misunderstanding of God’s law and His grace.

First we must understand the goodness of God’s law. There are many reasons to believe that His law of love is found not only in the Bible but also in our hearts. What both the Bible and our own hearts show us is that those who break these laws are also broken by them. Grace, according to the Bible, is God’s way of releasing us from the judgment we deserve.

What many misunderstand is that this grace does not make us immune to natural consequences. Neither does it spare us from the due process of human justice. What grace does is far more amazing.

BOOK CHART OF GALATIANS

FOCUS	Biographical Argument		Historical Argument	Moral Argument	
DIVISIONS	The Testimony Of Paul's Personal Integrity & Spiritual History 1:1 1:24		The Testimony Of Paul's Officially Recognized Apostolic Authority 2:1 2:21	The Testimony Of The Old Testament Scriptures 3:1	The Testimony Of New Testament Salvation 5:1 5:2 6:18
TOPICS	Validation Of Paul's Apostolic Authority The Liberty Of Grace Versus The Bondage Of A Works-System		Grace Anticipated In The Life Of Abraham And In The Law Of Moses The Triumph Of Grace Over Law In Every Dispensation	Grace Vindicated By The Transformation Of The Lives Of Those Who Believe The Fruit Of The Spirit Versus The Works Of The Law	
PLACE	Written From Syrian Antioch To New Believers In Southern Galatia				
TIME	About 49 AD				

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

PAUL'S CASE FOR THE TRUTH OF GRACE

Paul's letter to the Galatians is an emotional one. He was on his second missionary journey (about AD 49) when he received news that deeply disturbed him. Self-appointed Bible teachers from the Jerusalem area were bringing disruption into churches that he had only recently started in southern Galatia. They were raising questions about Paul's apostolic authority and attacking his teaching about grace. They were telling these recent converts that in addition to believing in Jesus for salvation they must subject themselves to Jewish ritual law.

Paul was angry with these teachers and disappointed with the Galatian believers. He had carefully instructed them in the principles of grace. Yet they had been intimidated by opponents of the gospel. Their lack of spiritual discernment puzzled and concerned him. It was this mixture of anger, disappointment, and concern that makes Paul's letter to the Galatians such an emotional one.

It's usually unwise to begin a letter on a defensive note, but Paul had no choice. More was at stake than his personal reputation. He was battling primarily for the truth of his message of grace. So he made no apology for defending his authority and teaching. He argued his case by presenting four distinct lines of evidence: (1) The testimony of his personal integrity and spiritual history. (2) The testimony of his officially recognized apostolic authority. (3) The testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures. (4) The testimony of the life-transforming salvation that grace provides.

THE TESTIMONY OF PAUL'S PERSONAL INTEGRITY AND SPIRITUAL HISTORY (1:1-24)

Paul was eager to establish the fact that he had received his teaching about grace directly from the Lord. So after a warm greeting and loving benediction (vv.1-5), he opened his heart to his readers. He passionately declared the truthfulness of his message (vv.6-9), defended his personal integrity (v.10), and appealed to the facts of his spiritual journey (vv.11-24).

“I know my message is true” (1:6-9). Paul was certain of the truthfulness of his message. So he charged his antagonists with proclaiming “a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (vv.6-7). He even invoked God’s curse on them: “If we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (v.8). He wanted this severe and shocking pronouncement to impress upon the Galatian believers the serious and destructive nature of their departure from the truth.

“I am honest and truthful” (1:10). Paul used his strong condemnation of these teachers as the stepping stone to a defense of his integrity. He said, “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ” (v.10). It appears that his enemies were accusing him of talking out of both sides of his mouth—upholding the law among Jews while rejecting it among Gentiles. Another Bible version makes this clear: “Does my language now sound as if I were canvassing for men’s support? Whose support do I want but God’s alone? Do you think I am currying favor with men? If I still sought men’s favor, I should be no servant of Christ”

(NEB). Basically, Paul was saying that if he were a two-faced manipulator, he would not have denounced these teachers as he did. He would have found a way to be conciliatory toward them.

“I received my message from God, not from men” (1:11-24). Paul declared that he received the good news he preached by a supernatural revelation from the Lord. He said, “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (vv.11-12). He then recounted how he changed from being a fierce persecutor of Christians to become a devoted follower of Jesus (vv.13-24). These Galatians knew what he was like before his conversion—extremely devoted to his national religion, passionate about protecting the traditions of his ancestors, and zealous in his efforts to destroy the church of God. Acts 7:58–8:3 and 9:1-19 tell us the story of his zeal as a persecutor of the church and the dramatic change that occurred when he was converted. In telling the story, Paul repeated his deep conviction that God had set him apart “to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles” (v.16).

Paul continued the story of his post-conversion spiritual journey. He explained that after a brief time of witnessing in Damascus, he had gone to Arabia for private meditation, prayer, and divine instruction (see Acts 9:19-25). Three years later (probably from the date of his conversion) he went to Jerusalem “to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days” (v.18). At this time he also met James, the brother of Jesus and greatly loved leader in the

church at Jerusalem. By emphasizing the brevity of his time with Peter and saying that he met only James, Paul reinforced his claim that he received both his call to ministry and his teaching about grace directly from Christ. He also wanted to remind the Galatians that Peter and John had spoken so favorably about him that the Christians in Judea, without ever having met him personally, accepted him and his ministry. They said, “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (v.23). As a result, said Paul, they “praised God because of me” (v.24).

SEEING GOD

- By permitting the entrance of false teachers among the recent converts in Galatia, God showed His respect for human freedom.
- In this same permission, God also revealed the value He places on the testing of our faith.
- In His calling and preparation of Paul for his unique ministry to the Gentiles, we see God’s sovereign wisdom and power to carry out His wonderful plan of redemption.

SEEING OURSELVES

- In the reluctance of the legalists to accept Paul’s teaching, we see how greatly we are influenced by our prejudices and pride.
- In Paul’s refusal to gain the favor of the legalists by compromising his message, we see the importance of standing on principle and truth.
- In the readiness of Peter and James to accept Paul, we see a commendable example for us to be free from envy and insecurity.

THE TESTIMONY OF PAUL'S OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY (2:1-21)

Although many of the people who were converted under Paul's ministry had been influenced by the Judaizers in varying degrees, they apparently respected the authority of Peter, James, and other leaders in the church. Aware of this, Paul called their attention not only to the unofficial endorsement of which he had just spoken, but also to the public affirmation of the truthfulness of his message and of the genuineness of his apostolic authority from the church leaders in Jerusalem. He also told how this endorsement was tested and reaffirmed in an encounter with Peter.

“My teaching and authority were publicly affirmed at Jerusalem” (2:1-10). Paul said that “fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem” (v.1). This was probably around AD 47-48, 14 years after his conversion. He said “again” because, according to Acts 9:26-29 and 11:30, he had gone there twice before. This time he went there to meet with a group of church leaders who needed to settle a dispute about whether Gentile converts were under obligation to keep Jewish rites and rituals. Acts 15:1-2 tells us that Paul and Barnabas were appointed to represent Gentile believers in this meeting. Paul said that God by special revelation confirmed his duty to go (Gal. 2:2). He also said that he and Barnabas took with them an uncircumcised Gentile co-worker named Titus. Knowing that the rebel teachers would demand his circumcision, they had privately discussed the situation with a few key leaders. They agreed that Titus did not need to be circumcised (vv.2-5). Later, probably during the large public gathering at which Peter and

James presented their messages supporting Paul's teaching (Acts 15:6-21), the leaders openly endorsed the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, extended to them the right hand of fellowship, and authorized their special ministry to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7-9).

In recounting what happened, Paul made three statements that seemed to show mild resentment toward Peter, John, and James, the Lord's brother. He referred to them as "those who seemed to be leaders" (v.2), as "those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me" (v.6), and as "those reputed to be pillars" (v.9).

While some biblical scholars find ways to deny that these words reflect some negative feelings toward these Jerusalem leaders, most accept this meaning. It may be that Paul was disappointed by their failure to act more quickly than they did to publicly repudiate the teaching of the adversarial legalists. It may be that even though these apostles finally took his side, they seemed to do so with some reluctance. Perhaps, though standing with Paul, they themselves sometimes fell back into their old Jewish practices and patterns of life. In one way or another, they sometimes failed to practice what they professed. This view portrays Paul as a remarkably mature Christian. He could see the weaknesses and imperfections of these recognized leaders and still respect them. He could express disappointment with them yet see them as his friends and gratefully accept their belated endorsement. The incident recorded in the next section seems to support the view that Paul had negative feelings toward the Jerusalem leadership.

"My authority was tested and maintained" (2:11-19). Paul related the story of an encounter with Peter

that tested and maintained his authority. Paul wanted his converts to know that he, though not one of the Twelve, was indeed an apostle. The event he described apparently occurred shortly after the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15). While Peter was visiting some Christians in Antioch, he at first had no qualms about eating meals with Gentile believers. His behavior was consistent with the decisions of the Jerusalem Council. But when a delegation of Jewish believers arrived, those who still kept certain Jewish religious rules, he separated himself from the Gentile Christians and ate only with “the circumcision.” Peter influenced even Barnabas to do so.

Paul was so disturbed by Peter’s obvious and public hypocrisy that he publicly rebuked him.

Paul was so disturbed by Peter’s obvious and public hypocrisy that he publicly rebuked him. This is in harmony with what he later wrote: “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (1 Tim. 5:20). What Peter was doing could have led to a rift between Gentile and Jewish church members. It could also have promoted the idea that observing Jewish religious rules lifts Christians to a higher level of spirituality.

How can we account for Peter’s action? He knew better (Acts 10:9-48; 11:1-18; 15:8-11). Apparently Peter’s instability, a trait clearly seen during Christ’s earthly ministry, was asserting itself again. But to his credit, it appears that Peter accepted Paul’s rebuke with grace. In so doing, he confirmed his own integri-

ty and Paul's apostolic authority. (In 2 Peter 3:15 we see how Peter in his later years revealed his tender affection for the man who had rebuked him when he referred to him as "our dear brother Paul.")

As I picture the scene, I see Paul first speaking directly to Peter and then lifting his eyes to address the whole group. (Since verses 15-19 are especially difficult to translate into plain English, I will paraphrase it.) Identifying himself first with the Jewish believers in his audience, he said, "Though we (as Jews before meeting Jesus) realized that we were a privileged people compared to the Gentiles, we discovered the absolute impossibility of being saved by law-keeping. We therefore had no recourse except to believe on Jesus for salvation. Does the fact that in seeking salvation we Jews, in obedience to what Jesus taught, like the Gentiles, turn away from the law and make Christ a promoter of sin? Absolutely not! He actually upheld and fulfilled the law through His sinless life and atoning death. I would therefore make myself a law-breaker if I were to start rebuilding the law-system that I have torn down as no longer in effect since the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. By returning to a works-system, I would be repudiating what He did and what I experienced. Loyal Jew that I was, I had to turn away from the law before I could live for God."

"My crucifixion with Christ further confirms my teaching and authority" (2:20-21). In these verses, Paul appealed to the confirming testimony of his changed life. He said, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"(v.20).

Because his transformation from a vicious enemy of Christians to a zealous witness for Christ was undeniable, no one could lightly dismiss his declaration, “I have been crucified with Christ.” The Galatian believers fully understood that Paul was referring to his conversion and its result in his own life. Since Christ died for him, Christ’s death was Paul’s death. It follows that when he believed on Christ, he died to all that he had been in his natural state. He had been a sinner under condemnation while vainly seeking to be saved by law-keeping. He was now a redeemed child of God. Because of his union with Jesus he could say, “Christ lives in me.” His old self had been replaced by a new self, but he still lived in the same body he had before his encounter with Christ. So he was not yet free from temptation and the possibility of sinning. But because Paul’s life was filled with the presence of Christ, he could say, “The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (v.20).

Paul concluded, “I do not set aside the grace of God [by going back to observing the regulations of Judaism], for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (v.21). It cannot be grace plus law—nor grace plus anything—because then it would cease to be grace.

SEEING GOD

- In choosing Peter to lead in the evangelization of Jews and Paul to proclaim the gospel of grace to the Gentiles, God revealed His right to choose who will carry out His program.
- In leading the Jewish pillars of the church to accept Paul’s teaching about the end of the law, God re-

vealed His concern for the church that Jesus is building.

- In allowing Peter to continue in his role as the leading apostle to the Jews, even after his blunder, God revealed His tenderness and His patience with us, His erring children.

SEEING OURSELVES

- In the apostles' request for Paul and Barnabas to participate in the Council to settle the matter of Jewish rules in the church, we see a willingness to set aside personal preferences to know God's will.
- In Paul's private meeting with a few of the church leaders before the public gathering to discuss the matter of circumcising Titus, we see how to deal sensitively with a controversial issue.
- In Peter's humble response to Paul's public rebuke, we see the humility that should mark all of us when we need correction.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES (3:1–5:1)

Paul could now breathe a sigh of relief. Having defended himself against the charges of his opponents, he could now present his case by doing what he loved to do—expound the Old Testament Scriptures. He began this new section with a reminder of the irrationality of their departure from what they had heard and seen through his ministry.

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you

heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning in the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you His Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (3:2-5).

When they put their trust in Jesus Christ, these Galatian believers had experienced an inner change. They had witnessed the miracles by which God confirmed the truth of Paul's message. After such a beginning, they were now letting themselves be deceived by false teachers who qualified themselves as experts in the Old Testament. The success of these legalists can very likely be attributed to their ability to fascinate their hearers by finding hidden meanings in every Old Testament narrative, every poetic expression, every prophetic pronouncement. This highly allegorical method of interpretation was in vogue among the Jewish rabbis at that time. The false teachers' ingenious flights of fancy wowed their non-Jewish listeners and led them to forget what they had learned from Paul.

The apostle therefore chose to beat these men at their own game. But he would do so by legitimately and plainly expounding the Old Testament Scriptures, making it clear that salvation is by grace alone.

Abraham was saved by grace through faith alone (3:6-10). Paul began his excursion into the Old Testament by loosely quoting Genesis 15:6, "Consider Abraham: He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (3:6). Because the legalists had used their misinterpretation of the Old Testament to win the Gentle believers to their way of thinking, the mention of Abraham struck a responsive chord in the

hearts of the recipients of this letter. They knew that the outstanding characteristic of the patriarch was his faith. He had believed God when He commanded him to leave the land of the Chaldeans (Acts 7:3). He had believed God when he was commanded to leave his father's house in Haran (Gen. 12:1). Then, after he and Sarah had grown old and were still childless, he believed God when He appeared to him and assured him that he would become a biological father with descendants as numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:1-6). It was then said of Abraham that he "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Paul made it clear that it was Abraham's faith—and only his faith—that gave him a new standing before God. Yes, it's true that he built altars and offered sacrifices. But these acts of devotion were not "credited to him as righteousness." Even circumcision played no role in his acceptance by God. The declaration of righteousness recorded in Genesis 15:6 took place 14 years before his circumcision. (Paul made this point in Romans 4:10-11 where he also developed his "salvation by grace through faith alone" teaching.)

From his reference to Abraham, Paul drew the logical conclusion that since God saved Abraham on the basis of faith alone, it follows that Abraham's spiritual children must be saved the same way: "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7).

Salvation by grace is the only possible way (3:10–4:20). Paul showed why salvation by grace is the only possible way guilty sinners can be saved by a holy God. The problem is not His law. It is good. It accurately tells us what He wants us to do and what He wants us to refrain from doing. The problem is

with us. Knowing the law and believing it to be a revelation of God's standard for our conduct does not keep us from continually breaking it. It provides us with neither the inclination nor the ability to keep it. Instead, it testifies against us and condemns us. But the law-system also has a blessed function. It demonstrates our complete inability to earn our salvation, and it prepares us for the message of grace. When it does this it achieves its highest purpose.

God's law provides us with neither the inclination nor the ability to keep it.

The law condemns, grace redeems (3:10-14). People who rely on any form of law-keeping (works) for salvation place themselves under an obligation they cannot meet—perfect obedience. If God is perfectly holy, so absolutely pure that He cannot compromise with evil, He must on the basis of the law demand absolute sinlessness. Paul quoted Deuteronomy 27:26 to make this point: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law” (v.10). No one meets God's standard, so the law can only condemn. But through grace, God provided for our need: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (vv.13-14).

God's grace covenant is superior to the law covenant (3:15-20). The grace covenant is superior because it focuses on Christ and provides eternal sal-

vation. Although it includes earthly and national elements, it “announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (vv.8-9). Gentile believers, with Abraham, are “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

The law covenant, on the other hand, cannot provide eternal salvation: “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’” (v.10). Because no one can render the perfect obedience the law requires, it is clear that “no one is justified before God” (v.11). Its demand for perfect obedience makes salvation by works or merit an absolute impossibility. So Paul once again pointed to the superiority of the grace covenant: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus” (vv.13-14).

The reliability of the grace covenant is beyond question: “Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case” (v.15). If we humans regard following the last will and testament of a person as a sacred trust, how much more certain we can be that our holy and faithful God will keep His irrevocable and sacred promises! And it clearly focuses on Jesus Christ: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his Seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your Seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (v.16). Why did Paul make a point of drawing a distinction between “Seed”

(singular) and “seeds” (plural)? He knew full well that the word *seed* is often a collective noun. A bag may say “Lawn Seed,” but it contains thousands of seeds and even may be a mixture of different kinds of seeds. The distinction, therefore, has an element of artificiality. But Paul did this for good reason. He wanted to make crystal-clear the fact that the ultimate and all-encompassing “Seed” of the grace covenant is an individual—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the covenant with Abraham was unconditional and focused on Christ, it remains in effect. The Mosaic covenant was not a replacement, but an addition—“added because of transgressions [with an endpoint] until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (v.19). The law covenant ended at the cross. God had used the law to reveal His holiness, the sinfulness of sin, and the absolute impossibility of earning salvation by works. The law covenant was no longer needed because the crucifixion of Christ at the hands of the very people He came to save demonstrated once-and-for-all the depth of our depravity.

Paul presented one final argument for the permanence of the grace covenant: “The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one” (vv.19-20). The covenant with Abraham came directly from God, but the law covenant involved the mediation of angels and Moses (Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2). And the mediatorship of Jesus Christ is different from that of the angels and Moses in that He is one with the Father, not a third party. Because “God is one” (v.20), at Calvary it was God “reconciling the world to Himself in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19). Because of His deity, Jesus Christ was not a third-party mediator.

The law achieves its purpose when it leads to grace (3:21-25). Afraid that some would misunderstand what he said about the law and believe that he was calling the law an enemy, Paul asked a question: "Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God?" (v.21). His answer: "Absolutely not!" By witnessing against us and showing that under a works-system the "whole world is a prisoner of sin" (v.22), it drives us to Christ. We were "held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ" (vv.23-24).

Now that Christ has come, the work of the law as a jailer and a tutor is no longer needed.

In these verses, the law was first depicted as a jailer and then as a pedagogue (a man who was appointed by wealthy parents to teach their sons and to exercise discipline over them). As a jailer, the law showed us our helpless bondage. But as a tutor, it pointed to the goodness and wisdom of God and, because of our failure to live up to that law, to our need for salvation by grace. In essence, it led to Christ, the Seed who would provide salvation. Now that Christ has come, the work of the law as jailer and tutor is no longer needed in the same way. Therefore, even though we continue to gain wisdom and insight from every element of the law (2 Tim. 3:16-17), we are no longer bound to this law as the people of Israel were.

The grace-life is a life to be lived and enjoyed (3:26-4:20). Having shown that the Old Testament Scriptures confirmed his message of grace, Paul ex-

horted the Galatian believers to enjoy its privileges. They were to remember that because Jesus perfectly obeyed the law for them and died to pay for their violation of it, they were now sons and daughters (full heirs) in God's family. All of them—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, masters and slaves—were “baptized into Christ.” Therefore, the old distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female no longer existed. And because Christ is the ultimate “Seed” of Abraham, this standing “in Him” makes every believer an heir of the promises God made to Abraham (3:26-29).

Paul returned to the metaphor of Jewish children under a tutor to portray the status of all people under a works-system, whether Jew or Gentile. They are “in slavery under the basic principles of the world” (4:3). For the Gentiles, this was a reminder of their days as pagans enslaved to imaginary gods. But now they were redeemed by Jesus Christ to “receive the full rights of sons” (vv.4-5). Because of this new status, “God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir” (vv.6-7).

After reminding them of their former status as slaves, Paul asked, “Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” (v.9). Why would they want to exchange their former bondage to paganism for bondage to Judaism? How foolish it would be for an heir of God to return to the bondage of the past!

Earnestly desiring to bring these Galatian believers back into a warm relationship with him, Paul tenderly recalled how they had once joyously received him as “an angel of God” (v.14). And then he asked, “What has happened to all your joy?” (v.15). Their

new attitude toward him was perplexing and distressing—causing him the pain of a mother in childbirth. But he would suffer this way until Christ was formed in them (vv.16-20).

How foolish it would be for an heir of God to return to the bondage of the past!

The story about Hagar and Sarah further confirmed the message of grace (4:21–5:1). Paul made one final appeal to the Old Testament to prove that it backed up his teaching about grace. He did this by referring to the Genesis account of Hagar and Sarah. While he was aware that he was writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, he assumed that they had heard the story from his antagonists.

Sarah, old and childless, asked Abraham to give her a child by sleeping with her maid Hagar (a common practice at that time). Ishmael was born out of this union and was Abraham's pride and joy for about 13 years. But God then gave Sarah a miracle baby—Isaac. A few years later (Gen. 21), when Sarah saw Ishmael mistreating her son, she demanded that Abraham send him and his mother away. Abraham was reluctant, but God told him to do this, promising that He would care for and bless the boy.

The slave woman Hagar and her son symbolize the law covenant given at Mt. Sinai. It was temporal and involved earthly Jerusalem, a city that had come under the power of the Roman empire. The free woman Sarah and her miracle son Isaac symbolize the everlasting grace covenant and the incorruptible, unconquerable heavenly Jerusalem, the city identi-

fied in Hebrews 12:22 as the eternal home of all the redeemed. In sending away the slave woman and her son, Abraham chose the heavenly rather than the earthly.

Paul called on the Galatian believers to make the same choice. They were the sons and daughters of God and citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. Just as God told Abraham to send away the slave woman and her son, they were to reject the message of those who were urging them to return to the status of slaves and the bondage represented by earthly Jerusalem under Rome. Paul concluded, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (5:1).

SEEING GOD

- In the absolute impossibility of God accepting anything less than perfection, we see His awesome holiness.
- In His making the law covenant to show us our sinfulness and helplessness so that we would be driven to grace, we see God's wisdom and goodness.
- In His provision of salvation through the sacrifice of His Son, we see the depth of God's love.

SEEING OURSELVES

- In the gullibility of the Galatian believers, we see how easily we can be led astray.
- In the tenderness of Paul toward a group of people who had terribly wronged him, we see how we should react to people who hurt and disappoint us.
- In Paul's testimony that he had been "crucified with Christ" and now lives "by faith in the Son of God," we see the wonder of our own salvation.

THE TESTIMONY OF NEW TESTAMENT SALVATION (5:2–6:18)

In arguing for the truthfulness of his message, Paul appealed to the dynamic power of New Testament salvation to change the lives of those who believe it.

Salvation produces a change of life (5:1-12). After warning the Galatian believers about the serious effects of having “fallen away from” his teaching about grace (vv.1-4), Paul said, “But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (vv.5-6). Those who take the way of faith need not torture themselves with questions about rites and ceremonies. Their only concern is to live out the life of love produced within them by the indwelling Spirit.

Paul again reminded the Galatian believers about the irrationality of what they had done: “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the One who calls you. A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. . . . The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be” (vv.7-10). He wanted the followers of the legalistic believers to reflect on the character of the men who so profoundly influenced them. Would good people find pleasure in leading joyful believers back into the joylessness of legalism?

In the face of God’s open confirmation of Paul and his message, these men had deliberately opposed him. Like yeast that works through a “whole batch of dough,” their teaching had brought in serious error that distorted the gospel. So Paul said, “The one who

is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be” (v.9).

Paul then returned to the matter of his own reputation by asking the question: “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?” (v.11). The legalists apparently had accused Paul of inconsistency in his attitude toward circumcision. They may have pointed out that he had consented to Timothy’s circumcision (Acts 16:3) but had adamantly refused to endorse the circumcision of Titus. But Paul was not inconsistent. Permitting the circumcision of the half-Jew Timothy to make him more effective in evangelizing Jews is a far cry from making it a universal demand on Gentiles like Titus. Paul expressed his indignation with these critics: “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (v.12). He wished that these men, so engrossed in the cutting of the body, would (like some pagan priests) go all the way and castrate themselves. At least eunuchs were harmless. They didn’t have children who would carry on their negative, joy-robbing ministry.

Salvation is marked by supernaturally produced qualities (5:13-26). After warning against using their liberty to indulge the sinful nature, Paul told them to “serve one another in love” (v.13). This set the tone for all that followed. The Galatian believers were probably arguing with one another about the law and issues of freedom. Paul wanted this to stop, so he wrote, “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you keep biting on and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (vv.14-15).

This kind of an unselfish, love-dominated life does

not come naturally. It conflicts with our natural tendency to be selfish, self-sufficient, and proud. We're like this because ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, every baby has come into this world with a sin nature. This sin nature, even after we're saved, is so powerful that in our own strength we can't subdue it. It is still a formidable enemy of a godly walk. Therefore Paul wrote, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" (vv.16-18).

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To understand these verses we must realize that our inherent tendency toward self-centeredness and pride remains unchanged from the cradle to the grave. Becoming a Christian neither removes it nor changes it. But when we receive Jesus as Savior we receive the help we need to overcome its downward pull. The Holy Spirit gives us a new birth and takes up His residence within our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20). He inclines us toward humility. He puts us in touch with God and changes the way we view Him. He draws us to God-centered thinking. But all the while, the sin nature keeps pulling us in the opposite direction. Paul said that "they are in conflict with each other" (Gal. 5:17).

Having portrayed the agonizing inner struggle that we all encounter, Paul then revealed how we can win the battle against our pride and self-centeredness. We can't just *decide* to be humble and God-centered. The sinful nature is so powerful that "you do not do what you want" (v.17). But the good news is that "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" (v.18). The way to a victorious Christian life is through a moment-by-moment conscious dependence upon and submission to the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul meant when he opened this section with the admonition, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (v.16).

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Paul contrasted the "acts of the sinful nature" and the "fruit of the Spirit" in verses 19-23. The sin nature produces a list of sins that can be grouped into four categories: (1) Sexually immoral conduct ("sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery"); (2) forbidden religious practices ("idolatry and witchcraft"); (3) hateful behavior ("hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy"); (4) inebriety ("drunkenness, orgies").

In sharp contrast, Paul listed the "fruit of the Spirit." This fruit, unlike the "acts of the sinful nature," is produced by the Spirit as we simply give Him control. We reap His bountiful harvest in a life marked by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith-

fulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The nine items in this list are self-explanatory. When a life is characterized by them, there is no need for law because there is nothing evil to restrain.

Paul concluded this section: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (vv.24-26). When Paul spoke of our having “crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires,” he was referring to our conversion. When we place our trust in Christ, we either knowingly or implicitly renounce our old life and confess our need for a new Master. We publicly symbolize this transaction when we are baptized, openly declaring our oneness with Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. This affirms our conviction that “our old self was crucified with Him . . . that we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:6). Once we make this declaration, however, we must remember that the sin nature, though doomed, continues to live in us unchanged like a crucified man before he actually dies. And it is only through dependence upon and submission to the Holy Spirit that we can overcome it.

In verse 25 Paul wrote, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” We have received new life from the Holy Spirit, but we must keep in step with Him by consciously depending on Him and giving Him ever-increasing control in our lives. Then the life we live will be energized by the supernatural.

Until we reach heaven, we will find ourselves falling back on self-reliance and experiencing failure. That’s why Paul agonizingly cried out, “What a wretched

man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). But complete victory will one day be ours to enjoy: “Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (v.25).

Salvation makes us a family in which we reach out to others (6:1-10). The grace we have experienced also equips us for a new level of kindness and compassion toward others—both Christians and unbelievers.

This means, first of all, that we will be on the lookout to help a struggling or fallen believer: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (v.1). Notice that we are to restore “gently.” The Great Physician has always dealt gently with us whenever we have needed His forgiveness and restoration. Also notice that we are to “watch” ourselves. When we recognize that we too are weak and prone to sin, and that we could succumb to the same temptation, we will overcome the pride and self-righteousness that can set us up for a fall.

Second, we must reach out to fellow believers who are struggling under a heavy load of weakness, grief, shame, or guilt: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load” (vv.2-5). As sinners saved by grace and dependent every day on God’s continuing mercy, we must reject the conceit that may cause us to neglect these people because we think our pleasant situation is God’s reward for our greater spirituality. In addition,

we must always think of ourselves as we appear to God and avoid the tendency to compare our abilities and accomplishments with those of others. This can lead either to pride or to despair. In sharp contrast, thinking of how we appear to God can both humble and encourage us. The realization of how far we fall short humbles us; the awareness of God's continuing love and grace in spite of our sins, weaknesses, and limitations encourages us.

Third, as sinners who are saved and kept by grace, we should do our best to financially support those who have devoted themselves to ministry: "Anyone who receives instruction in the Word must share all good things with his instructor" (v.6). The Greek word that Paul used for "share" (*koinoneo*) indicates that since we are fellow-recipients of an undeserved salvation, our giving is really a spiritual partnership.

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Fourth, using the analogy of planting and harvesting, Paul encouraged us to use our grace-given resources, including our money, to build for eternity (v.10). If we live to gratify our sinful nature, we will reap a harvest that will pass away. If we sow to please the Spirit, we will reap a harvest that will last forever. The interval between this sowing and reaping may seem long, but we must not let this discourage us. The day of reaping will surely arrive.

To sum it up, as sinners saved by grace, we are to

use our money and every resource God gives us to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (v.10).

Paul’s Concluding Remarks. In 6:11-18, Paul apparently took the pen from the hand of the person to whom he had dictated this letter and scrawled the rest of it in his own handwriting. He called attention to the large size of the letters (v.11), possibly an indication of the “thorn” of which he spoke in 2 Corinthians 12 (cp. Gal. 4:13-15).

Paul made one last reference to the legalists who were opposing him, saying that they wanted “to make a good impression outwardly” and that they were boasting about the people they convinced to be circumcised (vv.12-13). He expressed his earnest desire that he would never brag about his own accomplishments or attainments: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (v.14). Paul wanted to boast only in the cross of Christ, because it was through what the Savior did there that made possible the power, joy, and peace of salvation.

When Paul met the risen Savior who had died on the cross, his life was radically changed. The world with all its allurements, honors, and treasures was now dead to him. It had lost all its attractiveness and charm. He had become dead to the world. Those who lived for this world viewed Paul as a strange creature, an oddity, an object of contempt. But that didn’t trouble him.

Paul pronounced his blessing on all who lived by the grace principle, referring to both Jewish and Gentile Christians as “the Israel of God”: “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God” (v.16).

Deeply hurt by the Galatian believers who had repudiated him and his teaching, he expressed his desire that this be his last experience of such pain: “Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (v.17). This is undoubtedly a reference to the scars left on his body by the repeated scourgings he had received because of his testimony for Christ (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

He finally closed with another benediction: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.”

SEEING GOD

- In God’s leading Paul to write this epistle, we see His patience with His erring children and His concern for them.
- In God’s provision of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we see His concern for godliness on the part of His children.
- In the admonition that we do good to “all people,” we see God’s love for those who do not yet know Him.

SEEING OURSELVES

- In Paul’s exhortation to the church that we “serve one another in love,” we see our need to develop a servant attitude.
- In Paul’s reminder of the power of our sin nature, we see why we must live in dependence upon and submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit.
- In Paul’s analogy of sowing and reaping, we see the importance of recognizing our stewardship in handling our money and using our opportunities.

THE GLORY OF GRACE

A man known in the community for his hard drinking, mean spirit, and blasphemous speech showed his disdain for me when I first met him. When his small granddaughter died in an accident, he angrily said to me, “The only place she is going to spend eternity is 6 feet under.” A few years later, I heard that he had throat cancer. He was wary of me when I first visited him, but after several months he wrote me a note (because he had lost the ability to speak): “I have confessed my sin and placed my trust in Jesus. I told the Lord that He was right in afflicting the voice I have used for so much vile and blasphemous speech, and I thanked Him for giving me the opportunity to repent.”

At his funeral, I read what he had written and then spoke about the wonder of God’s grace. A few people expressed doubt that a deathbed conversion could completely wipe away a life of sin. But someone who had a better understanding of grace said, “Some who died before he did will probably ask him how he ever got to heaven. I can hear him say, ‘Just like you did. By grace alone.’” I like that sentiment, but I don’t believe that any inhabitant of heaven will question how anyone gets there. All will realize fully that they were saved by grace alone. Here on earth, the people who know God best and do the most to honor Him are also the most convinced of their unworthiness of God’s favor and need of His grace.

I’m thankful that God will save a hard-living old sinner in the eleventh hour. Why? Because I need that grace—and so do you! If you haven’t already done so, admit your sinfulness, stop your efforts to earn heaven, and come to Jesus just as you are.

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