TO LIVE IN THE GRACE OF CHRIST

Galatians 1:1–24

Key Verse: 1:6

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel…”

Today we’re starting our study of this book of the Bible called “Galatians.” It was actually a letter Apostle Paul wrote to the churches he had just started on his first missionary journey. He wrote this letter right after he got back. Over the next ten weeks we’ll be studying this letter. What’s the main point of Galatians? In this letter Paul says many things, but his main point is the grace of Christ and the freedom his grace gives us. In this world everybody would like to be free: problem free, debt free, burden free. At the start of a new school year lots of new college students are so happy to finally be free from their parents, free to do whatever they want. But in life there’s a profound paradox in our pursuit of freedom; the freedom we grasp for can often lead us to an even worse kind of slavery, and we find out about it only too late. Galatians tells us that there’s only one real place of freedom in this world: in the grace of Jesus. In this first study we want to think about what the grace of Jesus is, and what it means to “live in” it. Once we experience life in his grace, we wouldn’t want to exchange it for any other life in this world. May God speak to us personally through his word today.

In verses 1–5 of chapter 1 we see Paul’s introduction and greetings as he begins this letter. How does he introduce himself? Read verses 1,2a. At first we wonder, “Why is he emphasizing so much who sent him?” It’s because right after he got these churches in Galatia started, some people went there and started trash talking Paul. They wanted to discredit Paul because they didn’t like his message of freedom in the grace of Jesus. Who were these naysayers? They were Jewish Christians who wanted new non-Jewish Christians to follow all the Jewish laws and rituals just as strictly as they did. Because Paul wasn’t telling these new believers to do that, they immediately went to work to discredit him. Evidently they’d been saying that, for various reasons, Paul wasn’t qualified to go out into the world and teach about Christianity. Look at verse 1 again. Paul says that he was “sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.” He meant there’s no higher authority than that. God the Father and Jesus who rose from the dead are still the real ones who send servants into the world to spread the good news. Look at verse 2a. Paul also had credibility because of all the brothers and sisters with him, who were genuine believers who recognized him as God’s servant and supported him and his message.

Next we see who Paul is writing to, and what he says to them. Look at verses 2b–5. First we notice that he’s writing to “the churches in Galatia.” As we said, these are most likely the churches in four different cities Paul got started on his first missionary journey. How did Paul get those churches started? It’s so simple: he explained from the Bible about Jesus; he said, “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses” (Ac13:38,39). The forgiveness of sins in Jesus is God’s grace that sets us free, and it’s the best news in the whole world, still today. It’s God’s grace in Jesus that gets churches started. Why does that still happen, all around the world? It’s because, even though we really don’t want to, we all get enslaved to sin. When we’re enslaved to sin, we suffer from a guilty conscience. We become dark and despairing. We start hating ourselves. We try to make up for our sins in many ways. We try to put on a good show. Some people try to keep rules and laws strictly, to protect themselves from sin. But it never works. It’s because sin starts not from without but from within, and our sins follow us wherever we go, until the root of our sin is truly healed. Only the grace of Jesus, his forgiveness, heals our sins. We just need to throw away our pride and have the faith to accept it.

When Paul told people about Jesus, many non-Jews became believers in Jesus. It was a new era in Christian history, because until this time almost all Christians were Jews. It was so heart-moving to see many Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus. But everywhere he went Paul was persecuted. In Lystra he was stoned so badly that they dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But Paul was unstoppable. After sharing the gospel in all four cities, he went back to each place, strengthening the disciples, encouraging them to remain true to the faith, appointing elders for them in each church, and fasting and praying for them (Ac14:22,23). Look at verse 3. Now, in writing them this letter, he first greets them by saying, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ…” It was another way of reminding them of God’s grace of forgiveness in Jesus.

Even in this brief greeting Paul wants to say something more about Jesus. Read verse 4. Here Paul explains that Jesus “gave himself for our sins.” What’s he talking about? He’s referring to Jesus’ death on the cross. This tells us a little bit more about the meaning of the word “grace.” Jesus was the only one who was without sin. In fact, he was the holy Son of God. He loved God the Father and never did anything wrong. But he obeyed his Father’s will and gave himself for our sins. He didn’t *have* to; he wasn’t *forced*; he *freely* gave himself. He gave himself for our sins because he loved us (2:20b). There was no way we could deserve it, but he did it for us, anyway. He didn’t protect himself or save himself; he *gave* himself. In giving himself, he held nothing back. He sacrificed his very life for us. In his own body he took all the punishment our sins deserve (Isa53:5).

And what was the point? Paul says here that it was “to rescue us from the present evil age.” When Jesus gave himself for our sins in order to bring us God’s grace, he was rescuing us from the present evil age. It’s really God’s miracle. Whether we realize it or not, we’re all living in “the present evil age.” In this evil age, what’s going on? Today we’re commemorating the anniversary of 9/11, when terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. No matter how much money is spent, how much war is fought, how many lives are lost, people are still bent on killing other innocent people, even in the name of religion. People are full of hate and self-righteousness. Last year many innocent people were killed in Paris and Nice, France, and in Belgium. In the Syrian war there are stories that even children are being used as bombs. But there’s more to this present evil age than just terrorism. All around the world people bring injustice, racism, ingratitude and cruelty to each other in so many ways. In Chicago this year people are shooting each other more than ever. Mainly, in this present evil age people are being seduced into sin. People are being deceived and misled. They’re being fed lies that living apart from God is freedom. They’re being told that living against God’s truth is not a problem at all, that there won’t ever be any consequences. In the present evil age people find sin irresistible. But when he gave himself for our sins, Jesus rescued us from this present evil age.

What does it mean? It means his grace of forgiveness awakens us spiritually. His grace is the only thing that gives us the power to resist sin and evil. His grace is the only thing that enables us to forgive and pray for those who hurt us. His grace gives us spiritual victory even while living in this evil world. In rescuing us from the present evil age, Jesus doesn’t take us out of the evil world; he protects us from the evil one (Jn17:15). By his grace he fills us with his Spirit to live even in this evil world as his witnesses (Ac1:8). His grace transforms our minds so that we no longer conform to the pattern of this world, but live for God’s will (Ro:12:2). Look at verse 5. Here Paul tells us Jesus’ ultimate purpose in giving us his grace and rescuing us. It’s so that we may live for the glory of God. Apart from his grace we’re living for our own glory like everybody else. But in his grace, we want to live only for the glory of God.

Look at verses 6,7. Here Paul jumps to the main point in writing this letter. He says in verse 7b, “Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.” The word “gospel” means “good news.” Paul is referring to those Jewish Christians who were telling Gentile Christians they had to keep all the laws of Moses and all the Jewish rituals. In verse 6 he calls this “a different gospel.” It’s not the gospel Paul shared with them. In fact, he says in verse 7a that it’s “no gospel at all.” Keeping a bunch of laws and rules is never good news, is it? Then what *is* the good news? Paul says in verse 6 that God has called us “to live in the grace of Christ.” That’s the good news. It’s good news because it’s not a human idea; it’s from God. It’s God’s forgiveness. And, it’s good news because, as we’ve seen, it sets us free from every sin. Laws and rules govern only outward things like appearance and behavior. But God’s grace in Christ changes our hearts; it changes us from the inside out. It’s so much better that it’s incomparable! Look at verse 6 again. Paul says, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel…” It’s such a foolish exchange.

Why would anyone exchange a life lived by grace for a life lived by rules and laws? In the Galatians’ case, it may have been because they had just become Christians and felt they knew so little, so they were more easily persuaded. But it wasn’t just their issue; sadly, many Christians today would still rather live by rules and laws than by grace. Why? Because rules and laws are tangible, and grace is so intangible. Rules and laws are things we can do; they seem safer; living by grace seems vague, and even risky. When we’re called to live in the grace of Christ, we’re called to depend on Jesus, not on ourselves. And many people would rather depend on themselves and be in control of everything. Living by grace means, in a sense, relinquishing all control to Jesus. It means really *trusting* in *Jesus*.

How can we live in the grace of Christ? Paul himself is a good example. He writes later in 2:20,21: “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. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” To live in the grace of Christ, Paul focused on that grace. To do that, he said he was “crucified with Christ.” It means he died to his pride and selfishness so that Christ and his grace could truly live in him. And he lived “by faith in the Son of God” who loved him and gave himself for him. It tells us that to live in the grace of Christ requires faith. Paul said that through our Lord Jesus Christ we all “have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Ro5:2). It means the grace of Christ is our new foundation in life—not myself, my performance, my abilities, but his grace. We gain access to his grace only “by faith.” And we stand in his grace only “by faith.” To live in the grace of Christ Paul always remembered the personal grace and love Jesus had shown him. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” Living in the grace of Christ Paul accepted himself for who he was, nothing but a forgiven sinner. And God’s grace didn’t become a justification to take it easy; instead, that grace motivated him to work really hard for God’s glory. When Paul did his best to serve God, Satan tormented him, to get him to give up. But at such a moment Paul heard God’s voice: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul said, “Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2Co12:9). To live in the grace of Christ Paul embraced his own weaknesses and realized that God’s grace was always enough for him; it could get him through the worst sufferings. Some people mistakenly think that because of grace they can just sin freely. But Paul said the grace of Christ teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives (Tit2:11,12).

In the last part of today’s passage Paul tells us that the gospel of the grace of Christ can never be changed; no one, not even Paul himself, can ever change it (8,9). Paul refused to modify this good news of God’s grace in order to please his audience (10). Why is the gospel so special? Read verses 11,12. It means the gospel is truth revealed by Jesus Christ himself.

In verses 13–24 Paul explains how the gospel was revealed to him. It was at the strangest time, when he was persecuting Christians. The Risen Jesus appeared to Paul and forgave all his sins (Ac9:1–6). He gave him a new direction, to spread the good news of his grace to the Gentiles (Ac9:15). Paul needed personal time to process this. Then he went to the apostles in Jerusalem to confirm that the gospel that had been revealed to him was true. When people heard about God’s grace in Paul’s life, they praised God. When God’s grace truly works in someone’s life, it still causes people today to praise God.

Let’s read verse 6 again. Today we mainly thought about the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus, and what it means to live in it. May God help us to newly experience his amazing grace. And may he help us grow through our Galatians study to learn how to really live in the grace of Christ.