

A GOSPEL GREETING PART 3

August 31, 2008

TEXT: GALATIANS 1:1-5

REVIEW:

Paul begins his letter to the Galatians by Paul boldly introducing himself as "Paul the Apostle," (cf. v. 1). He also begins by introducing himself as "Paul the preacher" (cf., vv. 3-4).

Of all his enormous contributions, perhaps Paul's greatest contribution to the world was his presentation and proclamation of the good news of free grace. In Galatians, Paul sets out to contend for the truth of the gospel of free grace and freedom (cf. Gal. 2:5, 14).

What then was this gospel of free grace?

In these opening 5 verses, Paul gives 6 important affirmations concerning the apostolic content of his Gospel.

II. PAUL DECLARES THE APOSTOLIC CONTENT OF HIS GOSPEL (VV. 1, 3-5).

First, Paul reveals the:

- A. THE AUTHORITY OF THE GOSPEL: "NOT FROM MEN NOR THROUGH MAN, BUT THROUGH JESUS CHRIST AND GOD THE FATHER..." v. 1

Next, he reveals,

- B. THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL: GRACE AND PEACE, v. 3

These two words comprehend all that belongs to Christianity. They contain in themselves a summary of the nature of the Christian Gospel.

We have noted that, though customary, Paul's inclusion of grace and peace in his greeting was of extraordinary significance because of the dire situation facing the Galatian churches.

The Galatians were in danger of letting grace and peace slip by as a result of their embracing of "different gospel" (1:6-9). For Paul, such an action was unthinkable.

WHAT IS GRACE?

Grace is *the undeserved favor of God* by which sinners are cleansed from sin and guilt and received unto God for Christ's sake alone.

Grace comes through Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins (cf. 1:4). Therefore, Paul, as all the other NT writers, never disassociates grace from Christ. Grace and Christ are always found together in one organic and inseparable whole (cf. vv. 3-4).

WHAT IS PEACE?

Peace is both objective and subjective. It is both a state and a condition. Peace is the true effect of the Gospel believed, the offspring of grace.

Objectively, peace refers to the state of wellbeing and reconciliation with God, which the grace of God brings (Rom. 5:1).

Subjectively, peace is a condition, the inner conviction that all is well; an internal rest that God gives through His Gospel and Spirit.

Peace is ease of conscience in place of nagging guilt. Peace quiets the believer's fears for his failures and alleviates his anxiety and doubt of God's favor towards him.

This then is the nature of the Gospel and the Christian life: Grace and Peace. The question before us now is: How are this grace and peace made possible?

INTRODUCTION:

Note carefully the connection between vv. 3-4a where Paul writes, "3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and *the Lord Jesus Christ*, 4 *who gave Himself for our sins...*" (emphasis mine).

In his greeting, Paul does not have a lot of room to set forth a full blown doctrinal discussion. So, in light of the overall context of Galatians, it is significant that he chooses to call attention to the death of Christ at the very beginning.

Paul's gospel of grace and peace was in imminent danger of being distorted and turned into a conditional "gospel" of merit and condemnation (cf. 1:7). He was writing to believers who were fearful

of incurring punishment from abandoning the law as a means of justification.

So then, from the outset, Paul emphasizes the significance and sufficiency of Christ thus excluding one's obedience to the law as necessary for salvation.

William Hendriksen notes that by stressing the greatness and sufficiency of Christ's death for salvation, Paul highlights the grievous nature of the sin among those who taught that Christ's work of salvation must be supplemented by law-works (*Galatians, NTC*, p. 34)

In respect to justification, Leon Morris writes, "The essential Christian message is concerned with Christ's sacrifice of Himself, not with our conformity to the law," (*Galatians*, p. 37).

Every phrase Paul utilizes in vv. 1-5 is an early, decisive blow against the Judaizer's false gospel. In fact, Paul's greeting stands against all who would seek to establish righteousness by works rather than through faith in Christ alone.

Paul, thus, at once sets forth the death (see also "resurrection," v. 1) of Christ as the only means by which the benefits of grace and peace are obtained.

Grace and peace find their source "³ ...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave Himself for our sins..."

These double blessings originate from God who is our Father (cf. v. 4) and they are merited for us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Concerning Paul's description of God as Father and the three-fold designation of Christ, Hendriksen observes,

"Now this grace and peace have their origin in God our (precious word of appropriation and inclusion!) Father, and have been merited for believers by him who is the great Master-Owner-Conqueror ("Lord"), Savior ("Jesus"), and Office-Bearer ("Christ"), and who, because of his threefold anointing "is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near to God through him" (Heb. 7:25)," (*Galatians*, p. 33).

With this context in mind, we are now brought to a second affirmation of the apostolic content of Paul's Gospel.

B. *THE VITALS OF THE GOSPEL: CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION, vv. 1C, 4A*

The death and resurrection of Christ are vital to the Gospel. In writing to the Corinthian church, Paul states that the death and resurrection of Christ are of "first importance," (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

Without either one there is no Good News (cf. 1 Cor. 15:13-19). John Calvin notes, "It is in Christ's death and resurrection that the whole of perfect salvation consists," (*Institutes*, 2.16.5).

Noting the emphasis of the Apostles' doctrine, Jerry Bridges writes,

"The apostles triumphed and gloried in the cross; it became their confidence and their boast (Gal. 6:14). They could not live without it, and they were willing to die for it. The apostles were faithful to the message of the cross, and in so doing, they exposed themselves to hardships and danger, persecution and death. And yet they preached the cross, undeterred and undaunted, assured they were ordained to deliver this message, which was unspeakably dear to their souls. The message of the atoning death of Christ for sin is the heart of their gospel and is forever to be the cornerstone of the Christian faith," (*The Great Exchange*, p. 42).

1. *CHRIST'S DEATH, v. 4A*

As noted, the cross was the vital core of Paul's gospel. In 1 Cor. 2:2 Paul wrote, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Christ's atoning death was his confidence before God (Rom. 8:31-39) and his only boast (Gal. 6:18). Paul is unwavering in his assertion of the central importance of the Cross of Christ (cf., 2:21).

In comparison, the Galatians had turned to a system of salvation based on good works.

By doing so, they had practically denied the grace of God (1:6; 2:21; 5:4) and the substitutionary death of Christ (cf., 2:21; 5:4). Christ and His cross were no longer central in their confession or living.

Hence, at risk among the Galatian churches was the significance and sufficiency Christ and His Cross. Paul, therefore, begins his letter by boldly declaring the true ground of acceptance before God.

Luther, commenting on the phrase, "who gave Himself for our sins," states, "These words are very very thunder-claps from heaven against all kinds of righteousness," (*Galatians*, p. 11).

Jerry Bridges writes,

"In the epistle to the Galatians, the apostle Paul contends that the gospel is no gospel unless the full significance of the cross is kept central. He condemns the Judaizers, teachers who did not present the cross as the sole ground of acceptance before God but instead constrained the Galatians to observe the Law of Moses as a requirement for acceptance with God. In effect, they attempted to supplement the cross with circumcision and obedience to Mosaic law and Jewish customs. The apostle vehemently attacked any suggestion that the basis of man's acceptance by God could ever be anything other than, or in addition to, the cross," (*The Great Exchange*, pp. 43-44).

Zealous for the glory of God (1:5; 6:18) and burdened for the souls of men (4:19-20; 5:7), Paul flatly rejects the slightest trace of legalism because he rightly sees that the atoning death of Christ is the sole basis of a sinner's acceptance before God!

How does one obtain forgiveness of sins? How is a sinner justified before God?

Paul's answer is substitution!

a. SUBSTITUTIONARY, "FOR OUR SINS"

"The phrase, "who gave himself for our sins," is a doctrinal summary of the atonement.

Specifically, it speaks of substitution, the innocent for the guilty. The essence of redemption is the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

In 1 Cor. 15:3, Paul says it is "of first importance" that "Christ died for our sins..." Christ (the innocent) died to deliver us (the guilty) from our sins, our transgressions of God's law.

We will come back to this, but for now note that in both Galatians 1:4 and in 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul uses the plural, "sins." Christ died to atone for our multiple breaking of His laws.

The doctrine of substitutionary atonement is critical to the Gospel.

For example:

- As our substitute, Christ died to appease the wrath of God against our sin (1 John 2:2; 4:10).
- As our substitute, Christ died in order to meet the demands of God's law (Rom. 3:25-26; 5:9-19).
- As our substitute, Christ reconciled us to God (2 Cor. 5:18-19).
- As our substitute, Christ made it possible for us to be reckoned righteous before God (2 Cor. 5:21).

2 Corinthians 5:21 contains what Bible teachers call The Great Exchange (for an excellent treatment on this, see Jerry Bridges book, *The Great Exchange*).

The great exchange is a two-fold blessing:

First, our sins were charged to Christ and results in God's forgiveness.

Second, His righteousness is credited to us and results in justification.

Because of Christ's substitutionary death, we are declared not only not guilty, but we are also declared righteous! This is the best possible news in the whole world!

As our substitute, God treated the sinless Son as if He were guilty, and inflicted upon Him the punishment, which "our sins" deserved. Thus, because of Christ, guilty sinners through faith alone are now reckoned as if they were actually righteous (2 Cor. 5:21)!

Lastly,

- As our substitute, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

John Stott commenting on Galatians 3:13 writes,

"This is probably the plainest statement in the New Testament of substitution. The curse of the broken law rested on us; Christ redeemed us from it by becoming a curse in our place. The curse that lay on us was transferred to Him. He assumed it, that we might escape it. And the evidence that he bore our curse is that he hung on a tree, since Deuteronomy 21:23 declares such a person cursed (v. 13)," (Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 346).

The reason we can be forgiven, declared not guilty, have the curse of the law removed and be counted righteous is because of Christ, "who gave Himself for our sins."

Christ in His substitutionary death did for sinners what was impossible for them to achieve through their own moral efforts.

Chrysostom wrote,

"...we had pierced ourselves with ten thousand evils, and had deserved the gravest punishment; and the Law not only did not deliver us, but it even condemned us, making sin more manifest, without the power to release us from it, or to stay the anger of God. But the Son of God made this impossibility possible for he remitted our sins, He restored us from enmity to the condition of friends, He freely bestowed on us numberless other blessings,"
(*Commentary on Galatians, NPNF, vol. 13, p. 5*).

For Paul, even the slightest hint that a man could be justified before God on the basis of his law-keeping (merit) apart from the substitutionary death of Christ alone was simply unthinkable. The very fact of justification implies substitution. Substitution and justification stand or fall together.

John Calvin wrote, "Our acquittal is in this- that the guilt which made us liable to punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God," (*Institutes*, 2.16.5).

And so the question Paul raises in 1:4 is, "Who has ever obtained righteousness by keeping a list of rules or by the observance of religious ceremonies?"

No one! "For," as Paul writes, "if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly," (Gal. 2:21).

It is by the gracious substitutionary death of Christ and not by our works that our sins are forgiven; that we are justified before God and receive grace and peace.

Luther writes,

"With such gunshot and artillery must all other notions be destroyed, all doctrine of merit, works, superstitious ceremonies. For if our sins may be taken away by our own works, merit, and satisfaction, what needed the Son of God to be given for them. But seeing He was given for them it followeth that we cannot put them away ourselves. Again, by this sentence, it is declared that our sins are so great, so infinite and invincible, that it is impossible for the whole world to satisfy for one of them. And surely the greatness of the ransom (namely Christ the Son of God) declareth sufficiently that we can neither satisfy for sin; nor have dominion over it. The force and power of sin is set forth, and amplified exceedingly by these words, "who gave Himself for our sins," (*Galatians*, p. 11).

CONCLUSION:

Like Paul and all the apostles, we must keep the substitutionary death of Christ central in both our confession and daily lives.

Keeping Christ's substitutionary death central is important for a number of reasons.

Here are three:

1. FIRST, AS ALREADY NOTED, JUSTIFICATION AND SUBSTITUTION STAND OR FALL TOGETHER.

It is impossible for a guilty sinner to be justified before God by the works of the law (i.e., one's own merit; cf. Gal. 2:16). Justification comes only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, "who gave Himself for our sins."

Seeking to establish one's righteousness apart from faith in Christ alone is, according to Paul, evil (cf. 1:4, "this present evil age...").

Reliance upon one's efforts for the purpose of justification nullifies the grace of God and eviscerates the substitutionary death of Christ (cf. Gal. 2:21).

Consequently, the great Italian Reformer and Martyr, Aonio Paleario, declared,

"O great unkindness! O thing abominable! that we, which profess ourselves Christians, and hear that the Son of God hath taken all our sins upon him, and washed them out with his precious blood, suffering himself to be fastened to the cross for our sakes, should nevertheless make as though we would justify ourselves, and purchase forgiveness or our sins by our own works; as who would say that the deserts, righteousness, and bloodshed of Jesus Christ were not enough to do it, unless we came to put [it] our works and righteousness; which are altogether defiled and spotted with self-love, self-liking, self-profit, and a thousand other vanities, for which we have need to crave pardon at God's hand, rather than reward," (*The Benefit of Christ's Death*, pp. 27-28).

2. SECOND, THE BLESSINGS OF GRACE AND PEACE, INDEED EVERY GOOD GIFT, ARE BLOOD BOUGHT BY THE DEATH OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS.

Note well: All the blessings of the Gospel flow from God the Father through Christ the Son and are applied by the Spirit by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection!

Because of our disobedience, we came under the curse of the law. But, the Good News is the Christ redeemed us from the curse by bearing it in our place. As a result, all of the blessings that are ours in Christ come to us by way of His substitutionary death.

Because He bore the curse, we can be blessed. Jerry Bridges remarks,

"...of extreme significance to us, almost without exception the apostles address their New Testament writings to specific churches or groups of believers. We can conclude that the message of the atonement is for all believers, not just unbelievers or new believers. As Christians, we do not meet the Savior at the cross and then move past it or outgrow our need of it. The blessing of a restored relationship with God does not become something we

merit apart from the cross as we grow. All our blessings were blood bought. And the only hope of avoiding false doctrine and heresy, such as legalism (inadequate grace) or license to sin (abused grace), is to continually treasure the cross and the tremendous price of Christ's atonement," (*The Great Exchange*, pp. 42-43).

Christ's death on our behalf should evoke in us deep, heart-felt, humble gratitude for the lengths which divine love went to redeem us from our sins and to secure for us the blessings of God.

3. THE SUBSTITUTIONARY DEATH OF CHRIST IS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR CONSOLATION.

Concerning the phrase, "who gave Himself for our sins," Martin Luther wrote, "...we must with diligent attention mark every word of Paul, and not slenderly consider them, or lightly pass them over, for they are full of consolation," (*Galatians*, p. 11).

Paul, as was mentioned, wrote to individuals who were anxious and fearful of incurring punishment for abandoning the law as a means for their justification. However, it is not by one's law-keeping (i.e., performance), that consolation is found.

Legalism does not give peace for our ongoing failures. Instead, legalism increases our guilt and magnifies our failures. The doctrine of substitution is the only source of our confidence before a just and holy God.

Trembling consciences only find peace in the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, who gave Himself for our sins!

The significance of Christ's substitutionary death for our sins cannot be overstated or repeated enough. To read about the Cross and to talk about Christ's death for our sins is one thing. But, to actually experience the reality of this truth in our daily lives is quite different.

For:

- When we are in the midst of temptation;
- When we are painfully aware of our sin and failure;

- When we find it so easy to revert back to a performance-based mentality; thinking that God's favor and blessings are dependant upon our efforts to be good;
- When the enemy is working over time to accuse and condemn us, and we hear a voice question us, just as Christ, "If you are the son of God . . ." (Luke 4:3);
- When we are paralyzed by the relentless stings of an accusing conscience;
- When we are depressed, struggling and perhaps bewildered by events in our life that take us by surprise and leave us with heartache and more unanswered than answered questions;

Take for example, Greg Laurie, pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship, who recently lost his son in a heart-breaking car accident on the California freeways.

No doubt, many hearts were crushed over the lost of a son, husband, father and friend. Yet, to his church's amazement, instead of taking a Sunday off, Pastor Greg, with his heart breaking, took to his pulpit and declared, "I still believe."

As he fought back his tears, he went on to say, "Last Thursday was the most, I'll be honest with you, the most devastating day of my life and I felt like time just stood still and I couldn't imagine this happened. But I knew he was in Heaven."

I wonder how many of us could do that?

Christ's substitutionary death is the only source of strength for such a declaration of faith. The saving grace of Christ's substitution is our only consolation in times like this. Christ's substitution strengthens us in times of crisis. "The cross," Ravi Zacharias writes, "somehow invades us as the only reasonable point of definition for a wounded world," (*Zacharias, Cries of the Heart*, p. 60).

The peace that surpasses all understanding comes through Calvary, peace through propitiation. Grace and peace flow from a gracious God who gave Himself for our sins. And because Christ suffered as our substitute, we have the assurance and consolation to know that He is an understanding and sympathizing Savior.

So, when doubts assail you, you must cast yourself into the arms of Christ and look to Him, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (cf., Isa. 53:3). For, at the foot of the Cross you will find an all-sufficient and sympathetic Savior.

Heart-breaking events like Pastor Greg experienced serve to remind us why we must earnestly seek to immerse ourselves in the truth of the Gospel. We must daily, moment by moment meditate upon and continually remind ourselves of the truth of Paul's words, "...the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins!"

And so Martin Luther exhorts,

"Hold this fast, and suffer not thyself to be drawn away by any means from this most sweet definition of Christ, which rejoiceth the very angels of heaven: that is to say, that Christ is no Moses, no lawgiver, no tyrant, but a mediator for sins, a free giver of grace, righteousness, and life: who gave Himself, not for our merits, righteousness, and godly life, but for our sins...If He gave Himself to death for our sins, then undoubtedly He is not a tyrant, or judge which will condemn us for our sins. He is no caster-down of the afflicted, but a raiser-up of those that are fallen, a merciful reliever and comforter of the heavy and broken-hearted...If I define Christ thus, I define Him rightly and take hold of the true Christ, and possess Him indeed...Here then is no fear, but altogether sweetness, joy, peace of conscience..." (*Galatians*, pp. 13-14).

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