

One Gospel Galatians 1:1-10

We're starting a new series looking at Paul's letter to the Galatians. And he wrote it around 48AD, maybe only 2 years after planting the churches in Galatia, now modern day Turkey, that he's writing to.

And if you skim read it you might think this letter is written by a guy with anger issues, about a subject - circumcision - that has nothing to do with you. And yet, it has everything to do with you, *and* Paul's emotion is justified, because, as a letter, it gets to the heart of what the guiding authority in your life is going to be - who you listen to about faith and life; about how you can know that God smiles upon you, and how real change can happen in your life.

Reading: Galatians 1:1-10

An Astonishing Turnaround

Now just imagine a scenario: it's the start of a new year, you're at work, and your boss calls you and your colleagues to a meeting. And you're all stood in a line, as your boss works his way down, thanking each of your colleagues for their work over the last year, and picking out one two things in particular to praise them for. And you're stood there, waiting for your turn - what nice things is he going to say about you? But when he gets to you, he walks past you, and instead thanks and praises the colleague after you. Now when you walk out of there, what are you going to be thinking? Why didn't he thank me, why didn't he praise me? Because that wasn't by accident.

And whenever Paul writes to a church he introduces himself, and then he thanks God for the Christians he's writing to, and picks out one or two things where he can see God at work among them. It's what he does in every letter... except here. Right where you're expecting him to say, 'I thank God for you Galatians', he says, v6, 'I am astonished...'

Zero praise and no thanksgiving - just astonishment. And in place of an apostolic blessing, in v8-9 there's an apostolic curse. When I was about 18, I remember hearing a minister say that Paul wrote Galatians in 'white hot anger.' Now, maybe that's an overstatement, but Paul is certainly highly emotional. In fact, in chapter 3 he describes these Christians as '*Foolish Galatians!*'

So why this emotion? What's going on in Galatia that's got Paul going like this? Well, look at v6 again, 'I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.' And certain teachers have worked their way into the churches there and have been persuading these new Christians to abandon the gospel Paul taught them for another one. And Paul's angry with those teachers, but he's astonished that the Christians would follow them.

Now, obviously, there are huge differences between first-century Galatian culture and our own. But think why these guys would have started going to church, or been more interested in spirituality than others. Because it would have been surprisingly similar to us, wouldn't it. That search for meaning in life, and answers to the big questions; the search for God and the transcendent; for inner peace, or a community where you feel like you belong, or that desire to connect with the spiritual, and live life on another plane. All the time knowing that what you have at the moment doesn't do it.

But as soon as you start thinking like that, you're going to have to decide, 'what lens am I going to look through life with?'; what's going to determine *how* you see yourself, and God; or *how* you find peace with God, or with yourself; or how *are* you going to connect with the spiritual and what's going to be the basis for the meaning you give to life. So, to use Paul's language in Galatians, you have to decide, 'what gospel are you going to believe?'

And these teachers had arrived, saying, 'well, we can tell you. And Paul's right, *as far as he goes*. You do need Jesus. You do need to know that he died, and rose again. You do need to put your faith in him. But, if you *really* want to know God, if you really want to find peace and know the smile of God upon you - you need to do your bit your bit. Guys, you need to be circumcised, and everyone you need to start obeying the laws of Moses. Do that and you'll know that God really does love you, that you're in, that you're saved, and then you'll really start growing in your faith.'

And that's why this letter matters for you. Because how *do* you know God and that you're right with him, and he's ok with you? How do you know he loves you, that he's pleased with you? How do you connect with the spiritual and live life on another plane? And throughout Galatians, Paul is going to say, there's only one way, there's only one true gospel. And any other gospel, no matter who's teaching it, is no gospel at all: v7: 'Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.'

But here's the thing, you almost certainly believe, or are drawn to, a message almost identical to the one these teachers were spreading in Galatia.

Maybe you're not yet a Christian, but do you ever find yourself thinking, 'you know what, it doesn't really matter what you believe, what matters is who you are, how you behave, how you treat others, that you're loving, inclusive, non-judgmental.' So whether you're in, or out, whether you're an acceptable type of person to God or others, or not, is based on your behaviour, your morality, your politics, whether you're a good enough person.

Or, for those of us who are Christians, have you ever been to a church where how you dressed, or what you drank, or the places you went, determined whether God was pleased with you or not? Or, have you ever felt that God isn't pleased with you because you haven't prayed enough this week, or read your Bible enough, and that if only you got your life sorted then you'd be in God's good books, you'd be earning angel points, and he'd bless you more? That if your faith was just bigger, that situation you're praying for would change? Or have you ever thought, if I was just more obedient to God's commands, if I was more *Christian*, I'd be able to know I'm ok with him.

Or, for any of us, do you find yourself comparing yourself to others. And if only you could be as good as them - as intelligent, as productive, as sporty, as musical, as spiritual, as moral, you'd feel better about yourself, that you were more worthy.

And Paul is saying, if that's what you believe, that your performance matters for how God sees you, it's not the gospel you're believing.

And yet performance makes so much sense, doesn't it? It's how we do life: Our families, our education, our work: behave better, work harder, achieve more, and you'll be ok. You'll earn the favour and respect of others, and of the gods, and you'll be able to hold your head up. Because there's a kick that comes with being able to say, I've done it.

So what's wrong with it?

An Incredible Rescue

Let me ask you a question: how do you decide who you're going to let shape your life, and determine the way you think and see life? And I say that because you're exposed to multiple messages from multiple people about how you can find the good life, the life you want. Your friends, your family, the podcasts you listen to, the books you read, the media you consume: directly, or indirectly, they're all preaching to you a gospel of how you can be ok, how you can be a better you, how you can be *in* and win others', or God's, approval, how you can live on that higher plane, where life is as you want it.

But how do you decide which of those voices you're going to listen to? Because that's the challenge facing these Galatians, isn't it? How do they decide whether they should listen to Paul, or these other teachers? Is it by the number of their instagram followers? Or podcast downloads? Or whether the books are on the Bestseller list? Because, if so many other people are listening to them, maybe I should too? Or maybe their educational history? Or on your feelings, and if what they say feels good or right to you, you'll follow it?

And it's this issue of authority, who you're going to let shape the way you see life, that Paul keeps coming back to in this letter. And he starts in verse 1: 'Paul, an apostle - not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.'

Now, *apostle* simply means 'one who is sent'. And think about that, because whether or not you're going to listen to someone, or do what they tell you, depends on who's sent them, doesn't it. Let's say you get two letters in the post. One is from a political party asking for money and that goes in the bin. But the next one is from the tax man and you pay up. Or imagine you're driving along, and the car behind you keeps trying to get past you, and eventually you might reluctantly pull over just to avoid an accident, but if he's got blue flashing lights on, you'll definitely pull over.

How you respond to someone depends on their authority, who they're acting on behalf of. And so with any of these voices that we let shape us, ask yourself, who are they speaking for? What authority are they speaking with? Because you're inevitably going to accept *someone's* authority - even if it's your own.

And so right at the start Paul tells us where his authority to speak about faith and life comes from, and it's not in himself, or others. It's God. And that's why he uses some pretty strong language to describe what should happen to anyone who distorts the gospel he's teaching: v8-9, 'Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.' And in case you missed that, he says it again: 'As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.' In other words, 'To hell with anyone who tries to change the gospel, to hell with anyone who teaches you something different from this gospel.'

Which is pretty strong! But look who he includes: '*Even if we* or an angel in heaven' do this. So if Paul ever came along and said, 'look, I've given this a bit more thought, I really think you should get circumcised', they should ignore him. Or, if an angel came along, and you have some amazing

spiritual experience, and you just know, you feel inside you, this *must* be right, this just *feels* like a god-thing, but it contradicts what the gospel says, it's not a god-thing, and you should ignore it.

So, the latest hotshot bible teacher, with perfect teeth, who everyone else is raving about, or the podcast you listen to that says...; or that *influencer* with thousands of followers she says..., or deep down you *feel* that..., or all *your friends* are saying that...; Paul is saying, these aren't to be the authority as to what you believe, or whether something is right or wrong. There is only one gospel - and no one gets to change it.

And in v3-5 he sets out in miniature what that gospel is: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.'

Now, today, talking about 'sin' isn't exactly politically correct. But be honest with yourself, are there things this week, or last year, that you should have done but didn't do, or things you shouldn't have done but did do. And you feel guilty about it, and as if God is frowning on you. Well, Paul says, the good news of the gospel is that Christ took all those sins upon himself. At the cross he gave himself, in our place, to deliver us.

And that word *deliver* is used three other times in the New Testament: of Israel being delivered from slavery in Egypt (Acts 7:34); of Peter being freed from prison (Acts 12:11), of Paul being rescued from a lynch mob (Acts 23:27). So each time it's about someone being rescued from a power greater than them. And that's the gospel Paul says. It's why John Stott, the British pastor and author, called Christianity 'a rescue religion'. Other religions, all these other messages you hear, are helpful advice for self-improvement; or for boosting self-esteem, or teaching a path to self-fulfilment. But Paul says the gospel is about a hero who gives his life to rescue you when you could never rescue yourself.

Which is why Paul says in v5 that it's to God's glory. All these other things offer you the chance to share some of the glory, because you save yourself. But not in the gospel, Paul says. Because the true gospel is all about what God has done for you.

And that's why to abandon the gospel is to abandon God: v6 again, 'I am astonished that you are so quickly *deserting him* who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.' And whenever Paul talks about 'the one who called you' he's talking about God the Father. And when he talks about deserting and turning, he uses words that were used for when a politician switched sides from one group to another, or when a soldier deserted his comrades and fought for the enemy. Or think of a sportsman changing teams. What do they do? They hold a press conference, and present him with his new shirt - why? Because he's switched allegiances.

And Paul's saying, that's what you're doing if you change or try and add anything to the gospel. You're switching sides, you're playing for a different team, you're putting on a different jersey. It's God you're abandoning.

And the reason is that at the heart of the gospel is God's grace: v3, 'Grace to you'; v6, 'the grace of Christ'. And like authority, grace is something Paul's going to keep coming back to. That regardless of your performance, God lavishes his grace on you. Regardless of your performance he sends his Son to rescue you. Regardless of your performance, but because of his grace, he smiles on you.

And grace is either grace or it isn't, isn't it? When I used to work on the neonatal unit I used to have to scrub up and put on a sterile gown and gloves to do some practical procedures. And you have to do everything without touching something that isn't sterile. But the moment you do, the moment your gloves touch something *unsterile*, everything's contaminated, and you have to start again. It's either sterile or it's not. And it's either grace or it's not. Add a bit of, 'actually, you do need to obey God's law, you do need to be a more moral person, you do need to have more faith, or pray more, or wear the right clothes, or be a more inclusive person, if you really want to be accepted, for God to really love you', it's not grace, it's works.

But listen, this is more than just a theoretical argument. This matters for the very reasons why you want to know God, or connect with the spiritual, in the first place.

A Real Peace, and a New Age,

Look at v7 again, 'there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.' And that word 'trouble' means to agitate, to shake, to throw into confusion. And Paul's talking about what they understand to be true. But that inevitably impacts your heart, doesn't it?

You see, if you get the gospel wrong, and you think, 'I've got to earn God's love; I've got to be circumcised, I've got to obey the law, I've got to pray enough, or give enough, or believe enough, I've got to be a better person, if I really want to know the blessing of God in my life', your heart's always going to be troubled. It'll be troubled because you'll always be wondering, have I done enough? Or you'll always be comparing yourself to someone else and finding you come up short. Or, it'll be troubled because you start to think you *have* done enough, that you are better than others, and you become proud, and judgemental of others. Which is why Paul says, 'let these teachers, or anyone else, be accursed', because a false gospel inevitably brings a curse with it - like fear, or anxiety, or guilt, and, ultimately, condemnation and death, because none of us can ever be good enough. The one thing these false gospels can never give you is peace - that sense of wellbeing across every dimension of your life - because there's always more to do. There's always another '10 steps to...', or '5 keys for...', or '7 changes to make...'

But understand the gospel and *peace* is exactly what you get. Verse 3, 'Grace to you *and peace* from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Imagine your life is spinning out of control. You've got a list of jobs to do longer than your arm, and you're running around like a headless chicken trying to get them done. But as soon as you get one done, someone adds another three to your list. And the demands on you just keep growing. Do you have peace in your heart? No! You're troubled. But what if someone comes and takes that list and does all that's required of you and says, 'no more lists, no more jobs, rest.' You'll experience peace. And the true gospel tells you, Jesus has done everything - he's obeyed every law, he's fulfilled every requirement for you to be right with God. God already loves you. In Christ, he already approves of you. It's not dependent on you, it's dependent on him.

But it's also in Jesus that you can connect with the real spiritual world and live life on that higher plane that you're looking for. You see in v4 Paul says that Christ 'gave himself for our sins to deliver us *from the present evil age*.' And *this present evil age* is always in contrast with 'the age to come', when the kingdom of God arrives, and everything is put right, and life is as it should be. And Paul says that in Jesus, through his death and resurrection, God has punched a hole in history, and the age to come has broken into this present age. And in Christ we are delivered from this age -

from the imprisonment, the slavery of living for its priorities and desires; and instead we can live *now* in the goodness, the grace, the freedom, the peace of the age to come, of the kingdom of God.

And you don't do that by obeying the law, or by being a better you, you live on this different plane - the life of the Spirit, the new creation he'll call it later, by faith in Jesus and all that he's done for you.

So, the gospel, this great rescue, humbles you, because it tells you you need rescuing. But then it lifts you up and tells you, you are so loved that Christ did rescue you, regardless of your performance, and now you can live in that love. False gospels fill you with angst. The real gospel fills you with joy and wonder.