

## **Introduction**

A little girl in Tennessee is alive today because three years ago her foster-brother, Eli, braved the flames to pull her out of her crib and through her bedroom window to safety. The family awakened in the middle of the night to realize their home was on fire. Everyone was able to get out except 22 month-old Erin. Her bedroom was surrounded by the flames. The family determined to reach her from the outside through a window. The only way in was for the father to lift up the seven-year-old son who went into the fiery room and rescued the toddler. When asked to talk about it, Eli said, "I was scared but I didn't want my sister to die."

This story raises the question, what is so important to you that you would risk your life to save or defend? Is there anything you would be willing to die for if necessary to protect? What to you is more important than your life?

As we come to the study of Galatians and to the apostleship of Paul, we do not have to wonder if such a thing is that important to the apostle. Paul had risked his life because Jesus Christ and the gospel message were more precious than life in this world. It was Paul who said, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." For all practical purposes, he gave his life to preach the gospel to the folks in the region of Galatia. He had been stoned and dragged out of the city of Lystra; his assailants thought they were leaving him for dead. And when he came to, he went right back in to the city and continued doing there and elsewhere what had put him at risk. He proclaimed God's glorious gospel. He also zealously defended the purity of its message lest it become something that is no gospel at all.

A look ahead into the letter tells us that false teachers had infiltrated the churches in Galatia teaching that justification before God required more than simple faith. They were teaching that faith in Christ was not enough. To be truly justified, persons would also have to live under the mosaic law. They needed to be circumcised. They needed to keep the dietary restrictions; they needed to keep the ceremonies, the Sabbaths, and on and on. In other words they were teaching Christ was not enough. Merit was needed too. Such teaching, we will see, results in no gospel, no good news at all. It results in worthless heresy. It was the very opposite of what Paul was willing to die for. So he is writing to confront the heresy. As we come in our study of this priceless letter to verses 3-5, we see that from the very beginning Paul is setting forth the true gospel in opposition to what the Galatian churches were in danger of embracing.

[Read text and Pray]

What we are examining today is the opening greeting in Paul's letter. It is both like and unlike other epistolary greetings we see in the New Testament. What is unlike other greetings is that Paul does not include his usual expression of thanksgiving for those he is writing to. That aspect of the greeting seems to highlight the intensity and urgency with which he is determined to confront a false gospel and bring correction to the direction in which the churches were moving.

What Paul does include in this greeting provides a concise yet powerful and clear statement of the essence of the gospel message. It may sound like a customary form of greeting; however, it is a solid and robust declaration of the central elements of the gospel message.

It is an expression of the longing for divine grace and peace to be multiplied upon the Galatians, through the work of the Son which was planned by the Father, and which has resulted in deliverance for them and glory to God.

Every person who is a follower of Jesus Christ should be able to set forth concisely and confidently the content of the gospel message. That is exactly what Paul accomplishes in his greeting. And so it is an example for us to follow. The gospel is the message of God's grace and peace for those who believe, through the plan of the Father performed by the Son. So I am going to expound on these four gospel elements—Grace, Peace, the Work of the Son, and the Will of the Father.

**I. Grace.** Grace is where it all begins. How can sinful and unholy human beings receive anything good from God? Grace! The word "gospel" means good news. If there is no grace, there can be no good news.

It is said that grace is God's unmerited favor. I think it is more accurate to say that grace is God's de-merited favor. You see, grace is not simply receiving what we don't deserve, it is receiving the opposite of what we do deserve. The grace of God exhibited in the Scripture is the kindness of God extended to those who are worthy of his wrath. Holy and righteous God, by grace, dispenses immeasurable riches upon those who by all rights deserve his immeasurable displeasure and just punishment. This is the reality of the gospel. From beginning to end it is all of grace. If the message ceases to be of grace, it becomes no gospel. If the terms of receiving good from God have any other standard than grace, no good from God can be received.

The biblical gospel is about the Creator of the universe dealing kindly with those who deserve his hostility, and doing for the undeserving what they cannot and would not do for themselves. If we understand that fact, then we will begin to grasp that any time we start to place our hope of right standing with God on something we do, then we have lost all hope of ever arriving at that place. Right standing with God that in any way depends upon our merits is impossible. You see our merits all fail because they are all imperfect. They are all tarnished, tainted, and ruined by who we are. Our righteousness is filthy rags. And our state before God is dead in trespasses and sins. Salvation by grace means that even when we were dead, God made us alive and brought us to himself.

This, beloved brothers and sisters, is where the gospel starts. The witness of the Bible is that no matter how good is the setting, no matter how optimum the conditions, apart from God's grace we fall again and again. Adam and Eve in the best possible conditions in the garden of Eden fell into sin. Noah stood in contrast to the wickedness of the pre-flood world, but when they were all gone and judged, he began life in a new creation by planting a vineyard and committing sin. The children of Israel had the benefit of deliverance from Egypt. However, no sooner than they heard the law of God from Mt Sinai, they blatantly violated his very first two commands and sinned against him over and over. We violate the heart of God's law with our very best works. We need grace. And there is good news; God is gracious! He gives grace to the undeserving whose first order of drawing near to him is with the confession that they cannot. They cannot measure up and their best works are filthy. Their cry is not that they deserve good from God but they deserve his wrath and they need forgiveness. Grace. That is the first word of the gospel.

The next word is ...

**II. Peace.** The Hebrews would be well-familiar with the concept of Shalom. The blessing of the Lord pronounced by the priest upon the people of Israel culminated with the granting of peace. "The

LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

There are at least two ways we can think of peace in this context. It starts with relational peace between humans beings and God. There can be no peace at all if we do not have peace with the one who supplies peace. Peace with God has been granted by grace to those who believe. As Paul said to the Romans, "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1).

Out of relational peace, God gives shalom, peace. Jesus when he was preparing his disciples for his nearing departure said to his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (John 14:27). A little later he said, "in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

What kind of peace does the world give? The world is in search of peace. The world's idea of peace is no wars, no conflicts, no troubles. The peace that the world gives is a false sense of security, a false sense of well-being. It is an occupation with what is in the world and what is going on in the world which hides from the fact that it will have to answer to God.

The peace that Jesus gives is a peace that can be experienced EVEN when the world is at war. It is a true well-being that comes from God. It settles the soul with the knowledge that all IS well, even though it may not look like it. No matter what is going on, my sovereign Lord is in control and he is looking out for my good.

Think what this would have meant for the Galatians. This peace is exactly what Paul had and it is exactly what they needed. No doubt the hostility and mistreatment of the angry and jealous Jews was ongoing. No doubt the arrival of these teachers who were trying to bridge the gap between the new believers and the Jews appealed as a way of peace. But no. Peace does not come from a compromised gospel that abates conflict. Peace comes from confidence in the pure and true gospel of Jesus Christ. You can know that peace. Jesus desires for you and me to experience life with his peace. He has given us who believe in him that peace. If we are resting in the grace of God, and we are trusting in him, there is nothing about which to let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Rest in Jesus Christ.

Before moving on to the remaining two points of the gospel, let me pause for a moment to recognize that grace and peace as mentioned by Paul are his prayer for the Galatians. "Grace and peace to the churches in Galatia from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This is his desire for them. It is Paul's prayer that grace and peace from God be multiplied to them. Here is a model for you and me in our prayers for one another. Sometimes we may not know what to pray for each other. We can do no worse than to ask for grace and peace. Ask for grace for one another. We all need to be reminded that we are sinners saved by grace alone. We are not good people. We are what we are in Christ by God's grace. This understanding makes such a difference in the way we view those who are caught up in the present evil age. It reminds us that we depend completely upon the Lord to make it from one day to the next. Also ask for peace for one another. That we will rest in the grace of God no matter what.

Now, let's move forward. Paul points next to the means by which God's grace and peace are conveyed into the lives of human beings. How is it that sinners who need grace can experience peace with God?

It is through ...

### **III. The Work of the Son.**

Paul expresses the work of the Son this way: "the Lord Jesus Christ ...gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age."

A. He first draws attention to who the Son is. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. This title expresses Jesus as the risen Lord and King. He is no longer dead. He has been raised by the Father from the dead. He is God. He is the conqueror. He is ruler over all.

B. And yet the ruler over all became the servant of all. There is such weight in these words: "who gave himself." Jesus came into the world not to be served but to serve. This language captures the image from the Old Testament of the messiah as the servant. Isaiah 53 depicts him as bearing our sorrows and carrying our griefs. In the New Testament, in John 13, Jesus displays himself as a servant as he laid aside his outer garments and tied a towel around his waist. He poured water into a basin and began to wash and dry the feet of the disciples. If you are familiar with the event, you know that Peter objected: "You are not going to wash my feet!" He was not going to allow Jesus to stoop so low as to wash his feet. But Jesus replied, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." There can be no grace and peace for one who will not accept the work of Christ, the servanthood of Christ for him or her.

The ruler over all became the servant and gave himself. The death of Jesus on the cross was not administered to Jesus out of his control. He did not succumb to the cross because the humans involved were more powerful than him. He did not embrace suffering unwillingly. As there was no other way for sinners to be justified, he willingly submitted. He gave himself. The good shepherd laid down his own life for his sheep.

C. For what did he give himself? For our sins. Isaiah said of the servant that "he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace ... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." He had no sin of his own. But he exposed himself to the punishment due sinners. He who knew no sin became sin in our behalf. He suffered in our place. He paid the debt human beings owed to God for our offense against his holiness. It was a debt so huge we could never repay it. Our only hope is for the perfect lamb of God to become a sacrifice in our place. Jesus is that lamb. He alone can take away sin.

D. Not only does he remove the guilt of sin, he also brings deliverance to those whose sins he bears. He gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. The word DELIVER could also be translated RESCUE. When there is deliverance or rescue, there is a grave threat that stands over us from which we have been removed. There was that little two-year-old girl. She was caged in her crib in a room whose walls were engulfed in smoke and flame. She was going to die. But 7 year-old Eli was lifted up to her window by his father. He entered the room, lifted her from the crib and got her safely out of the burning home just before it was consumed with flames. He rescued her. She was delivered! The nation Israel languished in Egypt under oppression with cries of anguish. God sent Moses, however, to deliver the people. He brought them out. He rescued them. By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has delivered those who believe in him.

From what have believers been delivered? Paul specifies that it is from this present evil age. What is this present evil age? Well, it is the age in which we presently live. Jesus talked about "this age" and "the age to come." "This age" is now. It is an evil age dominated by ungodliness and worldly passions. It is the age in which the prince of the power of the air holds sway over those who walk according to the course of this world. This present age is marked by all manner of evil. Human beings think only of themselves and their selfish pleasures. They indulge in all manner of perversion. They pridefully celebrate what God hates—sexual perversions, adulteries, murder, abortion, disregard for authority, arrogance, lies, and discord. It is a cursed world constantly sinking deeper and deeper into depravity. And the present world is headed toward an end. The form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31; 1 John 2:17). It is on fire. And the closer it gets to its demise, the louder and more intense it burns with passion. It would take everyone down into the fires of divine judgment with it but for the work of Jesus. Those who believe in him are RESCUED; they are DELIVERED from this present evil age.

How can this truth not cause you to overflow with joy unspeakable and full of glory? Ours is the hope for the age to come where in glory we shall see our Savior face-to-face. In the new creation all the evil of this age will be put under judgment. All evildoers will be eradicated.

But our hope is not just for the future. We have BEEN delivered from the present evil age even though we still live in it. By God's grace we can resist being conformed to the world in which we live. The hopelessness and misery of unbelievers need not engulf our thinking and rob us of joy. As one commentator says, "we have been granted the grace to live the life of the age to come in the midst of the present age" (Tom Schreiner). Believers in Jesus have been delivered already. We are not under the power of darkness. We have already been transferred to the kingdom of light. Now let us who rest in Christ live accordingly! We can because we have been delivered!

And not only that, living according to ceremonial rules and rituals and trying to be right with God through our own efforts—even the mosaic law—is part of this evil age. And we dare not go back there. We dare not return to circumcision and law keeping as a way of being right with God. We are never more right with God than we are through Christ, and we need not live in that mentality. Obey? Yes, let us by all means obey Christ, but never in order to achieve right standing with God. Rather it is always to be our worship and thank you to him for the grandeur of his marvelous grace!

So the gospel in a nutshell is grace, peace, and deliverance by the work of the Son. Paul extols one more component.

#### **IV. The Will of the Father.**

A. The gospel is not according to human imagination but according to divine plan. The work of salvation for sinners through Jesus the Son is "according to the will of our God and Father." So, ultimately, the gospel is the idea and plan of God the Father. It was his plan to be gracious. It was his wisdom that discerned the way that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

B. God's provision of salvation is not an afterthought or the haphazard result of a series of unexpected events. He planned it before the foundation of the world. It is according to the will of God from eternity past. It was his design. It is by his authority, wisdom, direction, and determination that he brought to pass a sacrifice that would satisfy his holy justice. The saving work of God is far more about God himself than it is about those he saves. It reveals his grace, greatness, and his glory. And the result is that he should be glorified.

You know, when the young Eli went in and saved his sister, he ended up being interviewed on national news. Some attention was given to the little sister to be sure, but the spotlight was on Eli. Everyone wanted to talk to him about how he was able to overcome his fear and enter a burning room and get his sister out and why he would be willing to do it and so forth. And when it comes to the gospel, we may see that the design of it is to bring honor to the Son for his sacrifice and glory to God for his awesome plan. It is a plan that magnifies the Lord. The elements of this plan completely debase human pride. This plan is not based upon human goodness or human merit. The grace of it all and the substitutionary sacrifice of the servant according to the divine plan humble human pride and exalt God.

And we should be zealous to protect everything about God's gospel that gives him all the glory! This was all at stake in Galatia with the teachers of a false gospel that robbed God of his glory. Paul was intense about preserving the very gospel he had been willing to die for if necessary. We should be of the same mind.

### **Conclusion**

Imagine yourself to be in a helpless situation like Erin the 22 month old toddler. You are caged. You are surrounded by a blazing fire steadily encroaching upon you. There is no way out. Into the smoke-filled bleakness comes your brother who reaches down, pulls you out, and delivers you to safety. What are you going to do with your deliverance? Are you going to talk about how great you are and how worth saving you are? Are you going to demand to be put back in the flames to work your way out for yourself? Or are you going to extol that brother who risked his own life to save yours? Who is going to get the glory?

Well, if you have believed the gospel and rested in the work of Christ according to the will and plan of God our Father, you have been delivered through no strength or worthiness or contribution of your own. Who is going to get the glory?

And if you have not believed the gospel, your situation is so like that of the little girl. The present evil age is on fire. You will burn up with it if you do not entrust yourself to the work of Jesus Christ whose arms are lifted out to receive you and take you to safety. Won't you entrust yourself to him right now?

The old hymn gives the gospel call:

Come every soul by sin oppressed; there's mercy with the Lord, and he will truly give you rest by trusting in his word. Only trust him; only trust him; only trust him now. He will save you. He will save you. He will save you now!