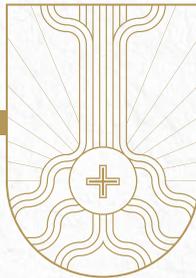


(((PREACHING *the* WORD)))

GALATIANS

GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING



TODD WILSON

R. Kent Hughes

Series Editor

“Todd Wilson’s exposition of Galatians admirably meets the goals of the Preaching the Word series. Wilson knows all the issues in this letter and treats them with remarkable fairness, always making clear just what the text is communicating to God’s people today.”

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Jim Samra, Senior Pastor, Calvary Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan; author,
The Gift of Church and God Told Me

“*Galatians: Gospel-Rooted Living* is a powerful reminder of how important it is for Christians to cling to the most fundamental aspect of the Christian endeavor: the relationship with our Lord and Savior that can only come by grace, through faith. This book is a scholarly work written in a conversational style that makes it easy for readers to identify with and to value the book of Galatians.”

Gene Getz, President, Center for Church Renewal

“Galatians lives! Reading this commentary seems like sharing in deep conversation with Todd Wilson. His acute questions and insights give many ‘aha’ moments. Wearing scholarship lightly, yet always intensely informed, he opens up this essential epistle to make a vital impact on us today.”

Michael Quicke, CW Koller Professor of Preaching, Northern Seminary,
Lombard, Illinois

Galatians

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Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations of Journals and Book Series</i>	11
<i>A Word to Those Who Preach the Word</i>	13
<i>Preface</i>	15
1 Go Back to Grace (1:1–5)	19
2 Apostolic Astonishment! (1:6–9)	27
3 People-Pleaser or Servant of Christ? (1:10)	35
4 You Are Your Best Argument (1:11–24)	43
5 Seeing Grace (2:1–10)	51
6 Remember the Poor (2:10)	59
7 Staying in Step with the Truth of the Gospel (2:11–14)	67
8 The Truth of the Gospel (2:15, 16)	75
9 Cruciformity: The Shape of Gospel-Rooted Living (2:17–21)	83
10 There’s Only One Way to Finish (3:1–5)	91
11 Abraham’s Blessing (3:6–9)	99
12 Clearing the Way for God’s Blessing (3:10–14)	107
13 Why Then the Law? (3:15–22)	115
14 Heirs According to Promise (3:23–29)	125
15 Adoption as Sons (4:1–7)	133
16 Turning Back Isn’t the Way Forward (4:8–11)	141
17 Imitation Is the Solution, Part 1 (4:12)	149
18 Imitation Is the Solution, Part 2 (4:12–20)	157
19 Children of the Free Woman (4:21–31)	163
20 What Ultimately Counts? (5:1–6)	171
21 Free to Run (5:7–12)	179
22 Through Love Serve One Another (5:13–15)	187
23 The Sufficiency of the Spirit (5:16–26)	197
24 Burden Bearing, Part 1: Spiritual Restoration (6:1–5)	205

25	Burden Bearing, Part 2: Pay Your Pastor (6:6–10)	215
26	Boast Only in the Cross (6:11–18)	223
	<i>Notes</i>	229
	<i>Scripture Index</i>	259
	<i>General Index</i>	265
	<i>Index of Sermon Illustrations</i>	271

A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our

ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes

Preface

I've spent a number of years studying Paul's letter to the Galatians, and have created a modest paper trail reporting what I've learned.¹ As a student and scholar, I've always been intrigued by the argument of this fiery epistle. But as a pastor and preacher, I've come to appreciate more fully the stunning realities to which this letter points—the promise of costly grace and the power of gospel-rooted living.

Galatians exists for grace. We find grace at the beginning (1:3) and end (6:18) and in the middle (2:21). But the grace in Galatians is not cheap grace—it's *costly*. “It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace because it justifies the sinner.”²

Sadly, the Christian Church, going back at least to Marcion (d. c. 160), has had constantly to fight the temptation to turn this *Magna Carta* of Christian liberty into a charter for cheap grace. As pastor-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously asserted in the face of a spiritually insipid Protestantism dithering in a sea of cheap grace: “Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.”³

Today, some seventy-five years later, our situation is still the same. Much of the church in North America is awash with cheap grace—and not to good effect.⁴ Ours, then, is the same struggle: the fight for costly grace, for gospel-rooted living. And Galatians, I trust you the reader will agree, is perhaps our choicest weapon!

Many have had a hand in helping this project come to fruition, and to them I owe a debt of gratitude. First, I'd like to thank Kent Hughes, who kindly invited me to contribute this volume to the Preaching the Word series. Special thanks also go to Lane Dennis, Al Fisher, Ted Griffin, and the entire Crossway team for their leadership in publishing and support of this project in particular.

The elders, staff, and congregation of Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois, where I'm the pastor, have, with their encouragement and prayers, shaped and sustained my preaching. To them I'm profoundly grateful.

My wife Katie is vital to everything I do. She deserves my warmest thanks in this—as in much else. And to our happy brood of five (with two more on the

way!)—thank you for providing me more delightful diversions than I deserve and the necessary grounding I so need.

I dedicate this book to my two pastors, Kent Hughes and John Piper. Kent was my esteemed pastor and mentor in college and graduate school. I then served as his associate at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois for several years prior to his retirement. His life of grace and discipline continues to inspire. For a two-year stint after college, I had the joy of serving on staff with and studying under Pastor John at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Those were formative days, and John’s influence continues to shape my life and ministry in countless ways. I thank God for them both.

Soli Deo gloria!

Todd Wilson

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: 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.

1:1-5

1

Go Back to Grace

GALATIANS 1:1–5



I WOULD LIKE TO TELL you a story. It's about a young man who ruined his life. He left home, traveled abroad, and wasted his fortune on shallow pursuits and empty pleasures. Eventually he came to the end of his rope: he was out of money, out of food, out of help, and out of hope. This profligate is better known as the prodigal son in Jesus' famous parable.

There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:11–16)

What do we do when we've made a mess of things? Where do we go when we've blown it badly? To what do we turn when we've embittered our child with harsh words, when we've betrayed our spouse with sheer stupidity, when we've alienated a colleague or a classmate with a series of me-first choices, when we've driven a wedge between friends or sown discord among congregants? Where do we go when we've been insensitive, thoughtless, or downright obnoxious? How do we respond when we've drifted away from the faith, compromised the gospel, or turned our back on God?

Grace to You in Galatia

Typically when we sin we like to hide—either our sin or ourselves or both. This is a natural response, hardwired into our genes. We get this instinct from our first parents, the progenitors of the human race, Adam and Eve. When they sinned, they hid (cf. Genesis 3:8–10). And humanity’s been hiding ever since.¹

When Paul’s young converts in Galatia first heard his letter of rebuke read aloud, they too, no doubt, wanted to run and hide.² As far as Paul was concerned, they’d gone prodigal! They’d turned their faith inside out and upside down; that’s what happens when we turn our back on grace and seek to be justified by the Law!

The Apostle Paul is flabbergasted by this dramatic turn of events, though he’s not quite speechless. “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” (1:6). “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1). “I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain” (4:11). “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (5:4).

The Galatians find themselves in a serious situation; in fact, it couldn’t be more serious. Paul knows it, and they now know it. Yet notice where this big-hearted apostle leads these wayward young converts. He doesn’t take them out behind the shed for a good whipping or banish them to the doghouse for their retribution. Nor does he vent his frustration with them on Facebook or tweet their crime in one hundred and forty characters or less.

Instead the apostle who gave them birth takes them back to where it all began: *grace*. He takes them back to grace. In the middle of the letter’s opening paragraph Paul says these easily glided-over but vitally precious words: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1:3). Paul’s saying, “You’ve made a mess of things, but all’s not lost! Go back to where you began; go back to grace. And there you’ll find just what you need—everything you need, the only thing you need. There you’ll find grace.”

Yet Paul knows the Galatians will have a tough time going back to grace because they’ve lost confidence in the gospel he preached.

Here’s what happened. After Paul left Galatia,³ his converts came under the influence of certain individuals who discredited his apostleship, called into question the validity of his gospel, and insisted his converts were only half-baked and needed to go all the way and get circumcised, if they were going to shore up their status of children of God.

These “Judaizers,” as they’re commonly called,⁴ were apparently quite effective in persuading the Galatians of the necessity of circumcision, if not

the need to embrace the Jewish law as a whole.⁵ Of course, they “could have drawn on a powerful battery of arguments to commend the law to the Galatian Christians.”⁶ In addition, they could have pointed to a number of advantages to circumcision in particular: sharing in the blessing of Abraham (3:6–18), securing their identity as the “sons of God” (3:23–4:7), even finding assistance in the battle against “the desires of the flesh” (5:16).⁷

As a result, Paul’s once enthusiastic converts were now ambivalent at best. They’d developed misgivings about whether Paul had told them the whole story and whether his gospel could get them to where they needed to go spiritually. Thus they were suffering from a bad case of buyer’s remorse (cf. 4:15, 16), the upshot of which was to turn away from the one who called them in the grace of Christ and turn to a different gospel, the one the Judaizers preached (1:6, 7). So serious, in fact, was their crisis of faith, they were ready to submit to the knife and get circumcised, no small step for them to take given the widespread antipathy toward circumcision among pagans and the inherent undesirability and risks of the procedure for adult males living in the ancient Mediterranean world.⁸

Paul’s Message Is Legitimate

Some of us find ourselves in a similar situation to the Galatians. We embraced the gospel with great enthusiasm at first, but we’ve found that living the Christian life isn’t what we expected. As a result, we too wrestle with a bit of buyer’s remorse, wondering whether something more is needed to get us to where we want to go in life.

This is just where the Galatians were, which is why Paul’s very first word to them is to insist that the message of grace still stands. But, notice, he speaks not about the message but the messenger: “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (v. 1).

Does he say this because he’s insecure about his own credentials? No, but in order to reassert the legitimacy of his gospel! For if Paul himself isn’t legitimate, that is, if he’s not truly an apostle sent from God, then his gospel isn’t legitimate either. It’s that simple. This is why Paul insists on his God-given commission here, something he’ll go on to do at greater length in this and the next chapter (cf. 1:11—2:10).

This is also why he appeals to the fact that he stands together with a band of fellow gospel workers as he writes to the Galatians—“and all the brothers who are with me” (v. 2).⁹ Paul is no lone ranger, a renegade working in isolation from the rest of the early church. The gospel he preaches and the gospel

the Galatians first believed is the same gospel preached by Paul's cohorts and many others.

We see, then, Paul insisting that he's a real *agent of grace*. Indeed, this is the point of his apostleship: to extend grace to others on God's behalf! This is also the point of Galatians: *Galatians exists for grace!* That's why Paul writes this letter: he wants to see grace unleashed on a desperate situation.

More importantly, God wants to unleash grace. That's why the church needs not only Galatians but all of Paul's letters, each one of which begins and ends with grace. Indeed, this is why we have the Scriptures as a whole, both Old and New Testaments, because God desires to unleash his grace in our lives through his inspired Word, the Bible!

From Genesis to Revelation the Word of God is a treasure trove of grace. Golden coins of comfort, costly pearls of assurance, precious jewels of promise are all found in the pages of Scripture. In fact, everything that was written in the Bible was written for us, that "through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Therefore, every time we make a mess of things, we must go back to grace by going back to the Word of God. When we blow it, we must not neglect Scripture. Instead of closing our Bible let's open it, read it, look to it, dwell in it! Again, when we sin our tendency is to neglect or even hide, because the Word of God is indeed "living and active . . . discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). But nowhere else will we find the very thing we need when we make a mess of things. There alone, in God's Word, will we find a message of grace—the gospel. Part of what it means to go back to grace, then, is to go back to the Bible, where the message of grace can be found.

Jesus' Sacrifice Is Sufficient

For Paul it's not enough to reestablish the legitimacy of his gospel. Sure, it may be true, but is it adequate? He therefore needs to demonstrate the sufficiency of the gospel as well. Paul knows he must convince the Galatians that the grace of God, turned loose on the world through the death of Christ, is more than able to meet their spiritual needs.

After Paul left Galatia, the Galatians came under the influence of certain teachers who were promoting the Jewish law as an effective way to advance spiritually (cf. 3:3). In addition, we can assume the Galatians themselves had probably found the Jewish law appealing because of the promise it held out for spiritual help. No doubt they also found themselves frustrated and fatigued with the same thing we often find frustrating and fatiguing: the continuing presence of sin in our lives.

Do we realize we need to be rescued from the dominion of sin? Sin is a lordless power, a godless force. Sin is not merely a one-time thing, an event, an action, something that's over once you've done it. Instead sin has after effects; it lives on! And these aftereffects, in turn, affect us. Is there a way to break free from this sin that so easily entangles?

Paul's answer is a resounding yes! There is. But it's not the path of the Law; it's the cross of Christ. Deliverance from sin and from "the present evil age" comes only one way; indeed, grace itself comes only one way: through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. "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*" (vv. 3, 4).

Thus Paul drives the Galatians back to this fundamental fact: *Christ gave himself for our sins*. For the death of Christ alone explains the presence of grace in our lives; and the death of Christ alone opens the wellspring of salvation: justification, sanctification, glorification.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!

What are these triumphs of his grace?

He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.¹⁰

So, then, when we sin, we don't need to hide from God. When we blow it really badly, we don't have to run away. When we're discouraged with where we are spiritually, we shouldn't flirt with other stuff but instead go back to the cross of Christ, return to the source of grace: the sacrificial self-giving of the Son for our sins.

"Amen" Is All It Takes

But how do we go back to grace? How do we get there? This is a pressing question for some of us because we've blown it big-time. We've all been there. Perhaps we have begun to doubt whether there's any hope for us, any solution. But we've heard that we can go back to grace, and we want to know how.

"Amen" is all it takes!

This is where Paul leads the Galatians: to utter their “Amen” to all that God has done for them in Christ. Notice the truly remarkable way in which he closes this letter’s salutation: “[Jesus] 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” (1:4, 5).

This is not a typical way to address a letter, is it? But with this closure Paul ushers the Galatians into the very atmosphere of worship, and by rehearsing what God has done for them in Christ, he invites them to voice their agreement to this great salvation with the confession, “Amen.”¹¹

You see, the way back to grace couldn’t be simpler: we only have to say, “Amen.” I’m quite tempted to say that it couldn’t be any easier. But I don’t want you to think uttering, “Amen” is easy. Because it’s not!

In fact, saying “Amen” may be the hardest thing we’ve ever done. Saying “Amen” is not something we simply do with our head. “Amen” is not “Yep” or “Sure” or “Got it.” “Amen” is something we say with our heart.

When we say, “Amen,” we’re more than observers; we’ve moved from being spectators to being participants. “Amen” is our way of entering into this divine drama, taking up our part, assuming our role in the story of grace called the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Until we do that, we’re simply sitting in the audience, out of the action, away from the benefits of grace.

“Amen” is, then, the only entry point into the world of grace. There’s no other way in. We can’t find grace in any other way because grace is only given to those who have faith; and the voice of faith is expressed in the word “Amen.”

A Letter for Prodigals

Galatians is often viewed as a letter for legalists, for those who seek to earn God’s favor by their works. And in a sense that is what Galatians is about. But Galatians is also a letter for prodigals—for those who have made a mess of their own lives, who are on the verge of apostasy, almost ready to shipwreck their faith, on the brink of moral or spiritual disaster.

Galatians begins and ends by calling wayward believers back to grace; therefore, it’s perfect for prodigals. Galatians never tires of saying to us: the message of grace still stands; the fountain of grace still flows; the way back to grace couldn’t be easier—all it takes is a heartfelt “Amen,” uttered in response to all that God has done for us in Christ.

This is the good news every prodigal needs to hear! This is the message every profligate son or wayward daughter needs to hear. This is the assurance every drifting church or disillusioned Christian needs to hear. This is the promise every wandering soul in our own prodigal world needs to hear!

But when [the prodigal son] came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:17–24)

Resolved: Go Back to Grace

Understand, then, this all-important first lesson of Galatians, this first principle of gospel-rooted living: *Go back to grace*. As we strive to move forward in the Christian life, we must remember that we need to go back—again and again and again—to grace. We’ll need to go back to grace in order to move forward in life.

I challenge us all to make the following not only a New Year’s resolution but a perpetual resolution that we are determined to keep: Every time I blow it, I’ll go back to grace. I won’t ignore it, play dumb, hide, or try to pass the buck to my spouse or my boss or my mom or my dad or my neighbor or my genes or my personality or my upbringing or my financial situation! Instead I’ll look my misstep in the face and then go back to grace—to the cross, that place where Jesus Christ has already taken the blame and condemnation and guilt upon himself.

There, at the foot of the cross, let us resolve to bow down in humble adoration and worship, ascribing glory and honor and praise to the One who gave himself for us “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” (1:4, 5).

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—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But 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. 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.

1:6-9

2

Apostolic Astonishment!

GALATIANS 1:6–9



IN JUNE 2000 I graduated from The Bethlehem Institute, a pastoral training program of Bethlehem Baptist Church, where John Piper is pastor for preaching and vision. This was the first graduating class. There were only five of us, so our graduation ceremony was held in a cozy restaurant in downtown Minneapolis.

Pastor John, as we affectionately called him, gave the graduation talk. And I'll never forget what he said. We were a small band of aspiring pastors in our early twenties, so he wisely took us to the story of King Solomon.

If you recall Solomon's story from 1 Kings, you know how impressive it is. Solomon is anointed king, is blessed by his father David, establishes his reign, receives an abundance of both wisdom and wealth, builds the temple and a palace, oversees the ark's return to Jerusalem, and establishes the nation of Israel as a major player in the region. All this takes place in the first ten chapters of 1 Kings.

But then you come to 1 Kings 11, which is where Pastor John took us, each with bated breath, anticipating the punch line to the story. Slowly and deliberately, he then read to us how Solomon's story ends.

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women. . . . And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. (1 Kings 11:1–4)

Closing his Bible, Pastor John cast his fatherly gaze on each of us and said, "Brothers, finish well! Finish well! O stay the course, and finish well!"

And from there he went on to admonish us to guard our hearts and stay true to our God, the one who'd called us in the grace of our Lord Christ Jesus.

Disbelief over Unbelief

No doubt Paul admonished his young converts in Galatia similarly. He knew eventually he'd have to say good-bye; therefore he made it a point to warn them not to forsake their first love or flirt with any other "gospel" (cf. vv. 6, 7, 8, 9). Surely his plea to these babes in Christ was: Finish well!

Imagine, then, Paul's shock when he learns that the Galatians are turning away from the One who had called them by his grace (1:6). Paul was, of course, no neophyte in ministry; he'd seen it all. Yet what could have prepared him for this heartbreak? With his own blood, sweat, and tears, Paul had established these precious churches (cf. Acts 13:13—14:23), only now to see them abandon the gospel and thus shipwreck their faith!

Unlike Solomon, however, the Galatians aren't being led astray by foreign wives but by *false teachers*. The outcome, however, is the same. Hearts aren't wholly true to the Lord, and affections wander toward other gods and other gospels.

With tears in his eyes, then, Paul composes this letter and sends it post-haste to Galatia. He's compelled to confront his wayward converts with what can only be called *apostolic astonishment*: "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" (1:6). He's incredulous; he can hardly believe their unbelief.

I suspect most of us know someone on the verge of apostasy. Or you yourself may be there. Apostasy can overtake any of us. It's hubris to think it can't happen to us. To the overly confident in Corinth, Paul says, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Apostasy is a possibility for us all.

Apostasy Is a Tragedy

But what is apostasy? It's *desertion*. When you desert what you once held dear or turn away from what you once treasured, you commit apostasy. To apostatize is to embrace the Christian faith, then reject it later on.

In the USA apostasy happens every day. In fact, studies show that an alarming number of young adults leave the faith during their time in college. Despite being reared in Christian homes, involved at church, even baptized as teens, when these young adults head off to university, they desert the faith in droves. And statistically speaking high percentages never return.

How do we respond to news of someone forsaking the faith? Does it tear us up inside? Are we overtaken, like Paul, with heartache and astonishment?

Apostasy ought to grieve us deeply. For what could be sadder than for someone to turn his own life-story from gospel triumph to heart-rending tragedy!

Paul is astonished because he knows apostasy is such a tragedy.

Apostasy is tragic because it means that individuals *desert the gospel*. Those who apostatize typically don't see it that way; they often think they're enhancing, rather than abandoning, the gospel. Surely the Galatians didn't think they were abandoning the gospel. But this, Paul says, is precisely what happens when you *add anything to the gospel*. The gospel equation is this: Jesus + Anything Else = Nothing!¹ Which is why Paul accuses the Galatians not of adding to the gospel but of turning to "a different gospel" altogether (1:6).

When we apostatize, we also *desert grace*. This is what makes the Galatians' situation so sad: they'd been called "in the grace of Christ" (1:6). But now they're abandoning this place of grace in order to return to a place called bondage (cf. 4:9; 5:1).

But the real tragedy of apostasy is this: we *desert God*. To apostatize is to forsake the living God for a dead idol, a golden calf of our own making. This is what the Israelites did at the base of Mount Sinai; this is what Paul sees the Galatians doing after his departure. Like Israel of old, his converts are "so quickly" (1:6) turning from him who called them.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" . . . And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Exodus 32:1-4, 7, 8)

The Apostle Paul, then, like Moses, confronts wilderness apostasy.² The Galatians, like the Israelites, are forsaking the God who called them out of Egyptian-like bondage to sin and are turning to a different gospel—a lifeless

idol that can neither speak nor save. They think they're improving the gospel, but what they're actually doing is forging a golden calf in the furnace of unbelief. This is the real tragedy of apostasy: we try to improve the gospel, only in the end to find we've abandoned it for an idol made by human hands.

Soul-Trouble and Twisted Truth

Why, then, we may wonder, does anyone commit apostasy? Why do people forsake the Christian faith? Why would anyone in their right mind turn from grace to no grace or from the gospel to that which isn't a gospel at all?

From what we know of the Galatians' own experience, apostasy comes over us when two things happen to us. First, we experience *soul-trouble*—a personal crisis, hardship, tragedy, or loss. And, secondly, we encounter *twisted truth*—some subtle perversion of the truth of Scripture, a slight distortion of the grace of God in the gospel.

Notice what Paul says about the Galatians: they're turning to "a different gospel" (1:6)—"not that there is another one, but there are some who *trouble you and want to distort* the gospel of Christ" (1:7). The Galatians were troubled, threatened, scared by these false teachers; they were also being taught a bogus gospel, a distortion of the real one.

This is the twin source of apostasy in every professing Christian's life: soul-trouble and twisted truth. Soul-trouble makes us vulnerable to twisted truth. When we're scared or hurting, discouraged or disillusioned, we're often more open to considering something in addition to the gospel that we first received. We may have found Jesus sufficient up to this point. But given the way things are now, we wonder if it's time to look elsewhere.

Consider Stephen, a freshman at one of the Big Ten schools. After an intense first semester in college, he's glad to be home for Christmas break and enjoy home-cooked meals, time with family and friends, and a respite from his studies. Yet while he's home Stephen's father breaks the news that he and Stephen's mother are getting a divorce.

Stephen's father says "irreconcilable differences" make continuing in marriage an impossibility. Stephen is crushed. But he is also disillusioned: yes, with his parents, but also with everything about his parents and what they've stood for over the years—including their Christian faith, which he came to call his own early in high school.

Stephen returns to college in the throes of deep sadness and anger; he's experiencing soul-trouble, the likes of which he's never tasted. But what he doesn't realize at the time is that his soul-trouble is going to alter his spring semester in a profound way. In fact, his World Religions class—which under

other circumstances would have been a useful intellectual exercise—is set to deliver a body-blow to his Christian faith. Now the grace-filled teachings of Buddhism strike Stephen as superior to the hypocritical Christianity he picked up back home and in Sunday school. By the end of the spring semester he no longer attends church; instead he is attending yoga classes with his girlfriend, practicing Transcendental Meditation with his roommate, and reading the writings of the Dalai Lama. And by the time Stephen returns home at the end of the school year, he’s resigned himself to the fact that he no longer believes in Jesus or calls himself a Christian.³

The reality is that one doesn’t wake up one morning and decide to forsake the Christian faith. Instead apostasy happens more subtly and slowly. As John Calvin says, “The devil sometimes uses apparently small, subtle issues to distance us from the gospel, without our even perceiving it.”⁴ This is why forsaking Christ can feel like something that happens to you as much as something you choose to do. Apostasy, in other words, means slowly drifting from the seashore of faith on a raft of doubt, driven by the winds of disappointment and carried by the currents of false teaching.

How to Avoid Apostasy

But how can we avoid drifting? *First, we must hold tenaciously to what we were taught.* Tenacity is what Paul calls for here: “But 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” (1:8). When the Apostle Paul tells you to not listen to him and even to ignore an angel, you know he’s calling for tenacity.⁵ Charles Spurgeon had the right advice: “Cling tightly with both your hands; when they fail, catch hold with your teeth; and if they give way, hang on by your eyelashes!”⁶ Don’t let go of the gospel! That’s the kind of tenacity we all need if we’re going to stay the course and finish the race.

Second, we must let Scripture be our final authority in matters of faith. We must let the Bible rule in our life. Listen to Martin Luther:

This queen [the Bible] must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to, her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should any doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God. Otherwise, let the teachers and the hearers be accursed along with their doctrine.⁷

We avoid apostasy, thirdly, by heeding Biblical warnings. The Galatians should have done this but obviously failed to do so. Notice, Paul reminds them

of what they've already heard: "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" (1:9).⁸

No one likes to be warned. We often feel like we're being talked down to. Thus our own pride and sense of self-sufficiency strongly resists warnings, even when the warning is the best thing for us. Human beings don't like warnings, whether it's a warning from our parents or a warning in the Bible.

But the reality is this: *warnings save lives*. None of my kids have ever thanked me for hollering, "Get out of the street!" But none of them have been hit by a car either. Warnings work. But they only work when they're heeded. As Christians we must heed the warnings of Scripture in order to stay, as Jesus says, on the hard and narrow way that leads to life (Matthew 7:14).⁹

Respond with Astonishment Ourselves

How do we feel when we learn that someone has abandoned the Christian faith? Does it grieve us little more than would the news that our favorite NFL player has just signed with another team? Does it fill us with no more disappointment than when we learn our favorite restaurant has gone out of business?

When someone abandons the faith, it should strike us with as much astonishment as would our best friend leaving his spouse. In fact, we should respond with *godly jealousy*, the kind Paul has for the Corinthians: "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2).

We must remember, however, that it's not the responsibility of *individual* Christians to call down anathemas on anyone's head. It certainly is the responsibility of all Christians to be Biblically well versed, so they can spot false teaching and encourage others to stay true to the gospel. But pronouncing people apostate isn't our responsibility. It's too sobering a task for any one person; instead it's the responsibility of *the church*, which is to say, it's the responsibility of duly appointed elders, who are entrusted with the task of guarding the moral and theological fidelity of the church (cf. Titus 1:9).

What is, then, our responsibility toward those who are in the process of leaving or who have already left the faith? In Galatians 6 Paul urges the Galatians, or at least some of them, to do for others the very thing Paul is doing for them. Having just explained to them the powerful working of the Holy Spirit within the life of the believer and the believing community, Paul then applies that to them specifically with these words: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (6:1). This is a call to pursue people: to restore anyone who has

been overtaken in any sin, whether it's the sin of lying or the sin of apostasy itself; to plead, to warn, to point that person back to Christ and back to grace.

Apostasy and the Faithfulness of God

Apostasy is a real possibility for each and every one of us. It is a threat to gospel-rooted living because it uproots us from the gospel itself. But let me hasten to add that what is even more real than apostasy is the faithfulness of God.

From what we see in the New Testament, the Apostle Peter was never more than a whisker away from apostasy. There was the time when Jesus needed to rebuke Peter for missing the point of his Messianic mission of suffering. There was the time Peter denied Jesus three times. And there was Peter's great act of hypocrisy in Antioch (cf. Galatians 2:11–14).

Yet here's the good news: Jesus Christ kept him! Left to fend for himself, Peter would have been devoured by the roaring lion (cf. 1 Peter 5:8). But he was never left alone. Jesus stood faithfully by his side, defending, protecting, and keeping him. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31, 32).

So, too, God the Father will do for all his children. By his own power God will guard us "through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5). He is more than "able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy" (Jude 24). He who "called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10). He "will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:8). Indeed Paul says, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

So, then, we must hold tenaciously to what we have been taught, heed the warnings of Scripture, and hope confidently in Jesus. For he says of his followers, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:29).

We are secure in the Father's hand!



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