**IN DEFENSE OF THE ONE TRUE GOSPEL – GAL. CHAPTER 1**

The theme of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is FREEDOM. Specifically it talks about our freedom in Christ. Paul reminds those of us who know Jesus Christ personally as our Lord and Savior that we are free because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. We’ve been forgiven, pardoned, and liberated. Galatians 5:1 says “For freedom Christ has set us free…” Jesus told his followers, “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

Christ has set us free -- free from what? For starters we’ve been set free from the power of sin. Paul deals with this in the Book of Romans. Paul says, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (Rom 8:2) We’ve also been freed from the penalty of sin, spiritual death or eternal separation from God. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 6:23) Third, we’ve been set free from the bondage of law, from religious legalism. Paul says, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” (Rom 6:14)

Galatians is a doctrine-filled book. It expounds on our Christian liberty which is the result of God's marvelous grace in our lives. The good news of the Gospel of Christ is that you and I don't earn our salvation. Our freedom comes by grace alone in Christ alone thru faith alone! We’re free!

Paul’s letter to the Galatians was not written to any one particular church, but to several churches in the region of southern Galatia – that’s in present day Turkey. It was a chain letter passed along to churches in cities such as Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. These churches had been founded on Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 13 and 14). He probably wrote this letter from Antioch in Syria, his home base, shortly after returning home. This makes Galatians the first of Paul’s letters. It is also believed to be the first of all the N.T. books written (even before the gospels).

As Paul writes he’s concerned about the influence of false teachers. These were people who had come from Jewish backgrounds and claimed to be Christians. However, they were deceiving many of the new and primarily Gentile converts. They were teaching that in order to be saved a person must, in addition to baptism, be circumcised and comply with all the Jewish rituals, feasts, and food laws. In short, their message was that belief in Jesus is a good start but to be fully acceptable to God you must also keep the Law. So they were teaching a legalistic false doctrine contrary to what Paul had taught. So, Galatians is Paul's response to this false teaching.

In addition to opposing what Paul had taught, the false teachers undermined Paul’s authority. They denied his apostleship. Paul's credibility was being challenged. In Gal Ch 1 Paul feels compelled to defend himself, his apostleship, his God-given authority, and to defend the one true Gospel of Jesus Christ which he had delivered to them. It was all under attack.

READ Galatians 1:1-2

Right off the bat Paul asserts that he IS an apostle. To become an apostle, a person had to have been an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry and have been selected for the office by Jesus Himself. Based on Acts Chapter 9 where Paul, then known as Saul, encountered the resurrected Christ on the Damascus road. However, the false teachers tried to undermine Paul's claim to be an apostle because he had not seen Jesus prior to His resurrection. In v 1 Paul claims that his apostleship came directly from God and not from men.

You will see similar language used by Paul at the beginning of many of his letters -- "Paul, an apostle" or "Paul, called as an apostle." It’s a regular point of emphasis because his apostleship was often questioned since he was not one of the original 12 disciples.

In v 2 Paul identifies to whom his letter is written.

READ Galatians 1:3

Divine grace is the basis of the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our salvation is not earned. It is an act of God’s grace. And the result of our salvation is that we now have peace with God.

READ Galatians 1:4-5

The freedom that we enjoy as Christians did not come without a cost. Freedom isn’t free. The price paid was the very life of Jesus Christ, v 4, “who gave Himself for our sins.” This was all part of God's plan to rescue fallen humanity from the oppression and penalty of sin. Ever since Gen Ch 3 Satan has tried to thwart God's ultimate will for mankind. Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the garden and they sinned. The result was broken fellowship with God, spiritual death and physical death. This is what Paul refers to as "the present evil age." He’s referring to Satan's evil influence in this world. But God put a plan into motion in order to counter this problem. HE came down to earth Himself, God the Son and paid the price. HE carried out His plan of redemption on the cross. Man did nothing. God did it all. He delivered us! Therefore, we can enjoy the benefit of what Jesus did for us. And we give God all the glory, v 5 – “to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

READ Galatians 1:6-7

The Galatian Christians were new converts, baby Christians. So they were not well grounded in their faith. As a result they were vulnerable to false teachings. They may have thought they were accepting a more complete view of God's salvation plan. In reality they had, to use Paul’s words in v 6, “deserted” Christ. They were, in essence, denying the power of Jesus Christ’s redemptive work on their behalf.

The “different gospel,” the one presented by the false teachers, leads only to slavery and death. But the true Gospel, the one Paul brought to them on his first missionary journey, leads to freedom and life.

There is no other way to be saved other than thru faith in Jesus Christ. The Galatian Christians were “troubled” in their souls by the false teachers who were “distorting” the gospel. This caused the Galatian believers to lose their inner peace, a peace that comes only from the assurance of their relationship with God. This “different gospel,” this perverted gospel had replaced their peaceful assurance, that had been founded upon God’s grace, with the bondage of legalism, the works of the Law.

READ Galatians 1:8-9

This is a critically important issue to Paul. In fact it’s so important that he repeats himself for emphasis. He uses very strong language here in these verses to condemn the false teachers. Paul says that false teachers, those who preach a gospel contrary to what he and Barnabas had taught, deserved eternal damnation in Hell. Strong words!

Why is this such a critical issue to Paul? Two reasons: First, these false teachings made what Christ did on the cross meaningless. As Paul will say later on in this letter: “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” (Galatians 2:21) Second, these false teachings lead to the destruction of men's souls. Peter, in 2 Peter 2:21, talks about how “there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” If the teachers will be destroyed then those who follow their false teaching will also be destroyed.

Satan is our enemy. He is a liar and a deceiver. He is a counterfeiter. But he doesn’t work alone. He has lying spirits, demons, fallen angels that work on his behalf. They often work thru human agents, including thru religious people. Satan is very subtle. He disguises himself as an angel of light. False teachers come across as very godly and religious, but all the while they’re sowing seeds of heresy. It is so important that we Christians study the Bible, know God’s word, ask God to speak His truth to us by His Holy Spirit. Otherwise we could very easily be swept away and deceived by any number of cults and false teachings out there.

READ Galatians 1:10

As God's appointed messenger, Paul could care less whether that what he was saying was pleasing or popular. His words were intended to challenge and to convict his listeners. Paul's obligation was to please his Lord, not men.

Paul spends the rest of Chapter 1 and all of Chapter 2 defending his authority. The false teachers claimed that their message superseded whatever Paul had taught. They argued that Paul did not have a right to speak for God. So the question before us is this: why should the Galatian Christians listen to Paul instead of these false teachers? Who should they believe? Who’s right? Paul is about to answer this question.

READ Galatians 1:11-12

So, why should the Galatian Christians – why should we – listen to Paul? Well for starters, because his message came directly from Jesus Christ Himself. No human being made it up nor did Paul receive it thru the traditions of man. Paul is an apostle making known truth of the gospel that was delivered to him. And how was it that Paul came by this truth? After all, he was raised as a Jew following the Law. Paul received the truth of the gospel message that he was preaching directly from Jesus Himself.

READ Galatians 1:13-14

So here is a second reason why the Galatian believers should listen to Paul – he was an exemplary Jew. One could argue that he was THE most religious Jews of his day. He had meticulously kept the Law from his youth, had relentlessly persecuted those whom he saw as the enemies of his faith, namely the Christians. All Paul could see because of his blinded zeal was a group of people with a blasphemous message that he needed to stop.

Paul argued that before his conversion he had been even more zealous for the Law than were any of these false teachers. And his credentials were indeed impressive by man's standards (read Phil 3:4-6). And yet Paul counted all of that as meaningless (Phil 3:7). All that matters is who Paul is now, and that is, an apostle of Jesus Christ, a messenger from God.

Paul's early education is proof that the gospel had not been handed down to him by men. What he had been taught all his life came from the traditions of Jewish rabbis – men such as Gamaliel (Acts 5:24 and 22:3). He was brought up in the ritual school, in the school of legalism. The Gospel message he now preaches is something completely different from all of the legalism of Judaism he had been taught earlier in his life. What he taught now had been revealed to him by God Himself and not by men.

READ Galatians 1:15-16a

Salvation is a sovereign act on the part of God. Paul didn’t just wake up one day and decide to become a Christian. No, God intervened. It was by God's grace that Paul was saved. And it’s by God's grace that you and I were saved. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8) God chose us. He called us. And then we responded to that call by an act of faith.

Luke describes in detail Paul's conversion experience in Acts 9:3-9. Paul's readers were probably well aware of this story. And this brings us to another reason why the Galatian believers should listen to Paul. He had experienced a unique, yes, even a supernatural conversion. Miraculously, by the power of God, no other explanation for it, Paul had been radically changed. He is a completely different person than he was before.

At the height of his antagonism against Christianity, Paul literally met Jesus, who tendered Paul's hardened heart. Jesus was able to break thru and reveal the truth of the Gospel message to Paul… a message of love not hatred; a message of grace not legalism; a message of how God can transform lives. Paul's Damascus road experience was no hallucination. Others that were with him could vouch for the fact that it really happened. It was no accident. Jesus targeted Paul specifically. As Paul says in v 16, God “was pleased to reveal His Son to me.”

Did you know that God is in the life-changing business? The same God who was able to take a fanatic, legalist, persecutor and hater of the church and transform him into the great preacher of the Gospel and writer of half of the N.T., the Apostle Paul – that same God can change your life also!

It was God's grace that saved Paul just as it is God’s grace that saves us. Now, does the sovereignty of God override our free will to make choices? Did it in Paul's case? No. God called Paul and Paul responded in faith. Paul was obedient to God's call. In Acts 26:19 Paul is relating his conversion experience to King Agrippa and tells him, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.” Clearly Paul had a choice whether to obey or disobey God’s revelation of Himself. The grace of the Lord moved upon Paul's heart and he responded obediently to Jesus Christ.

I want you to notice that, when Paul got saved, immediately God called him to service. He didn't just pluck Paul from the flames of hell and sit him up on a shelf like some kind of a trophy. No, God called him for a specific purpose which Paul now declares, v 16, “that I might preach him among the Gentiles…”

This was God's primary purpose for Paul from the beginning. God revealed this to Ananias in Acts 9:15 when He instructed Ananias: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” However, as a baby Christian Paul didn’t realize this – not right away. All Paul knew was that he had to preach Jesus. Acts 9:20 describes Paul in the aftermath of his conversion was proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. So at the beginning Paul preached to the group he was most familiar with, most comfortable with. He went to the Jewish people, his own people whom he had grown up around. It would be some 3 years later in Jerusalem that God would reveal to Paul in a vision that his mission was primarily to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul’s own testimony: “And He said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” (Acts 22:21)

READ Galatians 1:16b-17

When Paul got saved and began to preach Jesus, needless to say, the old Jewish guard was not very happy with their main man, Paul. The Book of Acts does not explicitly tell us that Paul went to Arabia. But Acts 9:23 tells us that Paul returned to Damascus “when many days had passed.” This would fit the timeline of when Paul went to Arabia. When Paul returned back onto the scene the Jews plotted to kill him. Thanks to the Christian believers in Damascus, their evil plans were thwarted and Paul escaped to Jerusalem.

Let me touch briefly on the time Paul spent in Arabia. It was a period of learning and re-training for Paul. There was a need for this because Paul thought, felt and acted like the devout Jew he had been all his life. He was just learning what Christianity was all about. So, who was it that taught Paul while he was away in Arabia? Paul's says, “I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood." This may mean that most of his re-education was not taught by men, but rather by God either thru His angels or by inspiration of the Holy Spirit or, as many Bible scholars believe, by the Lord Jesus Himself. I like to use my sanctified imagination and I picture Jesus sitting down and explaining to Paul in detail how He, Jesus, had fulfilled all of those Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah – just like He did with the 2 guys on the road to Emmaus. Paul was familiar with the O.T. scriptures. He had probably memorized large portions of them. But now he views them in a completely new light!

READ Galatians 1:18-20

The initial visit Paul makes to Jerusalem is discussed in detail in Acts 9:26-31. Paul mentions meeting only two of the apostles there – Peter and James. Please notice that he was only in Jerusalem for 15 days and met with only two of the church leaders. This underscores Paul's claim earlier in v 11-12 that “the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Here’s why he is saying all this: The false teachers had tried to convince the Galatian believers that Paul's message had been influenced by or even given to him by the apostles. Paul refutes this. That’s why he makes the statement in v 20: “Before God I do not lie!”

READ Galatians 1:21-24

The churches that had once suffered under Paul’s harsh persecution are now the same churches that are being strengthened by his ministry. Paul isn’t bragging on himself nor taking credit for what had happened in his life. The result when it’s all said and done is that God gets the glory.

Application:

1. When God touches a life, it brings about a transformation. This changed life becomes our personal testimony. People can argue with your beliefs and they can try and discredit your faith, but they cannot argue with your own personal experience.
2. Even though a person gets saved and experiences a tremendous transformation in their life, it might take many years before they are adequately prepared for the service that God has called them into. Paul was in Arabia for 3 years getting instruction from the Lord. From Acts Chapter 9, when Paul got saved, to Acts Chapter 13, when Paul and Barnabas departed on their first missionary journey, 14 years elapsed.
3. A closed door in one area may lead to an open door in a totally different area. One might assume with human reasoning that Paul was the most likely missionary to the Jews. But that became a closed door because of the strong animosity the Jews held toward him. Instead God called Paul to be the successful and dynamic missionary to the Gentiles, from which many of us by God’s grace have greatly benefited.

Are you ready to sing? How about a great hymn about salvation? One of my favorite hymns – Saved, saved saved!