

Galatians 1:1-5

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[0 : 00] New year, new sermon series, new Bibles. If you're new this morning, you're in the right place.

Starting a sermon series, as Matt mentioned, in the book of Galatians. It's page 972 in the Pew Bible. Look at just the first five verses.

We're going to dive right in. So turn to 972 in the Pew Bible, Galatians chapter 1, verses 1 through 5. As we turn to God's word, let me pray that God will bless our time spent hearing from him.

Let's pray. Father, as we draw near now to listen to your word, God, as we've just sung, we want to worship and bless your holy name.

God, we long for our souls, the very center of who we are, to praise you, to see you, to draw near to you.

[1 : 16] God, we realize that that is only possible if you draw near to us. Lord, we stand in need of your grace. So even now, as we turn to read this passage of scripture, to start this new series, God, we call upon your mercy to draw near by your spirit, living Jesus, to speak to us and to make us new.

God, to make us people who are free. Amen. Galatians chapter 1. 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. Amen. Amen. Well, words sometimes lose their meaning. Don't they? Take the English word goodbye.

We use that word all the time, don't we? How many of us actually use the word goodbye remembering that what we're saying is actually, God be with you? Or how about the standard way of starting letters with the word dear?

[3 : 01] When you think about it, that's a pretty affectionate word, isn't it? Imagine walking up to someone in person and addressing them as dear. Imagine after the service, I'm done with my little lapel mic, so I go back to James and I say, Dear James, thank you for running sound this morning.

It's a little odd. But that's just the way we start our letters, right? The word in the context has kind of lost its meaning. And on the whole, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Not much is lost if goodbye and dear have lost some of their original meaning. But with some words, that's not the case.

With some words, when we lose their meaning, we lose everything. We're starting a new sermon series this morning on the book of Galatians. And here's your spoiler alert.

Here's the main point of the book. Let me try to sum it up for you. There's one and only one gospel. And it's that a person is saved by grace, through faith in Jesus, and not by works of the law.

[4 : 13] Faith, not works. Grace, not performance. Jesus, not self. Of course, as Christians, I bet we'd all agree to that.

If given a quiz, on what basis are you saved, check grace, or check works, we'd all check grace. Easy. Done. Where's my sticker? What time's the potluck?

Why are we doing a whole sermon series on this book? But here's the deal. We don't actually believe it.

These words have lost their meaning. You and I don't fully believe that God accepts us completely because of Jesus, utterly apart from our works.

How do I know that? Because you don't live, and I don't live, all the time as if that's true. At a functional level, there are ways in which all of us are still practical Pharisees, legalists, atheists. [5 : 25] Think about it. When we compare ourselves to others and get proud and congratulate ourselves on how much better we're doing than they are, isn't that a denial?

That we're sinners? Saved by sheer grace? Yes. And then I'm guilty of that. Or when someone criticizes us and we react with bitter defensiveness or, on the other hand, we get totally depressed. Isn't that a denial of God's total acceptance of us in Jesus? Or when we're afraid to share our weaknesses with a fellow brother or sister in Christ, isn't that proof that we're still trying to build a righteousness of our own to stand on?

Friends, it turns out we Christians need the gospel as much as non-Christians. So I think it's something of a comfort that Paul actually wrote this letter, Galatians, not to unbelievers, but to believers.

The Galatians were Christians. Paul himself had started these churches. They had received the gospel. They were running well. But then something goes wrong. Simply put, here's the scenario.

[6 : 45] A band of teachers had shown up after Paul had planted these churches who had said that you have to be circumcised to truly be a part of God's family, to truly be right with God.

Just a little snip. Now on the surface, that sounds a little strange to us, I admit. Circumcision's not exactly a popular thing these days.

But it doesn't sound like something worth fighting over, right? I mean, okay, you have to get circumcised. What's the big deal? It's just a little bit of skin. But the reality is, it's a huge deal.

The gospel is not Jesus plus circumcision. The gospel is not Jesus plus anything. In fact, the gospel is Jesus plus nothing. That's the whole point.

Any ounce of human contribution that you add in order to get an advance on God's favor and you've actually lost the whole thing and thrown yourself back into slavery.

[7 : 50] Does that seem like a bold statement? Then come back week after week as Paul unravels that thesis. And here's the deal.

As we lose our grip on grace, the more we descend into a host of spiritual problems, anxiety, pride, self-love, self-hatred, guilt, fear, and on and on and on.

Why? Because as we lose touch with grace, we try all sorts of things to combat the resulting lack of peace. We lose touch with grace, no peace, and all of a sudden we're hunting for anything else that will do.

Some other kind of righteousness. We'll even try something as seemingly strange as getting circumcised. So we need to be reminded again and again of grace.

Martin Luther is famously quoted as saying, the truth of the gospel, I wish I could say this with a German accent, the truth of the gospel is the principal article of all Christian doctrine. Most necessary it is that we know this doctrine well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.

[9 : 10] Only Martin Luther could say something like that. You see, the default mode of the human heart, of your heart and mine, is performance-based, not grace-based.

It's like a grid that we fall into. We operate on the principle naturally without any encouragement that if I obey, then I'll be accepted. And if that's what we mean by the word religion, following rules in order to get accepted, then we're all helplessly religious.

But that's exactly what Jesus has come to set us free from. And to the extent that we get grace, that is, understand it, appropriate it, rest in it, we'll live peace.

To the extent that we really, deep down, get a taste, an experience, a realization, a grasp of God's grace in Christ, we'll live out of peace.

We'll live out in freedom. Jonathan Edwards, in one of his sermons, made a great comparison between knowing that honey is sweet, but then actually tasting its sweetness.

[10 : 30] The thing is, a lot of us know that honey is sweet, but we haven't tasted the sweetness. Now, the situation is so vital at Galatia, so important, so crucial, that Paul doesn't waste a second to get to his main point in this letter.

The first five verses are kind of like a powder keg that Paul loads his whole message into right in the opening, and then he's going to light it, and then it's going to explode for six chapters. Verses one and two, Paul defends his apostleship.

We're not actually going to look at that this morning because we're going to come back to it in coming weeks. The first two chapters is really Paul defending his apostleship, and we'll find out in the coming weeks why that's important. But the heart of this greeting, actually, is verse three. Grace to you and peace, he says. Now, if you've read any other of Paul's letters, you know that he starts nearly all of them with these very words, grace to you and peace.

But in the book of Galatians, he puts on the brakes right away, and he starts fleshing it out in verses four and five. He's pouring in as much meaning as he can right in the start.

[11 : 40] It's almost as if Paul is saying these words, grace and peace, have become too familiar to you. They've lost their meaning. I can't even say them to you without telling you more about them.

So before I even get to the body of my letter, let me make it real. for you. They've become black and white as it were. But let me add the color once again to grace and peace.

And we see that Paul makes three points then. And each of these points is like a depth charge that Paul sinks down and tries to rock us out of the religious rut that we inevitably fall into.

So here's the principle. Get grace, live peace, three points. How can we get grace? First point.

Jesus gave himself for our sins. In order to get grace, to understand grace, you have to remember how dire our position before God really is.

Paul's talking about the cross in this verse. And implied in what he's saying here is that our sin is so great that it took the very death of God's Son to atone for it.

[12 : 50] Now the problem is for many of us the gospel is the answer to a problem we don't think we have. Our view of God's holiness is so emaciated and our view of our own potential is so high that we don't really feel any need for the gospel.

We might need a teacher to instruct us in the right moral code or to observe the proper religious observances or to get involved in the worthy social causes. Okay, give me a teacher.

And in any other religion that's basically what you'll find more or less. But Christianity says that on our own our condition is utterly helpless.

no amount of teaching will do. It's as if we're drowning and someone throws us a book on how to swim.

It's not going to work. Of course, we'll always want to deny the real depth of our sin. We're very good at this as human beings. But let me warn you how dangerous that denial is.

[14 : 04] Think of it. It's much worse to be overestimated than underestimated, isn't it? Imagine you show up for your first day in med school and they immediately usher you into the operating room with a patient on the table and say, okay, you're on.

You had a pretty good application. We think you can do it. That would be nothing short of disaster. Maybe you've worked in an office where someone has been promoted to the level of their own incompetence.

it's a nightmare professionally. So why would it be any different spiritually? Especially when the stakes are so much higher.

Especially when your very soul is at stake. Why would you want to run the risk of being overestimated? But thankfully, Christianity won't let us make that mistake.

We're sinners who need not just a teacher but a savior. Not just a moral code but the cross. And yet, once we see how dire our position is, it's then that we see how great God's grace is because we do have a savior.

[15 : 22] Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins. Take hold of that and you'll begin to get grace. Look again at what's being said here.

He wasn't forced to give himself. Paul's very clear about that. Jesus Christ did it willingly. He chose to come. The king set aside his regal splendor and chose the cross because he loves his people. Because he loves you. He gave himself for our sins. But there's even more that's being said here if you look closely.

Jesus didn't just give himself on the cross. He did it for our sins. Now the word for in English could give you the impression that Jesus gave himself simply because we're sinners. He gave himself for our sins.

We were sinners. He had to come and die. But in that case there would only be a general kind of connection between his death and our sins. But actually the language is much more potent than that. The word for here means that it was on behalf of something or in the place of something.

[16:23] You see when I sign a form for my wife or for my son I'm doing it legally on their behalf and in their place. Right? In other words I'm signing it so they don't have to.

Similarly Jesus' death was in our place. He stood in my place. He was condemned for my sins. He was my substitute.

In other words he died so I never have to. And that friends is the fountainhead of peace.

And it means that first and foremost the conscience of a Christian need no longer be plagued by guilt. Jesus has done everything that needs to be done in your place.

He paid the penalty for all your sin each and every one. But you don't know what I've done you think. You don't know what I've done this week. What I've done again and again.

[17:27] God will surely hold it against me. But look at the cross friend. Your sin was paid in full there and then. You're forgiven.

You're free. That is the peace that the grace of Jesus holds out to you brothers and sisters. is your heart disturbed even now as the failures of the past week come to your mind?

The boundaries you said you wouldn't cross again. The moment of cowardice that kept you silent when you should have spoken up. The lie you told to save face in front of your friends.

Because of Jesus not a single one of those sins stands before you and God. The devil may whisper in your ear God can't forgive a sinner like you. But you are covered by Christ.

Be at peace. Though you are a sinner you're forgiven. There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Let that truth wash over you.

[18:32] Take hold of it with your heart. Don't let it go. This morning be free. But we can't stop there.

Look again at verse 4. Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age. In order to get grace, in order to understand grace, we have to realize that the cross of Jesus Christ doesn't just forgive our sins, it gives us the power to live holy lives.

It delivers us, it sets us free from what Paul calls the present evil age. Now I imagine for some of us a phrase like the present evil age sounds, let's face it, weird.

Present evil age sounds like Battlestar Galactica or something, I don't know. But again, the Bible doesn't pull any punches.

The Bible is often more realistic than many of us care to be. And I myself am guilty of this. I don't want to face up to the fact that the world is an evil and broken place.

[19:43] I'd rather turn a blind eye to it. But it's hard to get away from it, isn't it? The New York Times ran an article in the Democratic Republic of Congo this week. Here's a quote. Yes, sure they ask for food, but we don't have any.

At night they will be weak. Sure, they complain, but there's nothing we can do. Ghislaine Baerbock, a police officer in the DRC who can afford to feed her children only every other day.

We can pretend like the present age isn't evil. But really, we're only putting our heads in sand. So let me pull out three thoughts from this little phrase that will open up a world of meaning for us.

First, take the word age. The Bible is actually very sophisticated in its diagnosis of the human problem. Long before sociologists started writing about systemic injustice and people started rapping about the man, the Bible already realized that fallen humanity taken corporately is bigger than the sum of its parts.

When it uses language of age, it's capturing that very reality. And that means that the fight you're in is bigger than your own individual life. The sinful habits that you nurse and the secrets that you keep have bigger ramifications than your own individual pleasure or pain.

[21:10] We are part of a system whether we like it or not. Second point. Notice that it's called the present evil age.

Which implies that this age isn't the way things are always going to be. The way the world works now isn't the way God is going to allow the world to work forever.

There's an age to come. Now, some of you may already have a specter of marks whispering in your ear. An age to come?

This is pie in the sky, opiate for the masses, religion. But that's not it at all. You see, marks was actually wrong. If you really believe what the Bible says about the coming age, you won't be complacent in the face of evil.

You'll be courageous. You see, the selfishness and brokenness and evil and injustice of this age will be put to an end and God will finally reign.

[22 : 14] The Hebrew prophets used to say on that day God's glory will cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. No more will the false glory of dictators cover the earth.

Their days are numbered and they're on the losing team. No more will violence cover the earth. No more will poverty cover the earth. No more will heartbreak and depression and loneliness.

But instead, God's glory, the beauty, the majesty, the radiant delight that is the triune God, that will be the order of the day. C.S. Lewis once wrote that joy is the business of heaven.

And in the age to come, heaven will come to earth and the glorious, transforming joy of God will dispense with all that is opposed to him and God will be all in all.

That's point two. The present age will come to an end, giving way to the age to come. Here's the third. Christians have been delivered from the present evil age.

[23 : 27] through Christ's death and resurrection, we live as a people of the new age in the midst of this one. We've been delivered, set free from this one, Paul says.

Not in the sense that we're taken out of the world. We still live very much in the midst of it, but in the sense that it no longer dictates us. We no longer march to the beat of its drum. We no longer share its clouded fears and empty pursuits.

Instead, we live now, here, as citizens of the age to come. We live as an outpost of God's coming reign, a foretaste of what's going to be when God is all in all.

And that raises the million dollar question that will pound like a drumbeat throughout the rest of this book. Christian, why are you living like you belong to the present age when you've been set free to live now as a member of the age to come?

Your sins are forgiven. You're accepted in Christ. You've been given His Spirit to dwell within you through the cross and by His Spirit.

[24 : 51] The power of sin is broken in your life. The war is over. Peace has come. You can start living like God accepts you and is empowering you by His Spirit because He does.

And He is. Do you know what happens after a war is won and there's finally peace? People stop building tanks and bombs and they start building roads.

in schools and museums and they start dreaming about what life can be like now that the new day has come. Brothers and sisters, how much of our time goes into defending ourselves against others as opposed to expending ourselves in love for others?

It doesn't have to be that way. Imagine walking into the cafeteria of middle schoolers, high schoolers. And instead of being overwhelmed by what others are thinking of your clothes or your haircut, and instead of calculating how you can achieve the least possible embarrassment in the next 30 minutes of your life, I was there.

I know what it's like. Imagine that you're convinced that God has accepted you in Jesus Christ and that His Spirit is empowering you in that moment to do something utterly counter-cultural as a demonstration of that coming reign.

[26 : 26] So you're not on the defensive worried about who's judging you. Instead, you're looking for the friend who just flunked their math test and needs someone to tell them that it's going to be all right.

Instead, you're looking for the kid who always sits by himself because no one ever told him that God loves him and wants him to be a part of the family. Instead, you're looking for the girl who sits next to you in history who seemed curious when she found out you were a Christian.

All of a sudden, the cafeteria stops being a war zone with everyone's barrel aimed at the invisible target on your back and suddenly, it's become 30 minutes of high adventure to see how God's going to show up and do something amazing through you for his glory.

In Ephesians, Paul says that as shoes for our feet, we put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. Readiness. When we get grace, the peace we start to live is dynamic.

It's like a pair of shoes for our feet springing us forth into the world with the love of Christ. Where is God's peace propelling you?

[27 : 40] If it's not the cafeteria, is it your workplace? The house on the other side of the street? A country on the other side of the world?

Christ died for our sins to set us free from the present evil age and free for a life marked by the age to come. But surprisingly, verse 4 isn't done yet.

There's yet another reminder of grace. In order to get grace, you have to remember why God did all this in the first place. Paul says, it's all according to the will of our God and Father.

In other words, it is sheerly God's good pleasure that has brought all this about. First, notice the harmony between Father and Son in winning our salvation. At the cross, it's not as if a loving son was somehow coming to rescue us from an angry father.

No! It was the Father's own will that the Son should come and rescue us. And the Son, for His part, willingly gave Himself for the task. Father and Son working together in a covenant made from all eternity to rescue you out of love.

[28 : 49] The origin of this rescue came from deep within the Father's heart. And so there's no motivation or cause prior to God Himself that put our salvation into effect.

We don't put things in motion. Not by our faith. Not by our works. Listen to what Paul says. Christ doesn't ultimately give Himself for us according to our moral performance.

Nor does Christ ultimately give Himself according to our decision of faith. Christ gives Himself for us according to the will of the Father. Everything comes from Him.

And that means we can finally step off the shaky raft of our performance and onto the shore of God's free grace. we can finally stop being blown and tossed and we can finally get our balance and our bearings.

God can finally have His rightful place in our lives as a sovereign God. You see the gospel is not about what we do for God is it? In verses 3 and 4 Paul mentions not a word of what we do.

[30 : 04] It's all about what God has done for us. And that's why in verse 5 Paul ascribes all the glory to God. To whom be the glory forever and ever.

Amen. We aren't the center of the fanfare or the celebration. God is. And that is a wonderfully freeing thing.

It frees us to respond in genuine faith and adoration. It frees us to lift our gaze from ourselves to the one who's infinitely glorious and full of wonder and love and grace and finally to be set free from the tyranny of ourself.

You know the highest form of human delight is to lose yourself in another isn't it? When you taste your favorite dish you aren't thinking about the biology of your taste buds. You're swept up into the dish itself right?

The grace of the gospel the peace that comes as a result ultimately sweeps us up into worship. in delighting in the Lord whose work this is from beginning to end.

[31 : 17] Bless the Lord oh my soul the psalmist wrote all that is in with me bless his holy name. As we enlarge our grasp of the sheer unmerited grace of God towards us in Jesus our capacity for worship is enlarged.

which is to say that we become more and more alive. All that is within me says the psalmist there's not a part of his being that he wants to exclude from the worship of God.

After all that is what we were created for. To worship him to delight in him to glorify him in all we do. And it's the grace of the self-giving of the son of God to deliver us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and father that will continually unlock the door of worship in our hearts.

If we get grace we'll become a place with the genuine worship of God. So Paul has released his depth charges.

He's made his initial move to rock us out of the rut of our implicit legalism of our religious grid of our self-salvation habits. He started to put color back in grace and peace.

[32 : 49] But he's just started. The rest of the book is going to make it crystal clear that grace and peace are through Jesus and Jesus alone. So we're going to keep working it into our hearts and running it through our heads and applying it to our lives week after week after week.

And you know what's going to happen when we do? We're going to start living like it's true again. We're going to be a church that doesn't just say grace and peace but means it and lives it.

We're going to start living like we've actually been set free because we have. And perhaps even this morning for you the colors have started to shine again not because of my words but because Christ has been beckoning you to take hold of his grace and live in his peace once more so don't delay friends come to him again even now in the rest of our service confess your heart to him in prayer lay hold of his grace and be free let's pray Lord Jesus thank you that you would give yourself for our sins

Lord when we were lost and sinking deep in our own selfishness deep deep in our own worry and despair Lord you came and you rescued us you delivered us you set us free God I pray for my

brothers and sisters right now I pray for myself God that we would live in the glorious freedom that you've won for us Amen Amen Amen Amen