

Gospel Greetings

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Date: 04 January 2026

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- [0 : 00] Well, Happy New Year. It's good to see you all here. Glad that you have joined us this morning for worship.! It's good to gather together in God's house.
- You know, I've been reflecting as we move to the new year on the fact that it's now been 23 years that I've been able to be a part of Trinity as a church.
- And it's been pretty amazing to see what God has done in the last 20 years as we've seen God renew and revitalize this new season that's been going on in this last year.
- If you don't know, Trinity started in 1973, but there was a turning point after a decline in the 90s and in the last 20 years. It's been a beautiful thing to see what God has done in our church.
- And I've been blessed to be part of the leadership, the servant leadership for that church for most of it. And we have, as the leaders, wrestled. Because young churches have lots of things to think about.
- [1 : 16] We think about leadership structure. We think about programming decisions. We think about caring for children and families and seniors. Service planning, ministry priorities, building and physical plant, and so on and so forth.
- And it's been a blessing to see how God has worked in the midst of all those things. And my prayer is that God would continue to do this in our church.
- But, you know, as you wrestled through, as you think through that list, as we have wrestled through, there's always been a danger. That the pressures and the urgency and the challenges of those decisions could cause us to lose sight of what is central to the church.
- What is central to what God has called us to, and to allow these other things to become, in fact, our practical center. We make these decisions under the aegis of what our church needs.
- We wrestle and even fight over what we need to do. We fall into the trap of thinking, if only we had X program or XY personnel or Z priority, then we would finally be the church that we think we should be.
- [2 : 37] I don't know about you, but this isn't a problem only in our church, isn't it? It also can be a problem in our own spiritual lives, isn't it?
- It's a new year. It's a great time to review and think, how do I want to grow this year? Maybe you're a spiritual seeker and you're thinking, I don't know whether God exists.
- What do I want to do to pursue that this year? Maybe you've been a Christian for a while and you're thinking, what am I going to do this year? New devotional practices or spiritual disciplines that are going to get me to the next step or the next level.
- Maybe there are new patterns of obedience that I need to lean into in tithing or fasting or giving or evangelism or serving the poor or whatever it is. Maybe you have new reading lists and strategies of growing in theology and biblical knowledge.
- New curricula are things to do. Now look, just like with the church, in our own personal lives, these are good things for us to think about.

- [3 : 38] These are not unimportant things. These are not meaningless things. They are good for us to think about, both our personal lives and in our church.
- But they are not the center. And this brings us to our passage this morning. We are going to begin a series in the book of Galatians.
- And we're going to start today in Galatians and do it through most of the spring. And we're going to be introducing the book over the next couple of weeks.
- Because if you read ahead, you will see that the context and the reality of what's going on in the church of Galatia is the content of the first two chapters of the book in many ways.
- So I'm not going to spend a lot of time on the background today. I will simply say this, the Galatians was probably one of the first letters that Paul wrote. And he was writing to a church that he had planted, that he was involved in starting as he preached the gospel in the region of Galatia in what is now modern Turkey.
- [4 : 48] And this early church had been navigating questions. What do we believe and how do we practice it and how do we live it out? And it seems that in the midst of it, they had lost their center.
- And so Paul reminds them. He writes to remind them and to teach them what the center must be. So this morning, we're just going to look at the greeting.
- Verses 1 through 5 of chapter 1 in Galatians 1. In many ways, it's a normal greeting that could be summarized. Paul and the brothers with him to the church in Galatia, grace and peace to you.
- But you'll see as we read it that he fills that out with a few other comments along the way. And in fact, in those comments, we will see his opening salvo of teaching about what is meant to be at the center of the church.
- So, page 913, if you're looking at it in a few Bibles, we're going to read Galatians chapter 1, verses 1 through 5.
- [5 : 56] Let's read along together. 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 glory forever and ever.
- Amen. Please pray with me as we look at God's Word. Lord, we thank you for this new year. We thank you for this new series.
- Lord, we thank you for your Word, which is not new at all, but in fact has stood for years and centuries, Lord, as your revelation to us.
- And Lord, I pray for your help this morning. I pray that you would help me to speak clearly your Word. I pray that your Spirit would enable me. Lord, I pray for all of us, that our hearts would be willing to receive your Word.
- [7 : 16] Lord, that our minds would be enabled to understand it. And Lord, that you would move our will, Lord, to respond in obedience. Lord, to love what you love and to do what you have called us to do.
- We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. So friends, this is not rocket science. The center of the church is the gospel of God.
- The gospel originates with God. The gospel centers on God's saving work in Jesus. And the gospel's goal is the glory of God.
- So if you're taking notes, there's your outline. We'll look at the gospel originates with God. The gospel centers on God's saving work in Jesus.

And the gospel goal is God's glory. And the gospel of God, that is, this is the good news that we proclaim. This is the very core. This is what we say we are all about.

[8 : 23] When we say we're about a gospel, it is some kind of good news. But we need to make sure we get that good news properly oriented, right? And as you've seen from this, part of what we will see is that the good news that Paul exhorts us to embrace focuses on God.

So let's look at it through that lens. So first, in chapter, in verses one and two, the gospel originates with God. Paul, in his greeting, calls himself an apostle.

This is common. It's in most of his letters. An apostle at one level simply means someone who is sent. So the Evangelical Dictionary of the New Testament says that an apostle is some authorized as a messenger and representative of the crucified and risen Lord to bring the gospel to the churches.

This is the particular role that Paul had, that the 12 had, the 12 who were the followers of Jesus during his life. They are a unique group in history.

But this is what Paul has. He identifies himself and says, this is who I am, right? Now, we might read today the New Testament and think Paul is an organizational leader.

[9 : 45] He's an innovator. He's a church planter. He's someone who built and shaped the work with strategies and plans. And he did all of those things, true. But for Paul, when he talks about what he did, he said, this is the most important thing I want you to know.

I am not an apostle by my own choice. I'm not an apostle because other people told me that I should be an apostle. I am an apostle because of God, right?

Not from man, not through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father. Paul wants us to know that his ministry is all about God, God's call and God's will who sent him.

It wasn't because Barnabas took him under his wing. It wasn't because James and Peter gave their seal of approval. But it was because God had done it.

Do you remember how Paul describes his experience of God's call on his life? This is from Acts chapter 26, verses 15 through 18, as Paul is explaining where he comes from.

[11 : 03] He says this. He had this encounter with Jesus as he was going to persecute the Christians. And I'm going to shorten the passage and just pick up here.

And he says, and I, that is Paul. And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

See, Paul had this amazing experience. If you don't know the story, Paul was a persecutor of the church and God appeared to him miraculously. Jesus appeared to him and struck him blind.

And there's a whole story, and I couldn't expand the whole thing because we'd be here all day just talking about that part. But God intervened in his life to say, I am calling you in this unique and special role to take the gospel to people who haven't heard it.

And what Paul wants to remind the Galatians and us this morning is that the origin of his gospel was not his best ideas or his plans, but it was God.

[12 : 50] It was God who gave him that message, and it was God who gave him that commission to proclaim it. And it's interesting, too, if you notice at the end of verse 1, that he goes on to say, it's not just any God, but it's a particular God.

It's an amazing God, right? It's a God who raised Jesus from the dead. Right? Why is this important? Because Paul is saying that the message that I'm preaching is about a God who intervened in space-time history.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead actually happened. If there had been movie cameras in that day, or security cameras, or whatever it would have been, they could have actually filmed the resurrection of Jesus Christ because it actually happened.

It's not just an idea. It's not just a metaphor for some hopeful new thing, but it actually physically happened in space-time history.

And Paul says, my ministry of the gospel originated from a God who interceded and acted in real life today. Now, this is important in our culture, is it not?

[14 : 16] We live in a relativistic, pluralistic culture where religion is generally viewed as one truth among many. Religion has been relegated to private and experiential beliefs.

That's good for you. I'm glad you hold... I'm glad you've had that experience. I'm glad you think those things because I'm glad it's helpful for you. And religion has been really brought down to a level of psychological help of some sort, that it's somehow useful for us regardless of whether it's true.

But Paul reminds us, even in this very beginning salvo, that the Bible, the gospel of the Bible challenges that worldview.

It says that this is a historically verifiable God who acted in time-space history, right? That the God of the Bible has revealed Himself in a person who you could touch, who you could talk to if you were alive in the first century, and whom we have a historical account, not merely a mythological tale, to tell about who He is when we talk about Jesus.

And as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, if Christ wasn't raised from the dead, if this is all just a great myth, then we are the most to be pitied because we are fools, because we have staked our hope on something that is not actually true.

[15 : 51] But Paul says, no, it is true. And the gospel that I preach did not come from me or from any other human being. It came from God. But he says more, does he not, as he goes on in verses 3 and 4.

It doesn't only originate with God, but it focuses on God and God's work. The gospel centers on Jesus' saving work. So this is verses 3 and 4, and we see this normal greeting, grace and peace, which would be a common greeting in Greek in that time.

So it doesn't necessarily have great meaning, but Paul fills it with great meaning by expanding on what those terms mean in light of the Christian gospel.

Right? Grace, that is, the true meaning of it is undeserved favor, and peace with God is a result of God's work in Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins and to deliver us from this present evil age.

Do you see how this greeting that could have just been, hey, grace and peace to you, I wish you well, and moving on, he says, no, no, no. Grace and peace to you because God has worked in this world.

[17 : 18] This is the very core of the gospel, that Jesus came to give his life for the sins of human beings, of your sin and my sin.

He came as a substitute to take our place in dying for our sin. He came as a sacrifice, dying to pay the penalty of death, the wages of sin that we deserved.

He bore our sins so that Jesus, or so that God the Father could forgive our sin. This is the great exchange that Jesus gave himself for us.

He gave his righteousness, he gave his life to us and took upon himself our sin, our death, our judgment that we deserve.

And so grace and peace is not just a formality here, but an incredibly rich greeting. God has worked so that you might know the grace of God because of what Jesus did.

[18 : 35] God has worked so that you might have peace with God because the enmity, the broken relationship that you have broken because of your sin, God has dealt with at the cross finally and fully and completely.

He doesn't just do this so that we can be forgiven of our sin and restored to a relationship with God, but also, as it says, to deliver us from this present evil age.

Now again, we could preach a whole sermon on what the New Testament is talking about in terms of the ages, but let me give you a brief summary, right? The Bible and particularly the New Testament talks about the gospel is coming to bring a transfer of ages.

We live now in this present evil age and we all know that we live in it because you open the news every day and we see we live in a terrible age. All sorts of terrible things happen and when we go home, when we go to bed at night and in the stillness of our hearts, we look into our own hearts and we realize this present evil age isn't just out there, but it's in my own heart.

I too am full of all sorts of sin and darkness, of pride and pettiness and anger and frustration and envy. Where sin and death still reign in humanity, this is the present evil age and our hearts are in captivity to these dark powers.

[20 : 03] But Jesus came and died on the cross and rose from the dead to defeat sin and death, to defeat those things so that He might transfer us from the kingdom of this present age to the age of His beloved Son, to the coming age that is the kingdom of God.

Right? And here's the amazing thing about it. When Jesus came into the world, He inaugurated that. Right? He said, the kingdom of God is among you.

And the beginning, the in-breaking of this new age is still happening now through the church, through the preaching of the gospel, as human hearts are transformed by the message of good news that in Jesus we can be forgiven of our sin, that through repentance and faith we can be transformed and begin to live not as slaves to this present evil age anymore, but in a new life that we have with God that will stretch to all eternity.

Right? And we know that we're still waiting for the fullness of this. Right? We know that this deliverance is still a future thing in its fullness, but the core of it and the kernel of it has already happened.

And for those who have placed their faith in Christ, for those who have known the renewing, the spiritual rebirth that comes, we are already a part of this age to come that is no longer dominated by sin and death, but instead by joy and by eternal life with God.

[21 : 53] This is the good news of the gospel. This is what God has done for us. And when Paul says, grace and peace to you, and I want to remind you what that's about.

It's about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Now, it's worth us thinking for a few minutes how easily we might get the gospel wrong.

because we see that as we keep reading Galatians, the Galatians are getting their gospel wrong, right? In that context, right, in the early, in the first century where Christianity was coming out of Judaism in a significant way, there was a huge discussion in the early church about how does the work of Jesus relate to the Old Testament and the Old Testament law.

And there were some who were saying, yeah, Jesus is great, but we still need to keep the law. We still need to be doing this thing. So circumcision, dietary laws, and ritual separation from those who are unclean, we have to keep doing those things in order to be saved, in order to be God's people.

Now, I'm just going to put a pause there because that's what the next two chapters are about in Galatians. So come back next week and you'll hear all the answers to why that's not the gospel. But know that Paul is saying that is not the gospel.

[23 : 18] It's unlikely that many of us here today are thinking, oh, yeah, I need to keep my dietary laws. I don't know if I should have had that lobster last weekend or whatever.

It's unlikely that that would be our version of misunderstanding the gospel. But here are two ways that I think maybe are a lot closer to home that we might misunderstand the gospel.

The first one is that I think in our context many would say that in order to be right with God we just need to be a good person.

If we're good enough God will accept us. If we're generally better than the people around us who are, you know, if we think we're meeting some general standard of goodness isn't that enough?

And even in the church where we acknowledge God we just think God wants me to be a good person and that's what it means to know Him and to follow Him.

[24 : 23] But friends, do you see why this is not the gospel of God? First, because it denies the reality of human sinfulness that our hearts are inescapably wicked and rebellious against God and have broken our relationship with God and are unable to restore it on our own.

We do not have the righteousness in and of ourselves or goodness enough to overcome our sinfulness in order to have fellowship with a holy God.

But secondly, because it places the weight of our salvation on us. I have to be good. I have to be good enough. And the most crushing thing is when you think you're a good person and then you do something bad.

You know those NBA players who get tossed out of a game because they do something terribly egregious? They like haul off and punch someone and then after the game what do they say? I'm really sorry, that wasn't me.

No, it was you. It was you at your worst. And that's true for all of us. We will never buy our good enough.

[25 : 41] Attempts to be good enough people be able to save ourselves from sin. Only in Christ can we do it.

So that's one version that I think is common in our culture broadly is that we think the gospel is if you're a good enough person God will think okay, you're okay. There can be an even more and I'll use this word carefully evangelical.

By that I mean the part of the Protestant church generally that holds to the Bible as authoritative that holds to salvation by grace alone.

Even in churches that would say yes, Jesus died on the cross for my sins. We often can fall into believing that the gospel is that when we believe in Jesus enough that will save us.

Right? If if I wake up one day and I'm like oh my faith is really weak I don't know if I'm really saved. I'm struggling today.

[26 : 49] My devotions were really bad. My belief I don't know. I'm really I'm just feeling weak today. And there's some of us who would who have heard the message saying well you just need to believe more.

You need to really believe. Come on muster up that energy and that faith to have more devotion and more commitment and we might follow this through with a burst of new spiritual disciplines and new obedience and new things.

And again none of those things are bad in and of themselves but if we think that this new fervor is going to say oh now I know that I'm saved we need to be very very careful about this because it is not the strength of our faith that saves us but the object of our faith that saves us.

This is what Paul is reminding us of in this passage. It is about what God has done and Jesus Christ has done everything that is sufficient for our salvation.

Jesus has done everything through his death and resurrection and we merely receive this by faith. And even this friends is a gift.

[28 : 15] Right? Ephesians 2 8 and 9 For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God not a result of works so that no one may boast.

Do you see how God centered Paul's understanding of the gospel is? It's about what God has done in Jesus Christ and even we can only believe it because God is at work in us giving us faith to believe these things.

Paul's focus and ours must be on God in the midst of it. And this leads to the very end of our passage does it not?

Our very last point which is the gospel goal is the glory of God. Paul ends his greetings in verse 5 with to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. Now this is religious speak at the highest level. This is stuff that we can throw around. If you've grown up in church or read scripture you throw this around like it's popcorn.

[29 : 35] It's cheap but for Paul it's unique. This is the only greeting in which he pointed to the glory of God in this way in his very greeting and he wants us as he wanted the Galatian church to turn their hearts and their eyes to put God in the center.

God is the goal of the gospel that his glory would be seen. His glory being the manifold expressions of his beauty and majesty and greatness that these would be displayed and they would be seen by us and responded to by worship by praise by obedience by all the things that we are called to do to live out our lives as God's people but we do this in response to and in order to bring glory to him so that he may be the center of it.

Right? In Paul's mind God is always the lead character in the story God is always the sun around which the planets orbit in their paths God is always the monarch who reigns and who is the center of the kingdom and whose name is praised in his realm God is the one for whom it is worth counting all things as loss for the sake of knowing him and being found in him not having a righteousness of our own but having that which comes through faith in Jesus as Paul says in Philippians 3 and friends we need to be aware of how much our heart resists this the human heart always wants to put us in the center it is the very core of what happened in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were tempted with the thought you could be like

God you could de-center God from the center from the middle of everything and put yourself there instead and they succumbed to it and friends we do this every day I'm sure you've heard this example before but you know those conversations you have in your mind where you are having an argument with someone you always win right you always win you always say the right thing that's our human heart putting ourselves in the center if you've ever had a roommate or a spouse or a child you know that someone else invading your universe challenges your centeredness and so we fight over whatever how the dishwasher is loaded or how late we get to stay up or whatever it is why do we do this because we are so prone to be the center of our worlds

Paul reminds us that we were created in a world where God was the center where God is the center and we were created to find our place as his creation to glorify him to see his beauty and the beauty of his creation and to reflect back to him through praise and worship the glory that he deserves and most of all in the storyline of the Bible through the gospel because this is the place where we see his glory most fully presented not in creation but in redemption where Jesus Christ the son of God took on human form walked on this earth to be our savior who went to the cross to die for us who was then raised from the dead this is where the glory of

[33 : 46] God is most fully seen and it's not about us at all it is for us but it's not about us it's about God and his love and his action in Jesus Christ for us and friends in light of this then a truly gospel centered church is a God centered church that sees everything like John the Baptist we must decrease so that God would increase in our hearts in our relationships in our church life in our witness to the community and to our world oh Trinity may we be such a church that the gospel may be our center and that God would be glorified in us let's pray Lord we are thankful to you this morning that you have not left us that you have not left us in the small and pitiful place of putting ourselves in the center

Lord for it is an unbearable weight but Lord you have called us and Lord you have worked for us and you have revealed yourself so that we might be restored to you oh Lord we pray that we might be truly a gospel centered church that you would be glorified in our midst we pray this in Jesus name amen