

Galatians 1:1-10 Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers^[a] who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

⁶ 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—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians is a letter that shows us:

**How Christ has set us free and
how we are to live in that freedom.**

The need for freedom assumes that we are enslaved to something and the question is from what do we need to be set free. We might imagine that our enslavement is:

- Political – to be free from an oppressive government
- Social – our social circle has a hold over us
- Financial – we need a better paying job that will enable us to improve our standard of living
- Family constraints – we want to move out of the parental home, or more sadly out of the marital home

The problem with that kind of thinking is that we just exchange one kind of slavery for another. The new political leader turns out to be a dictator; the new social circle holds us in an equally firm grip; the better paying job results in longer hours that tie us to our

desk; the new home is soon just as mundane as the previous one. Worse still, in the process of seeking freedom, we have hurt people.

The greater problem is that this kind of thinking fails to recognise the real problem. We all have a much deeper problem that goes to the very heart of who we are, how we think, what we say and how we act.

It is the problem of sin

We are all born with a sinful nature and therefore we sin

The discontent that makes us want to break free from the things that seem to constrain us is primarily a sin issue. We fail

- to acknowledge God and his sovereign right to rule over our lives as he wishes
- to acknowledge God and his sovereign right to be loved, worshipped and obeyed.

When God acts in ways that we do not like, we kick against him. We are slaves to sin, and that brings with it the penalty of God's just and eternal condemnation.

We need to be set free from the power of sin in our lives and from the penalty of sin.

It is Christ who sets us free.

The letter to the Galatians shows us this, but it begins with a warning (v6 above). When Paul writes a letter to a church or a person, he usually begins by commending them in some way and giving thanks to God for them. In this letter, he starts straight in with a rebuke. These believers were turning away from Christ to a different message of salvation.

- That message was a 'Christ plus....' gospel, not the Christ alone gospel that came from God.

They were telling the people that, although Jesus came to save them from their sins, they also needed to be circumcised

and keep the Jewish law. This is so serious that Paul goes straight on the attack against this false gospel, saying that

This behaviour means they are deserting Christ

Although these believers had embraced the true Christian faith, they later rejected it for another message that is not the gospel, and therefore will not set them free from the penalty and power of sin.

To turn away from Christ to another way of seeking to be right with God, or to turn away from the freedom that Christ has purchased for us and back to the bondage of a legal system that has never saved anyone, is apostasy.

To turn away from grace is apostasy

Today, no one is likely to tell us that we need to follow Jewish law, nor will anyone call for the men to be circumcised, but we can still fall into legalism. We may be influenced by those who tell us that we cannot be truly saved or be pleasing God unless we keep their man-made rules for living, such as:

- Avoiding alcohol or not going to the cinema
- Reading the right version of the Bible
- Not listening to certain kinds of music, and dressing in a certain way
- Only singing songs from a certain era or only having one kind of instrument in church

Do not mistake this as licence to ignore the standards God sets for his people. We are not to indulge the flesh, sin against our consciences or ride roughshod over other believers. We are under the law of love, which will show itself in love for God and love for our neighbour. However, when we make our acceptance with God conditional on whether we are keeping the rules, and when we try to live the Christian life in our own strength using human means, then we have fallen from grace into legalism.

**When we turn away from Christ alone for our justification with God
we are falling into apostasy**

This is very serious

How are we to avoid falling into apostasy?

- 1) **We avoid apostasy by knowing the gospel.** We need to be tethered to Christ with a clear understanding of the gospel and how to apply it, otherwise when the winds of false teaching come, we will be pulled away from Christ. In Paul's greeting to the church, he gives a summary of the gospel (**vv3-5**), and then expounds on it throughout the letter.

The person of Jesus Christ is central to the message of the gospel. The gospel is good news that tells us what Christ has done for us so that we can be put right with a holy God and live godly lives that please him.

Christ gave himself for our sins.

He gave himself up to death on a cross, suffering on our behalf the eternal death our sins had incurred. He rose again to deliver us from this present evil age, setting us free from sin not just at some point in the future, but in the present. No one forced him to do it. He gave himself for our sins. Jesus was very clear about this: ¹⁷ **For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.** ¹⁸ **No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. (John 10:17-18).** In the account of those who witnessed his death, we read in confirmation: **Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:46).**

We need to be sure about this to avoid being drawn into a particular heresy that was prevalent some years ago. Some in the evangelical church sought to undermine the truth that we are put right with God through Christ alone, who was punished in our place for our sin. They called this truth 'cosmic child abuse', viewing it as if God was an angry abusive father who was punishing his son for the crimes of others.

When we are tethered to Christ with the gospel, we know that is not true. Jesus willingly laid down his life for us, because he loved his Father and he loved us.

If we are going to avoid apostasy, we need to know the gospel

2) We avoid apostasy by feeling the tragedy. How we feel when someone turns away from Christ to legalism exposes what we believe about the gospel. Paul is astonished that anyone would want to turn away from Christ (v6). It is how we might feel when we hear someone has divorced their spouse. It is a tragedy that baffles us. In turning to circumcision and law-keeping, the Galatian believers are effectively divorcing themselves from Christ.

They are divorcing themselves from the one who is the loveliest of all saviours, and chasing a form of salvation that will leave them cut off from God's grace. It does not make sense.

When we really know the gospel, we will feel the tragedy when we see people turning away from it.

**We will go after them
and plead with them to return to Christ.**

3) We avoid apostasy by calling out the heretics (vv7-9). Paul is calling for anyone, no matter who it is, who preaches a message that is contrary to the gospel to be eternally condemned by God. This sounds shocking, and even unchristian, to us in the 21st century!

- Paul is showing the absolute priority of ensuring that the church is not led astray by those who want to distort the gospel.

Why does it matter so much?

It is of eternal significance because eternal life is at stake

Among the most dangerous false gospels today are:

- the prosperity gospel, which promises health and wealth if you come to Jesus.
- The message that says you are a Christian because you had a religious rite performed on you as a baby

Those who teach these things need to be called out because they are giving a message that keeps their followers from eternal life and brings dishonour to the name of Christ. This is not going to make you popular, but a true servant of Christ (v10) will teach the true gospel because they desire to please God, and want to see people eternally saved. To avoid apostasy, we need to:

Know the gospel

Feel the tragedy

Call out the heretics

The gospel is good news from God, as Paul will show us through the letter. We can have assurance in the gospel, but we also need to apply it.

- a) Gospel assurance:** The Bible constantly affirms that God is faithful to keep his own people. Jesus assures us: **I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.** ²⁹ **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 10:28-29)** God is faithful to keep his people and it seems there is still hope for the people Paul writes to. In his greeting, He offers them God's grace and peace.

- If we are turning away from Christ, and towards legalism, it is possible to repent and turn back to experience God's grace and peace.

If you are questioning whether it is worth it to keep on with Jesus, or you have been thinking that God accepts you because of your righteousness or that he will not accept you because you are not good enough, then you need to know that the Lord offers you grace and peace and calls you to turn to Christ alone for your justification.

b) Gospel application: To avoid apostasy, we need to know the gospel. When we know the gospel, we will feel the tragedy and call out the heretics. However, we need more than just an intellectual knowledge of the gospel. We also need to know how to apply it to our lives.

- We can hold the view that Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin, but then seek to live out our Christian life by adding rules for living and seeking to keep them in our own strength.

We fail to live as Paul lived: **I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20).**

How can we live in a way that celebrates our justification by faith, and does not depend on the flesh?

We do this when we rightly apply the gospel to our lives on a daily basis.

When you are convicted that something is wrong in your life, the following steps will apply the gospel rightly:

- You confess the sin to Christ, trusting that his death alone is sufficient for God to forgive and accept you
- You ask Jesus to show you from his word the promises he gives that will undermine this sin in your life
- You trust the promise. In so doing, you begin to experience the Spirit changing you to become more like Jesus

As an example, perhaps you have a struggle with wanting vengeance. Someone has hurt you in the past, and, despite knowing you are wrong to do so, you think about how you might get even. To deal with this:

- You first confess it as sin

- You take a passage such as Romans 12:19-21: **Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave itⁱⁱ to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”** ²⁰ **To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”** ²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**
- You trust God’s promise to deal justly with whoever has hurt you.
- You begin to act on God’s promise by obeying what the scripture says. You pray for that person, in the knowledge that you have grieved God far more than they have grieved you. You have the assurance that Christ has not rewarded you as your sin deserves, and so neither should you act with vengeance. As you pray, you have the assurance that you can leave it for God to work out his own justice.

Thus, you find your heart being changed and you can begin to show gospel grace to those who have hurt you.

That is how we experience Christ delivering us from sin in this present evil age.

**Rather than turning away from Christ, and towards legalism,
we turn towards him to take hold of the freedom he has bought for us.**