



**GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
APOSTOLIC ASTONISHMENT!**

Galatians 1: 6-9

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⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸But 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. ⁹As 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.

Introduction

In June of 2000, I graduated from a church-based pastoral training program called The Bethlehem Institute. It was, and still is, a ministry of Bethlehem Baptist Church, in Minneapolis, MN, where John Piper is the pastor. This was the first graduating class, and there were only five of us. So we had the graduation at a nice restaurant in downtown Minneapolis, and, as you might have guessed, Pastor John was our graduation speaker.

And I'll never forget what he said to us, this small group of aspiring pastors in our early twenties. He took us to the story of Solomon. Now, if you follow Solomon's story through the opening chapters of 1 Kings, it's truly impressive. Here's what you find: Solomon is anointed king, blessed by his father David, establishes his reign, prays for wisdom and increases in both wisdom and wealth, builds the temple and a palace, oversees the ark's return to the temple, dedicates the temple, offers up many sacrifices, and establishes the nation of Israel as a major power in the region.

But, then, you come to 1 Kings 11. And there Pastor John brought us, each sitting on the edge of our seat, wondering where exactly he was headed. He read to us how the story of Solomon ended.

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 (1Kings 11:1-4).

Pastor John then closed his Bible and gazed fatherly-like at each of us and said: “Brothers, finish well! Finish well! Oh, stay the course, and finish well!” He then went on to admonish and exhort us to not let our hearts be turned away to anything else and thus to remain true to the Lord our God, who had called us in the grace of Christ Jesus.

It’s not hard for me to imagine the Apostle Paul admonishing and exhorting those young converts in Galatia, to whom he’s written this letter, in exactly the same way. When Paul knew he had to leave, he no doubt warned them not to forsake their first love, not to flirt with any other gospel, not to turn away from the one who called them in the grace of Christ Jesus.

I can also easily imagine the sense of shock and heart-break Paul experienced when he learned that his beloved Galatians were on the verge of turning away from God. Paul had seen just about everything. But nothing could have prepared him for this: the news that these precious churches of his—the ones he’d founded with his own blood, sweat and tears, literally (cf. Acts 13:13-14:23; Gal. 4:13-14) —were on the brink of abandoning the gospel.

The Galatians had been led astray not by foreign wives, but by false teachers. Yet the outcome was the same as Solomon’s. Their hearts were being turned away from the Lord their God and to another gospel. So, through a veil of tears, Paul pens the letter you now have before you and sends it to the Galatians. And there he expresses 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” (Gal. 1:6). The Galatians are on the verge of apostasy, and the Apostle Paul can’t believe it. He’s astonished by their imminent apostasy.

Frankly, some of you may know someone who’s on the verge of apostasy. Or you may be on the verge of apostasy yourself. Apostasy is a possibility for each and every one of us. Don’t think you’re somehow immune to the threat of turning away from Jesus. When Paul met Christians who were overly confident to the point of being cocky and self-assured of their ability to stand firm, he said to them: “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Apostasy is a possibility for each and every one of us.

Apostasy Is a Tragedy

What is apostasy? Apostasy is, at root, an act of desertion. It is when you desert him who called you, as Paul accuses the Galatians of doing (1:6). Apostasy is when you forsake what you once held dear or turn away from what you once treasured. Apostasy is when you embrace the Christian faith, then later on reject it.

Apostasy is what an alarming number of young adults are doing these days. Born and reared in Christian homes, involved in Sunday school from their earliest days, perhaps even baptized as teenagers, yet they desert the Christian faith in college or their early twenties. And, statistically speaking, high percentages never return.

When someone apostatizes from the Christian faith, it ought to rip us up inside. We ought to respond with apostolic astonishment and heart-ache ourselves. Why?—because apostasy is such a tragedy. I don’t mean that in a melodramatic sort of way; I mean that in the literal sense of the word: apostasy is the saddest way for your Christian story to end.

Apostasy is such a tragedy because apostasy is, first of all, *deserting the gospel*. People in the process of apostatizing usually don’t see it this way; instead, they think what they’re doing is enhancing the gospel, not abandoning it. The Galatians no doubt didn’t see themselves as

forsaking the gospel. But that's in effect what happens when you add anything to the gospel. *Jesus plus Anything leaves you with Nothing!*—which is why Paul accuses the Galatians, not of adding something to the gospel, but of turning to “a different gospel” altogether (1:6).

Because apostasy is a desertion of the gospel, it is also *a desertion of grace*. This is what is so sad about the Galatians' own situation: they'd been called, as Paul says, “in the grace of Christ” (1:6), but now they were abandoning this place of grace to return to a place where there was no grace, but only bondage (cf. 4:9; 5:1).

Yet, here's the ultimate tragedy of apostasy. Not only is apostasy deserting the gospel and deserting grace, it is also *deserting God and turning to idolatry*. Apostasy is a tragedy because apostasy is forsaking God for an idol, a Golden Calf of your own making. You see, this is what Paul accuses the Galatians of doing, the same thing the Israelites did at the foot of Mount Sinai: turning “so quickly” from the one 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 in Galatia: 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—an idol, a lifeless thing that cannot speak, nor can it save. They think they're improving the gospel; what they are doing is constructing a Golden Calf. This is the tragedy of apostasy; when you try to improve the gospel, you abandon the gospel and turn to idolatry.

Soul-Trouble & Twisted-Truth

Why, then, does anyone commit apostasy? Why do people forsake the Christian faith? Why would anyone, you might wonder, turn from grace to no-grace, and from the gospel to that which really isn't a gospel at all?

From what we learn from the Galatians' own experience, your heart is turned away from the gospel when two things happen in your life. First, you *experience soul-trouble*, some sort of existential crisis, hardship, personal tragedy, fear of the future, or painful loss. And, secondly, you *encounter twisted-truth*, some perversion of the truth of Scripture, a distortion of the gospel of God's grace in Christ.

Notice what Paul says about the Galatians: they're 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" (1:7). The Galatians were being troubled, threatened, scarred by these false teachers; they were also being taught a bogus gospel, a distortion of the real thing.

This is the twin source of apostasy in every professing Christian's life: soul-trouble and twisted-truth. Soul-trouble makes you vulnerable to twisted-truth. When you're scared or hurting or in pain, you're more open to considering something else in addition to the gospel you first received. Jesus may have been good up to a point, but with the way things are in your life right now, it's time to look elsewhere. That's how people commit apostasy.

Consider Stephen, a freshman at one of the Big Ten schools. He's glad to be home for the Holidays, but learns that after twenty-five years of marriage his mom and dad are getting a divorce. Of course, he's heartbroken; crushed, really. But what he doesn't realize, nor does his mom or dad or anyone else, is that this soul-trouble of his is going to profoundly alter his Spring semester at college. Now, his Comparative Religions class, which under different circumstances would have been an interesting stretch to his faith, is going to deliver a major body-blow to his Christian faith. In fact, as he processes the pain of his parents' divorce all semester, he finds himself drawn to the teachings of Buddhism and increasingly put off by the Christianity he learned in Sunday school. By the end of the spring semester, he's stopped attending church and started practicing yoga and meditation with some friends in his dorm. And by the time he returns home for summer break, he's come to terms with the fact that he no longer believes the Christian faith.

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." This is why turning away from Christ can feel like something *that happens to you* as much as it is something you decide to do; it can feel like drifting away from the shore of faith in a raft of unbelief.

How to Avoid Apostasy

How, then, do you avoid drifting? *The first thing you need to do is hold tenaciously to what you 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 ignore an angel, you know he's calling for tenacity. 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!”¹ 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.

This means, secondly, you must also *let Scripture be your final authority in matters of faith*. You must let the Bible rule in your life. Listen to Luther:

This queen [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.²

The third thing you must do to avoid apostasy is *heed the biblical warnings that are intended to help you*. This is what the Galatians should have done, but had obviously failed to do. Notice how 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).

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. Christian, you must heed the warnings of Scripture in order to stay, as Jesus says, on the hard and narrow way that leads to life (Matt. 7:14).

Respond With Astonishment Yourself

Let me ask you candidly: How do you *feel* when you learn that someone is abandoning, or has abandoned, the Christian faith? Does it strike you with as much grief as when you hear that your favorite NFL player has just signed a transfer; or with as much disappointment as when your favorite restaurant has moved to new location?

When someone abandons the faith, it should strike you with as much astonishment as would your best friend is leaving his spouse. In fact, we should respond with godly jealousy, the kind Paul showed to 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 Cor. 11:2-4).

Let me add, however, that you shouldn’t assume it to be your responsibility to call people apostates or call down anathemas on their heads. That’s not the role or responsibility of *individual Christians*. It certainly is your responsibility to be well-versed biblically and theologically so that you yourselves can spot false teaching. But making such weighty pronouncements isn’t your responsibility. Instead, it’s the responsibility of the church. Which is

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Full Harvest*, p. 114.

² Luther, *Galatians 1535*, p. 58.

to say, it is the responsibility of duly called pastors and elders, who are entrusted with the task of guarding the moral and theological purity of the church (cf. Titus 1:9).

What is, then, your responsibility toward those who are in the process of or who have already left the faith? Here, let me take you to Galatians 6, where 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” (Gal. 6:1). This is a call to pursue people: to restore anyone who has been overtaken in any sin, whether that’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

Listen: Apostasy is a real possibility for each and every one of us. It is *the threat* to gospel-rooted living because it, of course, uproots you 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. Gal. 2:11-14).

Yet, friends, 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 Pet. 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 you through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 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 Pet. 5:10). He will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:8). Indeed, 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 (Phil. 1:6). He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (1 Thess. 5:24).

So, then, heed the warnings of Scripture, hold tenaciously to what you have been taught, and hope confidently in the Lord Jesus Christ who 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 10:28-29).

Amen.