



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
GO BACK TO GRACE
Galatians 1:1-5
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Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

¹Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—²and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

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

Introduction

Today, I'd like to begin with a story. It's a story about a young man who blew it—really badly! So badly in fact, he blew through all of his money and wasted his entire fortune. And in the process, he made a royal mess of things. So much so he found himself in the mess—a pigsty, in fact!

There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:11-16)

This young man had blown it! Where would he go? Where do prodigals go when they blow it?

Where do you go when you blow it? Where do you go when you make a mess of things: your life, your family, your marriage, your career? Where do you go when you've been

insensitive, or thoughtless, or uncaring, or just a plain jerk? Where do you go when you've wrecked your faith, run away from God, fallen from grace?

Of course, our instinct is to run and hide. When we blow it, we either hide our sin or ourselves, or often both. It's in our genes; we got it from our first parents, Adam and Eve. They, too, ran and hid when things went wrong.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself. (Gen. 3:8-10)

Grace to You in Galatia

I suspect the believers in Galatia were tempted to do the same, when they heard how Paul reacted to where they were spiritually. Simply put, they had made a mess of things for they were turning away from grace and seeking justification by the Law. This left Paul completely flabbergasted. "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" (1:6). "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1). "I'm afraid I may have labored over you in vain" (4:11). "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace" (5:4).

It's obviously a very serious situation; in fact, it couldn't be more serious. Yet, notice where this big-hearted Apostle takes these misguided Galatians when they've blown it big time. Behind the shed for a good whipping? Out to the doghouse for a week's retribution? Does he post their mug-shot on *Facebook*? Or *Tweet* their crime in just under 140 characters?

No, the Apostle, who first gave them birth, takes them back to where it all began. He takes them back to grace. There, in the middle of the letter's salutation, we hear these easily overlooked but vitally precious words: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3).

It's as if Paul is saying to them: "You've made a big mess of it. But all's not lost. Go back, Galatians, to where you began; go back to grace. There, you'll find what you need—everything you need, the only thing you need. There, you'll find grace."

In order for this call to go back to grace to work, Paul knows he has some serious work to do for the Galatians have lost confidence in his gospel. They've lost confidence in its *legitimacy* and they've lost confidence in its *sufficiency*. They're not convinced what Paul preached was still valid, nor are they persuaded any longer that his gospel can take them to where they need to go spiritually. It's as though the Galatians caught a bad case of buyer's remorse; having once been enthusiastic about what they received from Paul, they now harbor serious doubt (cf. 4:15-16).

Perhaps some of you are in a similar situation. You've recently embraced the message of grace in the gospel. But living the Christian life hasn't turned out to be all that you had expected

or perhaps all that you had been taught it should be, or could be. And so, you too are wrestling with a bit of buyer's remorse at your decision.

Paul's Message Is Legitimate

That's where the Galatians were! And that's why Paul's opening salvo, his very first word, is to insist that *the message of grace still stands*. But notice, he doesn't speak directly about the message, but the messenger. "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (v. 1).

Does he say this way because he's insecure about his own credentials? No, but in order to reassert the legitimacy of his gospel! For if Paul himself isn't legitimate, that is, if he's not truly an Apostle sent from God, then his gospel isn't legitimate either. It's that simple. This is why Paul insists on his God-given commission here, something he'll go on to do at greater length in this and the next chapter (cf. 1:11-2:10).

This is also why he appeals to the fact that he stands together with a band of fellow gospel workers as he writes to the Galatians—"and all the brothers who are with me" (v. 2). Paul's no lone-ranger, a renegade working in isolation from the rest of the early church. No, the gospel he preaches, and the gospel the Galatians first believed, is the same gospel preached by many others.

We see, then, Paul insisting he's a real *agent of grace*. Indeed, this is the point of his apostleship: to extend grace to others on God's behalf! This is also the point of Galatians: Galatians exists for grace! That's why Paul writes the letter: to speak grace into a desperate situation.

And that's why we have this letter; in fact, that's why we have all of Paul's letters. Indeed that's why we have both the Old and New Testaments, the entire Bible—because it is God's communication of grace into our desperate human situation.

This ought to encourage you, then, that when you blow it in life, don't close your Bible. Open it. Read it. Delve into it, in fact. The temptation is, of course, to run and hide from the living and active word of God, which discerns the thoughts and intention of the heart (Heb. 4:12). But nowhere else will you find the very thing you need when you make a mess of things. For there alone, in God's word, will you find a message of grace: the gospel.

From Genesis through Revelation, the Bible is a treasure chest of grace. Golden coins of comfort, costly pearls of assurance, precious jewels of promise, they're all there in the pages of Scripture. Indeed, everything that was written in the Bible was written for us, Paul says to the Roman Christians, that "through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Part of what it means to go back to grace, then, is to go back to the Bible, where the message of grace can be found.

Jesus' Sacrifice Is Sufficient

Now, even if Paul establishes the legitimacy of his gospel, he still has an even bigger problem on his hands. He still has to reestablish the *sufficiency* of his gospel. Therefore, he must persuade the Galatians that the grace of God unleashed by the death of Christ is powerful enough to get them to where they need to go spiritually.

You see, after Paul left Galatia, the Galatians came under the influence of certain teachers who were promoting the Jewish law as an effective way to advance spiritually (cf. 3:3). In addition, we can assume that the Galatians themselves had probably found the Jewish law appealing because of the promise it held out for spiritual help. No doubt, they also found themselves frustrated and fatigued with the same thing you and I often find frustrating and fatiguing: the continuing presence of sin in our lives.

Did you realize that we need to be rescued from out under the dominion of sin? Sin is a lord-less power, a godless force. Sin is not merely a one-time thing, an event, an action, something that's over once you've done it. Instead, sin has after-effects; it lives on! And these after-effects, in turn, affect you. Yet, is there a way to break free from this sin that so easily entangles?

Paul's answer is a resounding: Yes! There is. But it's not the path of the Law; it's the cross of Christ. Deliverance from your sins, and from this present evil age, comes only one way; indeed, grace itself comes only one way: through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. "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*" (vv. 3-4).

You see, then, Paul drives the Galatians back to this fundamental fact: *Christ gave himself for our sins*. For it is this fact, and this alone, that explains the existence of grace in our own lives; and this event—and this alone—is the wellspring of our salvation: our justification, our sanctification and our glorification.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!

What are these triumphs of his grace, you ask?

He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.

So, then, when you sin, don't hide from God. When you blow it really badly, don't run away. When you're discouraged with where you're at spiritually, don't flirt with other stuff. Instead, go back to the cross of Christ. Return to the source of grace: the sacrificial self-giving of the Son for our sins.

Amen Is All It Takes

But what does it take to go back to grace? How do you get there? This is a pressing question for some of you, because you've blown it big time. And you know it; we've all been there. Yet

you have begun to doubt whether there's any hope for you, any solution. But now you've heard that you can go back to grace, and you want to know how.

"Amen" is all it takes!

You see, this is where Paul leads the Galatians: to utter their "Amen" to all that God has done for them in Christ. Notice the truly remarkable way in which he closes this letter salutation: "[Jesus] 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" (1:5).

Not the typical way to address a letter, is it? But with this closure, Paul ushers the Galatians into the very atmosphere of worship, and by rehearsing what God has done for them in Christ, he invites them to voice their agreement to this great salvation with the confession, "Amen."¹

You see, the way back to grace couldn't be simpler: you only have to say, "Amen." I'm quite tempted to say that it couldn't be any easier. But I don't want you to think uttering, "Amen," is easy. Because it's not!

In fact, saying "Amen" may be the hardest thing you've ever done. Because saying "Amen" is not something you do simply with your head. "Amen" is not "Yep" or "Sure" or "Got it." No, "Amen" is something you say with your heart.

When you say, "Amen," you're more than an observer; you've moved from spectator to participant. "Amen" is your way of entering into this divine drama, taking up your part, assuming your role in the story of grace called the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And until you do that, you're still on the sidelines, out of the action, out of the benefits.

You see then, "Amen" is the only doorway into the world of grace. There's no other way in. You can't find grace in any other way because grace is only given to those who have faith; and the voice of faith is the word, "Amen."

A Letter for Prodigals

Galatians is often viewed as a letter for legalists, for those who are trying to win God's favor with their works. And, in a sense, that's right. But understand this: Galatians is even more *a letter for prodigals*, for those busy making a mess of their lives, on the verge of apostasy, ready to shipwreck their faith, on the brink of moral and spiritual disaster.

Because Galatians calls us back to grace, it's perfect for prodigals like you and me. This letter never tires of saying to us: the message of grace is still valid; the fountain of grace still flows; and the way back to grace couldn't be easier: all you need to do is utter a heart-felt, "Amen," to all that God has done for you in Christ.

This, friends, is what every prodigal needs to hear. This is what every prodigal son or daughter needs to hear. This is what every prodigal church needs to hear, whether in ancient Galatia or somewhere on Lake Street. And this is even what our prodigal world needs to hear:

¹ Cf. Martyn, *Galatians*, p. 91.

But when [the prodigal son] came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24 ESV)

Resolved: To Go Back To Grace

Don't forget, then, this all-important first lesson of Galatians, this first principle of gospel-rooted living: *Go back to grace*. Especially as you strive to move forward in the year ahead, remember you'll need to go back again and again and again; that is, you'll need to go back to grace, in order to move forward in life.

In fact, let me challenge you to make this the New Year's resolution you really do plan to keep: *Every time I blow it, I'll go back to grace*. I won't blame it on my spouse, or my boss, or my mom or dad, or my neighbor, or my genes, or my personality, or my upbringing, or my financial situation. In fact, I will not blame it on anyone or anything else because Jesus has already taken the blame for all of it.

Instead, I'll simply return to the foot of the cross, and there humbly bow in worship and adoration of the one who gave himself for me to deliver me from this present evil age, according to the will of our God the Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Father, you have made known to us the path of life; and that path is the path of grace. Would you give us confidence to walk that well-trodden path, as we bless and adore you for opening it to us through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.