

Grace and Peace to You

Galatians 1:1-5

KV 3-4, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.”

Galatians is a letter written to the churches in the region of Galatia, a province of the Roman Empire. Today ancient Galatia is in the central part of modern day Turkey. It was written around 50AD by the apostle Paul, and is the only one of his letters to be addressed to churches in more than one city. Paul was a promising young Jewish leader, zealous for his Jewish traditions – so much so that he persecuted Christians intensely. But the Lord had mercy on him, and on his way to Damascus the Lord revealed himself to him. He had met the One true God, and changed. From that point on, he preached Christ instead of persecuting Christians, and our Bible records three major missionary journeys he conducted in order to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. It was on his first missionary journey that he founded these churches in Galatia, recorded in Acts 13 and 14.

The first city in Galatia that Paul arrived in was Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath of that week, they went into the synagogue and sat down. After reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to Paul and Barnabas, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.” This is kind of like how we call up guests and visitors to our worship services, and ask them to give their prayer topics, but imagine if one of them came up and did what Paul did.

Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand, “Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!” And he reasoned with them from the Scriptures how Jesus was the promised Messiah and the fulfillment of the promise God made to their ancestors when they were enslaved in Egypt. This indeed was good news to the people, who asked them to come back the next Sabbath. Well, instead of just the synagogue gathering together, almost the WHOLE city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, maybe because no one came to hear them speak. So they stirred up opposition and persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from that city.

Next, they moved on to Iconium, about 60 miles to the southeast of Pisidian Antioch. There Paul and Barnabas spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed, but there were some Jews who refused to believe. These Jews poisoned the mind of some Gentiles against them, and a plot arose to mistreat them and have them stoned. When the disciples found out about this they fled to Lystra and Derbe.

In Lystra, Paul healed a man lame from birth. When the crowd saw what he had done, they shouted in their language, “The gods have come down in human form!” They called Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes, and they started offering sacrifices to them. When the apostles heard of this, they tore their clothes and shouted, “Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from worthless things to the living God.” Even after this, the crowd still wanted to sacrifice to them. Some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, they just couldn’t leave Paul and Barnabas alone, and

won the crowd over. One hour they were worshipping Paul, the next they stoned him and dragged him outside of the city, thinking he was dead. However, after the disciples gathered around him, he went back into the city. Paul was either crazy, fearless, or both, but he was determined to spread the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

What made Paul so bold, so fearless? What made him so eager to win souls to Christ? It was the grace of God. Paul says, in Eph 3:8, “Although I am the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” He himself saw the unsearchable riches of Christ. In his past life he breathed out murderous threats to Christians, thinking he was serving God, until God revealed to him that he was fighting against Him. Really he was seeking for his own glory, to make his own name great, but when he met Jesus he saw the true glory. He saw the salvation, the majesty and the glory of Jesus, a glory so vast it was unsearchable. To this glory he was given the grace to reveal it to the Gentiles.

Some of the Jewish Christians could not accept this. Historically, the Jews had a contempt for Gentiles, and this racism perhaps grew with their pride they took in being the chosen people of God. To the Jews were given the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. To the Jews were given the Law from Moses. To the Jews were given the promise that the Messiah would be one of them. Because of their ingrained pride, when salvation began to break out among the Gentiles, most notably in the ministry of Paul, they did not want to accept that God would choose others outside their race for salvation. So they put a burden on Gentile believers, that if they wanted to be saved, they had to convert to Judaism first and follow all their customs and laws.

Clearly they had added their own man-made addition to the gospel and perverted the grace of God. Jewish Christians were going to these Galatian churches, and telling them that unless they started following Jewish customs, they cannot be saved. They were taking away their salvation and adding a condition on top of it to get it back. What may have surprised Paul was how quickly the Galatian churches were turning away from him, and he wrote this letter to counter these false teachings and restore the purity of their faith and freedom in Christ.

Look at v.1, “Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” The Judaizers casted doubt on the credibility of Paul. They could have been sent from churches that were led by Peter, John or James - Jesus’ top disciples who knew the Lord personally. But who is this Paul guy, where did he come from, and didn’t he used to persecute the church? They were questioning Paul’s authority in order to discredit his teaching, so that they could spread their false ideas.

So Paul asserts his identity: an apostle – sent not from men, but by Jesus Christ. These opening words might have struck a chord in the Galatian’s hearts. The Judaizers, could they claim that they were sent by Christ? Could they claim to be apostles? In this opening greeting he reminds the Galatians of a couple of things: 1. The equality of Jesus and God, so that they are one and the same: if he is sent by Jesus, he is also sent by God, and 2. The identity of Jesus – that God raised him from the dead shows that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah. This is the simple message of the gospel, and one of the main points every Christian should believe: that

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

Paul continues in v.3-4, can we all please read these together: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.”

Grace and peace to you! This is a common greeting in many of the New Testament letters. We generally don’t hear greetings like this in America. We say hello when we greet someone, but I’m not sure what that means. While I was in college I learned the Muslim greeting, As-Salam Alaykum, which means, “Peace be unto you.” In Chinese people say, “Ni hao,” which literally means “you-good,” but maybe means something like “goodness be to you.” I know how to say “Ahn young hah say yo,” but I’m not sure what it literally means.

It might sound odd to say “Grace and peace to you” to someone these days, but here we see that Paul, and several other New Testament writers, wish grace and peace to their readers. So what is grace? Grace is the free and unmerited favor of God, in other words, it is receiving favor and blessing from God that we do not deserve. Why do we need grace? It is because we really don’t deserve anything from God, but we need everything from him. That’s why people hate grace – we want to feel entitled, and we don’t want to be dependent; we want to be independent to do what we want. One time my brother bought a homeless woman some bread, and right in front of him, right outside the store she threw the bread into the garbage can. She rejected my brother’s grace, and felt like she deserved something else from him, just for sitting out there. That’s how we treat God when we are indifferent or reject Jesus, God’s grace to us.

We need God’s grace because we are a wicked and rebellious people by nature, and we rebel against the laws of God. I’ve broken all ten commandments. The first through the fifth commandments I violated because there have been times where I admit, I did not love God with all my heart, strength, soul and mind. I have broken the command to honor my father and mother, I have stolen (when I was a kid), and I covet, though I have never murdered nor committed adultery, I have done so in my thoughts, and therefore I am a complete lawbreaker. There is nothing on earth that can save me from my sins. There is nothing I can do to save myself. I find that I am a slave to sin and helpless.

God saw the darkness in men, he also saw their helplessness and weakness, and He had compassion. Our God is a merciful God, He is a loving God, and He is a gracious God. God did not hold back, but he gave us the best of everything He had – He gave us his Son. God did not give us silver or gold, but He gave us something far more precious – He gave us Himself. Our sins cost him dearly. There was nothing in the world that each person could give for their sins, each person would need more than the total value of the world, an unthinkable amount. But think about the greatness and sufficiency of Jesus, the offering for our sins, who was able to pay for all sinners who believe in him.

Jesus is more than enough to cover my debt, but God’s grace goes even beyond that. It is God’s grace that washed away my sins and turns me to Christ, it is God’s grace that keeps me, it is God’s grace that strengthens me. It is God’s grace that increases my faith, knowledge and

affection for Him, and His grace that helps me to do His will. The sources of God's grace are infinitely deep and wide. Eph 1:7-8 says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us." John tells us that from the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us (Eph 3:20).

God's grace also gives us peace. Peace is a state of harmony, a state of tranquility – everyone, whether good or evil, desires peace, because peace gives comfort. Many people look for peace in the things of this world, but often, worldly peace is deceptive. How many testimonies have we heard of athletes, thinking they will be satisfied when they get the championship, only to find out when they got to the top they still felt empty? How many people think, oh, if I made this much money, I would be happy, if I get this much in the bank, I'll be happy, only to find that the more money they have, the more problems they get. When we go through hard times, the peace found in this world will not help us. If persecution or war comes, what will our money or positions do? Look at v.3 again, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul here does not speak of a peace that's from the world, but a peace that's from God. That's the peace that will help us to overcome, even when times are difficult. It's the peace Paul had when he was stoned and left for dead, but walked back into Lystra.

God's grace gives us peace with Himself. Peace with God is the ultimate peace, and it is the source of peace, because from God is where all of His abundant grace flows. Rom 4:25 says, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." We are justified by the resurrection of Christ. What does it mean to be justified? It simply means to be declared righteous. Christ's blood cleansed us from our sins, but his resurrection was the declaration of our righteousness. God declared you, (insert name here), if you have been saved by God's grace, righteous. You are right before God, pure and acceptable, because of what Jesus has done.

Once peace with God is established, God's grace gives us power to have peace. Look at the end of v.4: Jesus gave himself to rescue us from the present evil age. We are living in an evil age. Actually, from the fall of man until Jesus comes again, this is the present evil age. As long as Satan roams free and has dominion over the earth, the days will be evil. But more specifically, in our time, we see evil increasing more and more each year. Abortion rates are increasing, divorce rates are high, casual dating and immoral relationships are winked at, unemployment is still high, and there is a bloody war in Syria.

We are not rescued from this evil age in the sense we are taken out of it, not until Jesus comes again, but for now God has a better plan. He rescued us from the control that the evil age has over us, and has equipped us with the power to win souls, just like Paul was doing in Galatia. James 4:7 says, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Christ has won the victory over Satan, he has removed all of his power. Satan may try to accuse you, he may try to say, (insert name here), you're not a good person, God is not pleased with you. Or he may say, (insert name here), you're a failure. But to summarize what Martin Luther wrote, when Satan accuses you, "You tell Satan, 'No, for I go to Christ who gave Himself for my

sins. When you accuse me, Satan, you are cutting your own throat, because you have reminded me of God's goodness towards me, How he so loved me that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. By calling me a sinner, Satan, you really comfort me above measure." See how you run to Jesus for protection, and he will guard you!

In fighting the Lord's battles, we are given power. 2 Cor 10:3-5 says, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ." We do not fight back with guns, swords, insults. Our weapons have divine power, these weapons are prayer, and the word of God which the Holy Spirit will help us use. 1 John 5:5 says, "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God."

And one last grace I will mention that gives us peace is contentment, 1 Tim 6:6, "But godliness with contentment is great gain." We do not have to be lured in by the lusts that are in this world. Advertisements, movies, TV shows all try to displace our peace, so that we will buy their products or emulate that lifestyle. But God will train us and teach us that God's grace is sufficient for me, and we can be content with what we have, and not envy or covet what our neighbors have.

Finally, God's grace gives him all the glory. Look at the end of v.4, and 5 – "according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." It is the will of God to give us grace and peace, and it is the will of God to rescue us, so we love that prayer, "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Now notice something in v.4 – "according to the will of our God and Father." Not everyone will receive God's grace, peace and rescue: only the children of God. Only those who call him Father. Only those who love His will and do His will.

Ask yourself, are you truly a child of God? Or are you a friend of the world? James exhorts us, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (James 4:4)," but gives us this promise in v.8,10, "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

How shall we receive God's abundant grace and peace then? By faith in Him alone. When I say faith, I don't mean just believe on Sunday, but in every day of the week, take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ. Horatius Bonar wrote, "Devotion is the highest employment of grace." The highest and best use of the grace of God is constant devotion to him in all you do. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Pet 1:3). When we read those words in the text, "Grace and peace to you from God and Jesus," let us savor those words in our hearts, and give praise and thanks to God for his rich and matchless grace, and look forward to the day when he comes again to deliver us into heaven. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!