



Galatians



R E F O R M E D

E X P O S I T O R Y

C O M M E N T A R Y

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

Galatians

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

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Galatians

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To

William S. Barker, Sinclair B. Ferguson,
and my other mentors on the faculty of
Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia,
whose superior scholarship, brotherly friendship,
and godly leadership
brought reformation to my life and ministry.

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law
but through faith in Jesus Christ,
so we also have believed in Christ Jesus,
in order to be justified by faith in Christ
and not by works of the law,
because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 2:16

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church, for the world. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Con-

Series Introduction

fession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastors, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Dr. Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Dr. Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries our gifted authors

can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

This commentary originated with a series of sermons preached in the Sunday evening service at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Its overall interpretation is in line with classic Reformation teaching on Galatians, especially with regard to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. By trying to base their justification on their sanctification, the Galatians were in danger of exchanging God's grace in the gospel for performance-based Christianity. But the apostle Paul rightly warned them that any form of works-righteousness is inimical to the good news of salvation, arguing "that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16).

Properly understood, the gracious gospel of Galatians liberates us from legalism. Since we are legalists by nature, the book challenges many of our preconceptions about what it means to have a right relationship with God. F. F. Bruce wrote in his commentary on the epistle:

When, from time to time, someone appeared who understood and proclaimed the genuine message of Galatians, he was liable to be denounced as a subversive character—as, indeed, Paul was in his own day. But the letter to the Galatians, with its trumpet-call to Christian freedom, has time and again released the true gospel from the bonds in which well-meaning but misguided people have confined it so that it can once more exert its emancipating power in the life of mankind, empowering those who receive it to stand fast in the freedom with which Christ has set them free.¹

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 278.

Preface

Like every other aspect of my ministry, this commentary was written within the context of Christian community. I praise God for everyone who helped to bring this book into print:

- Josh, Kirsten, Jack, Kathryn, Karoline, and especially Lisa, who remind me to live the gospel I preach;
- the members of Tenth Presbyterian Church, who sustain me by their prayers for God's work in my life and ministry;
- the elders at Tenth, whose blessing enables writing to be an important part of my work as a pastor;
- the Tenth staff, who share with me in the blessings and burdens of ministry;
- Dan Doriani, Iain Duguid, and Rick Phillips—my colleagues and teachers—who improved my work immensely by making many exegetical, theological, and practical suggestions;
- Jonathan Rockey, who read and commented on my original manuscript (as he does for nearly all my books);
- Robert and Katherine Arthur, who generously allowed our family to stay at Weston Farms on the Chesapeake while I worked on the final revision;
- Al Fisher and the fine staff at P&R, who have the vision and skill to attempt a full new series of commentaries;
- and James Montgomery Boice, who set the standard for expositional commentaries.

My prayer is that God will use this commentary on Galatians—the first volume in the Reformed Expository Commentary series—to help people understand and teach the gospel of grace in all its liberating power.

 *Galatians*

THE GOSPEL OF FREE GRACE

1

DEAR RECOVERING PHARISEE

Galatians 1:1–5

*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.*

(Gal. 1:1–2)



Galatians is a letter for recovering Pharisees. The Pharisees who lived during and after the time of Christ were very religious. They were regular in their worship, orthodox in their theology, and moral in their conduct. Yet something was missing. Although God was in their minds and in their actions, he was not in their hearts. Therefore, their religion was little more than hypocrisy.

The Pharisees were hypocrites because they thought that what God would do for them depended on what they did for God. So they read their Bibles, prayed, tithed, and kept the Sabbath as if their salvation depended on it. What they failed to understand is that God's grace cannot be earned; it only comes free.¹

1. I am well aware of the efforts of E. P. Sanders and others to rehabilitate first-century Judaism as a religion of grace. However, our best and most reliable resource for understanding Pharisaism is still the New Testament, which plainly shows that the religion of the Pharisees was infected by a reliance on human effort for salvation. For a full and accurate assessment of the prevailing legalism of first-century Judaism, see D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 2004).

There is a way out of Pharisaism. The way out is called the gospel. It is the good news that Jesus Christ has already done everything necessary for our salvation. If we trust in him, he will make us right with God by giving us the free gift of his grace. When we reject our own righteousness to receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ, we become former Pharisees.

Most former Pharisees have a problem, however. It is hard for them to leave their legalism behind. Although initially they received God's grace for free, they keep trying to put a surcharge on it. They believe that God loves them, but secretly they suspect that his love is conditional, that it depends on how they are doing in the Christian life. They end up with a performance-based Christianity that denies the grace of God. To put this in theological terms, they want to base their justification on their sanctification.

This means that most former Pharisees—indeed, most Christians—are still in recovery. There is still something of the old legalist in us. Although we have been saved by grace, we do not always know how to live by grace. The gospel is something we received some time in the past, but not something we live and breathe. Galatians was written for people like us.

FREEDOM LETTER

Paul's epistle to the Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty. Its theme verse is a declaration of independence: "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). Whenever the church has understood this gospel message, Galatians has brought life and freedom to recovering Pharisees.

This was true in the life of Martin Luther (1483–1546), the father of the Reformation. Luther had tried everything he knew to be a good Christian. He wrote, "I was a good monk and kept my order so strictly that I could claim that if ever a monk were able to reach heaven by monkish discipline I should have found my way there. All my fellows in the house, who knew me, would bear me out in this. For if it had continued much longer I would, what with vigils, prayers, readings and other such works, have done myself to death."² Yet as hard as Luther worked, his conscience was still troubled by

2. Martin Luther, quoted in Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (London: Longman, 1981), 51.

the thought that he was not good enough for God. He didn't understand the gospel of grace. His breakthrough came when he discovered that Christianity was not about what he had to do for God; it was about what God had done for him in Jesus Christ.

The free grace of God in Christ, received by faith, was the great theme of Luther's famous lectures on Galatians, which he began by saying: "I do not seek [my own] active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I did have it and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I . . . embrace only . . . the righteousness of Christ . . . which we do not perform but receive, which we do not have but accept, when God the Father grants it to us through Jesus Christ."³

Through Martin Luther, the book of Galatians taught the same lesson to the great Puritan preacher John Bunyan (1628–1688). In his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan describes how a battered old copy of Luther's commentary came into his possession. He was surprised how old the book was, but he was even more surprised when he read it. He wrote, "I found my condition in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled, as if his book had been written out of my heart . . . I do prefer this book of Mr. Luther upon the Galatians, (excepting the Holy Bible) before all the books that ever I have seen."⁴

Why does this epistle have such a liberating influence? Because the church is always full of recovering Pharisees who need to receive the gospel again, as if for the very first time.

WHO WAS PAUL?

The letter opens with more argumentation than salutation: "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (Gal. 1:1). The author's name comes first, as was customary in ancient letters, and then his name is followed immediately by his credentials. Paul identifies himself as an apostle sent by God

3. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, in *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 26:6.

4. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. W. R. Owens (1666; repr. New York: Penguin, 1987), 35.

rather than men. Two things are obvious from this return address. One is that Paul was upset. In the Greek original, his words are terse: “Paul, apostle, *not*.” It is equally obvious that the reason Paul was upset was that enemies were trying to undermine his authority.

In the ancient world, an apostle was an official messenger, like an emissary or ambassador. The messenger had the authority to represent his superior, something like an agent who holds the power of attorney. In the New Testament, the term “apostle” has a more specific meaning. It denotes the official spokesmen for Jesus Christ, especially his original twelve disciples. These men were chosen, called, and commissioned by Christ himself to teach on his behalf (Luke 6:13–16; Mark 3:14–19).

Apparently, some critics were quick to point out that Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples. He was a latecomer, they claimed, who had not been commissioned directly by Christ himself. Therefore, he was only a second-rate apostle—his gospel was just hearsay.

If this is what people were saying about Paul, it is easy to see why he dispensed with the customary pleasantries and started his letter by defending his credentials. He was not merely being defensive. He understood that his opponents were making a personal attack in order to advance a theological error. They were devaluing Paul to disparage his gospel. If they could show that he was an impostor rather than an apostle, they could discredit his message of grace.

What was at stake, therefore, was not simply Paul’s reputation, but our salvation. The great New Testament scholar J. B. Lightfoot (1828–1889) began his commentary on Galatians by saying, “The two threads which run through this epistle—the defence of the Apostle’s own authority, and the maintenance of the doctrine of grace—are knotted together in the opening salutation.”⁵ Paul was not defending himself as much as he was defending the independence of his apostleship in order to defend the gospel. When it came to the good news about salvation by grace through faith, he refused to budge so much as a single micron.

The truth is that Paul was not sent from men. His apostolic commission did not come, for example, from the church at Antioch. Nor was he sent by a man, as if his call had come through someone like Barnabas or Peter. No,

5. J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (1865; repr. Lynn, MA: Hendrickson, 1981), 71.

Paul was an apostle by the will of God. God had set him apart from birth, called him by grace, and revealed his Son to him (see Gal. 1:15–16). Thus his commission was neither originated nor mediated by mere human beings.

Paul’s opponents said that his gospel was not God’s word to man, but a man’s word about God. Skeptics make the same argument today. They accuse Paul of Tarsus of inventing Christianity. They say that Jesus of Nazareth was a teacher of love and a model of sacrifice, but then Paul came along with all his complicated Greek concepts and turned Christ into Christianity.

At the beginning of his letter to the Galatians, which was one of his earliest letters, Paul explains where his Christianity came from. It came straight from the mouth of Christ. Paul was “an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:1). His authority was not human, but divine. Therefore, Paul’s message is God’s own message about salvation from sin. Anyone who sets aside his apostolic teaching sets aside the gospel truth of Jesus Christ.

WHO WERE THE GALATIANS?

Paul addressed his pastoral letter “to the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). This apparently simple phrase has generated a good deal of scholarly discussion. Who were the Galatians?

The old theory was that the Galatians were the Celts and the Gauls (literally, the “Gaulatians”) who lived in northern Asia Minor. Luke reports that Paul and his companions “went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” (Acts 16:6; cf. 18:23). Perhaps both Luke and Paul (see Gal. 3:1) were referring to the ethnic Galatians who lived in the north.

The main problem with this view is that none of the churches in northern Asia Minor are mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. This would be surprising if those churches were the scene of a major theological conflict and the recipients of one of Paul’s most important letters.

The newer theory is that Paul was writing to churches in southern Asia Minor. Ethnically speaking, the people who lived there were not Galatian. However, the Romans had turned Asia Minor into one large province, and they had been calling it “Galatia” since before the time of Christ. Paul, who was a Roman citizen, may well have been using a proper provincial title to

refer to Christians who were not necessarily Galatian by birth. Indeed, “Galatians” may have been the only suitable term that included all the people in all these churches.

To give a modern example, consider the way the Russians incorporated Georgians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and other ethnic groups into the former Soviet Union. Although these groups retained their ethnic identities, they were sometimes referred to as “Russians.”

One good reason for thinking that Paul was writing this circular letter to churches in the south is that he had planted churches there himself. The main cities in the southern part of the province of Galatia were Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe—the very cities Paul visited on his first missionary journey.

Furthermore, Paul’s recollection of the way the Galatians responded to the gospel (Gal. 4:12–15) corresponds to Luke’s description of those cities in his history of the early church (Acts 13:1–14:28). The way Luke summarizes Paul’s preaching to these churches is especially striking: “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38–39 NIV). As we shall see, justification by faith in Jesus Christ, apart from the law, is exactly the message Paul wanted to urge the Galatians not to forget.

Whether the Galatians who received this correspondence lived in the north or the south, which is more likely, there is little doubt as to why Paul was writing to them. One of the best summaries of his message comes from the first Latin commentary written on the letter, by the theologian Marius Victorinus (d. c. 303): “the Galatians are going astray because they are adding Judaism to the gospel of faith in Christ. . . . Disturbed by these tendencies Paul writes this letter . . . in order that they may preserve faith in Christ alone.”⁶

Religious traditionalists, probably from Jerusalem, were trying to teach the Galatians a new gospel. These men dogged Paul’s footsteps all over Asia

6. C. Marius Victorinus, *Ad Galatas*, quoted in F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 21.

Minor. Often they are called the “Judaizers” because they wanted to require Gentiles to follow Jewish customs. They taught that a Gentile had to become a Jew before he could become a Christian. In short, their gospel was Jesus Christ plus the law of Moses.

To be specific, the Judaizers wanted Gentile believers to be circumcised. Their theology is summarized in Acts 15, where we read that “some men”—possibly the very men who caused trouble in Galatia—went down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Not surprisingly, this teaching was especially popular among believers who were former Pharisees (Acts 15:5). The church has always been full of recovering Pharisees who want to add human effort to God’s grace.

THE RISEN CHRIST

To help Christians—especially recovering Pharisees—rediscover the gospel of grace, where should one start? Well, before receiving the gospel again for the first time, people have to know what the gospel is. So the obvious place to start is with the gospel itself. This is precisely where Paul begins his letter to the Galatians. He starts with the good news about the cross and the empty tomb. The gospel is made up of these two great saving events—the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Whenever Paul preached the good news, he started with the facts. He simply recounted what Jesus Christ had done in human history to save his people from their sins. This is the strategy he adopted when he wrote to the Corinthians: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved. . . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:1–4). The gospel is the atoning death and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul adopted a similar strategy when he wrote to the Galatians, only this time he started with the fact of the resurrection: “Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (Gal. 1:1). This Jesus was no ordinary man. Although it is not the apostle’s main point, there is a hint here of the doctrine of the incarnation. Paul mentions Jesus in the same breath with

God the Father. The calling of God and the calling of Christ are one and the same. Thus Paul distinguishes Jesus from mortal men (“not from men nor through man”) and uses a preposition to pair him with Almighty God (“but through Jesus Christ and God the Father”).

Jesus is a man, of course. Later Paul will say that he was “born of woman” (Gal. 4:4). But the man Jesus of Nazareth is divine as well as human. He shares an essential and eternal unity with God the Father. Between them there is “no distinction of essence.”⁷ “There is no other God,” wrote Luther, “than this Man Jesus Christ. . . . We must look at no other God than this incarnate and human God.”⁸ Although he was a man among men, Jesus is very God of very God.

This Jesus is the God-man whom God the Father raised from the dead. But why would Paul start with the resurrection? He does not mention the crucifixion until verse 4, so he seems to be taking things out of their chronological order.

The reason Paul does this may have to do with his autobiography. Remember how he first came to Christ. He did not meet him at the cross. Rather, his calling as a Christian and his commission as an apostle began with his encounter with the risen Christ. Paul’s conversion happened while he was on his way to Damascus, breathing murderous threats against the Christian church: “Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:3–5). So in Galatians, where Paul has to defend both his own apostolic authority and the truth of his gospel message, he quite naturally begins with Christ and his resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a stupendous divine miracle. The body of Jesus of Nazareth was taken down from a Roman gibbet and placed in a Jewish tomb, where it remained until the third day. Then, by his infinite power, God raised Jesus from the dead. Not only did he bring him back to

7. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. Gross Alexander, ed. Philip Schaff, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series (1889; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 13:3.

8. Luther, *Galatians*, 26:29.

life, but he also gave him a glorious and immortal body with supernatural powers.

Paul never would have believed this unless he had seen it with his own eyes. But we do not have to take just Paul's word for it. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, also called Christ, is recorded in reliable documents as a fact of human history. There are multiple eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ. Over the course of many weeks, Jesus was seen in his resurrection body by women as well as men, by skeptics as well as believers. These men and women had the opportunity to see Jesus with their own eyes. They walked with him and talked with him. Their unanimous testimony is that they had been in the presence of the risen Christ.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is gospel truth, but by itself, the resurrection is not the gospel. Although it proved God's victory over death, it did not take away our sins. This is where the crucifixion comes in. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes that saving event by saying that the Lord Jesus Christ "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal. 1:4). This verse teaches four important things about the cross of Christ.

First, it shows the *willingness* of Jesus to go to the cross. The crucifixion was a voluntary self-sacrifice. Jesus gave the most precious gift of all. He "gave himself" (Gal. 1:4). He "gave himself up" (Eph. 5:25), or he "gave himself for us" (Titus 2:14). No one took Christ's life away from him; he freely gave it away: "I lay down my life"—Jesus said—"that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:17–18). This is also emphasized in the gospel of Matthew, where an unusual phrase is used to show that at the moment of his death Jesus "yielded up his spirit" (Matt. 27:50).

Second, this verse shows the *purpose* of the cross. The reason Christ gave himself away was "for our sins" (Gal. 1:4). A transaction took place on the cross. We were the ones who deserved to die because we owe God an infinite debt for our sin. But Christ took our place on the cross. He became our substitute, our sin-offering. He gathered up all our sins, put them on his own shoulders, and paid for them with his death. Thus the crucifixion of Jesus

Christ was not merely an example of supreme sacrifice, but an actual atonement for sin. It enabled God to forgive us by satisfying his pure justice.

We learn from this substitutionary atonement how impossible it is to pay for our own sins. Full atonement requires nothing less than the blood of Jesus Christ, the very God. Our confidence lies in the fact that Jesus gave his lifeblood for our own personal sins. Luther could even imagine having this confidence when facing the devil himself: “When the devil accuses us and says: ‘You are a sinner; therefore you are damned,’ then we can answer him and say: ‘Because you say that I am a sinner, therefore I shall be righteous and be saved.’ ‘No,’ says the devil, ‘you will be damned.’ ‘No,’ I say, ‘for I take refuge in Christ, who has given Himself for my sins.’”⁹

Third, this verse shows the *effect* of the cross. Christ was crucified “to deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). When we think of the cross, we usually think first of the atonement. As we have seen, Christ died to pay for our sins. But Christ was also crucified to emancipate us from this evil age. The gospel is a rescue, like being released from servitude or freed from prison.

By “the present evil age,” Paul means “the course and current of this world’s affairs as corrupted by sin.”¹⁰ In the words of another commentator, he means “the totality of human life dominated by sin and opposed to God.”¹¹ Ours is an age of corruption, decay, and death. It is dominated by the evils of war, murder, oppression, slavery, incest, and abortion.

Jesus died on the cross to save us from all of it, not just individually, but together, as a new humanity. As Timothy George puts it, “Here Paul described what Jesus’ death accomplished not only in terms of our personal salvation but also in regard to God’s redemptive purpose in the wider historical and cosmic arenas.”¹² Even though we continue to live in this evil realm, we are being rescued from it through the cross. The age to come has burst into the present age. We ourselves no longer have to live the way we used to live when

9. *Ibid.*, 26:36.

10. Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 2d ed., 4 vols. (1888; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 4:84.

11. Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 41.

12. Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 87.

we were under the power of evil. Already we are beginning to live the life of the age to come, when God’s will is always done.

When we pray—as we do in the Lord’s Prayer—that God would “deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13), we are asking God to finish the work Christ began to do on the cross. This is why Galatians is the epistle of the soul set free. It announces that Jesus died on the cross to deliver us from evil. Deliverance is “the keynote of the epistle,” wrote J. B. Lightfoot. “The Gospel is a rescue, an emancipation from a state of bondage.”¹³

Fourth, this verse shows the *origin* of the cross. Christ died “according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal. 1:4). The execution of Jesus of Nazareth was not an unforeseen tragedy, a mere accident of history; it was part of God’s plan for the salvation of sinners. The apostle Peter said as much to the very men who nailed Jesus to the cross. In his famous sermon in Jerusalem, he declared, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23).

Paul said the same thing to the Galatians. The cross had been in God’s mind from all eternity. Thus it demonstrates the love of God as well as the love of Christ. There could be no conflict within the Trinity, as if a loving Son had to rescue us from an angry Father. On the contrary, the willingness of the Son was in response to the Father’s will. The Father does not love us because the Son died for us. Rather, the Son died for us because the Father loves us. The cross had its origin in our Father’s heart.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY

The crucifixion and the resurrection, the cross and the empty tomb—these are the simple facts of the gospel. The good news is that Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead, gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of God our Father.

These facts do not contain a single word about anything we do. They simply document what God has done in human history through Jesus Christ. The gospel is not about what we do for God; it is about what God has done for us. God the Father is the one who came up with the gospel plan. God the

13. Lightfoot, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 73.

Son is the one who made the willing sacrifice, in keeping with the Father's will. God the Father is the one who raised Jesus from the dead. Together the Father and the Son accomplished our salvation through the cross; together they announce it to the world through the teaching of the apostles; and together they apply it to our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, all the glory goes to God, which is precisely how Paul ends the beginning of his letter: "To whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (Gal. 1:5). If salvation is God's work from beginning to end, then all the honor and majesty belong to him forever. Literally, his glory "is into the ages of the ages," which, unlike this present evil age, will never pass away.

If all the glory goes to God, what comes to us is only grace, which is what Paul's letter to the Galatians is all about. It holds out "grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:3). These are not pious clichés; they are God's free gifts for sinners. Grace is the favor God has shown to undeserving sinners through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And grace is exactly what recovering Pharisees need. We are tempted to forget, sometimes, that Jesus is all we need, and when we forget, we need to rediscover the gospel of God's free grace.