

“This Present Age”

Psalm 2; Galatians 1:1-5

July 23, 2023

I'll never forget the day I was going to move away to Durham for seminary. It's hard to believe that's been over 18 years now. In some ways, it feels like just yesterday. It was a sunny August day and, believe it or not, it wasn't oppressively hot, I remember that. Natalie and I had only been married a couple of months, barely enough time to get all my stuff unpacked in her new townhome. And I had everything arranged. I knew what time I was picking up the rental van, knew what time my friends were arriving at my house to help me move. Heck, I had even planned where my volunteer moving crew was going to eat after we'd finished. It was a perfect plan. Oh, if it had only went the way that it was planned. The first major hiccup occurred when I arrived to pick up the rental van. When I got there, I was surprised not to see ANY rental vans on the property. This after I had called the day before to make check that everything was in place. Well, it turns out that there was a SNAFU there. They'd rented the van (and all their other ones as well) and, at present, they had NO INVENTORY OF VANS for me to take. It was a major blow and I felt my brilliant plans collapsing. Thankfully, there was a van-rental competitor down the road. And even though it was getting towards the end of the month when their inventory is tight, they had the right sized truck. My friends only had to wait at my house about an hour while I got the new van and made my way back over to my home. Little did I know that was only the beginning of our misfortune. Thankfully, we got the job done but with traffic, a rainstorm and a parking brake mishap it sure wasn't pretty and it absolutely did not go according to my brilliant plan.

It was the poet Robert Burns who once penned the line, “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” Wasn't he onto something universal there? No matter how well we draw things up on the proverbial board, something always seems to come along and complicate or waylay our plans.

I had an experience of that just last week. As you know, I've been away on study leave for the last two weeks. My plan was to take a class through the Dallas Theological Seminary online on Galatians. Registered for the class, got the course materials and was looking forward to it starting the first Monday on my break. But on the Friday before, I got an email telling me that the seminary was updating their network and that online classes would be OFFLINE for the very week I had planned to take the course. I adapted but it just goes to show the truth of Robert Burns poetry – the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

Even though he wouldn't have had access to the specific words, I'm sure the Apostle Paul would've thought something similar when it came to the churches he had planted in Galatia. Now since we'll be talking about this letter quite a bit, it's important you know where we're talking about as if you look on your present day maps, you won't find Galatia anywhere. The churches that Paul writes to in Galatians in in a region of modern-day Turkey. Just in case you were wondering, Turkey is about 600 miles from Jerusalem. No matter what you think about Paul, it is clearly amazing how far his travels for Christ took him.

These churches Paul is writing to? It's important that. We remember that it was he who planted them. Which means that prior to his arrival, the people had never heard about Jesus Christ or, if they had, only in a vague and misunderstood way. Paul brought them the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I can only imagine the amount of hard work church planting takes. I mean, it's hard now but it would've been exponentially so back then. You really only had your voice and the vague hope that people would listen. Thanks be to God for the Holy Spirit that they did. I can only imagine the long hours Paul would've spent getting to know people. The effort it took to explain Jesus' resurrection and what it meant would've been tiring too, no doubt. Then, to top it all off, you've got to make a living, right? We know that Paul, for example, was a tent-maker. That means that on top of his evangelizing work, he had a real job to boot. Planting those churches in Galatia would've been an amazing amount of work but that's exactly what Paul was called to. So, Paul takes the time and

energy to get these new Christian communities going but then he is called to go plant other churches. He leaves behind what I'm sure he planned them to be thriving bastions of the Christian Gospel.

Were it not for sin, Paul's teachings should've kept the Galatian churches on track but, thanks to some outside influence, it didn't. In fact, things had gone terribly wrong after Paul left. You see, sometime after Paul left, another group of Christians came into town only what they had to share wasn't really the Gospel. What they had, and Paul wants the Galatian Christians to see this, was brought slavery back upon the people who'd previously been freed by Jesus Christ. This angered Paul greatly and you can feel some of his ire towards this other faction ooze out in his letter. So, as Paul sits to write this letter to the churches in Galatia, he is deeply troubled. He sees a dynamic at play that could in fact threaten the Gospel in a way to make it seem useless, unnecessary. But it isn't going to happen without Paul applying his brilliant mind and the power of the Holy Spirit to convince them (and us) of their error.

Now it helps to remember as we begin to study this letter that letter writing in ancient times had a very rigid protocol. That is to say that you wrote with conventions that we're recognized by the reader. But the first thing you had to do then just as you have to do today is you have to let the reader know who the letter is coming from.

And boy does Paul do that, doesn't he? "Paul, an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities." Right at the outset, Paul identifies himself as an apostle. This was an important designation at the time as it is today. Now, there are lots of ways we can look at this word apostle. It means messenger, by the way. But, in our tradition, we tend to view the apostles as being those individuals who were fortunate enough to be instructed and led by Jesus Christ Himself directly. Other traditions set the bar elsewhere. You might hear someone referred to as "The Apostle So and So." It's just a different way of looking at things. We in the Reformed tradition, look at apostles as being those original followers of Jesus who were so designated. But remember, Paul wasn't one of the original followers of Jesus, nor was he even a believer prior to his conversion. But it's important to the rest of the letter that Paul is accepted as having apostolic authority. And he very much should. Apostles are called directly by the Lord Jesus Christ and that's exactly what happened to Paul.

Now, if we'll remember, Paul prior to his conversion was a zealous Jew. So zealous in fact that he was charged with persecuting the church on behalf of the Jewish authorities. But, if we recollect, everything changes for Paul on the road to Damascus. While on a mission to bring down the church, Paul is approached by none other than Jesus Christ. **Acts 9:4-6:** *"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. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'"* At a particular time, Paul was called from out of the darkness of his life into the irrepressible light of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Paul, very quickly after his conversion, becomes an Evangelist, starting his missionary work right at the beginning. Now it's important to note that right after his conversion, Paul doesn't go to Jerusalem to get the blessing of the other Apostles. HE does this eventually, as we'll see in our study of Galatians. Paul is quite successful in his work. But he's not the only one out there with something to say about Jesus Christ. Because you see, the group that had come to Galatia after Paul's departure believed that the Gospel required the adoption of the Jewish laws to be efficacious. Jesus' message had been on the acceptance of the sinner by faith. But that must've seemed a little too "loosey goosey" for some in the Jewish ranks. They were good with the idea of Grace....to a point. What they apparently were trying to convince people of was that AFTER their conversions, Gentile Christians had to adopt the Jewish Law. Baptism would've served as kind of like an entry step. You were baptized into Christ and then you started following the Jewish laws.

Now, before we get all in a huff, think about how this would've made a certain amount of logical sense if you didn't have a New Testament. It is a known fact that Jesus was a practicing Jew Himself. Now, if you didn't have an adequate understanding of the New Testament, it might seem perfectly logical to continue doing the very things that Jesus Christ Himself was doing. It really does

help us to remember that the New Testament wasn't yet available to these earliest believers. They were entirely reliant on the teaching that came from the Christian authorities. It also makes it easier to understand exactly how come they went astray and began to believe, yet again, in the importance of the Jewish laws.

Imagine it like this. I'm a Braves fan. I love them. I watch every game I can. That's why I've struggled this past week as they went on a four-game losing streak. The good news is that to be a Braves fan, all one has to do is pull for the Braves. There aren't any rules or anything other than maybe that you've gotta hate the Phillies. But then again, doesn't everyone hate the Phillies? But now what if someone came to me and said, you can't be a Braves fan, you're not wearing a hat. Never mind that I in fact have a hat, I'm just not choosing to wear one at the moment. But according to these Braves super fans, unless you're wearing a hat, you're not really a Braves fan. You can believe in the Braves, go to games, buy merchandise, pull for them but unless you're wearing a hat, you're just not part of the team. Chances are we'd find that kind of thinking annoying. But now imagine if instead of wearing a hat, you're talking about circumcision in an era long before pain killers and antibiotics. You can see how that would impose sort of a limiting factor on Christian conversions.

All indelicate matters aside, these Judaizers were effective. In fact, the churches in Galatia are all likely seduced by their theology. And, again, if we factor in a lack of the New Testament, this straying into error makes an awful lot of sense. And, on the surface, adopting the Jewish law didn't seem like a huge thing. But to Paul's thinking, this was a radical departure from a wonderful thing. In essence, Paul thought that this belief was this was no less than trading freedom for slavery yet again.

This is why it was so important to establish where Paul's authority came from. That's why in this important self-identification section of the letter, Paul is insistent that he wasn't relying on human wisdom, guidance or authority to speak to them but was instead speaking to them as one of Jesus' chosen apostles, embraced by the original believers in Jerusalem. But, more importantly, Paul's authority and guidance come from Jesus Christ Himself and God the Father directly. This is going to give his words far more weight and importance and they reflect the truth of what's going on in this situation. It makes sense that Paul would want to assert his status here. Nothing less than the Gospel was being imperiled by these Judaizers. Because you see, if our favor with God rests upon anything OTHER than Jesus Christ, it is a faulty belief and one that will likely drain our lives of joy. And the reason for that is alluded to in our scripture reading today. One of phrases Paul uses here and alludes to frequently throughout his letters is "this present evil age."

That's a jarring word to our modern ears. We're conditioned to believe that life in modernity is the best living possible in the history of man. That we're sculpting things the way that they ought to have been since the beginning. In the midst of these massive changes is a real denigration of faith. In fact, just yesterday I saw a story online purporting that the number of people who believe in God slipped another 3 percentage points from a few years back. And while that was little more than clickbait, the truth of the matter is that the role of faith in people's lives is deteriorating.

But if we don't have faith in God to remove our sins, what will become of us? Well, I think we're seeing it play out in real time. To begin with, there is a push to sanitize things which the Bible deems sinful. We surely see that in modern times, don't we? In my lifetime, I've seen things like gambling and prostitution go from well-accepted vices to common practice in society. That is to say if sin can't be defeated, we might as well just go with the flow. But you see, the absence of the awareness of sin doesn't make those things any less sinful. There are always consequences for sin...bad ones. So, as we free ourselves from the bondage of faith, what we discover isn't freedom but misery.

But there is GOOD NEWS! And Paul introduces it to us right in this opening passage from Galatians. That we are being delivered from this present evil age by none other than Jesus Christ who is the only Son of the Father God who is and always will be LOVE. And what a comfort that is to know. Because we live in a world where our plans can unravel. Paul's did, that's for sure. While he imagined a thriving church following his departure, the churches in Galatia fell into apostasy. We, too, feel the sting of failed plans ourselves. We've lost jobs, loved ones, opportunities disappeared,

things went wrong. But through all of the ups and downs, Paul wants us to see ourselves and being delivered from all this mess.

At the beating heart of this whole letter is an emphasis on God's grace. We have been forgiven of our sins. This isn't a future hope but is instead a present reality. We are the forgiven people of God!

And while our plans may fail, God's plans do NOT. And let us never forget that in the fullness of time, God sent His only begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. This gracious act of God was followed up by Jesus' perfect faithfulness to the Father which included a long and lonely walk to Calvary where He suffered and died for our sin. To God be the Glory

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.