

A TIMELY LETTER

GALATIANS 1:1-5

**THIS LETTER OF PAUL TO THE GALATIANS IS
RELEVANT FOR OUR LIVES TODAY.**

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A Timely Letter

Galatians 1:1-5

I titled this sermon "A Timely Letter" not so much for what it meant to the original recipients of this letter, but for us. After studying through I & II Peter, then following that up with a study through the prophet Amos, I kind of feel discouraged and depressed about how pathetic my walk of faith is. As I have talked with many of you, I know that I am not alone. When we take a good hard look at the Bible, God's commands, and Jesus' expectations for us, then measure our holiness and goodness according to these, we realize how evil we are and how unworthy we are even to mention God's Name.

This self-examination should lead us to discouragement, depression, and a sense of hopelessness. In other words, we should come to the conclusion that no matter how hard we try, how many good things we do, and how religious we are, we are still unable to be worthy of God's love. Honesty dictates that we come to the conclusion that all I deserve is an eternity in hell.

Now that's depressing and it's extremely discouraging. But that sense of hopelessness is actually good. I know that sounds strange but it's true. That sense of hopelessness actually opens the door for God to apply His grace, mercy, and love to our lives. The love of God caused Jesus to come down from Heaven, take on human flesh, suffer, and die as an acceptable sacrifice for our sins. The message of the Apostle Paul in this letter is that it is only the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross that allows us to be in a right relationship with God. It is Jesus, plus or minus nothing that makes us holy, good, and acceptable to God.

The problem is that people, who think they are good, can never understand what the grace of God is all about. But telling people they are no good doesn't always endear a pastor to his congregation.

Let me give you an example. You all remember the church I used to pastor, the one that was so tough. (How tough was it?) It was so tough that I was always jumpy. I wasn't very popular, and was always afraid to get blindsided. One of my deacons was kind of lazy at home. Instead of fixing his screen door, he had his family pry open the door with a knife, or a screwdriver, or hatchet or something.

One day I went to house to visit him and rang the doorbell. The deacon peeked out through the curtains and then shouted to his son, "Quick, Tommy. It's the pastor. Get the hatchet!"

Needless to say, I didn't hang around to get the real story about the warped door. I just ran to my car and took off. I think the Apostle Paul faced a lot of that sentiment because he preached against self-righteousness regularly.

Unless we take the time to read, study, and meditate through books I Peter, II Peter, and Amos, we tend to forget how wonderful the concepts of God's love, mercy, and grace really are. We have a tendency to easily think we are good and upright people, almost deserving of God's blessings. Unless we realize how much we need God's grace, mercy, and love on a daily basis, the Gospel is meaningless. However, after the time we have spent studying through the letters of Peter and the book of Amos, we have come to realize how helpless we are to fight sin on our own. That's why I'm excited to preach through Paul's letter to the Galatians. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **THIS LETTER OF PAUL TO THE GALATIANS IS RELEVANT FOR OUR LIVES TODAY.** It doesn't matter if you are not yet a Christian on your way to becoming one, if you are a new Christian, or if you have been a Christian for more than 30, 40, 50 years or more. We must apply the Gospel of grace to our lives every day.

I. THE SENDER (VS 1-2a)

The Sender Of This Letter Was Himself Sent As A Letter By God.

In verse 1 and the first half of verse 2 we are introduced to the sender. The interesting thing about the writer of this letter is this. **THE SENDER OF THIS LETTER WAS HIMSELF SENT AS A LETTER BY GOD.**

The very first word in the letter introduces us to the man. The author of this letter was Paul. Paul was his Greek name. It is the name that he uses once converted to Christianity and the name he uses as a missionary. But his given name was Saul. Saul was a Jew. But he was no ordinary Jew. He was educated at the feet of the most influential rabbi, Gamaliel. This young man Saul belonged to the most prestigious sect of Judaism, the Pharisees. Saul was on the fast track to the top of Jewish society. He was one of the most educated and influential people of his society.

A. THE MAN

The first time we meet this young man in the Bible is in Acts chapter 7. You see this influential group Saul belonged to hated Christians. In fact, it was their goal to exterminate every believer and crush the Christian movement. One of the early Christian leaders, Stephen, gave a public testimony of who Jesus was. The group Saul belonged to became so incensed by the message; they executed Stephen on the spot. We learn that Saul was present. He held the coats of the murderers and he gave his approval to the whole bloody incident.

Listen to the driving force in Saul's life:

"¹ ... On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison" (Acts 8:1-3 / NIV).

On one of his journeys to hunt down and kill Christians, he was headed for the city of Damascus. On the way, the risen Lord Jesus appeared to him and confronted him. At that moment, Saul gave his life to Jesus Christ in faith. That involved a total change in his whole being. He had to give up his prestigious place in Jewish society and religion. He now had to follow Christ and be persecuted with the rest of the Christian church. Saul would later find out that Jesus had more suffering in store for him than the normal run of the mill Christian. Later Saul went by his Greek name Paul since he would be primarily ministering to the non-Jewish world.

B. THE MISSION

Next, we are introduced to his mission. Look at the next phrase. Paul describes himself as an apostle. If you just take a peek at the word that follows apostle, you will see that he was "sent." The everyday usage of the word apostle in Greek simply refers to someone who was sent on a mission. It also carries with it the meaning that the one who is sent represents the sender. So for example, an ambassador of the United States is sent to a foreign country by the government. She not only handles the everyday affairs of her office, she actually represents the United States government. The same idea applies to the president's cabinet. Each person is appointed by the president and sent on a particular mission. When accomplishing their duties, they actually represent the president.

However, the New Testament describes apostles in a more technical sense. In Acts chapter 1, the 11 Apostles who were directly appointed and commissioned by Jesus held a very special place in the early church. They were to be the official leaders of the church and representatives of Jesus Christ. There were 12, but Judas betrayed Jesus and went off and hanged himself. The remaining 11 felt they had to appoint another to take his place so they laid out the qualifications. The Apostle Peter said:

"²¹ ... it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22 / NIV).

So the official definition of an apostle was that the person had to be with Jesus from His baptism through His resurrection. The person would have to be a credible witness of the resurrection power of Jesus.

Paul is somewhere between the everyday definition of an apostle and the official New Testament designation of an apostle. Paul did not travel with the 12 from Jesus' baptism until He died and rose from the dead. However, Paul did meet the Lord face to face on the road to Damascus. And Jesus Himself commissioned and sent Paul on a mission. In fact, it would be totally out of Paul's comfort zone. Paul could have moved with great ease among the Jewish community and could have engaged the Jewish scholars at a very high level. However, Jesus chose to send Paul to the Gentiles. For Jews, Gentiles were everyone in the world who was not Jewish. Paul grew up hating Gentiles and tried to avoid being near them in any way.

So Paul became an apostle of Jesus Christ in a very strange way. Others in the New Testament ultimately come to be referred to as apostles as well, like Barnabas. In today's church structure, I believe that the office of apostles refers to our modern day missionaries. Their primary mission is to reach unbelievers or support those who are reaching unbelievers. They are sent out by the church.

C. THE MESSAGE

The interesting thing about Paul is that often he himself becomes the message. The gospel message is simple. God created us to be in a love relationship with Him. Because we have a natural bent towards sin and rebellion against God, and because we sin by harming others and disobeying the commands of God, that relationship is broken. There is nothing we can do to repair the broken relationship between God and us. We cannot be good enough or holy enough nor do enough good works to pay for our sin. That's why Jesus came down from Heaven. Because of our helpless estate, and because of God's love, Jesus took on human flesh, suffered, and died so that His blood could cover our sins. We receive forgiveness and a restored relationship with God simply by giving ourselves to Jesus in faith.

Paul's life was radically transformed. The only thing that can explain those sorts of changed lives is that the "Jesus" Paul preached was actually the Promised Jewish Messiah. And to prove that Jesus really is the Messiah and to prove that by placing our faith in Him we can be saved, God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection power and person of Jesus Christ guarantees the truth of the Gospel message. Paul's life was a demonstration of Jesus' resurrection power.

It also seems that Paul was traveling with an entourage. We know that he traveled with Barnabas and Luke. I'm sure there were others as well.

Let's keep this in mind. We are God's open letter to the world. We are to be clear messages of His love, His grace, and His mercy. As people look at our lives, can they really see the love, mercy, and grace of Jesus in us? Let's keep this in mind. **THE SENDER OF THIS LETTER WAS HIMSELF SENT AS A LETTER BY GOD.** We too have been sent as letters to the world in which we live. We should clearly be different from the society in which we live.

II. THE RECIPIENTS (VS 2b)

This Letter Has Been Sent To The People Of God

In the second half of verse 2, the recipients of the letter are mentioned. **THIS LETTER HAS BEEN SENT TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD.** To be sure, this letter was written to a specific group of local churches at a particular time in history. However, as God's chosen people, the letter is applicable to us as well.

A. THE DATE

First, let's talk about the date. The dates of the events I am about to give you are approximate dates because often the best of scholars differ by one or two years. Jesus was born around 5 B.C. He was crucified, died, was buried, and rose from the dead around 30 A.D. Paul evangelizes these churches on his first missionary journey sometime between 47-50 A.D. That journey is described in Acts chapters 13-14. There was a famous early church council that took place in Jerusalem around 50 A.D. It is described in Acts chapter 15.

What is interesting about this council is that it deals exactly with the problem Paul was writing to the Galatians about. If the letter had been written after the Jerusalem council, there would have been no debate. Paul could have simply referred to the decision of the council. That's why I believe the date of this letter is right after Paul completed his first missionary journey, and right before the Jerusalem Council. That would place the writing of the book somewhere between 49-50 A.D. The exact date is not important. What is important is the timing of the letter. It comes after Paul evangelized Galatia and before the Jerusalem Council. As I read Acts 13-15, I'm guessing the letter was written by Paul from the city of Antioch around 50 A.D.

B. THE LOCATION

The location is identified as Galatia. There is considerable debate about the exact identification of Galatia. There was a group of people located in northern France called the Gauls. They migrated down through Europe and settled in the northern part of what is today Turkey. They settled in a small region up by the Black Sea. When the Greeks and Romans conquered the world, the Romans expanded the territory and made it a province. They called the whole province, Galatia. The province cut down the whole center of modern day Turkey. It almost touched the Black Sea in the north and it almost touched the Mediterranean Sea in the south.

The debate is whether Paul is writing to this tiny city/region called Galatia in the north, or to the whole province of Galatia.

I'm a simple man, so I tend to go for the simple solution. If you go back and read Acts 13-14, you will see that Paul evangelizes the cities of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch. These are all cities in the big Roman Province of Galatia. And further, there is no evidence that Paul ever made it so far north as to reach the original city of Galatia.

C. THE DESTINATION

Which brings me to the destination. Notice to whom Paul is trying to reach in the province of Galatia. He is writing to the churches in Galatia. Paul planted churches in the cities of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch. This letter was meant to be circulated and it was meant to be authoritative in each church. I know that I have said this at least a thousand times but it's worth repeating again. The church is not a building or an institution. The word synagogue means "gathered together." The word *ecclesia* means "those who have been called out."

The church is the people of God gathered together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Therefore, this letter is equally authoritative for us. We may not face the exact problems the churches in Galatia were facing, but we still face the problems of adding to or subtracting from, the essentials of the Gospel. Our challenge will be to apply these truths to our modern day situation. Just

because this is going to be difficult, we must do it because **THIS LETTER HAS BEEN SENT TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD.** We are God's people. The message is for us.

III. THE SOURCE (VS 3-5) *Life Is All About Loving God*

Verses 3-5 reveal the ultimate source of this letter. As we gain insight into the source, we gain insight into what life is all about. **LIFE IS ALL ABOUT LOVING GOD.**

A. BLESSINGS

For believers, we are to constantly live with the blessings of God's grace and peace. "Grace and peace to you," is a common salutation for Greek and Jewish letters of the day. Grace was typically a Greek opening. It meant beauty, charm, elegance, and grace in a social sense. But for Christians, grace meant all the unmerited favor we receive from God. I want us to catch the full force of Paul's salutation of grace. In one of his other letters, Paul says this about our salvation and the way we became part of God's chosen family:

¹⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9 / NIV).

This is a powerful concept to grasp. None of us are saved because we have done more good things than bad things. None of us have become God's children because we are smart, clever, or hardworking. None of us are Christians because we are so holy. If any of us here are authentic Christians, it is simply because of God's grace demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf.

Let's combine this concept with the everyday meaning of grace in the Greek. Realizing that is only by grace that we have been saved makes us humble, charming, and graceful. Here are two formulas we have to keep in mind as we study through Galatians and as we live our lives:

Morality – Grace = Legalism

Morality + Grace = A Beautiful Elegant Life

Without grace from God we could never experience the blessing of peace either. Peace is the Jewish greeting *Shalom*. In ancient Rome, peace simply meant the absence of conflict. In other words, we have all heard about the incredible peace Rome brought to the whole world. It was known as "*Pax Romana*." But Rome brought this peace as a result of crushing any idea or any threat to different thinking. There were usually no rebellions or uprisings because Rome would crush them and make public spectacles of them. In fact this idea of peace led to the persecution of Christians in the 1st -4th centuries.

Peace meant something much different to the Jews and the Christians. Peace means that we can be in a right relationship with God no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. In other words, peace is living above our circumstances whether good or bad.

So when Paul greets the churches in Galatia with grace and peace, he is blessing them with gracious, beautiful, elegant lives that have learned to live above their circumstances. Isn't that a beautiful benediction we should pray on another? It would really be beautiful if we learned to greet one another with, "The grace and peace of the Lord be with you" wouldn't it?

B. SALVATION

One of the greatest blessings we have received from God is the source of what makes grace and peace possible in our lives, salvation. The source of this incredible salvation is the love of God the Father and His Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is not some philosophy conjured up by some poet. Salvation comes directly from the heart of God. Again, without Jesus, each one of us, no

matter how good or noble we think ourselves to be, deserves to spend an eternity in hell. Without Jesus we are hopelessly lost.

The motive of our salvation is the love of God. The method of our salvation is the death of Jesus on our behalf. The whole Old Testament Hebrew sacrificial system was the substitute of a perfectly unblemished innocent animal's blood and death for the sins of the one offering the animal. In other words, when the Hebrew brought the animal to the priest and laid his hands on the animal, he was transferring his own personal guilt onto the animal. The priest would slit the animal's throat, catch the blood, and splash it on the altar. During the original Passover, the Hebrews killed a lamb and sprinkled the blood over and on the sides of the doorposts. When the angel of death came by, he passed over that house.

When we place our faith in Jesus and confess our sins, we are actually transferring our guilt to Jesus and His blood covers our sins and cleanses us of all our unrighteousness. God provided a way in which we can be in a right relationship with Him. When we give our lives to Jesus in faith, God now looks at us through the blood of Jesus. That is the method of salvation.

The motivation of our salvation is God's love. The method of our salvation is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The mark of our salvation is that we are now free. Freedom is the mark of an authentic Christian. Jesus has rescued us from our bondage to Satan, the world, and death. We no longer have to give in to sin. We no longer have to put other people down to get ahead. We no longer have to feed our egos. We are now free to follow Christ. The mark of our salvation is freedom.

C. DESTINY

God is the source of our grace and peace. God is the source of our salvation and God is the source of our destinies. We have to always keep in mind that Jesus changed our eternal destinies from Hell to Heaven: from death to life. For our destinies here on earth he replaced despair with hope, meaninglessness with meaning and purpose, and bondage with freedom.

I don't want you to miss the last phrase in verse 4 and all of verse 5. Sometimes you will hear people talking about how God wants you to be rich and healthy and for your life to go smoothly. In reality, God's will for our lives is that everything we say and do, reflect His love, His grace, His mercy, and His peace to this lost and hurting world. And look closely. His will may mean suffering, humiliation, torture and death for us.

Jesus acted perfectly in accordance with God's will. Because Jesus perfectly acted according to the will of God our Father, we can now be reconciled with God. We can enjoy salvation. We can experience grace and peace no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. We are free from trying to impress or please people. We are free from the judgments and values of this world. Life is all about giving glory to God. Because Jesus perfectly obeyed God, He brought great blessings into this world. If we perfectly obey God, God can bring great blessings to this world and especially those around us. We are not to be looking to become rich and healthy. We are to be looking at drawing attention to the love, grace, mercy, peace, and salvation of God. **LIFE IS ALL ABOUT LOVING GOD.**

Even though the issues and situations will sound strange to us today, there is a clear message that will be applicable. **THIS LETTER OF PAUL TO THE GALATIANS IS RELEVANT FOR OUR LIVES TODAY.**

We will have to be very careful with the text and try and understand the universal principles. But I think it will be worth it. At least we have a good accurate text. There are not many textual issues with the book of Galatians. It is pretty much straight forward, unlike this incident from Horace Greeley's life. I'm not sure if the story is apocryphal or if it's true.

Horace Greeley was the famous editor of the "New York Tribune" and was notorious for having the most illegible handwriting. It was said that often he couldn't even read his own writing.

One day, he wrote an editorial at the last minute and handed it to the typesetter. Hurriedly, the typesetter printed it the best he could.

When the paper came out, there were several outstanding errors in it since there was no time to proofread it before sending it to press.

Greeley was furious and fired the typesetter on the spot. In fact, he wrote him a scorching letter denouncing his stupidity. However, the note was written so illegibly that the typesetter couldn't read it.

Being fired, he started to apply at different newspapers for a job. The foreman at one of the rival papers asked him if he had any recommendations. He said, "I've got a letter from Mr. Greeley," and produced this letter in which Greeley called him all sorts of names.

The foreman glanced at it, but he couldn't read it either. He asked, "How much were you making with Greeley?" The typesetter named the figure. The foreman replied, "I'll give you \$15 a week more. Start tomorrow morning."

Thank God Paul text comes to us in a very readable fashion. However, we must be careful to make the right applications for today.