

Freedom in Christ, Part 1

Scripture: Galatians 1:1–5

Code: 48-2

Open your Bible to Galatians. It shows up right after 1 and 2 Corinthians, in case you were wondering. Galatians.

There are many of you who have been here a long time – many, many years – and we've not done an epistle in a number of years. So this is a wonderfully welcomed time. Somebody asked me today, Have I preached Galatians before? And the answer is I think it was 1973, or something like that. And I'm so thrilled to be back at this incredibly significant epistle from Paul.

The book of Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of spiritual freedom. It has been called the Christian's Declaration of Independence. It has been identified as the battle cry of the Reformation. And, of course, this is the year that we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which liberated the gospel from Roman Catholicism and gave birth to Protestantism as we know it.

And, of course, the key figure in that Reformation, as we look back at history, was a man named Martin Luther, who was a Catholic monk. When he came to the study of the book of Galatians, discovered the true gospel, the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, and he says, "The epistle to the Galatians is my epistle." That's a quote from Luther. Luther then also said, "To it I am, as it were, married. Galatians is my Katherine." You remember, if you know his history, that he married Katherine von Bora, whom he called Katy, and he said, "Spiritually speaking, Galatians is my Katherine."

Merrill Tenney, years ago, said, "Christianity might have been just one more Jewish sect, and the thought of the Western world might have been entirely pagan without the book of Galatians." It's an incredible book, and we're going to be spending weeks and months in this book, not in any hurry.

Luther's commentary came out his teaching on Galatians, came out of his salvation experience. He was saved while he was teaching Galatians. But Luther's commentary on Galatians became the manifesto of the Protestant Reformation, and the Protestant Reformation found its message from the book of Galatians; and then, of course, as well from the book of Romans.

Galatians deals with the important issues: law, grace, works, the gospel, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, our Lord's death, His resurrection, salvation, sanctification – all of these critical gospel-related realities are part and parcel of the book of Galatians. But the primary message of the book of Galatians is freedom, freedom: freedom from sin, freedom from judgment, freedom from hell, freedom from all forms of spiritual bondage, and liberation into the glorious purposes and grace of God. About twenty times in this short epistle of six chapters we will come across some form of the word "bondage" or "freedom." It is a book about spiritual freedom. It is so relevant.

It was critical in the Reformation to set people free not only of the bondage of sin, but the bondage of false religion, which had held the Western world captive for about a thousand years. Just to talk about freedom is to speak the language of our time as well. It wasn't the language of Reformation time. There was a thousand years of darkness and spiritual bondage in which the Roman system held the church captive. And it was the Reformation and the book of Galatians that brought the liberating, freeing gospel that delivered souls from the bondage of error and the bondage of sin.

Freedom is an important thing to talk about. It's certainly popular today. Contemporary man, contemporary women in our culture pride themselves on personal freedom. Personal freedom is a big thing. In fact, we are constantly told that we don't have a right to encroach on anyone about anything if they deny us that space or that opportunity. They have complete freedom to control their own thoughts as to what they think, and their own exposure to things they might not want to hear.

Never has there been such a confused understanding of freedom in my lifetime as there is today. Free people think freedom comes from being free to do whatever you want to do, to hear whatever you want to hear and only what you want to hear, and to have no one impose on you anything that you don't want. There are no absolutes in the moral world; there therefore should be no moral restraints. There is no recognition of accountability, responsibility, or judgment. And so we hear that people demand freedom to say what they want, freedom to think what they want, freedom to do what they want, freedom to disagree, freedom to dissent, freedom from authority, freedom from ethics that are imposed on them – freedom.

But they're not free. That all is a deception. There is no freedom to the unregenerate soul, because that soul is bound to sin. The only freedom they have is the freedom to choose the sin that most appeals to them. There's no freedom from sin. Therefore there's no freedom from guilt. Therefore there's no freedom from fear. There's no freedom from judgment. There's no freedom from eternal punishment. It is a lie. It is the deception of our time that people are really free. They are bound in sin to the degree that the Bible says they are slaves to sin, free to choose which sinful master they prefer, but nonetheless slaves. They are bound in the chains of transgression and iniquity, headed for a sentence from God that will assign them to eternal punishment. They're not free.

Jesus said in John 8, verse 32: "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And he's talking about gospel truth, the truth of the Word of God. That is the only thing that sets you free, because it alone frees you from the bondage of sin, and consequently guilt, and judgment, and death, and eternal hell. The message of Galatians is the message of freedom: real freedom, true freedom.

Now religion wants to offer freedom. Religion comes along and wants to aid man in finding some freedom from what grips him, what distresses him, what troubles him, what frightens him. And religion takes all forms across a wide spectrum. Some forms of religion are legalistic, and they say that if you really want freedom you have to keep certain rules, and you have to abide by them fastidiously and passionately and extremely and zealously. And that's where Martin Luther was, and that's where monks are, and that's what monasteries have done, and that's what nuns have done, and many other forms of religious sacrifice, self-denial, rejection of social life, marriage, locking themselves into some prescribed form of sort of deprived living, fastidiously attached to certain laws, certain rituals, certain ceremonies that have only to do with external behavior, because they can't change the heart.

On the other hand, there are others who say real freedom is found in being bound by no law at all. You need to be completely free to do whatever you want without restraint, and only in that will you find freedom, and then there's everything in between. Every religion offers its own spin on freedom: freedom from what bothers you, freedom from what disappoints you, what causes you anxiety. And it might be the freedom offered by ritualism. If you do these rituals, if you're bound to these forms of ritual, and if you do them often enough, even though they in themselves are a bondage, they are the path to the freedom your soul desires. For some it's that rigorous asceticism and self-denial, and even inflicting pain on yourself.

For others it's a kind of spiritual masochism where you believe that this kind of moral self-denial will bring you true freedom, so you join a monastery; and maybe if it's bad enough and if your lusts aren't controlled enough, you inflict wounds on your body. Maybe you go in public and close your eyes so you don't see things. For other people it's developing a sort of self-righteous approach to life and being a good person, having a kind of morality that's sort of generally acceptable.

For other people, freedom comes in self-reliance. Freedom comes in being disconnected from anybody else's expectations, anybody else's inclinations, anybody else's intrusion into your life. That's more and more popular as people stay single longer.

For some people, freedom is a kind of morality. For other people, freedom is amorality. For some people, freedom is just existentialism. That was the philosophy of the last fifty years: "Just be you." That's real freedom. All of that is sheer satanic deception. No one on any of those terms is free.

All humanity, Scripture says, are enslaved by sin, enslaved by sin in the kingdom of darkness ruled by Satan, who is the prince of the power of the air who dominates them. They are children of the devil, and there is no freedom. The freedoms they think they enjoy are only illusions on the way to eternal bondage in a hell of punishment. There's no freedom.

You can try a Western religion. You can try Eastern religion – Hinduism, Buddhism, cults, Mormonism, whatever it is. They all offer some path to freedom from your problems, your guilt, your fears. They all lie. They all lie. Whether you choose to be a moral person or an immoral person, whether you choose to be a good person or an openly bad person, thinking you're going to find freedom. Neither will bring you that, nor will anything in the middle, because you must be free of yourself. That's exactly right.

How do you free yourself from who you are? Your problem is not outside of you, it's inside of you. It's aided and abetted by those that are around you, and the culture that defines corruption and standardizes it and makes it ubiquitous. But you are the problem, and you will never be free until you are a different you. And the only thing that'll do that, Paul says to us in Galatians, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is nothing in the world that can free you from you.

And you are a sinner. You are a slave of sin, bound in sin - whatever path of life you take, religious or irreligious, moral or immoral, good or bad, or anything in between. Whether you have decided that you're going to be a philanthropist or decided you're going to be a criminal, none of those things will give you freedom. You will just choose your form of reaping what you constantly sow, and that is transgression, trespass, iniquity, and sin.

So where does freedom lie? Look at chapter 5, verse 1, and here's a summation of Galatians. Galatians chapter 5, verse 1: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free." There, in a sense, is the summation of the book of Galatians. "It was for freedom that Christ set us free."

Freedom comes in Christ and in no other place. There is no freedom in legalism on the one hand, in libertinism on the other hand, or anything in between. Freedom is only in Christ. Listen to this: as long as you are in bondage to sin you are not free; as soon as you are in bondage to Christ, you are set free. Your supposed freedom is bondage to sin. Your bondage to Christ is freedom from sin - from its power, from its consequences, and someday from its presence. This is why Christians talk about joy, and peace, and love, and satisfaction, and hope, and fulfillment, because they have been set free from the bondage which dominates all people: the bondage of a sinful nature.

When a person comes to Christ he or she comes to the liberator. He is *the* liberator who sets us free. The prison door is finally open and true freedom is found, and we will never again be incarcerated. We are free forever: free from the power, the penalty, and one day the presence of sin.

That's Paul's message, and what a message it is. What an incredibly significant message it is, because every human being in the world experiences constantly the bondage to sin, the fear of death and judgment that is in every heart. So Paul, in this letter, is going to show us where true freedom lies; and it lies in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now as carefully argued as this book is, as brilliantly presented as it is, as masterfully as the argument unfolds in the book, this is no cool treatise of an academic nature. It is a hot, volatile, righteously angry presentation. The apostle Paul writes this under tremendous distress. He is righteously angry.

The book of Galatians is like a flashing sword in a great swordsman's hand whose heart is on fire to defend something. And what is he defending? He is defending, first of all, the gospel which is under assault; and, secondly, the people who have been his life, the folks in the churches that he has established who are being exposed to lies and legalism. So he writes as one who is deeply disturbed, and even angry. You see that – and let's go to the beginning of the book – as he starts the letter.

Notice it's a rather familiar beginning: "Paul, an apostle" – and then in parenthesis he gives us a hint of what he's facing – "(not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen."

And then immediately this: "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!"

That's quite a beginning, amazing beginning. What you notice there is there's no commendation. He wrote thirteen letters in the New Testament; this is the only one that doesn't have some commendation. It doesn't say something nice, something affirming, something encouraging. There is a fury burning in his heart, because the gospel is being attacked; and therefore the people to whom he has taken the gospel are in a dangerous position. He writes as one who fights against the intrusion of false teachers, and for the defense of those he loves. He is fighting mad.

Now he, along with Barnabas his friend, had founded these churches in Galatia, in southern Galatia, and did that on the first missionary journey. You know that Paul is basically converted in Acts 9, and by the twelfth chapter he is set apart for the ministry with some other men, and they start out on their missionary journeys. We come into Acts 13 and 14, and that's their first missionary journey. They go into the region called Galatia. Galatia's not a town, it's not a city, unlike Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and others that have the names of the other epistles. This is a region, and there are a number of towns in the region of Galatia. In fact, they are familiar.

There's the town called Antioch, which is a rather popular name; a town called Iconium, a town called Lystra, and a town called Derbe. And on the first missionary journey Paul went to all those places, preached the gospel, and established a church. These were the people that he gave the gospel, people dear to his heart. He went back on his second missionary journey to Galatia. He went back on his third missionary journey again to Galatia. He had a huge investment with them.

By the way, when he came to the town of Lystra, according to Acts 14:19, the Jews were so furious with him that they stoned him. So he has incredible opposition. And when he goes, you remember his strategy. When he went into any Gentile town he would go first to the synagogue, because as a Jew he had a connection; and because the gospel came to the Jew first and then the Gentile, he would go there to see if the Lord would save some Jews, then he would have some people with him to try to reach the Gentiles.

Some Jews would believe; the rest would begin to persecute him and whoever was with them, and then begin to persecute the church that he established. So in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, you have these little new churches. Paul has now left after the first journey, left after the second and the third, and through it all, they are being persecuted by the Jews who reject the gospel. They're living in a very difficult situation.

External persecution is one thing; but when Paul finds out that there are false teachers there who claim to be Christians who have gotten inside the church and are perverting the gospel, he is furious, he is furious. They are disguised as angels of light; that's how Satan disguises himself. So you have the reality in these churches made up of Jews and Gentiles that the believing Jews along with the Gentiles are being persecuted by local Jews.

And then to make it worse, there are other Jews who claim to be Christians, and those Jews who claim to be Christians we call Judiazers. They claimed to believe in Christ, but they also believed that you could not be saved without circumcision and adherence to the Mosaic ceremonies, observance of the Sabbath, etc. And they believed that you couldn't be sanctified without continuing to keep all the Mosaic, external, ceremonial rules. So they were trying to *Judaize* Christians, both Jew and Gentile. They came in with their false gospel, and Paul went right to the issue - no words of

commendation. I'm sure there could have been things said to the believers, the true beleaguered believers in these towns in south Galatia, but he doesn't have time for any of that.

He is shocked. He is completely stunned by the fact that they are listening to the Judiazers, and so he launches in saying, "I don't care who they are. I don't care if it's we, myself, and Barnabas, or another of those who travel with me, or even hypothetically an angel from heaven. If anybody comes and alters the gospel that I gave you, let him be *anathema*, damned, accursed!"

Now that's the kind of preaching you would never hear today in an evangelical church, sadly. Heretical false teachers have come, very subtle. Go over to chapter 4, just to look at them, and verse 17. He says this about them: "They eagerly seek you" - they seek you, they want you in their fold - "They seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them." This is what false teachers do. They seek souls, and they seek to convince those souls that they are in fact *shut out* of the kingdom of God, but that they have the doorway in. That's what all false religion, false Christian forms of cults do.

"They seek you, not commendably. I seek you commendably for God and the truth. They seek you not commendably. They just want to shut you out to make you think you're outside the kingdom, and they and they alone can show you the way in." That's what false teachers do.

At the end of chapter 6, or near the end of chapter 6, in verse 12, he says something else about them: "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be *circumcised*." What? Yes. They're going into a church of adults and demanding that all the men be circumcised according to Old Testament circumcision, or they cannot, they cannot be in the kingdom of God.

"They're imposing circumcision on you." Why would they do that? Simply, verse 12, "so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ," which tells us they were saying, "We believe in Christ, we believe in the cross of Christ, but the Jews hate us so much. So in order to stop the persecution we're going to ask you to be circumcised." So they were going to get double duty out of their false gospel. They were going to tell people, "You're not even in the kingdom, though you think you are. The only way in the kingdom is through us, and here's the door, and the door is circumcision. That'll get you in the kingdom, and that'll quiet the persecution at the same time."

Paul says in verse 13 of chapter 6, "Those who are circumcised don't even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so they may boast in your flesh." Here's another purpose: they did it because they wanted to be the ones who showed you the door to the true kingdom. They thought they were the true teachers. They did it because they wanted to evade persecution, and they also did it because they wanted to rack up converts. "They wanted to boast in you coming to them."

Heretical false teachers; they created serious trouble in that church. Chapter 5, verse 10: "I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view, no other view." What do you mean "no other view"? No other view than Christ. No other view than Christ.

Back in verse 6, he says, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision or uncircumcision mean *anything*. It's faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? Certainly this persuasion didn't come from Him who *calls* you. This is a little leaven that's going to

leaven the whole lump of dough. I have confidence in you,” verse 10, “that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is.”

And then he gets really, really coarse, verse 12: “I wish that those who are troubling you and wanting you to be circumcised would castrate themselves.” Wow! What a statement. What a statement. And why? Because, verse 13: “For you were called to freedom, brethren. You were called to freedom. You were called” – the end of the verse – “through love to serve.”

So the false teacher said circumcision is necessary for salvation. Maintenance of all the Mosaic ritual ceremonies, dietary laws, customs, traditions – necessary for sanctification. You’ve got to do it all.

Go over to chapter 4; I’ll show you this, verse 9: “Now that you have come to know God,” he says to them, “or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?”

“You’re going backwards. All of those rules and rituals were shadows. And now the substance of Christ has come, the shadows are gone. The light has dissipated all the shadows - the true light who is Christ. Those are just elemental things. Those are the ABCs. Why are you going back again? Do you desire to be enslaved all over again? You’re going back to days and months and seasons and years.” What’s that? That’s the old Jewish Sabbath calendar with all the feasts and festivals and elements.

“Why are you going back? I beg of you, brethren, I beg of you, become as I am. You don’t want to go back. Christ arrived, the gospel is preached; that is the sign of the new age. Why would you go back to the old age? They’re corrupting your understanding of salvation and corrupting your understanding of sanctification. Circumcision has no part of salvation. Ceremony has no part of sanctification.” What they’re doing, of course, is attacking the gospel of pure grace and faith, and they’re adding works, and actually external, physical kinds of works and ceremonies. “You were saved,” Paul says to them, “by love through grace, and now you live by love in grace.”

Go back to chapter 3 for a minute, and we’ll get another glimpse at what his message is. “You,” verse 1, “you foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you,” – Who has tricked you, who has conned you, who has seduced you? – “before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? You’ve been to the cross. You’ve seen the gospel. You know where your salvation lies. Who bewitched you? Why are you so foolish?” Verse 3: “Having begun already by the Spirit, are you going to be perfected by the flesh?”

This book is a defense of the gospel of grace; it’s a powerful one. And you can see by the language that Paul uses he is dead serious about this. Anything that compromises salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is *anathema*. And whoever proclaims it is *anathema*, accursed.

Now keep in mind, the Judiazers claimed to be Christians. That’s how they had access to the churches. Furthermore, there’s a real possibility that the Judiazers, at least a core of them, came from the Jerusalem church; and that was the first church, the Pentecost church. Why do I say that? Because we know that all these issues of circumcision, ceremony, Mosaic law, came up in the Jerusalem church to such a degree that in Acts 15 they had to have a church council to straighten it out. Very likely, some of those from the Jerusalem church that wanted to introduce circumcision and

all the elements externally of Judaism left there, took their message, and dogged the steps of the apostle Paul.

Their goal again – you saw it - to turn people away from Paul to believe them, to tell people, “You’re on the outside, you’re not in; but we’ll show you the way in, and it’s through circumcision and ceremonial observance.” And they did it, in part, to gain converts for their own system; in part, to escape persecution by acquiescing to the Jews; and, in part, of course, to rack up names on the lists of their accomplishments. Paul condemns all of it.

Now in Galatians he has three tasks. His first task is to defend his apostleship, because they have to trust him. It’s not as if there are other people preaching what he’s preaching – you do understand that. Paul goes to the Gentile world and essentially he’s the man, he’s the guy. He’s the preacher, the speaker. They even acknowledged him in pagan places as the chief speaker. There isn’t anybody else.

So, look, if you reject Paul, then you don’t get the gospel. If you shut down Paul, if you deny his authority, there’s no other source. There are not media organizations pumping out the gospel. There aren’t other preachers preaching the gospel. It is absolutely critical that Paul have authority, and that people believe that he spoke authoritatively. And that is why at the very beginning of this letter, he can’t get more than two Greek words out of his mouth. One is his name and the other is his title, “Paul apostle,” until he has to answer what has been coming at him: “Not sent from men nor through the agency of man.”

That’s what they were saying. They had to discredit Paul. They had to shut him down, shut him out. So chapters 1 and 2 are a defense of his apostleship. Chapters 1 and 2 are a defense of his apostleship. Chapters 3 and 4, then, are the establishing of salvation by grace alone; 3 and 4, the establishing of salvation by grace alone. Chapters 5 and 6, showing Christians that their walk is a walk in grace, not in law. Chapters 1 and 2, Paul’s authority. Chapters 3 and 4, the gospel of grace. Chapters 5 and 6, the Christian walk in grace.

You see the heart of Paul coming through here with such power. You can understand, can’t you, just in what I’ve said this morning, why this got ahold of the heart of Martin Luther. He saw the fury in the corruption of the gospel, and he was a pretty furious guy. They called him a wild boar tearing through the Lord’s vineyard. Paul was the mentor, you might say, through Galatians to Martin Luther.

So heresy had hit these churches, and each little congregation was shaken and troubled and bewitched, and even begun to buy into it so that they began to depart from the gospel of grace into legalism, to go from the new age in Christ and the New Covenant back to the old age, back to the elemental things. And Paul wants them to know that grace alone saves. Grace frees, liberates; and grace empowers holy living. True freedom comes through grace.

Now let’s go back and look at the very beginning. Let’s see what he says initially about his authority, and then he’ll say something about his message, and then something about his motive. But, first, his authority: “Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead).”

That’s about as clear as it’s going to get, right? He doesn’t come with some human authority, his

own, or from any other agency of men. This is his commission: he comes sent “through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.” Jesus Christ is truly God, as proven by the resurrection. And it is the true God who raised Him from the dead that has commissioned Paul.

Well, let’s look at His name “Paul.” He uses it again in chapter 5, verse 2, where he says, “I, Paul.” Very common name. *Paulos* in the Greek; a very common name. But when we say “Paul” we all know who we’re talking about, don’t we. Its identity is enough for us. He is that marvelous, well-known Jew who was converted to Christ on the Damascus Road who founded these churches and many other churches. “Paul” is enough for us.

But he didn’t start out as Paul. He started out as Saul, didn’t he. The first time we meet him is in the book of Acts. We’re early in the book of Acts, and he’s holding the cloaks of the people that are stoning Stephen to death. Stephen has preached the gospel early in the book of Acts in Jerusalem. The Jews are infuriated, they throw him off a ledge, they begin to stone him to death, and there’s a guy standing there holding the garments of the people stoning Stephen; and that’s none other than a man named Saul.

Saul was very, very devoted to Judaism. Look at chapter 1 for just a moment, and go down to verse 14. Galatians 1:14, “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. That’s why” – back to verse 13 – “I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.” That’s the Saul we meet in the eighth chapter of the book of Acts.

We meet him again in the ninth chapter of the book of Acts, and I want you to look at that for a moment. I think this is such an incredible and remarkable account of his conversion.

“Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples,” – by the way, he said he was a blasphemer and a murderer; he is killing Christians – “went to the high priest in Jerusalem, asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way” – Christianity became known as “the Way,” because Jesus said He was the Way – “both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

“As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus. Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’” Amazing moment. “He said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ He said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it’ll be told you what you must do.’ The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

“Now there was disciple” – a disciple of Christ – “at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘Here I am, Lord.’ And the Lord said to him, ‘Go up and go the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.’” God gave Ananias a vision, and Paul a vision of Ananias to set up the meeting.

“But Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I’ve heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.’ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. And for several days he was with the disciples who were in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’”

This is an unbelievable miracle. This is a man who is an adult, who has been such an extreme Pharisee, so far advanced in his religion, that he murdered Christians. In one period of three days he is now a preacher of the gospel of the very One he hated and persecuted.

This is the transforming power of God. There is no human explanation for Paul. He’s not a hypocrite even as a Jew. He’s not a hypocrite even as a Jew. He says, “I was a blasphemer, I was a murderer, but God had mercy on me, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.”

He believed he was serving God; he believed it. He was not like many Pharisees who were religious hypocrites. He wanted to obey every command, every tradition, every ceremony, offer every sacrifice. Everything that Moses required he wanted to do to the nth degree. Legalist of the strictest kind. He says, “My whole life I had a clear conscience. I have a clear conscience now, and actually I had a clear conscience when I was a Jew, that I was doing God’s work. Now all of a sudden everything has changed.”

In fact, Galatians 1, if you go down to verse 15, “When God, who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood. I didn’t even go to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me...I went to Arabia” - “and I was there three years. I don’t have a commission from anybody in Jerusalem. I have a commission from Christ Himself.”

Separated from his mother’s womb in the plan of God, saved on the Damascus Road, commissioned three years in the desert, in the wilderness, as the Lord reveals to him the gospel that he preaches. Strict, bigoted, zealous, passionate legalist becomes the apostle of freedom in Christ, freedom from the Law. He writes the Magna Carta. He writes the charter of freedom that he found in Christ. That’s why he said, “It was for freedom that Christ has set us free.” He had been freed from the bondage of his legalistic religion, which did nothing to deliver his soul from sin. Paul has to defend his apostleship, and that’s what he does right at the very outset immediately: “I was sent from God.”

You know, when you think about it, pretty amazing that the Lord put so much responsibility in that one man. And now you know why, though they tried, they couldn’t kill him. Though they stoned him and left him for dead, God raised him from the dead. You know why, as he says in 2 Corinthians, he went through all the horrors of suffering over and over and over and over; but the Lord never let them kill him. And even when they put him in prison, the Lord continued to cause him to speak with power and conviction the gospel.

You couldn't shut him up, because essentially the future of the gospel in the Gentile world depended on him, depended on him. God has always done His mighty work through a very few. Really, the whole world turned on this man. I mean, we don't even hear the name of an apostle after Paul starts his ministry in the twelfth chapter of Acts. It's him. We might wonder how much God could do through one man. Well, here's an illustration.

But they didn't think he was authorized. Well, after all, their argument might go like this: "Hey, Judas was a discredited disciple, committed suicide. But he was replaced. He was replaced by Matthias. There was a replacement God chose through the picking of lots and Matthias was chosen. And who do you think you are? The twelve is complete. You're an outsider."

And they might have said, "Further, you're a blasphemer. You were murdering Christians. Surely God wouldn't choose you. Who do you think you are? And, oh, by the way, you don't have any authority from Jerusalem and the apostles there." So Paul has to defend his authority.

Now he does quickly identify his authority in three ways, **and I'll tell you what they are next Sunday.**

When we talk about a man of authority, Paul had authority prior to his conversion, didn't he. He had authority from the leaders of Israel. Then he was sent by man through the agency of man. But the authority that he possessed after his conversion came straight out of heaven, and it was in that authority that he preached the gospel, which had been revealed to him from God Himself. Let's pray together.

Lord, we are so caught up in the wonder of Your work in the life of the apostle Paul and the power of his influence. The drama of the change demonstrates what new birth is: that the apostle Paul, who was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, circumcised the eighth day, of the nation Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, zealous for the traditions, blameless before the Law, counted it all, he says in Philippians 3, as refuse, rubbish, garbage, dung, nothing, when he discovered the righteousness that comes not by works and not by religion, but the righteousness of God granted to him through faith in Jesus Christ. And in the moment when he turned from the righteousness of the Law and was freed to receive the righteousness of faith, the righteousness of God granted to him by faith, everything else was rubbish, and he was set free.

We are only set free from ourselves, and our sin, and guilt, and death, and judgment, and eternal punishment through faith in Christ. We can never have a righteousness that satisfies You. You must give us Your righteousness. You must credit us with Your righteousness. And that is exactly what You have done.

As Paul said, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, to be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." What a gift. The only way to freedom from sin's power, from sin's penalty, from sin's presence is to receive the righteousness that comes from heaven and is granted to those who put their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Lord, we, with full hearts, thank You for the freedom that is ours in Christ, for freedom - freedom from

sin, freedom from death, freedom from judgment, freedom from punishment. Christ has set us free. Do that work, we pray. Amen.

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