



Galatians 1:1-10
 Finding Freedom: Galatians
 Hard Habit to Break

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This morning we embark on a new adventure for a new year, as we journey through the book of Galatians for the next 12 weeks. If you've never read Galatians or don't know much about it, you may wonder, "Why would we do that?" and may honestly want to know what is in this letter that might be of value. Others of you maybe know this letter of Paul's well and ask that same question, followed by another one: "Are you crazy, Pastor?" And I'll tell you, my answer is: I've been asking myself that same question. I mean, I planned this out this past summer, but as we've gotten closer over the last few weeks I've been wondering "why did I plan this?"

But, one of the things that I remember from my seminary days was the admonition that we pastors should "preach the whole counsel of Scripture." In other words, preach through a wide range of the Bible – not just favorite books, passages, themes, etc. Tim Wertz told me after I'd been pastor here 2-3 years, that he'd never worked with a pastor who preached from the Old Testament as much as I do. It was a compliment, by the way; and again, like a drum beating in my head, I hear my preaching professors say: "preach the whole counsel of Scripture." So, we're in Galatians. And the fact is, it has much to offer in the way of wisdom, admonition, and encouragement about the faith. It is a rich letter.

So, a little background about Galatians before we dive into today's passage. **First, Galatians is not in the Old Testament...it's in the New Testament, and many Christians have read it. But I believe it tends to get set aside.** One author says, "...Galatians tends to dived people into two camps: those who think highly of it and those who do not." He goes on to comment that some people say that "every sentence contains a thunderbolt."¹ It's a fiery and emotional letter from Paul to the Christians in Galatia, and Paul is clearly addressing some conflicts and wayward theology/practice that has quickly crept into the Church. Galatians 3:1 is a great example of all of this, when Paul writes: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1). He doesn't mince words, does he? Because this isn't necessarily a letter

that makes you feel real good – like Philippians, or First John, or the Gospels – it tends to get set aside. We don't like tough love very well, sometimes. 😊

Second, Paul weaves in a lot of Old Testament references and history which, if you're not familiar with it all, can be puzzling and confusing, even intimidating. Galatians may only be 6 chapters long, but it is densely packed with theology, history, culture, and more. It is all written to help his readers grow in their discipleship to Jesus, but it could be almost overwhelming for us if we're not familiar with that background. So most every Sunday we will cover that stuff to help us understand what he's saying.

Third: He also writes inspiringly to draw them (and now us) into a deeper relationship with Jesus, and a deeper fellowship with one another. For instance the “fruit of the Spirit” – which is a favorite portion of Scripture for a lot of people – is given in Galatians 5; there is Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20); Galatians 3:28, a verse that I recall studying 20 years ago and reading one author who said it was the most “explosive verse” in the New Testament, that says, **“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)**. There is Galatians 5:1, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” and that freedom theme is sprinkled throughout Galatians and gives us our overarching theme for this series; and lastly maybe most famous verse of all, Galatians 6:11, where Paul takes over the pen himself, and writes, “See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!” Ok, maybe that last verse isn't so well-known and influential...but it does give insight into how Paul wrote his letters: mostly they were dictated and someone else wrote. So there's a lot in Galatians that many of you will recognize and have heard either from Galatians itself, or similar themes from other sections of Scripture.

Fourth: There is some vigorous scholarly debate about who exactly was the recipient of this letter. It's addressed to “the churches in Galatia.” Galatia was a region of the Roman Empire, though there was a southern and northern portion. The northern portion came to be known as Galatia some 300 years before Christ and the term “Galatians” really is more of an ethnic

term about the people who lived there, than the title of a defined region. The southern part of Galatia was called Galatia because of the spread of the Roman empire, and was more of a defined place, a politically defined “state” within the Roman empire. Whether he was writing to Christians in the north or the south (no one seems to think it could be both) really is irrelevant in the end, but it makes for fascinating reading if you like that kind of thing.

Fifth and finally: most scholars agree that Paul wrote this letter in the late 40’s or early 50’s A.D. Some argue for a later date, but that is definitely the minority view. So, if the late 40’s to early 50’s is right, this was written 15-20 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, which is the blink of an eye from a scholarly perspective.² That would make it Paul’s first letter, or very nearly so – 1 Thessalonians is sometimes thought to be his first, as well. If you want to pursue this kind of stuff more (audience, date, etc.), I’ve left some resources in the footnotes of the sermon text that will lead you to some things you can read (and there’s a lot more online than what I’ve shared).

So, with that introduction to Galatians, let’s dive into God’s Word to you and me today: **Galatians 1:1-10.**

Right off the bat, we see the Christocentric nature of Paul’s letter. It’s from Paul, an apostle “not sent by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brothers and sisters with me.” He’s immediately getting their attention and reminding them about the power of God the Father, and therefore God’s supremacy, over any and all other gods or religious endeavors to which one might turn. As we’ll see throughout this letter, that is a primary problem Paul is seeking to address – that the Galatians are turning away from the gospel message of “salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus alone.”

He’s also reminding them that he visited with them (also introduces himself to people who are new) and now writes to them not because he’s self-appointed or elected by some group of people. Rather, he has a calling upon his life, directly from God (flows out of his encounter with Jesus, which he recaps later in the letter), that has put him in this position of proclaiming the gospel message of Christ crucified for our sin, and raised from the dead to

give us hope of eternity. And, although this letter is coming from him, he reminds them that he's a team player: He's with other Christians and writing on their behalf...in fact, the letter is being sent from them as well.

It doesn't take long for him to then dive in head-first to the why he's writing. And he does so with great passion and strong language. **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Jesus...turning to a different gospel which is no gospel at all...they are trying to pervert the gospel...let them be cursed...again, let them be cursed.”** The Greek language here is really strong. The English almost doesn't do it justice. Two translations I looked at in preparation for this, for example, take the phrase “let them be under God's curse” – which appears twice in succession – and they render it “let them go to hell.” I wasn't going to read those translations for our Scripture reading this morning! That's shocking, it's so strong. Now, the Greek for “hell” is not actually used, so it's not an exact translation, but it illustrates the passion and strong words Paul uses here, and that he uses throughout this letter.

So, what's going on in these churches? And remember, a church in their day was not a large gathering with a pastor who was called by the congregation and other staff to help lead and run all the ministries of the church. The church was much more organic. Individual churches met in people's homes; everyone had input into their teaching and learning, kind of like our small groups and discipleship classes. There was no large gathering – whether in person or virtually through Youtube. As the church grew, they divided up into more homes in which they'd meet.

As a result, there was a greater possibility (than we might have today) of false teachers coming in and having sway. The Christian faith was all so new. There weren't established traditions, theology, or a set of beliefs that had been around for decades or centuries, and so forth. There was no established way to “test” someone's orthodoxy or their theology. There was *some* foundation for that with Judaism, since Christianity grows out of that...but even for Jewish Christians, Christianity was, and is, a major shift in thinking. For Gentile Christians – non-Jewish Christians, which would have primarily been Paul's audience here – there may have been no religious

background, or one that was built on Greek Mythology or other pagan religions.

And so the gospel message of Jesus Christ is not getting painted on a blank canvas. Not that it ever is, really. But oftentimes the canvas is one that's already been prepped with Christian beliefs or values. For a lot of us, this is the case. Many of us probably grew up in Christian homes, or we had Christian friends, or we went to Christmas and Easter services growing up. Anyone who was born before maybe 1980, and especially if you were born in the 1950's or earlier, those people have a sense that they grew up in "a Christian nation." Even if not everyone had a faith in Jesus, there were shared values, and a basic understanding of the Christian faith by most people. And so for people who grew up in that larger culture, when we came to a place of faith in Jesus, there was, to varying degrees, some Christian background and understanding already built in to us. There wasn't as much "deconstructing" that needed to happen, in order to construct this new faith in Jesus.

Today, however, more and more frequently, that kind of story is becoming less and less common. A greater percentage of people living here on the Eastside – or most anywhere in America – are unfamiliar with the gospel message than would have been 30 or 40 or 60 years ago. If they have heard much about Jesus, there's a good chance it wasn't in a context that was favorable to Christianity, and so what they know about Jesus may be skewed away from the Biblical truth. **So in some ways, the larger context around us today is becoming more like the context in which Paul operated: there is little cultural understanding of Jesus and the Christian faith.**

So that's their background; it's similar to ours today. They had a lot of erasing that needed to be done on the canvas of their lives in order to have a blank canvas on which to paint the gospel message. Undoubtedly, Paul had to do a lot of that work when he shared the good news of Jesus. And with these Christians in Galatia, that faith in Jesus took root. They were receptive. But from what Paul writes, he has clearly gotten word that there are people who have come in since he left, and are twisting the gospel message. Or they were there before but have slipped back to old ways of thinking and teaching. They're teaching something other than the cross of Christ and the empty

tomb. They're teaching something other than grace and forgiveness...and it's impacting the faith of the people to whom he's writing.

This is something we must always be wary of ourselves, with the tricky balance being that God doesn't call most of us to be isolationists and retreat from the world in order not to be "tainted" by different things. I know right now we're not as socially engaged as we normally would be, and for good reason; 2/3 or more of our Sunday morning attendance is now online as people worship from home or while on vacation in Maui, or wherever they may be...but most of us don't really want to be hermits or monks, isolated from the world. And with rare exception, most Christians aren't. We want to engage the world. We want to let the light of Christ shine for all to see, as Jesus puts it himself. But even as we do that, we want to hold fast to the truth of the gospel, the truth of Jesus Christ.

Paul is trying in this letter, and we see it expressed strongly right here in these opening verses...**Paul is trying to get them back to Jesus.** Back to the gospel message. Back to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is a great word for us here in the 21st Century, as well, and perhaps especially as we start a new year. It's a good time to take stock of life and in particular to assess where we are in our faith. Is there some belief that has crept into our faith that maybe doesn't square up with Scripture? Or is there some facet of our lives that doesn't square up with Scripture? And if there is, how did that come about, and most importantly: What are we going to do about it? For the Galatians, it probably was that they slipped back into old ways of thinking about spirituality, maybe putting Jesus *alongside* other gods, rather than *over* and *above* them and the only one worth having allegiance to...recognizing the others as false. Sometimes, old habits die hard.

Anyone remember that song by the band Chicago from 1984, "Hard Habit to Break"? It's about a guy who lost the love of his life and he's having a hard time moving on – she's a "hard habit to break." But sometimes we struggle with that spiritually, as well. **Things that we thought were dead and buried will find new life and come back to haunt our walk with Jesus and the**

relationships with people in our lives. Do you have some habits that have been hard to break? Let 2021 be the year that you grow spiritually and put some things to rest that are holding you back from living for Jesus more fully and shining his light more brightly. That's one side of the coin.

On the flipside: Maybe there are some new habits that need to get started. I mentioned briefly in my Christmas Eve message that our family is reading through the Bible this year. We have Bibles that are laid out chronologically, so that will be kind of fun, and then set up to be read each day so you read the whole thing in a year. So it will be combining daily Scripture reading with conversation around the dinner table about what we read that day, and then once a week I'm going to prepare a quiz for my kids to see if everything is sticking, with quarterly exams that cover everything we've read up until that point. They didn't know about these quizzes and exams when we asked them if they'd like to do this Bible in a year thing or not. 😊

Maybe diving into a new habit of Bible reading like that is an important step for you. Or signing up for the 7-week class on 1 Peter on Monday nights that's coming up to grow in Scriptural knowledge and get to know some folks at RH better. Or maybe a long-term small group would be beneficial and you'd like to help get something going where you'd explore Scripture together and support and encourage one another – you can help get one started with RH folks. Daily journaling, praying, personal devotions, Bible reading...I mean the possibilities are endless.

What's something you can do this year to help you stay on track with Jesus, so Paul's words to the Galatians don't become his words to you: **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Galatians 1:6-7).** Or maybe you don't know much about Jesus and the grace, forgiveness, and peace with God that can be found through faith in Him. Galatians is a great place to get a blank canvas so God can begin painting the gospel message for you on it.

Jesus gave his all for you and me. The cross testifies to this. And the empty tomb backs it up, gives the cross meaning, and gives us hope for eternity with God. That's the gospel message, and it's the message of Galatians. Let's stay on track with that Gospel message this year here at Rose Hill and in our own individual lives, bringing God all the honor and all the glory as we live for him. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ David Pawson, "Unlocking the Bible" in his introduction to the chapter on Galatians.

² This is pretty in-depth on all of these "who, where, when" questions: <https://bible.org/article/date-and-destination-galatians>
For something a little less dense, try these: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/who-were-the-galatians/>
<https://religiousaffections.org/articles/biblical-studies/a-timeline-of-pauls-ministry-in-galatians-and-acts/>