

True Freedom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 April 2023

Preacher: Joshua Russell

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, friends, brothers and sisters. It's great to be here with you. If you are new this morning, my name's Josh. It's a privilege and a joy to take you through Paul's letters to the Galatians to kick us off this morning. And it's been so encouraging. Let me just add to what's already been said, just to say that I was deeply encouraged to hear Nick's story and hear the gospel from your brother. And my aim this morning is to encourage you again with the gospel of God's grace, though this is a hard-hitting passage for us.

Now, friends, you may know that in the book of Colossians, at the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he mentions another letter that he's written to the church of Laodicea, a letter that, as far as we know, has been lost in the sands of time, has been missing. But I want you to imagine this morning that we found this letter. Imagine if, after all these years, we dug it up and authenticated it and translated it, and we could read it here this morning. I actually had ChatGPT write me one of these, but I won't read you that. But anyway, what if somehow, though rather unsettlingly, we discovered that some of the things in Paul's letter to the Laodiceans were just not quite in line with the gospel we find in the New Testament, in his other letters? What if Paul wrote some things to the Laodiceans that were just subtly different from the gospel he outlines in, say, Romans or Ephesians, or, say, radically different? Now, of course, this is all hypothetical, and we have good reasons to believe that Paul never did or would have done such a thing. But I just want you to imagine such a hypothetical scenario because of verse 8. You see, in verse 8, Paul imagines a very similar hypothetical scenario. He says, but even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preach to you, let him be accursed. I think that is a profound verse, isn't it? And it's our key verse for the morning. We're going to work our way through the whole passage, but I think this is the key verse, the take-home verse, if you like. You see, what Paul is saying is even if we were to find another authentic letter from him, or if somehow we managed to get a hold of another sermon he gave, or a book he wrote, we would still have to hold it up to the scrutiny of the gospel as he originally preached it. Even if an angel from heaven should come, the most magnificent and trustworthy speaker you can imagine, even if an angel from heaven should come and preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. Not just an international speaker, right, but a speaker from another world. So you see, this verse is very important, and this passage is very serious. And it means, doesn't it, that we need to know the gospel really well. We need to know the gospel really well. And we need to know how to spot a counterfeit gospel, a corrupt or contrary gospel. Because you see, even if someone who, someone comes along who you deeply trust, who smells and sounds legit, who walks like a gospel preacher and talks like a gospel preacher, you know, dresses in chinos and socks and sandals and carries a big black leather Bible, etc.

You know, what this passage tells us is that we mustn't just give him a path, you know, and switch off our critical thinking and our careful Bible reading. The problem is we are all prone to judge a book by its cover, aren't we? And that means we can be easily fooled. I mean, I don't know what it might be that appeals to you. Is it a big smile, you know, glorious white teeth, that American optimism?

Or is it that English accent that sounds so intelligent, regardless of what I'm saying, and authoritative and sophisticated, you know, thank you very much? Or is it that down-to-earth Aussie charm that sounds just so honest and true blue, like this guy just is going to call a spade a spade? That was my absolute best attempt at mocking you all. But because, average to poor from Dr. Gentle, but because we've, whatever it might be, we've got to keep on asking ourselves, don't we? Not just, what does this guy sound like? Or does he seem authentic, or affable, or winsome?

Or does he have a PhD, or this qualification, or that qualification? Does he come from the right tribe, my tribe, or from that institution, that theological college, or denomination you trust?

[5 : 10] You know, these are all superficial things. We've got to keep making sure he's actually preaching the gospel. It doesn't matter if he's preaching from a platform we usually trust.

You know, if he's got an article on the Gospel Coalition website, or he's preaching up at CMS Summer School, or something like that. We need to keep making sure that what he's preaching is the gospel.

And in order to do that, we need to know the gospel really well, inside and out. So, let's get into Paul's letter. We'll have a think about the context of our key verse and come back to it at the end. Paul begins almost all of his letters in the same format. You can see it there on your outline. He identifies himself first, then who he's writing to, then he gives a short greeting, and usually he follows that with thanksgiving and prayer, prayer, although that is notably absent in this letter, which really makes my point for me.

Because Paul begins his letters in a fairly standard way, that often the things worth paying attention to are the little differences, the little nuances and embellishments that he uses to kind of flavor each letter a little bit differently.

[6 : 20] We'll see in a moment why Paul isn't very thankful in this letter. So, he always starts off by telling us that his name is Paul. Sometimes he refers to himself as a servant or a slave.

Here he uses the word apostle. That's not unusual at all. It means someone who was sent, like an ambassador. Paul sees himself as a messenger, a sent one, an emissary.

It's a title that carries with it a certain amount of weight, depending, of course, on who sent you. So, very often Paul will describe himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the will of God.

But notice here there is something unusual. Paul wants to stress exactly who didn't send him. And he doesn't do this in any of his other letters. But here, Paul wants to make extra clear, doubly clear, that he wasn't sent by men.

Galatians 1.1. Paul, an apostle, not from men, nor through men, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead, and all the brothers who are with me.

[7 : 26] We'll see how this plays out in the rest of the letter. It does become very important. But even now, you see, what Paul is saying is that he was no ordinary apostle. He hasn't just come from a bunch of religious people in Jerusalem.

He wasn't commissioned by some worldly government or politician. He was sent by God himself and the Lord Jesus Christ. And he's writing this letter to the churches of Galatia.

So, I think we need to do a little bit of orientation here, a bit of geography and history, because it'll come up. It'll come in super handy as we go through the rest of the letter. So, geography-wise, hopefully you can see on this map, there's just a little map of Galatia.

Galatia is that kind of dark green region up there. And the important thing to notice is that Galatia is not just one city, but a whole region. So, this letter is not written to one church, but to multiple churches in Galatia.

And the key cities to pay attention to are all in the south there. Derbe, Iconium, Lystra, and most importantly of all, Antioch in Pisidia. Pisidian Antioch.

[8 : 36] So, Pisidian Antioch was the capital city of southern Galatia. And it's the first place Paul visited when he went there. So, if we go back to the book of Acts to see how it played out.

Let's go back to Acts chapter 13, if you've got a Bible in front of you. Do some Bible flipping with me. Acts chapter 13.

We'll pick it up in Acts chapter 13, verse 14, as Paul and Barnabas are heading off on their first missionary journey. This might get a bit confusing. But you see down here in Syria, in the yellow, they start off in a place called Antioch.

And they end in a place called Antioch, but it's a different Antioch. Okay? So, don't get confused about the two Antiochs. But that's why Pisidian Antioch is called Pisidian Antioch, because the other one is Syrian Antioch.

Okay? And so, they were sent out from Syria, from Antioch in Syria. And that's kind of home base, if you like. Barnabas was probably the pastor of the church in Antioch. Antioch is where Christians were first called Christians.

[9 : 45] And then they head down to Cyprus and so on, if you follow the blue line. Up to Pamphylia and Perga. And then finally into Galatia. And they go to Antioch of Pisidia first.

So, verse 14 is when they arrive in Antioch of Pisidia. They came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day, they went into the synagogue and sat down.

After the reading from the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them saying, Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it. So, Paul stood up and motioning with his hand said, Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen.

I'll skip down to verse 26. Unfortunately, we don't have time to read through everything. Verse 26. Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation.

Having recounted various promises and stories in the Old Testament. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.

[10:59] And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.

But God raised him from the dead. And for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus.

As also it is written in the second Psalm, You are my son. Today I have begotten you. And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way.

I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David. Therefore he says also in another Psalm, You will not let your holy ones see corruption. For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption.

But he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you, therefore, brothers, that through this man, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

[12:15] And by him, everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. All right.

Now let's just stop there for a moment. I want you to take note of that verse. This, you see, is a really important part of Paul's gospel. And there are several key terms in these verses that are going to come up in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

As if to say, brothers, remember what we talked about. We talked about forgiveness of sins. We talked about freedom. We talked about the law of Moses and the inadequacy of the law of Moses. Now skip down to verse 44. The next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.

And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.

[13:22] Now, into chapter 14, they head down to Iconium and then to Lystra. This angry mob of Jews keeps chasing them from town to town, stirring up trouble.

Again, I'd love to read all the details. They keep preaching. They perform various signs and miracles and wonders and so on. People get converted. Paul gets stoned and they think he's dead, but then he gets up somehow and goes back into the city and keeps preaching.

But jump ahead to chapter 14, verse 21, when they reach Derbe. Chapter 14, verse 21. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. And that is the end of the Galatian leg of Paul's first missionary journey.

So you can see how Paul preached the gospel there and in some ways he saw fantastic success. Lots of people believed. But he also faced fierce opposition and persecution.

[14:45] And then before leaving, he tried to set up the region on a stable footing with mature men in every church to try and protect these fledgling churches and nourish the faith of these young disciples.

But now, jump over to Acts chapter 15. Because a bombshell is about to hit. By now, Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch in Syria. And Luke writes in Acts chapter 15, verse 1, But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now, this seems to be the crisis behind Paul's letter to the Galatians. Luke doesn't tell us exactly, and scholars debate this, of course, but scholars debate everything. So anyway, Luke doesn't tell us exactly, but it seems very likely that these troubling men from Judea spread their false teaching not only up to Antioch and Syria, but also around through Cilicia and into Galatia.

And you see, what they're teaching goes directly against what Paul taught the Galatians, doesn't it? Paul taught the Galatians that freedom and forgiveness of sins is to be found not in Moses, but in the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus.

This new teaching goes directly against that. Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. So Luke writes in Acts chapter 15, and after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

[16:29] Now, I take it, just as important background to this letter, that Paul's letter to the Galatians was originally a part of this no small dissension and debate. Right?

That these false teachers threatened to destroy Paul's fledgling little churches, and he wasn't just going to try and sort of sit by and take it, so he wrote this letter and sent it off to the Galatians, and then he rushed down to Jerusalem to seek support.

Okay, so let's go back to his letter then to Galatians. I hope that was clear, but if you've got any questions, feel free to ask me about it afterwards. Turn back to Galatians chapter 1. We're into verse 3.

In verse 3, Paul offers his usual greeting, extending grace and peace to the Galatians. He always writes grace and peace to every church. It's his way of summing up the Christian faith, right, of summing up his ambassadorial message, if you like, the message from his superiors.

God's message to his people is one of grace and peace. Let it be proclaimed everywhere that those who trust the Lord and acknowledge him as their king live under his unconditional, undeserved love, shining down on us, ruling our lives and our destinies, and we have peace with him.

[17:44] No longer enemies, and more than that, we get to enjoy a new relationship of harmony and friendship. So it sums up the Christian message, grace and peace. And it's also Paul's way of including both Jews and Gentiles, all right?

Karis is the word for grace there. It's very close to the word karain, which means greetings, and that's the way the Gentiles would have greeted one another. Karain.

So Paul uses karis as a kind of variation on that theme. And then Jews, still to this day, greet one another with shalom, don't they? With peace. So grace and peace, this is Paul's way of wrapping his arms around all of God's people, Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles, the whole Christian community, and reminding them of the essence of their new relationship with God.

But notice in verse 4, he adds in a fair amount of additional information for the Galatians that he doesn't usually put in his greetings. So he says, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Often he would just end there, but here he doesn't. From the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever.

[19:00] Amen. So let's just unpack this extra material for a moment. Notice how Paul describes the times we live in as the present evil age. The present evil age.

I don't know about you, but I wonder if that's how you would describe the times we live in. See, in the Bible there are two ages, two major epochs.

We talk about the middle ages and the age of reason and the information age and so on, don't we? But in the Bible there are really only two ages of great significance. The old age and the new age. Or to put it in another way, the present evil age and it must be the future good age. Right? In other words, the first age is characterized by sin and death and decay.

The old age is a time of slavery and darkness and evil. Sometimes it's called the old world. Think of the people of Israel and their life in Egypt or something like that. And then the new age, past the baptism of the Red Sea and so on, the new age is characterized by righteousness and life and joy and peace in the presence of God in the promised land.

[20 : 07] The new age is a time of freedom and light where the world and all things will be renovated and restored by the Holy Spirit. So you see, what Paul is saying is that Jesus came to rescue us from the old age and transfer us into the new age.

The Exodus was only a foreshadow of this. But how did he do that? How did Jesus transfer us from one age to the other? Well, strangely enough, by dying. Which, of course, begs the question, how did his death achieve this amazing rescue?

And the answer still is packed tightly into verse 4 because, of course, he gave himself for our sins. For our sins. That is, he gave himself up to death in order to pay for our sins, in order to deal with our sins.

Sin is the root cause of all the problems in the old age because sin destroys our relationships including, most importantly, our relationship with God. Sin provokes God's righteous judgment, so sin leads to chaos and corruption and ultimately death.

That's why Jesus came to deal with our sins. Like a lightning rod, he took all our sins upon himself and then he absorbed all the destruction and chaos that we deserve.

[21 : 28] He took the full force of God's judgment and wrath against us so that it would be turned away from us and swallowed up forever. And then, when Jesus rose from the dead, he was the first to enter the new age.

He was the first man to walk in a resurrection body, not just a temporarily resuscitated body like Lazarus, but a new, immortal body fit for the new world.

And remember, we skipped over this in verse 1, but Paul did already emphasize the resurrection of the Lord Jesus to highlight the significance of his apostleship. You see, if Jesus has risen from the dead and he was the one who commissioned Paul, who sent Paul to preach the gospel, that means Paul has been sent as an emissary from the new age, from the new world.

Not just from an ordinary kingdom, but from the kingdom of the risen Lord Jesus, the true king of the universe who will reign forever and ever. Long after this old age of corruption and death and decay is finished and forgotten, Jesus will continue to reign in resurrected power, in immortality over the new world with his people over God's kingdom forever.

This is why Jesus' resurrection was not just another miracle. No, Jesus' resurrection means that he is the king of the new world. He is the king of the new age, the king who will reign forever and ever.

[23 : 00] And so that we might hear his message, the message from the next world, so that we might hear it now, Jesus sent his emissaries, his ambassadors, one of whom was the apostle Paul.

Now, why do the Galatians need to hear about all this? I mean, we all need to hear it, don't we? But why does Paul put it in such a special position in this letter compared to the others?

Well, that brings us to verse 6 and Paul's astonishment. Where Paul starts to address the bombshell, the crisis behind the letter. He says, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.

Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble 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 the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. First, notice how serious this problem is. If this was a chemical substance, I'm sure Paul would have one of those skull and crossbones on the label.

[24 : 16] Paul is at DEFCON 1. Fire danger, catastrophic, extremely hazardous, code red, lights and sirens. Sometimes when he writes to churches, he just has to clarify a few things.

He's very pleased with how they're going and very thankful and he's super encouraging. Paul isn't just an alarmist with an overactive imagination, but what he's dealing with here is as deadly serious as it gets.

And what he finds so astonishing is just how quickly it's all happened. It may only have been a matter of months, perhaps as much as, I think, a year or two since he was there preaching the gospel to them.

They all got converted. If his first missionary journey took place sometime in AD 46, 47, and most likely this letter was written sometime in AD 48, possibly 49, on the eve of the Jerusalem Council. Their faith seems to have proved so fickle. What have all those elders been doing? And of course, when someone abandons the faith, they're not just abandoning a set of ideas and propositions of philosophy or something like that.

[25 : 24] They're abandoning a person, in fact, God himself. To give up on the gospel is to give up on the God of all grace, the one who called you, the one who called us in his lavish grace and kindness, the one who sent the message.

And Paul says they have turned to a different gospel. Now, we're approaching our key verse again. This is where Paul starts to reach his climax. And he tells us a few things here about the gospel that are just so important.

But first, I think we need to understand step back for a moment and understand, make sure we know what a gospel is. Because for us, the word gospel is a very religious word. It's the good news about Jesus' death and resurrection or something like that.

You might say the good news about how Jesus paid for our sins. But in the ancient world, the gospel, a gospel, wasn't necessarily a religious thing. A gospel was just a big announcement. It's a news headline. It's a momentous, grand publication, a proclamation. Usually, often used in the context of announcing the news of a great victory in battle or the rise of a new emperor.

[26 : 33] I think probably the best example of a gospel that we all know would be something like the proclamation of King Charles after his mother passed away. You know how the British had to follow all that protocol and everything.

Various heralds were sent out across the country and into public squares to proclaim, the queen is dead, long live the king. And that's what a gospel is.

And that's essentially what the gospel of the Lord Jesus is proclaiming. It's not so much, for instance, the story in which this announcement happens. It is the announcement itself that the old age is over and the new age has begun.

Not to make any comments about our queen's reign, but the long reign of sin and death and darkness has come to an end and the new reign of God's beloved son has begun.

And not to make any comments about Charles' reign necessarily either, but you get the idea. That's the kind of thing that's being said. Now Paul says, why have you abandoned this gospel and turned to another one?

[27 : 42] Not that there really is another one that is another one from God. Now the problem is in verse 7, there are some who are troubling you and distorting the gospel of Christ and I think no doubt Paul has in mind those in Acts chapter 15 who were claiming that unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Paul says, no, this is not the gospel. This distorts the gospel. This is not grace and peace, right? This is lies. Jesus is the king for both Jews and Gentiles.

You don't have to be circumcised to belong to his kingdom. Jesus is the king who was crucified, whose death paid for our sins. You cannot supplement his sacrifice with law keeping.

And so we come to our key verse, but even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we've said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

You know this is the key verse, don't you? Because he repeats it. It's the key two verses. And the language is so strong, Paul effectively says they can go to hell. And remember, this is a man who really believed in hell.

[28 : 54] It's not flippant. It's not funny. It's deadly serious. Let me just make one minor translation clarification. Paul doesn't actually use the word contrary here.

He just used the word beside or apart from. I think that subtlety is really important. If they're preaching a different gospel, let them be accursed.

It doesn't have to be, you know, directly, wholeheartedly, contrary, as it were. Because any difference, any different gospel is a distortion, is a corruption that will lead you away from Christ. Paul doesn't want the Galatians to go to hell, so he wants to condemn in the strongest possible terms, those who would mislead them. Now, this verse has so many implications for us, doesn't it? It's so far removed, first of all, from the postmodern, you know, you do you approach of our age. This is your truth and the Galatians are just pursuing their own truth or something like that and Paul's just affirming them.

[29 : 57] Paul says, no, there is only one gospel and that gospel is true independent of the preacher and it's not about who's saying it, you know.

It's not because Paul is an old Jewish man that you should listen to him or an old Jewish man so you shouldn't listen to him or something like that. Paul doesn't have the authority to change the gospel even as an apostle.

In fact, especially as an apostle, he only has authority to pass on the message from his superiors. It's not about who's saying it. It's not about who he's saying it to.

There's not a gospel for the Jews and a gospel for the Gentiles, a gospel for the Indonesians and a gospel for the Africans, a gospel for East and a gospel for West, a gospel for honor-shame cultures and a gospel for guilt-innocence cultures.

There is one gospel and the gospel is not malleable or adjustable. Of course, it can be communicated in different languages and with different vocab and to varying depths.

[31 : 07] But in the end, there is only one gospel and it never changes, not in the slightest. There is one gospel for all mankind. It is the only message that brings salvation.

It is the news that Jesus is Lord and long live the King. It's the news that that once crucified and despised and rejected Galilean preacher, that bloke, he has been raised to life and exalted at the right hand of God.

He is the one sitting on heaven's throne now and forever. He is the one who will rule over the future age of righteousness and glory. So he is the one to bow down to now.

He is the one to give your allegiance to now and to trust in now. If you are new to church this year, welcome. We want you to know this gospel and that is why we preach Christ and him crucified and raised to life.

This is the gospel that we have come to believe, that we have come to love and that we want to preach. and for all you old timers, brothers and sisters, this is the gospel to cling to for another year.

[32 : 21] This is the gospel we need to know thoroughly and make known to the world. Let's pray. Loving Father and Almighty God, we give you great thanks for the Apostle Paul and his clear proclamation of the gospel.

Amen. Help us in our hearts to trust the Lord Jesus who gave himself for our sins and to honour him who reigns above and who will reign forever and ever.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.