

No flesh-and-blood Gospel

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 1, and if you have one of our big hardback Bibles, you'll find that on page 972. Page 972.

And I'll read tonight the passage that Rupert is going to take, chapter 1, verse 1, through to chapter 2, verse 10. An impassioned apostle speaks to the Galatians.

Paul, an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead, and all the brothers 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 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. Amen.

I am astonished that you're 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.

[1 : 25] 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.

For am I now seeking the approval of man or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I was still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people.

So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.

[2 : 46] Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.

But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God I do not lie. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

They only were hearing it said, He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they glorified God because of me.

Then, after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation, and set before them, though privately before those who seemed influential, the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.

But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet, because of false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery, to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

[4 : 21] And from those who seemed to be influential, what they were makes no difference to me. God shows no partiality. Those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles.

And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.

Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, that was an awkward start to the evening, but let's be very British about it and get down to work. Galatians chapter 1 and 2. Open up your Bibles, please.

[5 : 33] Page 972. And a quick word of prayer. Amen. Father God, we pray you'd use this time to keep us trusting in your Son and rejoicing in his service, looking to please only him, our rescuer.

We ask it, Lord, in Jesus' strong name and for your glory. Amen. Amen. Sometimes the most reassuring words someone can ever say are these.

No, it's not just you. I think of some of the questions we might ask, hoping for that response. Is it warm in here? Or am I going down with something?

Are you still hungry? Or am I just being greedy? Did that sermon sound a little bit fishy? Or did I misunderstand it? Sometimes it helps to hear that it is not just you.

And it was one of those sorts of questions that Paul wrote this earliest surviving letter to answer. A question, I suspect, a bit like this. Is the Christian life often a little discouraging?

[6 : 54] Or is it just me? You see, Galatians is a far more pastorally helpful letter than I think it might at first seem.

But a bit like a pastor, this letter gets pressed into all sorts of other uses, which aren't really what it's here for. I've had to think a bit about what a pastor is useful for.

And I guess a pastor is useful to have around for all sorts of reasons. At least we'd like to think so. For answering those big theological questions. To be there at important times.

To train you in reading your Bible. But none of those are what he's for. A pastor's job is to care for your soul through ministering God's word to you.

And Galatians is a letter written to care for the Christian soul. It's not here to answer all our theological questions about the law and the Old Testament.

[7 : 54] It's not here as a polemic against Roman Catholicism. It's not here as a training book on growing fruit of the Spirit. Yes, it's useful for all those things, but they're not what it's for.

It's written to say, no, don't worry. It's not just you. The life of faith can be a little discouraging at times. Often, you don't seem to make a lot of progress.

But that doesn't mean you've got it wrong. So whatever you do, don't shipwreck your soul because you thought there was some way of doing the Christian life better.

Now that means that what we'll learn from this letter ought to help us with the very thing I think most Christians tend to get most frustrated and discouraged by.

This is a letter all about living in the awkward age, the age every one of us finds ourselves in. We live in a time the Bible finds really exciting.

[9 : 00] All those shadows of the Old Testament have passed away and Jesus has ushered in his kingdom. And yet the truth is, we don't feel all that special yet.

Yes, our sin's been paid for and we know that we belong to his coming world. But for now at least, each of us has to keep on living in these fallen bodies with our mixed motives and muddled hearts.

And no, it's not just you. Living like that doesn't often feel right. Loving Jesus doesn't mean that all our doubts and struggles and temptations just melt away.

And that's why people living in this awkward age are always going to be vulnerable to the sort of thing which troubled the Galatians all those years ago.

The idea that there's some secret to holiness that we need to grab hold of, a secret to growing in the Christian life. You see, this isn't really a letter about how to get right with God.

[10 : 11] It's a letter about how to live right with him, how to make progress in our struggle with the flesh. So no wonder when visitors came to the church in Galatia, probably with links to the big mother church in Jerusalem, these discouraged young converts were easily troubled.

Grace, that's a good start. I'm glad you've trusted Jesus. But if you think you're ready for heaven as you are, my friends, I'm afraid you've got a bit of a way to go.

Now the answers people tend to push today and the answers those teachers pushed back in Galatia are probably very different. Their trick, of course, was to focus on Jewish law, to go back to the customs of the Old Testament, separation and purity and marks of moral cleanness.

That was their answer to the flesh, their shortcut to holiness. And my guess is that the things that trouble Christians today tend to be very different answers, different solutions, but the problem we face is just the same.

All of us still live in this awkward age when, however close we might be to home, we're not there yet. And so discouragement and that feeling that we just aren't making a lot of progress and the fear that perhaps we're doing something wrong all of those are very real struggles, aren't they?

[11 : 48] Which makes the urgent, agonized tone of Paul's warning here something that we've got to pay attention to. If we let discouragement with a Christian life take a hold, well, it is surprisingly easy to start looking for the wrong answers to our problems.

Answers which, however, subtly they seem to compliment Jesus and his gospel, actually deny everything he's done for us.

That was the problem in Galatia. Tonight then, I think Paul has two desperately important lessons to teach us about how rescue from this age of the flesh and struggle works and how that rescue can never work.

And the first one comes in verses one to nine. And if we want to understand anything else in this letter, then this is the most fundamental point of all. It's that nothing in this age can pull you out of this age.

Now, I bet you've heard people use the phrase, you can't pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. It's a preacher's favorite, isn't it? But I like a good challenge. And frankly, any excuse to put off writing a sermon is a good excuse.

- [13 : 07] So last week, I sat down in the middle of my study floor and had a good go at it. Now, of course, my first problem was that I wasn't quite sure what a bootstrap actually is.
- But initially, I was fairly cocky. And so I thought the heels on the back of my shoes ought to do. So down on the floor, I got and tried to pull myself to my feet without touching anything but my shoes.
- Well, it turns out I wasn't paying anywhere near enough attention in my physics lessons. I like to think I'm not a proud man. And so I only kept trying for about 20 minutes.
- What got me in the end was the realization that if Jen walked past the room, she'd finally realize what a lunatic she'd married. But believe me, I tried every technique I could think of. Rocking, rolling.
- I wouldn't recommend bouncing. That one was painful. Well, conclusion, it really is not possible to pull yourself up without grabbing hold of something above you.
- [14 : 10] And Paul's gospel is well and truly about somebody reaching down and dragging us up. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins.
- Why? Verse four. To deliver us from this present evil age. Paul's gospel is all about deliverance from something that we could never defeat by ourselves.
- Deliverance from the problem of our flesh and brokenness and sin and into the age to come. And because that deliverance works by Jesus Christ stepping in and pulling us out, well, notice verse five.
- He gets all the thanks and all the glory. Not just now, but more literally, verse five, for age upon age.
- Notice how that word age comes three times in that one verse. Tells you a lot about this book. Usually the way Paul opens a letter is very significant.
- [15 : 18] And if he closes a letter with the same thoughts, you can be sure that you're onto something important. So just flick on with me to chapter six, would you? And the last six verses. And what do we find there?
- Verse 15. Neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision. Frankly, nothing in this age counts for much at all. No. What counts is a new creation.
- Do you see how this letter begins and ends? Paul's gospel is about Jesus pulling us out of this age and delivering us into the next, into a new creation.
- And it's the very first verse of this whole letter which begins to show us how that's possible. Chapter one, verse one. What is the very first thing that Paul tells us about Jesus Christ?
- is that he no longer belongs to this age. He has been raised from the dead. The Lord Jesus is the Christ, the king over a new creation, verse one, which means that Jesus Christ is the one thing we can hold on to who isn't simply a bootstrap tied to this age of sin and death.
- [16 : 40] And the most remarkable thing in Paul's gospel is this. If you belong to Jesus, then already you have a foothold in his new creation.
- There's a link between Jesus and you, a rope if you like. And as we get deeper into this letter, we'll see that that link is Paul's big answer to our discouragement, our struggle with life here in the flesh, our lack of growth and holiness and progress.
- That link is Christ's spirit. Jesus' spirit is the only way out of this age because Jesus' spirit is the thing which ties us and pulls us to Jesus, the Lord of the age to come.
- So let me give you some encouragement just as we're setting out in this letter. if you don't feel like much of a new age person, then you're in good company.

The only difference between you and the Christian who feels like they're making nothing but progress is that you have a shred of self-awareness.

[17 : 57] But don't let that dishearten you. Look at the astonishing word in verse 4. Jesus Christ gave himself. It's done.

Accomplished. So the next time you feel like the pull of this world and this age is something that you will never escape, take another look at Galatians chapter 1 verse 4.

Jesus' whole purpose in giving himself was to deliver you from the things you cannot beat on your own. and he's done it already with nothing left for you to supplement or complete or bring to the table.

And that's a challenge, isn't it? Because it means that as Jesus choked and gasped for breath on the cross, he was longing for you and me to be separate from the world around us, different to it, undefiled by the ways of this age.

And if that doesn't challenge you to keep on fighting and struggling, then nothing will. But he struggled and he fought so that you and I could carry on living here in the flesh knowing that the battle was won, that we do not belong to this world any longer.

[19 : 20] And that is an astonishing gospel, isn't it? So imagine how astonished Paul must have been in verse 6 when he heard the news of these young Christians he'd loved and disciples and shared that wonderful news with.

And he'd heard that already this church, one of Paul's churches, the church you'd least expect to turn away, already they were giving up on Jesus as the answer to their struggle.

Now how on earth could things have come to that in this church of all churches? Well it wasn't because they'd been poorly taught, was it? Paul had been their teacher and probably less than a year ago since the writing of this letter.

It's not that they were poorly taught, it's not that they weren't genuine. No, it's the genuine Christians who are most vulnerable to this. the problem was a group of people Paul calls troublemakers, troublemakers.

Notice that verse 7, not false teachers, he gives them a much more subtle name. These were people who troubled normal converts, who played on their insecurity and discouragement until everyone wanted whatever it was they had, their easy answer to growth and godliness.

[20 : 47] Now what Paul is going to show us to devastating effect is that these troublemakers who seem so godly and spiritual to the Galatians are in fact as deeply rooted in this evil age as it's possible to be.

Their motives are this world motives and their answers to holiness, Jewish law in their case, those are this world answers. and of course any gospel that comes from this age, this world, is no gospel at all.

He couldn't warn them more starkly, could he? Even if I or an angel from heaven came and preached anything other than Jesus Christ given to deliver you from your sinful flesh, well let that person be cast into hell.

That's where a this world gospel is going to lead you. It's a no gospel because nothing in this age can ever pull you out of this age.

And that's what makes Paul's second point so crucial. Because nothing in this age can deliver you from it, nothing in Jesus' gospel could ever be improved by mere flesh and blood.

[22 : 05] blood. So that's the point Paul makes all the way from chapter 1 verse 10 through to chapter 2 verse 10. Nothing in Jesus' gospel can be improved by flesh and blood.

You see, Paul's preaching wasn't some message that he thought up on his own. No, his gospel was Jesus' gospel. Some people take this whole section as if Paul was the boring guy you get sat next to at a wedding who only wants to talk about himself.

So what we have here is a long, tedious autobiography to defend his own position. What that misses is that this section isn't really about Paul at all.

There's nothing really special about me, he says, except verse 10 that I am a servant of Jesus Christ. And everything that follows verse 10 is proof that Paul's gospel really belongs to Jesus and not to any man.

Paul isn't out to please any human being. He's simply here to deliver what was given to him by the Lord. Now the clue, I think, is down in the footnotes because verse 16 uses a word that is very loaded in this letter, a word that unfortunately doesn't make it through into our translation.

[23 : 32] Where does Paul's gospel come from? Well, look at the footnotes. Not from any flesh and blood. What Paul is doing here is distancing his gospel from any human answer, any flesh answer to our sin problem.

You see, these troublemakers' answer to the Christian life isn't God's answer. It's a flesh answer. It looks holy, it looks spiritual, but it's a not gospel.

Notice the two repeated words of this section, man and revealed. Man and revealed. I'm not pleasing any man, he says, three times in verse 10, twice in verse 11.

In fact, it all goes all the way back to verse 1, doesn't it? I'm an apostle, a messenger, not through any man, but through God. word number two, revealed.

This is a gospel revealed to me from someone above and beyond this age. I received it from Jesus, verse 12. God revealed his son to me, verse 16, and turned me around completely from my human ways of doing things.

[24 : 49] And when I did go to speak to other human messengers, chapter 2, verse 1, I did it because of a revelation. And privately, notice that, not to impress any human being.

It's not that Paul is distancing himself from the other apostles. No, the point he makes is that he and they agree in absolutely everything, chapter 2, verse 6, but he distances himself from any human interference which could have added to the gospel given to him from heaven.

Nothing in Jesus' gospel can be improved by flesh and blood, by man-made solutions to godliness and growth. Now, why does Paul labor that point so much?

Well, partly, I suppose, because as a lot of people suggest, Paul was often accused of being a people pleaser. His gospel where Jesus does everything and humans contribute nothing just seemed too easy, especially on these Gentile converts.

But I think there's a little more than that going on here. Paul isn't just on the defensive. This is the start of an attack that he's going to wage right the way through the letter that human answers to full acceptance with God and progress in the Christian life are more about pleasing people than pleasing Christ.

[26 : 24] You see, he isn't just defending himself. He's accusing the troublemakers right from the start of this letter. Notice how much focus there is running through this section on the pressure to please human beings.

things. It's how Paul begins the argument in chapter 1 verse 10. It's there in Jerusalem in chapter 2 verse 4. False brothers have slipped in, putting the apostles under enormous pressure to make their gospel a little bit more Jewish, a little bit more pleasing to religious men.

And you can imagine how unbearable that message must have been to Christians living in Jerusalem, can't you? We know that as this letter was written, nationalistic feeling and resentment of outsiders was boiling up in Israel like a pressure cooker.

In the end, that pressure became so fierce that the Romans slanted the boil by burning the whole place down, temple and all. And imagine how being a Christian Jew in that atmosphere and holding on to a gospel that said that these uncircumcised Gentiles like Titus in verse 3 were no less pleasing to God than you were with all your customs and traditions.

Imagine how that felt in a religious atmosphere like this. That's the church these Jerusalem apostles are trying to hold together and what pressure there was to compromise, to please other men.

[27 : 59] It's hard to read just what the situation was like in that Jerusalem church, isn't it? But I wonder if the reason Paul says these apostles seemed influential is that already you can see the church in Jerusalem beginning to go bad.

More and more Christians deserting Peter and James and John and caving in to the troublemakers, caving in to the pressure to please human beings.

And how subtle those false brothers are, they slip in secretly, hardly noticed, pushing answers which seem so wholesome and godly.

But it's piling on the pressure to please a human being, to add human things to Jesus' gospel, pressure that spreads from Jerusalem to Antioch, where we'll meet it next week, and already it's beginning to trouble the Galatians.

And you can imagine what that pressure sounded like there, can't you? You've made a great start, you Galatians, with Paul's gospel. But you know, back in the mother church, we've learned a thing or two over the years.

[29 : 11] And if you really want to get on, well, you need to come and join our group. We'll show you how it's done back in Jerusalem. We'll teach you what real discipleship is all about.

But there's the dead giveaway, that somebody's gospel has turned into a no gospel. gospel. It's the moment their answer to sin shifts from keep on trusting Jesus to join our group, join our Jewish table, join our church plant.

I think you'll find that we're a lot more real with each other, a lot more authentic. That's what you need. Yes, your church is great, it's a gospel church, but I think you'll find the meatier Bible teaching at our church will really help you grow a lot more.

What you need is a smaller church that's more honest, more open, or a bigger church with more training. We could apply this to anything people add to Jesus, couldn't we?

Anything at all that's more about pleasing human beings, being pulled over to one group or the other. But the more those additions to the gospel begin to divide Christians from others in the same church, the more Galatian those solutions start to look.

[30 : 32] So Paul says, hold on a minute, real rescue doesn't come from this world, it comes from heaven. So nothing in Jesus' gospel, in my gospel, could ever be improved by this world's answers.

Not even if those answers come from the most impressive Christians in the church, or even the church in Jerusalem, the oldest church in the world. Isn't it interesting, verse 10 of chapter 2, that the one thing the apostles stipulates, love of the poor, is the one thing Paul is so concerned about already.

Love is what Paul sees threatened in Galatia, isn't it, by a gospel which divides Christians into cliques and factions. Love and care for one another is right at the heart of the real Christian life, the way Paul is going to teach it at the end of this letter.

So you see, his gospel lacks absolutely nothing. This is authentic, full-fat Christianity, and to add anything to it would just be to contaminate it.

God is going to be to be to God. So when it comes to who we listen to, and what we trust, we need to be every bit as streetwise as we are with the water we drink.

[31 : 56] If you're traveling in India, you're pretty careful, aren't you, about where you get your water from. You want to check its source. And Paul says, the source of my gospel is God himself.

God is going to check the seal, won't you? And the seal on Paul's gospel is absolutely pristine. It's not been tampered with by any human being.

But the final test, of course, is what happens when you take a sip. Drink in a human gospel, promising an easy answer to your flesh.

church. And Paul's going to show us that you end up with a church that is sick as a dog. Instead of loving concern for those whom God loves, the result we'll see in chapter 5 is backbiting and division, a kind of spiritual deli belly.

And in the end, if you rely on the things of this age, you will go the way of this age. You'll reap its corruption. And it's death.

[33 : 06] Well, two quick summaries just to apply the warning. Number one, anything slipped into Paul's gospel will enslave you to a dying age.

However subtle and practical those additions seem, the moment our answer to sin and discouragement shifts from keep on trusting Jesus to try doing it our way, well, you've turned the gospel into a not gospel.

Number two, any pressure to please flesh and blood can be pressured to desert Jesus. Chapter 1, verse 6 would have absolutely horrified these Galatians.

The last thing they thought was that they were giving up on Christ. Christ. But while Paul is all about pleasing Jesus Christ, the troublemakers here want disciples of their own.

And those two things are irreconcilable. people. So where's the emotional pull coming from as your pastors urge you to commit time and talents and money?

[34 : 20] I hope it's not to please us, to please the elders or the staff or your small group. But listen carefully. Finally, let's take great confidence in what Paul has to say because brothers and sisters, it is not just you.

The Christian life can be long and hard and it sometimes feels like very slow progress. But we know that Paul did not get the message wrong.

It wasn't tampered with. Nothing was left out. And what a relief that making it doesn't depend on pleasing any human being or any cosmic slave driver.

It depends on a loving father who simply asks us to trust him and keep going with Jesus. The father who gave his son to deliver us.

So that like Paul, we can say it is his approval I need and not that of any man. I'm a servant of Jesus Christ. I know him and his gospel is more than enough.

[35 : 37] Let's pray. Father God, we recognize that more than anything, we need deliverance from this age and its grip on our hearts.

And so we thank you so much that although we struggle here feebly in the flesh, you have given your perfect son and raised him from death so that we belong where he is.

Help us, Lord, to rest in no other hope than that and to live patiently, not to please any man, but to serve Jesus Christ, our deliverer.

For we ask it in his precious name. Amen. Amen.