**Galatians: Paul’s Letter of Freedom**

**Sunday September 2, 2018**

**“No Other Gospel” (Galatians 1:1-12)**

**1. Introduction: *Translating Galatians***

It’s a bit of an understatement to say that the Bible is the most translated book in the world. One historian has stated that between 1945 and 1990 over *twelve hundred* new translations of the Bible (or portions of it) into English have been made (Daniell, *The Bible in English,* p. 136). Today, there are many options for Bible readers as far as English translations: The New International Version, The New Revised Standard Version, The King James Version, The New Living Translation, The Contemporary English Version, The English Standard Version, The Jerusalem Bible, and the list goes on and on. Such a selection of translations is somewhat overwhelming. Some Christians even get into intense arguments over which version is best. But I’ve always stressed that the most important thing is that people are reading the Bible in whatever translation they choose.

One of the newer and more striking translations to enter the scene in recent years is Eugene Peterson’s *The Message.* Peterson, a writer, former pastor and professor emeritus at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C, devoted ten years of his life to the task of translating the Bible into modern English. But he didn’t start out with the ambitious goal of translating the entire Bible; the origins of his translation had much humbler beginnings. In the early 1980’s Peterson was a pastor in a Presbyterian church near Baltimore, Maryland. Dismayed by the increasing levels of anxiety and fear within his congregation and community due to rising inflation and growing racial tensions, he turned to Paul’s letter to the Galatians to help his congregation to “*recover their identity as a free people in Christ, a people not conformed to the world but living robustly and spontaneously in the Spirit*” (Peterson, *Eat This Book,* p. 131). His pastoral strategy was to “soak” his congregation in Galatians – a year of teaching the adult class on Galatians followed by a year of preaching through Galatians. But he quickly discovered that his adult Bible study class wasn’t quite getting the full impact of Paul’s revolutionary words to the Christians in Galatia. Reflecting on this experience, he writes:

“Here I was laying the groundwork for a major renewal of Spirit-torched imagination in my congregation. Galatians, Paul’s angry, passionate, fiery letter that rescued his congregation from their regression to cultural slavery, was on the table and nobody was getting it. Sweetly smiling, they were giving more attention to stirring sugar into those Styrofoam cups than to the Spirit words that pulsed in Paul’s metaphors and syntax. It was obvious that they weren’t getting it. And I was offended, mightily offended” (Peterson, *Eat This Book,* p. 133). Later that afternoon, when he was expressing his frustrations to his wife, he came up with an unusual idea – teaching his Bible class Greek. He reasoned that, “If they read it in Greek, Paul’s somersaulting, cartwheeling, freedom-trumpeting Greek, they’ll get it.” His wife sweetly smiled and said, “I can’t think of a better way to empty out the classroom” (p. 133).

So, he took a different tack – translating Paul’s Greek into the language of everyday Americans, “the words and the phrases they used when they were at work on the job, at home playing with their children, out on the street” (p. 135). Every week, Peterson would prepare a fresh translation of a section of Galatians and distribute it to the adult class for study. He was thrilled with the results – the class was fully engaged in the Scriptures as they read, listened to and wrestled with Paul’s words. A year of Bible study was followed by a year of preaching through Galatians. Peterson went on to write a book on Galatians, which included his translation of the text (*Travelling Light: Modern Meditations on St. Paul’s Letter of Freedom).* His editor, impressed with this fresh translation, asked him if he would consider translating all of the New Testament. Hesitant at first, he finally agreed and *The Message* was born.

As I start on this journey through Galatians, I don’t have lofty goals like translating the whole Bible or writing a book. But I like Eugene Peterson before me, hope and pray that the words of Scripture would shape our lives. I want our conversation with Paul over the next little while to *free* us from our anxieties and pessimism so that we can be open to God and to others. I want us to be *gospel people* whose lives are formed by God’s liberating gospel. Who knows what kind of fruit that our journey through Galatians will bear? But one thing’s for sure:

“Through the Christian centuries this letter has often been used by God to restore vigor and passion to the life of faith and to confront the world with the realities of a free life in Christ, a life that is free for all; enabling us to live freely in relation to God and all others” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 13).

**2. The Opening Move: *Paul’s Greetings* (1:1-5)**

Galatians opens like many of Paul’s letters do, with the basic formula of *writer* (Paul) *to the recipients* (the churches in Galatia).” But a closer inspection of his opening words reveals that all is not well. Typically when Paul begins his letters, he does refer to himself as an *apostle*, but what is quite noticeable here is the extent to which he emphasizes the *divine authority* that undergirds his apostleship. “*Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead”* (1:1). Why does Paul begin his letter with such a strong declaration? We will soon discover that he was responding to a critical situation within the churches in Galatia; the true gospel was being supplanted by an alternative, false gospel. Those who were promoting this pseudo-gospel sought to discredit Paul’s preaching by questioning God’s call for him to be an apostle. They figured that if they could discredit the messenger, they could discredit the message. Paul’s credentials were being questioned, as was his message. Realizing that the truth of the gospel was at stake, Paul argues that his apostolic commission and the gospel that he preached both came from God.

At the same time, Paul used these opening words to give a strong reminder of the central message of the gospel to his readers. The gospel is the story of God’s gracious actions on behalf of humanity. God *raised* Jesus from the dead to free us from sin and death (1:1). Jesus *gave himself* for our sins in order to *rescue us* from this evil world (1:4). All this, Paul declares, is *God’s plan* (1:4). “In the story of freedom, God is always the subject; the human, always the object. If men and women are to live free, it will be because of God’s actions, not because of our own will or disposition or politics or intelligence” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 20). Paul’s words emphasized a precious truth for those Christians in Galatia and for us as well. Once imprisoned by the power of sin, we are rescued, released, and liberated by God because Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins. It’s not a matter of us pulling up our bootstraps and saving ourselves. We are *all sinners* unable to save ourselves apart from the grace of God. We are only freed from sin because of God’s loving actions on our behalf. As we shall see, this central truth of the gospel was what was at stake in Galatia.

**3. Getting Down to Business: *Paul’s Impassioned Rebuke* (1:6-10)**

Things were so grim in Galatia, that Paul didn’t even take the time to express his thanksgiving for them. In all of Paul’s other letters, he gives thanks for his audience right after he greets them. In Galatians, however, the thanksgiving section is conspicuously absent. This reveals Paul’s exasperation and distress over the situation since he can’t even commend his readers for anything. At the same time, this highlights the severity and the urgency of the situation as Paul dispenses with the formalities and gets right down to business.

If the lack of a thanksgiving section is a hint of Paul’s frustration and concern at the unfolding events in Galatia, then, his words in verse 6 explicitly express his dismay - “I am *astonished* that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.” The verb used here for “astonish” is more than an expression of surprise. It signals Paul’s irritation, disapproval, disappointment, and rebuke. Paul is really upset by the situation in Galatia, so he sharply rebukes his readers, using very strong language to characterize their behaviour. Peterson’s translation nicely captures Paul’s impassioned reprimand, “I can’t believe your fickleness—how easily you have turned *traitor* to him who called you by the grace of Christ by embracing a variant message!” (1:6, *The Message*). The Galatians were acting like *traitors* or *turncoats*. They were like soldiers deserting their platoons or people who jump from one school of philosophy to another. Except the Galatian Christians were not merely switching one philosophy for another, they were *abandoning God*, the one who called them by the *grace of Christ*. Again, the significance of Paul’s words should not be lost. He was stressing that the means by which they were drawn to God was God’s *unmerited favour* in Christ, that is, *the grace of Christ*. This is the gospel in a nutshell – Christ’s gift of himself, his body and blood given for us so that we can be freed from sin and reunited with God. It was this gospel of God’s grace that the Christians in Galatia were rejecting by turning to “a different gospel.”

This expression, “a different gospel,” seems to suggest that the new message that the Galatians were accepting was just a minor variation of the gospel. But Paul sets the record straight – another gospel does not exist since there is only one true gospel. Again, Peterson’s translation nicely articulates Paul’s point – “It is not a minor variation, you know; it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God (1:6, *The Message*). Paul goes on to describe a group of people among them who were agitating, unsettling and confusing the Christians in the Galatian churches by preaching an alternative message (1:7). As Paul’s letter unfolds, we will discover a whole lot more about the identity, message and motives of these rival preachers, but for now, Richard Longenecker’s concise description of them will help us to understand Paul’s deep concern for the Galatian Christians:

“Paul’s opponents were Christian Jews who came from the Jerusalem church to Paul’s churches in Galatia with a message stressing the need for the Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep the rudiments of the cultic calendar, both for full acceptance by God and as a proper Christian lifestyle” (Longenecker, *Galatians,* p. xcv).

These rival preachers, called “the Judaizers,” did not oppose the gospel message that stressed belief in Jesus, but they offered a *supplement* to Paul’s message. Arguing that their message was complementary to Paul’s, they taught the Gentile Christians that faith in Jesus *and* the keeping the Jewish Law were necessary for full acceptance by God. In a nutshell their slogan was, “Let Moses finish what Christ began” (Stott, *The Message of Galatians,* p. 21). Eager to become fully integrated into God’s people and to live a life pleasing to God, these Gentile Christians were very susceptible to the Judaizers’ message. But Paul did not see their message as a minor variation of the gospel; he viewed it as an affront to the gospel of grace. The gospel of grace proclaims that Christ died for our sins and that nothing can to be added to his redemptive work on our behalf. For Paul’s Gentile readers, it meant that belief in Jesus was all that was necessary for God’s acceptance.

While the specific problems that Paul faced in Galatia are not completely relevant to our context, the struggle for the truth of the gospel remains a perennial problem. If the gospel is the good news of God’s free and unmerited favour offered to everyone, how does that truth impact our lives and our congregation? Do we really believe that God graciously accepts us in Christ or do we suppose that we need to follow the rules in order to earn God’s love? Does the gospel of grace impact our attitudes towards other people? Are we willing to communicate the message of God’s grace to people who may be a bit different than us and invite them to become our brothers and sisters in Christ? Or do we have unspoken rules and expectations that define what a Christian is apart from the grace of Christ? Does the gospel define us as a congregation? Does the gospel define our mission in this community? How do we avoid making our message something other than God’s good news of freedom? Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a good place for us to begin to unpack these and many other important questions.