

THE TRUE MESSAGE

Galatians 1:1-10 [MW21-04]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Hakaru, Sunday 31 January 2021

One of the most interesting and useful courses I took at theological college

- was 'Unity and Diversity in the New Testament'
- now may be you're a bit wiser, have a more realistic view of things than I did but I, along with all of my classmates, had this vague notion of a "Golden Age" of Christianity
- a time right back in the first century when everyone agreed everyone had the same message when there was a unity of purpose, action, understanding
- and over the centuries since then, we've kind of fallen away from that it makes sense, it's logical ... and ... it just wasn't like that!

The course blew all that out of the water

- the New Testament appears to give us an ordered picture of the Christian faith but underneath there are clues, glimpses of a time boiling with controversy with argument, with violent disagreement
- any of our church's synods, any meeting between Pentecostals and liberal theologians has got nothing on this!
- no meeting of Christians in any context these days has the power and passion that went in back then
- I tell you, that course was a real eye-opener

It's important to have a clear grasp of this:

- there was not an essential unity in the beginning of the Christian faith rather there was a great diversity out which grew a sometimes graceful but more often screaming, kicking, biting, grudging agreement and understanding
- and at the forefront of all this, taking the heat and using it as a blacksmith might use an anvil and forge, was our old mate Paul
- we have so much to be grateful to Paul for without him and his dedication our faith might not only be very different we might not have been part of it at all

What then has all this got to do with this letter to the Galatians?

- this letter has been likened to a sword flashing in a great swordsman's hand maybe today we might compare it to a cricket bat in the hands of Kane Williamson or a cricket ball in the hands of Kyle Jamieson
- Paul and the gospel he preached were under attack if that attack had succeeded Christianity may have become just another Jewish sect dependent on circumcision and keeping the law and have nothing to do with grace
- it's a sobering thought, but if Paul's opponents had had their way we might never have had the chance to know the love of Christ

These days you see it all the time

- a 'definitive' TV report and everyone says: yes that's what happened then a few days later another so-called investigative journalist comes out with the 'real story'
- and everybody believes that ... until the next thing

Some people came to Galatia and said Paul was not really an apostle

- people need not listen to him
in fact he's well off the mark – and we can prove it
- this, what we tell you now, this is the real deal

They said Paul couldn't possibly be an apostle

- according to Acts 1:21 an apostle had to have accompanied Jesus during his earthly life and have witnessed his resurrection
- furthermore Paul was one of the most savage persecutors of the church and held no official appointment from the leaders of the church
- everything they said was 100% true, there was no denying it ... except for that part about not being an apostle

Paul answers this, proudly insisting that his apostleship has no human source

- and that no human hand ordained him to office
he received his call direct from God
- others may be able to answer "yes" to the Acts 1:21 conditions
but Paul had a unique qualification:
he had met Christ face to face on the Damascus Road
- this also helps us understand how Paul could continue so cheerfully in the face of such great opposition, how he was able to toil and suffer
- because he was certain his task had been given to him by God

Now in all probability Paul was furious with those who preached another gospel

- and likely disappointed that those who he had so recently taught would be tempted to turn away
- yet note how he speaks to them:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ
- "grace" combines the beauty of life with undeserved generosity
so it is as if Paul is saying: may the beauty of the undeserved love of God be on you
so that it will make your life lovely too
- "peace" includes the Hebrew 'shalom'
Paul wishes them everything that is to their highest good
everything that will make their minds pure, wills resolute and hearts glad

Then Paul gets to the heart of the matter

- and highlights the major difference between the gospel he preaches
and the one these others have come in with, and tried to discredit him with

And what is that difference – anyone pick it up?

- grace, free grace
Paul believed with all his heart there was nothing a person could do
to earn the love of God
- therefore all a person could do
was fling themselves on the mercy of God
in an act of faith
- all people could do was take in wondering gratitude what God offered
the important thing was not what we could do for ourselves
but what God had done for us

Those who came after Paul said that in order to please God

- people had to follow the rules and regulations of the law every time a person performed a deed of the law it was a credit entry in their account with God
- they taught it was necessary to earn the favour of God for Paul this was completely and utterly impossible

Paul's opponents charged that he was making religion 'too easy'

- and that he did this in order to 'suck up' to people to ingratiate himself with them
- Paul responded that this, logically, did not make sense for if religion is about fulfilling rules, then theoretically at least it is possible to satisfy its demands
- the obligations of love however are something else altogether Paul is holding up the cross and saying: "God loved you like that"
- the claims of love are not easy at all for in response to a love like that, we can never give enough

Then Paul says something that is the cornerstone of his life's mission

- it is not people he is serving or trying to please: it is God it made no difference to him what people thought or said
- for he is a servant, more than that in fact a slave, of Christ

Why is he so keen to be a slave of Christ?

- because of the true message, the real gospel, the only Good News: *Christ obeyed God our Father and gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins to rescue us from this evil world* (Gal. 1:4)
- because Paul himself had been rescued, set free he knew only too well what it was to live differently
- he had been a hard line rule and law man, striving to keep the Jewish religion pure meeting Christ face to face had changed that now, like a reformed smoker, he wanted everyone else to experience the difference
- he was desperate for everyone else to discover and enjoy this same grace and he was determined to make sure no one turned people away from this

For Paul it started and ended with grace, God's grace shown to us in Christ Jesus

- a gift which we do not deserve, which we cannot earn, only receive this is the true message

Something of this for our time comes out in this incident titled "Caught Speeding" (*God's Vitamin C* p.166)

My spirits were soaring as I propelled my convertible south along the interstate. I had just completed my junior year at college and was heading home for the summer. My thoughts were racing as I anticipated the summer break, which would be followed by my senior year and then - graduation! Everything seemed right with my world - until I turned off the interstate and was pulled over by a policeman.

"Did you realize you were speeding back there?"

"No, sir," I answered honestly as I fumbled for my driver's license. Moments later, I drove away with a ticket on the seat beside me. I inched my way out of the city and along the county roads that wound toward home. My speed had dropped and so had my spirits. Suddenly life didn't seem so promising. Neither did going home.

The thing I dreaded most was having to tell my dad. He had warned me that if I didn't drive more carefully I'd get a speeding ticket one day. I could already hear his lengthy lecture, complete with 'I told you so.'

Then an idea exploded. I was 21 years old. An adult with my own car. Why should I tell my parents about the speeding ticket? I could sneak into town one day and pay the fine. No one would ever have to know.

That's what I decided to do. But strangely, I didn't feel better.

When I finally arrived home, Mom's greeting turned into a question, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I shrugged. Her look told me she didn't believe me.

My parents decided to visit my aunt that day, and I went along on the ride that took us into the next county. I don't remember anything that happened at my aunt's that afternoon. The speeding ticket had become all-pervasive, weighing on my mind with greater and greater force.

Eventually, we started home. Dad was driving with Mom sitting beside him. I sat in the back seat, alone with my ticket. Finally, I gathered my courage and blurted out, "I got a speeding ticket today!"

Mom wheeled around and, with a sigh of relief, exclaimed, "So that's what's been bothering you."

Now it was Dad's turn.

"Why, everyone gets a speeding ticket once in a while," he said.

That was it? That was the lecture I had dreaded? Yes, that was it. With those words, Dad assured me of his forgiveness. The great weight I had been carrying lifted.

No one mentioned the ticket again until the next morning. I was getting ready to go with our church youth on an outing when Dad asked, "What did you do with your speeding ticket?"

"It's in my wallet."

"Don't you think you ought to leave it here? You might lose it," he advised.

"Dad!" I exclaimed. He was treating me like a child. Even if I lost the ticket, I was sure the officer had filed a copy.

Later, Mom explained why Dad wanted me to leave the ticket. He had planned to take it and pay the fine for me!

I had dreaded a reprimand from Dad and instead received understanding. Now, not only had he forgiven me, he was also willing to take it on himself to pay the fine I owed. I had always known Dad loved me, but now I saw his love in a new way.

No matter what anyone says, it's just not possible for us to pay our own ticket!

- the thing which inspired Paul to 'flash his sword' in Galatians to hit a six straight over the sight screen to bowl a 140 kilometre an hour bouncer
- is the glory of the grace of God and the necessity of realising that we can never save ourselves

[PP Slide]

As Paul writes:

May grace and peace be on you from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who, because our God and Father willed it so, gave his life for our sins, to rescue us from this present world with all its evil.

Glory be to him for ever and ever. Amen.

(Galatians 1:3-5)