

## AN EVIL GENERATION

You are surprised that we are still in the first chapter of Galatians? Has anybody ever mentioned that our world is in too big a hurry? Are you among those who think it's better to watch twelve poor movies than to watch one good one? Or to read twenty mediocre books than to read one classic? Have you, like me, ever read a classic and missed most of it because you were in such a hurry to get on to the twenty mediocre? For some years, I thought the real reason for reading was to convince myself and others that I was well-read. And I *was* well-read. I could tell you the titles and authors and what the books said, and even which ones were right, and to what degree. I still missed most of it. So did a lot of my professors. They were well-read too.

Some of you have been reading Galatians two or three times a week. Thank you! Now, what if for the coming week you let Galatians be the *only* thing you read? No newspapers, television, books, movies. Just read and reread and ponder Galatians instead. Of course, that's how it really was for the Galatians to whom Paul writes. No movies, computers, television, newspapers, magazines. They didn't even have a personal copy of the letter; they heard it read when they got together. They heard it over and over, talked about it, memorized it, even thought about what it meant. Why would Paul say these things? Was he right? Others had said differently. The Galatians themselves had long *believed* differently. It was not really the letter, of course, but *what the letter was talking about* that mattered. Have you ever wondered how they "got it" so deeply and profoundly, when many of them were what we would call uneducated peasants? Uneducated does not mean unintelligent. And they were not distracted like we are.

*"Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed; to him be glory for ever and ever! Amen." (Galatians 1:3-5)*

We have talked about Paul being an apostle, and about our being apostles. We have revisited the eerie claim that the Gospel we have received is not of human origin. At least some of you agree that tracking these Pauline thoughts leads us into strange and valuable territory, and that the more we ourselves mean to walk the Christian WAY in true and earnest devotion, the more fascinating Paul becomes to us.

Nevertheless, in comparison to the phrase we are highlighting today, the others recede to the sidelines, to the periphery. *“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed ....”*

Being an apostle means nothing if we have no message to carry. We cannot be emissaries if no one has sent us.

I am frequently told that Paul’s kind of language is no longer useful – that his imagery no longer reaches or moves people. Actually, people have been telling me this for as far back as I can remember – that the “sin/salvation/evil-age/rescue/died-for-our-sins” approach to spiritual growth is old and out of date and no longer calls people into newness of life. That always amazes me. First of all, I live in a community where people are deeply moved by this Message – where they are in fact finding newness of life, new purpose, new comfort and strength – and they keep growing more confident, more effective, and more loving because of it. Moreover, the people who tell me it is old and outdated, or dumb and wrong, are (with very few exceptions) ... how do I say this gently? They don’t strike me as having much depth of spiritual peace, discernment, devotion, commitment, or even a very active personal relationship with God. What can I say?

Well, I can say that this language is still useful to me. It reaches and moves me mightily, and has for years. Rather than diminishing with time and familiarity, it seems to grow stronger and more compelling. While to me I don’t seem to be a very good illustration of this new life – and like some of you I feel ever sheepish about how little I seem able to accomplish for the Christ who keeps doing so much for me – still, I do know what direction my life takes when I am left to myself and my own devices. Worthy or not, I still claim the Kingdom – the new LIFE in Christ – with gratitude, and confidence, and inner rejoicing.

That puts us in a bind, doesn’t it – if this language and imagery are incredibly important to us, but dull or obnoxious to others. I do have friends, especially among the clergy, who say, “Keep the old concepts if you like, but at least find fresh language and fresh symbols for expressing them.” I do find fresh *illustrations* all the time, every day, all around me. The Spirit has not stopped any efforts on our behalf. But why would I have objections to the language of sin and salvation, of

death and resurrection, of conversion and giving my allegiance to a new King who reigns over a different kind of Kingdom?

Frankly, most of the alternative images and “new” language I hear sound too tame, too bland, too anemic. They are usually a watered-down, limp suggestion that maybe we have a lot of potential and should just try harder to realize it. Now, who could pretend that this is wrong? A little focus – a little concentration – would certainly help most of us. But that’s a far cry from the heart-stopping drama of a Living God who bails out of Heaven into the suffering and anguish of human life because the children are so precious – and so lost – and something *must* be done to save them.

Frankly, when I hear people objecting to biblical language and images, I suspect that it is not the imagery which is old or tired, but that they are still trying to duck or dodge the Message itself. Naturally, it’s easy for me to come to this conclusion because that’s what I have so often done myself. My problem with the language and imagery of sin and salvation is that it is not merely language and imagery. I can pretend on the outside just as well as most of you – not as well as *all* of you, but as well as *most* of you – that everything is fine, I have it all together, and I don’t have any difficult inner issues of fear or loneliness or dread or greed or despair; that my heart and soul are perfectly tuned to the will and heart of God; that my life is a living illustration of willing obedience and service and devotion. (Doesn’t that sound incredibly wonderful?) I can pretend I am like that and that my life is like that, but this is not my total experience.

Being fair, not just to me but also to you: We do know moments when we live on the higher levels. I suppose that if we didn’t get whiffs and tastes of the Kingdom, we wouldn’t have such an incredible longing for more – we wouldn’t have such a hunger to keep walking with Christ. So the Jesus who came among us – who lived and died that we might dare to trust, and begin to return, the love that the Father bears toward us – that is not just imagery! And neither is the sin or the alienation or the fear that makes it so hard for us to trust – so hard for us to believe – that there really *is* a God of LOVE: that is, a God who loves us. It’s easy to believe in a vague, generic, impersonal God. That does not cost or require anything from us. It’s even pretty easy to believe that God loves other people, as long as we don’t know them very well. A New England friend used to tell me, “Jesus died that we might dare to stick our necks out too.” Sometimes he would add: “And that

we might dare to stick our hearts out and get them wrecked and hurt, and leave them out there anyway.”

Do you live in an “evil generation”? Why would Paul call his time “a wicked age”? Wouldn’t Turkey have been beautiful in his day? Sunsets and clear air and sparkling beaches; the seas and the rivers were teeming with fish; the rainforests were not endangered; there was no threat of radiation or global warming; nobody had yet asphalted the most beautiful farmland in the world. Of course, there were slaves everywhere, strings of boy prostitutes, Roman occupation – and Paul knew that people just like him had killed God’s Messiah. He knew it because he himself had been part of the mop-up operation.

Do you wake up in the morning and say to yourself: “Golly, I sure hope God can rescue me out of this present wicked age”? It starts to sound weird for a moment. But what’s really weird is that for a moment, we thought it sounded weird. You can tell about our fear of this wicked age by the thickness of the shields we wear. They are so thick and heavy that some days we can barely lug them around anymore. Lots of us actually *cannot* lug them around anymore; we get sick and depressed, and dream only of finding some place to go hide away from it all.

It is now familiar to most people that one of the pronounced patterns in the disease of alcoholism is a thing called “denial.” Seeing the reality with clarity would directly threaten the pattern of the alcoholic life itself. If the alcoholic begins to acknowledge how much damage alcohol is doing in his life, it brings to consciousness the terrible thought that he may need to stop drinking. Since that is an intolerable conclusion to any alcoholic, the mind will literally do anything it has to in order to avoid blaming alcohol for the problems. So the problems are not acknowledged. “Problems? I don’t have any problems! What problems?! Some self-righteous person is exaggerating them. Some hypocrite is making it up. Everybody has a fender-bender once in a while, so what’s the big deal if *I* do?”

I noticed a news story about a drunk driver who was arrested for knocking down one of the few remaining telephone poles still standing on Kauai. I smiled because I knew how that drunk was feeling: “Jeez, a hurricane can knock down everything in sight, but the entire police force drops everything and comes running after me because of one little pole. The injustice of it all!” Drunks think like that. Even if the problems get too obvious, we can still deny that alcohol is the cause. It was the

spouse, or the neighbor, or the boss, or the government, or God. Well, even non-alcoholics sometimes blame the government; I was sober a long time before I realized that even sober people sometimes think like drunks. Denial is a serious phenomenon. Denial protects *the disease* instead of the person who has the disease. Denial shields the disease against solution or healing. “*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.*” (John 8:32) Thanks be to God! But the counterpart is: “If we keep our denial, then the denial will ensure that the disease will go on developing and getting worse until we die.”

All of us fight an enormous denial when it comes to sin – our alienation from God. We do not easily admit that the sin is causing us any problems. And if the problems get undeniable, then it is not our sin – that is, it is not our fault; it is circumstances beyond our control, or other people (spouse, boss, children), or the government, or God.

Do you live in an evil generation? “Nah, we gotta keep thinking positive. It gets a little difficult from time to time, but life is still pretty good. We’re plugging away. We’ll make it. Did you see the game yesterday? What a cliff-hanger!”

“... *Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age ....*”

Is Paul depressed? Is he being negative, or cynical, or paranoid? Not at all. He is only echoing Jesus: “*This generation is an evil generation. It seeks a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah.*” (Matthew 12:39; Luke 11:29) (Repentance is the sign of Jonah: turn – convert – join a different Kingdom and live for a different reality.) We do not have to stay spiritually drunk all our lives – unconscious to the presence of God. We can stop drinking-in the myths and excuses of a secular, alienated, broken world. “*Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed; to him be glory for ever and ever! Amen.*”

Do you realize that this is a wicked age? You can park your car at a trail-head and come back to find everything gone. You can even get back home and find that your home has been ransacked. Is that enough to call it a wicked age? It depends on the day, I suppose, and whether it happened to you. So if it happens to somebody else and I’m not much concerned about it, is that not one of the clearest marks of a wicked age?

“Today, an African-American boy in an urban area is more likely to die of a gunshot wound than was an African-American male who served in the Vietnam War.” (*The Wonder of Boys*, by Michael Gurian.) Fifty-nine thousand American soldiers were killed in the Vietnam War. Over sixty thousand of the surviving veterans have committed suicide since that war. Does that bother any of you – that we are killing ourselves faster than our enemies can kill us? Does it bother you that there were fewer casualties among U.S. servicemen *during* the First Gulf War than when we were at peace?

Why is our society now content to emphasize individuality and glorify every separate racial, ethnic, and cultural group? And not just that, but that *instead of* responsibility and participation in the larger community to which we all belong? For decades, schools and churches have been undoing the very things we marched for and believed in during the civil rights movement. Never mind black and white together; never mind becoming a united people – everybody back to their own heritage. Forget the wings; focus on the roots. Our world once again found a way to deny and delay the imperative of coming together, of identifying with each other, of working together against disasters about to envelop and destroy us all. So let’s each continue our loyalty to our past glory and our past hurts, and blame each other for our hard histories, Do you know what happens in any marriage, any community, or any world that wants to keep its resentments, angers, and vengeance – and never learns forgiveness or rebuilds love? Divorce = alienation = SIN. If the words are so outdated, how come the reality stays the same?

Is it a wicked age? You know I could go on and on, as you could yourself, with far grimmer illustrations of the same reality. *Of course* we don’t like to think about it too much. Denial is appealing for many reasons. There is still beauty all around us, despite the growing destruction. I am always amazed that in the midst of this wicked age, I keep running into so many courageous, loving, caring people. How come it is still a wicked age, when there are so many wonderful people? Well, a wicked age brings forth great caring. It is one of the sad things about studying history: to see that humans are so bad when things are good, and so good when things are bad. For instance, when did the great schools of Greece develop – Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, and the rest? They were what made ancient Greece great, right? Wrong! They were part of the death throes of Greece – a desperate attempt to train up the young men to character and values that might avert the decline. All to no avail.

In any case, no matter how remarkable the wonderful people are, the air and the waters are still being polluted, abuse and dishonesty still run rampant, the third world is still starving, and the time of the privileged is fast running out.

Strangely enough, it has always been true that conversion – the awakening of the Spirit – has also been an awakening to the magnitude of the evil and wickedness all around and within us. People do not flock to Jesus – turn their lives around, begin to walk the Pilgrim’s Way, become followers and servants of the Christ – until the shields and shells of denial are cracked wide open. It is not until we see the world and ourselves in the throes of the alienation, divisions, hatreds, and fears called SIN that we begin to grasp the magnitude of our plight – *or* the magnitude of the brazen and audacious purpose of what Jesus is doing for us and among us, and what He is inviting us into.

Most of the time, I suspect, we miss the Christian Life because we expect a big change on the outside and a minor adjustment on the inside. And most of the time, it is the reverse. There is a minor adjustment on the outside (at least that most people can see at first) and an incredible change on the inside: A change of values, allegiance, purpose, motivation. A change not of the personality, but of the pillars – the foundations on which it stands. A total reworking of what we are worth, why we are here, what we are trying to accomplish, and how.

The glory of the Christian Life – of the New Kingdom of Christ to which we give our only true allegiance – is not that it will save the world for democracy. It is not that it will solve the outer problems of our reeling, hurting world. It is not that it will save the spotted owl, or restore the forests, or make all the races and religions live in peace. We may work toward some of those ends from time to time, as God gives us light. But that is not the reason or purpose of Christianity.

The glory of the Christian Life is that we get to *be* – to exist – in God’s presence ... that we get to *know* the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ ... that we get to be part of a community of other sinners whose only authentic bond – and our only credentials – is the sheer awareness and acceptance of God’s love and grace.

*“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us out of the present wicked age as our God and Father willed; to him be glory for ever and ever! Amen.”*