

Dr. Tim Gombis, Galatians, Session 2, Galatians 1:1-10, The Introduction to This Letter

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Welcome to this second lecture on Galatians. This is covering Galatians 1.1-10, the Introduction to This Letter.

If you've read the introductions to Paul's letters, you will notice that this one is very different, which tips off how this letter is going to be very different from the other letters that Paul writes.

You know, letter introductions often give loads of clues to the argument of a letter, the tone of a letter, and the feeling of a letter, and this one is really no different. In fact, it's very instructive to read the introduction to Galatians next to the introduction to Romans. These letters are often situated side-by-side because they have a number of similar themes.

Abraham shows up, justification by faith is a big deal, and there is a lot of talk about righteousness and the Mosaic Law, Jew-Gentile relationships, etc. Read the introduction to Romans, verses 1-15, and you'll see a dramatic difference to the introduction to Galatians, especially verses 1-10, but this is also cryptic, the beginning of Galatians. I should say it's very clipped, whereas, in Romans, Paul is very wordy and elaborative on how much he longs to see them and how he's thinking about them and all this kind of thing.

Galatians is very different, very distinctive. He certainly emphasizes his apostleship but doesn't just mention that he's an apostle. He talks about it not having a human origin but a divine origin, which is very different from anything that he says in other letters.

You already get the sense that perhaps, and many have made this point, Paul is being a bit defensive, or we should say, why does he have to emphasize that aspect? That may be part of it, being defensive, but there may be some other reasons for that as well. You'll notice that this is not a letter to a church but to churches. As we mentioned before, there was probably a network of churches that he was writing to.

Perhaps these are house churches that are closely related to one another, which would not be uncommon at all. More distinctive and certainly very striking to us, there's no thanksgiving for the churches, and there's no commendation. When you read a letter that comes from around the same time Galatians was written, 1 Thessalonians, there's loads of commendation.

Paul loves these people and is impressed with them; their reputation is spreading. Galatians, none of that. Paul doesn't name any ministry associates, even though he's undoubted with people, especially, as I've suggested if he's making his way down to Jerusalem, or maybe about to leave, or already arrived in Jerusalem when he writes this letter.

He mentions being rescued, or even perhaps being just snatched from the present evil age, and that is going to be something that we're going to camp on for a little bit in this lecture. Furthermore, there are no plans to come visit. There's no recounting of good relations.

I mentioned in the previous lecture that in chapter 4, he does talk about the very interesting occasion that led to the founding of the churches, but he's not eager to see these people again, necessarily. Just to say, this is a distinctive letter opening, which marks this letter off as very distinctive when he sets it over against other letters. I'm going to suggest during this lecture that one of the keys to understanding, in fact, probably the key to understanding the rhetoric of Galatians and really understanding the holistic conception of the argument, is to understand the apocalyptic character of Galatians and to understand the sets of oppositions, the antinomies, these oppositions that Paul repeats throughout the letter.

These come from Paul's apocalyptic framework, which is set off right in verse 4, when Paul makes this statement, referring to Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, that he might rescue us or deliver us from this present evil age. To rightly understand what is going on in Galatians and to rightly understand much of Paul's theology, we've got to come to grips with the apocalyptic framework of Paul, or this cosmic framework in which Paul sees everything. Now, these may not be terms that you use all that often, cosmic frameworks or apocalyptic frameworks, but what I mean by that is this.

We can sort of chart Old Testament or Jewish expectations in this way. That is to say, God's people and scripture spoke of this; God's people understand that they are living in the present evil age. They are living in the period of the reign of sin.

Satan is their ultimate spiritual enemy. They experience the powers of darkness and the opposition of the flesh, and people die, which is not at all in God's plan. And, during this age, the prophets speak of this, and Jews of the Jewish period between the Testaments are all looking forward to what the prophets talked about.

They're looking forward to the day of the Lord. They're looking forward to that climactic day when God will return, where he will save his people, he will judge the wicked, will obliterate evil, will defeat his cosmic enemy Satan, and he will do away with the present evil age, and bring in the fullness of the coming age. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel speak of a new creation, of God sending his spirit, of the

kingdom of God coming, of the reign of God arriving, so that God's righteous people enter this period of Shalom, where they're experiencing creation the way that God intended it to be.

A reign of righteousness, wholeness, and the pouring out, as I said in the last lecture, especially for Pharisees, the pouring out of resurrection life so that God's own people experience God's own life in the land the way that God intended them to. So, just to say, this is the sort of future-oriented expectation coming out of the Old Testament that would have shaped Paul's mindset and the Jews of Paul's era. Now, this is another chart.

I'll point this out carefully. There's a sense in which that one singular day from that previous slide is sort of split into two, and something unusual kind of happens in the apostolic preaching. This is how the apostles rendered things, and this has a massive effect on how Paul's theology should be regarded.

There's a sense in which, at the moment of the cross, what's often called the Christ event, or the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and his resurrection and his ascension to reign, there's a sense in which this day, this day of judgment and day of salvation, is the day of the Lord. So, salvation has come already. The present age has been judged.

And so we can say that there's a sense in which the new creation does come. The new creation is poured out. But there's also something that's very, very unusual.

This present evil age is not fully obliterated. It is not fully done away with. There's a sense in which the apostles are still looking forward to a future day, the day of Christ, when the fullness of God's salvation is consummated or completed or fully worked out.

So, in New Testament theology and in Pauline theology, we talk about the already but the not yet. That is, the present evil age has been judged and destroyed, but it's not yet fully destroyed. The new age in Christ and by the Spirit has begun, but it's not fully here yet.

And we still await that future day when it is fully here. All of that to say is that the Church inhabits this time between the times. We inhabit this time between the day of Christ and the day of Christ, between the day of the Lord and the day of the Lord, the day of salvation and the day of salvation.

It's this kind of unpredicted, unforeseen, between-the-times kind of time where we experience the overlap of the ages. The present evil age is judged and destroyed, and we're delivered out of it, but we're not fully out of it yet. We're still sort of here so

that we feel sort of the push and pull of both of these; we feel the effects of both of these ages at once.

We live in the crossover of the ages. Another way we can depict this reality is in this way. That is to say, we were fully wrapped up in the present evil age, but God has brought us into this new age, and in the death and resurrection of Christ, God has actually put to death the old world and has brought about the creation of this new age where we are to basically fully find our identity.

This is what Paul wants the Galatians to do, to find their identity in this new age, because what he sees is that the teaching that they are being given there in Galatia is basically a teaching that, yes, it's saturated in Scripture, and it comes from the Bible, but it is being oriented by categories that come from this fallen age. But what he says here at the very beginning is you have been delivered out of the present evil age, and by implication, you have been brought into this new age by the Spirit. However, the Church inhabits this time between the times, this cosmic space that is still overseen and feels the influence of the present evil age, and we inhabit this cosmic space that is also subject to the influence of the Spirit.

So, when Paul talks about the warring of the flesh and the Spirit, again, he is not necessarily talking about these two dynamics that are internal to each individual. I do feel these effects as an individual, but Paul is talking about these larger dynamics. The realm of the flesh is at work on communities.

The realm of the Spirit is at work on communities. And communities and relational dynamics and constructions of identity in social spheres and cultural values, all of this. Communities experience life together in space.

And for Paul, that is in space and spaces. For Paul, this current age is one in which these spaces are subject to the influence of the present evil age and the powers of death and the power of the flesh, which affects relationships. Churches and the small social units of Jesus' followers are also places that God inhabits by His Spirit.

So, we feel the effects of the Spirit and the effects of the flesh in our relational dynamics and even in our bodies. But this is the larger dynamic that kind of accounts for Paul's apocalyptic antinomies, where he's talking about... He'll have a number of these. Paul is not an apostle appointed by men.

He's appointed by God. He's trying to basically say that even though the church inhabits this crossover of the ages, the way that you're currently thinking and living and the decision you're entertaining is basically consistent with the world that God brought you out of. What I want you to do is to think, consider, and make decisions as you make your way forward as a community in terms of your identity that God has brought you into here.

So, this present evil age and the new age, the new creation age in Christ and by the Spirit, accounts for the oppositional thinking that Paul has in Galatians. There's a way of thinking that comes from the flesh of the present evil age. There's a way of thinking that comes from the new age in Christ, and that is what Paul is getting across.

What he's basically trying to get them to do is to construct their identities, know their identities, and live their community life from that new age in Christ and from that new reality. Also, it's the case, and this may be a good time to just say that many times when contemporary Christians imagine salvation, we think of salvation as something that has to do with me and that something has happened to me. I got saved.

I enjoy salvation. So, I imagine perhaps my internal space as a space that was corrupted and filled with sin, and Jesus has moved into my heart and cleansed things within, and now I am saved. It's a good thing for me to go to church with other saved people, which is a good learning experience or opportunity to learn how to kind of manage and enjoy the salvation that I have.

It's my possession. That's a way of thinking about things that are true enough from an individualistic and really earthbound conception. For Paul, he thinks about salvation first and foremost as something that happened to the cosmos.

The fabric of creation had been hijacked by the powers of death, the powers of darkness, Satan, sin, the flesh, and death. And when God created Israel and gave the law into that situation, all these powers of darkness and the powers that affected and infected the very fabric of creation itself made sure that that project ended disastrously. So, when God brought about His work in Christ, that is a work that He did to the fabric of the cosmos.

He's proving that by building these communities of Jesus' followers that enjoy the presence of the Spirit. So, when Paul thinks about salvation, he thinks about the cosmos first, God's cosmic enemies that He's defeated, and how that is depicted and realized in reality by new communities that spring up of people that have been made new and brought into these new fellowships. Cosmic, corporate, individual.

Whereas we in the West, at least the way that I was trained to think, it's thoroughly individual. And we might need to think about what we do corporately. But cosmically, we just don't think in those terms.

But for Paul, the cosmos is strategic. And that accounts for those antinomies. So when Paul talks about his apostleship as not from men, but through Jesus Christ, there may be somewhat of a defensiveness there.

But what he's trying to say is his apostolic commission, and his apostolic call have to do with a radically new realm that's been inserted into reality. It's not one that is constructed from below. It's not from the realm of men.

By the way, this may be a little bit of a clue to getting into the anti-law rhetoric that we do find in Galatians. There's a sense in which, in Paul's day, what had become of Judaism was a culture that was a lot more shaped by issues going on in the present evil age than by scripture. This is the realm of humanly constructed prejudices, of humanly constructed means for accomplishing things, using strength, using coercion.

This is the realm where identity is constructed in very human ways, where I have value based on my race, ethnicity, gender, and social status. That's what gives me my worth. In the Judaism of Paul's day, Paul was subject to all these ways of thinking, just because these are humans.

That's why when he gets an opportunity to express the radical newness of the gospel, he talks about how in Christ, there's no more Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. These are not the things that give us our value anymore. What gives us our value is being in Christ.

Actually, the cross has shattered this realm. It has put this realm to death, and it has crucified us to this realm, so we now have to, I'm trying to change my language; we now get to experience freedom. We don't have to, but we get to experience the freedom and the wonder and the joy and the liberation of constructing our identities from our inhabiting Christ, which gives us ultimate value, which is all part of the gospel, and we'll get to that as we make our way through.

But just to say, in Paul's mindset, he had certainly become captive to human ways of thinking that ended up making Paul see non-Jews as less valuable than Jews, perhaps seeing women as less valuable than men, have Pharisees as far more valuable than all these sinners that they needed to either deal with in some way or get rid of or coerce into becoming more obedient. And because of what happened to Paul himself, there's a radical newness, and Paul wants the Galatians to experience that newness. That set of antinomies that comes from this apocalyptic framework is far different and is a far better way of rendering the antinomies than antinomies that we often try to get at, like thinking of the binary between being and doing or believing and obeying, or relationship over religion.

Paul's not thinking in those terms. He's thinking in terms of the old creation, the present evil age, and the new creation. The present evil age and the new creation.

The present evil age consists of actions, attitudes, postures, relational dynamics, mindsets, and cultural assumptions that are holistically of this world and often

destructive. Behaviors, attitudes, postures, relational dynamics, ways of being, and ways of doing that all are generative of freedom because they're Christ-oriented postures and relationships, etc. So that apocalyptic framework we'll come back to again and again.

A couple of other features of what's happening here in Galatians 1-10 in this introduction to the letter. Paul makes reference to God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead, which is a unique feature. It's not very common to have Paul mentioning the resurrection in a letter opening.

But for Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus go together. It is the death of Christ and his resurrection that have brought about resurrection space, which is the fullness of life. And, of course, that fullness of life is enjoyed by church communities.

And for Paul, the new age has come in Christ. That's the radical newness of the gospel for Paul. And again, when Paul thinks about resurrection, he does not think about me being raised from the dead.

That's included. What he thinks about is holistic cosmic transformation. Now, again, Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

We've been co-raised with him. But all of creation and all creatures are not now currently experiencing the fullness of resurrection. So, we experience resurrection already, but not yet.

Paul speaks of this as a current experience. Keep in mind that resurrection and our current enjoyment of it needs to be understood in terms of the holistic character of resurrection that would have shaped Paul's understanding. Because for Paul, resurrection life, life from the dead, means new politics, a new economy, a new way of being, a new way of doing, a new way of relating.

It is thoroughly holistic, which is a note for contemporary churches to be thinking about Christian existence in terms of a new holistic way of being. So church communities are. I hesitate to use this word because of how it's misunderstood, but church communities are political units. They are units of people gathered together under the rule of Christ, who relate to one another in a radically different way, who serve each other because they're now in Christ, who relate to the outside world in radically different ways, who take a political posture toward another and a political posture toward the world.

But that's politics oriented by generosity, love, care, service, gift-giving, and hospitality, not politics of power-grabbing, name-calling, and derogatory speech. Sadly, the politics of the church in many parts of the world have been corrupted by the politics of this world because many Christian environments have become

environments thoroughly embedded within this age instead of new environments that are thoroughly embedded within the new age in Christ. But when Paul thinks about being raised from the dead, it is holistic and sets a holistic trajectory for the life of the church.

Paul talks about, in Galatians 4, or sorry, in verse 4 of chapter 1, when he mentions Jesus Christ, this blessing of grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And when Paul mentions Jesus Christ, he mentions him as the one who gave himself for our sins. This giving of himself is, for Paul, the core of Jesus' identity.

Paul's going to mention this again in Galatians 2 when he mentions Jesus Christ, the one who loved me and gave himself up for me. So, Jesus' self-giving is his identity. Again, let that run through your theology.

If Jesus' self-identity is the one who is self-giving, that's also the identity of God, and that sets the direction for the identity of the church as people who are self-giving and live lives of self-giving love, a community dynamic of self-giving love. In verse 5, Paul goes on to mention this kind of prayer wish with regard to God the Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. This cryptic, very brief mention of glory is not just generalized, but in Paul's theology, the glory of God has everything to do with humanity because people in Paul's theology are the image of God, they are the glory of God, and they are to glorify God, which reminds me of Irenaeus' quote, the glory of God is the human fully alive.

The glory of God is the human fully alive. And in biblical theology, humans, overseeing the spread of God's peace and God's rule, God's shalom on earth, is what the glory of God looks like. So, humans glorify God in that way.

Seen in this light, you can depict the controversy in Galatia as sort of a dispute about what does the glory of God look like. The Jewish missionaries are very certain that what glorifies God on earth is the spread into Gentile lands, non-Jewish communities, of Jewish identity. Gentiles converting to Judaism, faithfully following Jewish tradition, being circumcised, and basically converting to Judaism, becoming Jewish, as the way that God is properly glorified in Christ.

Paul sees that basically glorifying God in Christ is remaining non-Jewish, but in a sense, remaining pagan because Jewish Christians would have seen Paul's communities as communities of paganism. To be one who glorifies the God of Israel is to be a Jew. But Paul sees, and Peter did too, but Paul sees the full consistency of the Christian gospel as Jewish Christians glorifying God as Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians glorifying God as non-Jewish Christians.

Turkish Jesus followers, Egyptian Jesus followers, Syrian ones, whatever, wherever the gospel finds itself. So, in a sense, this is a dispute about what kind of human

behavior actually glorifies God. Making our way into verses 6 through 10, Paul does not get past verse 6 without starting his rebuke.

And so, really, verses 6 through 10 are Paul's rebuke right away, without even any warm-up. In verse 6, this immediate transition and this highly emotional language where he says, He accuses them of defection right away. This defection is in contrast to the delivery that Paul had just spoken about.

God is the one who has delivered the Galatians out of the present evil age and brought them into this new age, and he depicts them as deserting back. This is like God bringing Israel out of Egypt into the promised land, and they want to return. Which, you know, read Exodus.

And these narratives are very likely what Paul is thinking about. You are defecting. You are going back to slavery.

You're going back to Egypt. He says that they are doing this in favor of a different gospel, which he goes on to say is actually not another gospel. There's only one gospel, which is an indication that the people who have come here to the Galatian communities and are shaking them up and disturbing them, agitating them, are very likely Jewish Christians.

So, they're not non-Christian Jews. I'm not sure that non-Christian Jews have had too much of a concern for Paul's communities. These are Jewish Christians informing Paul's communities that they are not fully in the kingdom of God.

They are not saved unless they are converting to becoming Jewish. Paul does not mince words here at all, but he says in verses 8 and 9, he issues this double damnation, which let me just read this, but even though we, Paul and his apostolic ministry team, or an angel from heaven, if we should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you at that first visit, let that person be accursed. Let them be damned.

That's untidy language and impolite language to be used in church. I don't care. I'm going to say it again.

This is Paul's rhetoric. He knows this is going to sort of shake them up a little bit. As we have said before, so I again say, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you receive, let him be accursed.

This kind of raises the question, is it ever appropriate to actually be using this kind of language of other Christian people? Whenever I teach Galatians in class, I always ask my students, do you think it's appropriate to talk like this? Sometimes, Christians actually do talk to one another like that. I've been in some Christian contexts where a

group of Christians can have so many theological agreements with someone very near to them on the theological spectrum, but they disagree on this one narrow thing. And the level of accusations of biblical infidelity and playing fast and loose with Scripture are just unbelievable.

Is it okay to talk like that? I'm not going to answer that necessarily. I would be very, very hesitant to ever speak in this way. Paul is delivering an apostolic, speaking God's Word in God's place.

He's speaking on behalf of the Lord Christ as an apostle of Jesus Christ. I'm not sure that we should take that kind of prerogative for ourselves. I think that there are certain ways of thinking, certain ways of being a Christian community, that are damnable.

Certainly, we can think of all kinds of ways that the Church participates in economic oppression or exploitation, the way that the Church furthers and participates in cultures that are racist, where people are oppressed and humanity is degraded. But I think we need to be very, very careful about speaking to one another using such high-powered language. I would be hesitant, especially in light of Jesus' warnings in the Gospels, that we will face judgment based on what we say, based on our words.

Proceed with caution. Well, Paul moves on in verse 10 here to deny that he is trying to please men. Did you hear what I just said Paul is saying to these communities? Do you think I'm now seeking the favor of men or of God? Am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

So, this denying of man-pleasing is an indication that Paul is not trying to win some popularity contest. He is no longer living, I mean in Paul's own self-conception, he is completely dead to this world. He's not trying to construct an identity that will earn applause from other people.

He's not trying to construct an identity that will earn him social approval. He says at the end of Galatians, through Jesus Christ, I have been crucified to the world, and the world has been crucified to me. That doesn't mean he comes out of the physical world.

In his view, that means he's not thinking in these terms at all. So, he's not trying to please anybody. He is over here.

He has his commission from the Lord Christ. He is secure in his identity in Christ. He knows who he is.

He's dead to trying to construct an identity to earn social approval. He is in this new realm where he is focused on faithfulness to the Lord Christ, which gives him the

liberty and freedom to say what he knows his audiences need to hear. So, in Paul's mind, in the present evil age, he'd be living for the applause of others.

In the new humanity, he is living for the glory of God.

Well, call to a halt right there. That is just verses 1-10 of Galatians 1. In this introduction, Paul begins with great abruptness, just turning right around to confront his audience, and we'll move on to the substance of his argument in our next lecture.