

Grace takes you all the way.

“But in the past, since you didn’t know God, you were enslaved to things that by nature are not gods. 9 But now, since you know God, or rather have become known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elements? Do you want to be enslaved to them all over again? 10 You are observing special days, months, seasons, and years. 11 I am fearful for you, that perhaps my labor for you has been wasted.” -- **Galatians 4:8-11** (CSB)

Grace takes you all the way.

Ultramarathoners are heroes of mine. Their ability to go for 100 miles and keep a pace that I can’t run two miles in!

The story of one runner however matches the problem unfolding in the Galatians churches.

“Jim Walmsley has a thorn in his side in the form of the Western States Endurance Run. Two years in a row he’s entered the prestigious 100-miler as the much-hyped favorite and two years in a row he has left disappointed.

In 2016, he attacked his debut at the distance aggressively, going out at a pace 40 minutes ahead of the course record. He made a wrong turn at mile 93, got lost, and shuffled in to a 20th place finish.”

That wrong turn cost a record and made a legend. The wrong turn was actually a short cut but in order to avoid disqualification he had to run back two miles to get on the course and that mistake ruined his race. He was beaten by essentially running in reverse.

Some in the Galatians churches were doing the same thing, running the wrong way ending up in reverse.

The Christian life is a race - “Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, 2 keeping our eyes on Jesus,” -- **Hebrews 12:1-2** (CSB) - so there is

movement involved, hills and heat, but looking to Jesus is recognition that the race is already won - that is where our endurance comes from, it is how we finish.

Galatian Christians succumbing to the lure of false teaching and the inclinations of their flesh, were running in reverse.

This is what has Paul concerned, what needs to be corrected, it is the taint that has to be removed from the churches.

Folly of Reverse

Anyone ever driven a manual transmission? It is a great experience, such control... but if the gearbox or clutch are wonky, after lots of use and little care, you can slip gears. If you slip into reverse it could be catastrophic!

This is what was happening for too many in the Galatian churches. Paul reminds them of what used to be.

“But in the past, since you didn’t know God, you were enslaved to things that by nature are not gods.” -- **Galatians 4:8** (CSB)

Here is the reminder of what life used to be like. For most of them, Gentile believers, their past was marked by the paganism of the culture they lived in. Idolatry in the raw - worshiping made-up deities of stone and wood. A performative existence of trying to bring pleasure to a rock so it would make it rain on you.

A life enslaved, trapped in never grasping what they were reaching for. Always lost.

But they had heard the gospel - the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, preached by Paul and they came to believe. They recognized that they were sinners in need of rescue and that came in Jesus.

Sadly, “what is” was starting to match what “used to be.”

“But now, since you know God, or rather have become known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elements? Do you want to be enslaved to them all over again?” -- **Galatians 4:9** (CSB)

Things changed, they know God - where before they would have no understanding of God they have been awakened and saved. They have been redeemed, experienced the Spirit, the application of their sonship in Christ.

The problem is that they are turning back to weak and worthless elements.

Paul here is not talking about gross sin - that is coming - this is a justification problem. What they think is needed for redemption, for salvation. And how life is supposed to look - treating God like that rock they had to please to get rain.

Paul feared they were in danger of walking away from the freedom they received by faith in Christ and by this liberating work in order to embrace special days and months and seasons related to the law.

Paul associates the Galatians' turn to Torah as a return to Gentile idolatry.

This has long been a human problem, even for those that have experienced redemption.

Israel, having been freed from slavery in Egypt, hungers for the food of oppression and longs to go back.

Why is it happening in Galatians churches founded in the gospel?

Without a doubt the influence of judaizers owned a lot of the blame. Those that came from Jerusalem and taught that to be a “real Christian” you had to observe the Mosaic law, or at least the parts of it they preferred - that would create a hurdle for Gentiles.

This, paired with the fact that they are human and inclined toward these things, was a disaster.

And it is why it still happens today.

We love law - to-do's, something to accomplish. And sometimes, grace can sound too good to be true. That I can be saved without regard to how bad I am, that I don't have to prove myself first, spruce up my resume, or hang with the right peeps.

Salvation on the basis of faith? Surely there must be something about me that is worth it, something I must do to be saved or maintain my salvation.

We are also surrounded by merit - by earning in our world. Things that are actually good and worthwhile. You should do a good job in order to be promoted. You should study before the test so you can pass it.

If I want to lose weight I need to stop eating donuts - it makes sense. It is right and good to earn it when it comes to my waistline but not salvation.

We also love control - to put ourselves in charge of the situation - we don't need to get into the ways we do this these days - because some of you would email me mad that I brought it up - but we want to be in the driver's seat. We forget that the first lie was that we could be god and we go on trying anyway.

All these things together make up our risk for jumping back into slavery. Then along comes something novel, some new way of thinking, some uncovered necessity in serving Jesus, or the best life lived under the Mosaic Law. (It's a thing). Some friends share a meme that fires all of my triggers and I shift into reserve.

We become convinced that grace can't get us to where we need to go, so we take a wrong turn and ruin the race.

Proving myself by being better at keeping the old calendar than everyone else. Or whatever we tend to place with Jesus plus... Back into slavery.

“As many as trust to their own strength and righteousness, do serve a god, but such a god as they themselves have devised, and not the true God indeed.” Martin Luther

The temptation to turn back is never far from any Christian convert, especially when he or she finds themselves in the midst of a wilderness of difficulties.

Paul contends the Galatians' turn from Christ toward works of the law is equivalent to a return to idolatry.

"...he feared maybe the Galatians did not really believe the gospel when he preached the crucified and resurrected Christ to them the first time..." Jarvis Williams

Labor wasted. Paul living that pastor life fearing that all his work is in vain because the folks reject it and live under the law. But it's also a waste for the believer. Decades spent missing out on grace, missing redemption, adoption, and the Kingdom.

It is hard to see why the Galatians would be attracted by slavery except that the perversity of the fallen human heart wants to do something itself to contribute to being justified before God. We have here in these verses not only a window into the Galatians' thinking but also a mirror into our own hearts, for we too are strongly inclined to contribute something toward our justification.

There is another way. A solution.

Joy of Grace

The scandalous freedom of the gospel rejects all earning or self-generated contribution. Christ has accomplished everything.

"But now, since you know God, or rather have become known by God" --
Galatians 4:9 (CSB)

Paul places a vital correction here. "Or rather..." They know God but only because he knows them. They have become known by God.

"What matters supremely, therefore, is not in the last analysis the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it - the fact that he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hand. I am never out of his mind... He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters."
J.I. Packer

God is the initiator. Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. He does the earning, the redeeming, the adopting. You just live in freedom in him. What joy!

“Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. 5 He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he richly poured out on us with all wisdom and understanding.” -- **Ephesians 1:3-8** (CSB)

Christians are no longer under the Mosaic covenant. We are under a covenant by the blood of Christ - that of grace.

This is the remedy - His grace toward us - what we see when we run with our eyes on Jesus.

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” -- **Matthew 11:28-30** (CSB)

We have to come to the realization that this invitation from Jesus is not exclusively for those that are beat down. This is for the achiever all the same. In salvation, Jesus carries the burden, all the weight. In our living his yoke is easy and burden is light. The only weights that slow us down are those we cling to.

And to release that weight, we need the good news of this grace, over and over again, and then some more.

“The law is divine and holy. Let the law have his glory, but yet no law, be it never so divine and holy, ought to teach me that I am justified, and shall live through it. I grant it may teach me that I ought to love God and my neighbour; also to live in chastity, soberness, patience, etc., but it ought not to show me, how I should be delivered from sin, the devil, death, and hell.

“Here I must take counsel of the gospel. I must hearken (listen) to the gospel, which teaches me, not what I ought to do, (for that is the proper office of the law,) but what Jesus Christ the Son of God has done for me : that He suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death. The gospel wills me to receive this, and to believe it. And this is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consists.

“Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.” **Martin Luther**

It is still right and good to think about how we live in light of Christ - how we approach marriage, parenting, work, justice, bringing peace to our neighborhoods. Loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbor as self is still true but it is not the way of salvation - it is living forward from salvation.

So as for the Galatians, the remedy to sliding back into slavery is more of the gospel - the preaching of grace. This letter to the churches is our “more cowbell” moment.

Classic SNL skit portraying the recording of the Blue Oyster Cult’s song *The Reaper*. Christopher Walken playing the producer just wants more cowbell.

The Spirit playing the producer in our lives just wants more gospel.

Some say there has to be something more shiny than that. They say, ‘You can’t just go on preaching the gospel.’ Paul has a different opinion.

I plan to go down with the gospel ship because it is the only life preserver that can bear my weight!

Running back to the old ways is going in reverse. Freedom looks different. Grace takes you all the way. Jesus has earned the “well done” that you will hear. Now live.

Grace takes you all the way. Because it is the only way.

Be suspicious of reverse - There used to be a poster on the DC subway that was encouraging people to report suspicious behavior, something out of the ordinary or dangerous, paired with suspicion was “suminspicious.”

The devil doesn't have any new tricks but he is consistent in trying to move us away from grace. There are new ways and unlocked mysteries all the time, don't be enslaved by them, instead ask the Spirit to keep you watchful for ways you disregard grace and where your transmission slips.

Beat the gospel of grace into your head and heart. When we think we know and want to move onto other things we prove we don't know at all. This is the meat we are meant for, the grace of Christ. Run with it. It is the pure power of God for salvation. See it in Scripture, hunt for it, savor it, share it, preach it to yourself every day.

Jim Walmsley took a wrong turn and had to reverse course, it was the mistake that made him lose. But Walmsey would be back and eventually he would win by running the right course... in 2018, 2019, and 2021. Oh that he would be known by God!

The Galatians were running in reverse but were course-corrected by the same truth that founded their faith, the grace of the gospel. It is what gives us endurance, what brings us in, and takes us all the way home. May we be known for trusting in this grace alone because we have become known by God.