

From Saul to Paul

His transformation and our own

Rod Carmona

Note 6: A paraphrase of the Galatian letter

E-mail received at 11:34 p.m., year 44 A.D.

To: antioch.pisidia@church.com, iconium@church.com, lystra@church.com, derbe@church.com

From: apostle.paul@church.com

Subject: Paul's letter to all the congregations in the province of Galatia

Dear brothers and sisters in the churches of Galatia:

I, Paul, apostle, not by popular vote, nor was I designated by a high human authority, but directly by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead, together with my companions in the faith here: greetings. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ shower his grace and peace upon you.

We know his grace and peace because Jesus has rescued us from the evil of the world in which we lived, through his own sacrifice for our sins. God's plan is that all of us might experience this rescue. Glory to God forever!

I am astounded at how rapidly you have betrayed him who called you by the grace of Christ to go after a gospel that implies a message that is completely different. This is not just a small variation but something totally different; it is a lie about God. Those that have generated this confusion among you are twisting Christ's message out of shape.

I want to be absolutely clear in this: even if I myself, or one of us, or even an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel different from the one you originally received, may God's curse fall upon him. I said to you before and I now repeat it: if anyone, no matter his reputation or credentials, should preach to you something different, may God's curse fall upon him.

Do you think I am speaking forcefully in this way to manipulate people, or to obtain popular approval? If my object were popularity, I would not need to make myself a slave of Christ. For me, what is really important is God's approval! I want you to know with absolute clarity that the gospel that I proclaimed is not a question of nice words. I did not receive it by tradition nor was I instructed by a teacher. It comes directly from God and was given to me by Jesus Christ himself.

I am confident that you already know what kind of person I was when I belonged to the Jewish religion. In those days I was dedicated to violently persecuting the churches of God, trying systematically to destroy them. I met the demands of the Jewish religion better than most of my companions, and I was more devout than they were to follow the teaching received from my ancestors. Even so, God had other plans for my life. God loved me and chose me from before I was born to serve him. When the time came, he revealed to me his Son, so that I might proclaim to all nations the good news about him.

When that happened and I received my calling, I did not seek counsel from anyone not did I go to Jerusalem to know the opinion of those who were apostles long before I was; instead I went into Arabia. Later I returned to the city of Damascus. But three years passed before I went to Jerusalem to meet Peter and share experiences with him. I was only there two weeks, but how significant were those days! Except for James, the brother of Jesus Christ our Lord, I did not see any other apostle. I am telling you the truth. God knows that I don't lie!

After that, I initiated my ministry in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. Having spent all that time and being actively involved, the churches of Judea still did not know me personally. They had only heard that it was said: "That man, who persecuted us in the past, is now proclaiming the same message that before he sought to destroy". And they praised God for what he had done in me.

Fourteen years later, Barnabas and I went to Jerusalem, taking Timothy with us. I went to clarify with them what had been revealed to me. I presented to them exactly what I was preaching to those who are not Jews. I did this privately with the recognized leaders of the church to avoid a public controversy, mixed with racial tension, that might expose my years of work to be discredited, and place in danger my current ministry. It is significant that no one required Titus to be circumcised, since he was not Jewish.

While we were having this encounter, we were infiltrated by some who presented themselves as brothers in Christ to spy on the liberty known by those who are genuine Christians. Those fake followers only wanted to take away the freedom that Jesus Christ had given us, and make us slaves again to the legalism of the Jewish traditions. But not for even a moment were we convinced, for we wanted you to continue in obedience to the genuine message of the good news.

The recognized leaders of the church did not add anything new to the message that I preach. Their reputation does not concern me, for God has no interest in appearances, nor do I. It became quickly evident that in the same way in which Peter had been charged with proclaiming the good news to the Jews, I had been charged to make it known to those who are not Jews. Recognizing that my calling comes from God, the pillars of the church, James, Peter and John, shook the hands of Barnabas and myself to show their agreement, assigning us the ministry to those who are not Jews, while they would

continue with the responsibility for those who are. The only additional request they made was that we remember to help the poor in the church in Jerusalem, as I have always done.

Some time later, when Peter came to the church in Antioch, I had a face to face confrontation with him and I told him clearly that he had gone too far. This was the situation: before the coming of the Jews who said they had been sent by James, Peter ate with the Christians who are not Jews. But when these pharisaical Jews came from Jerusalem, he did so no longer because he was afraid of them. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the church of Antioch joined with them in the hypocrisy, even to the point that Barnabas got caught up in the farce.

When I noticed that they were not behaving in accord with the message, I confronted Peter before them all and said to him: "You, who are Jewish, have been living without following the traditional rules before these persons arrived from Jerusalem to keep tab on you. What right do you have then to oblige those who are not Jews to follow those rules?"

All of us have been Jews since we were born, and we have always tried to obey all of God's rules, not like those who didn't even know them. Nevertheless, we know very well that God only accepts those who have a personal faith in Jesus Christ, and that no one can be saved by just obeying the law. We know that by experience, for we have tried that ourselves. We know that no one can please God through his own efforts to fulfill the law. We ourselves have believed in Jesus as the Messiah, so that God might accept us for trusting in him, not by our efforts to be perfect in fulfilling all the norms.

Have some of you taken note that we are not perfect? But if we discover we are also sinners, like those who are not Jews, should we think therefore that Christ caused us to sin? Of course not! If I tried to be good in my own strength, I would be contradicting myself, I would be acting like a charlatan.

What has really happened in this: I tried to fulfill all the commandments and rules, seeking with all my strength to please God, and I failed. So I gave up being a legalist in order to be a man of God. As far as the law is concerned I am dead, and this is so because of the law itself. However, now I live for God! In reality, I also died on the cross, together with Jesus Christ. It is no longer important for me to look good before you or to have a good reputation. I no longer live trying to impress God, for it is Christ that lives in me. The life that you see me living is no longer mine, for I am living through faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me. I will not reject God's love. For if he should accept us only based on our obedience to the law, then Christ's death would have been unnecessary.

Oh, Galatians, how foolish you are! It seems almost like someone has hypnotized you!

I gave you a clear explanation of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Let me ask you one thing: When you initiated your new life with God and received the Holy Spirit, did you receive him because of your great effort to fulfill all the law, or because you accepted with faith God's message for you? Obviously, it was because you accepted God's message! And if that is the case, are you going to continue with this crazy idea? Because only someone who has lost his mind could think that he had the ability to carry out on his own what God began. If you were not sufficiently wise or strong at the outset, how do you suppose now that you can move on to perfection? Have you already suffered so much for nothing? I don't think so.

Answer this question: Has God performed miracles in your lives and given you the Holy Spirit because of the tremendous moral quality of your lives, or was it because you trusted with faith the message of the good news? Could it be that what has occurred with you is also what occurred with Abraham? For he trusted in God, and that act of believing was accredited to him as if he had lived a righteous life.

The genuine followers of Abraham are not those who place their confidence in the fulfillment of laws and religious rules, but those that believe and trust in God. Thus all who live by faith receive the same blessing that Abraham received, because he lived by faith. This is not a new doctrine.

Everything had already been stated before in the Old Testament concerning the fact that God would also accept those who are not Jews, simply because they place their confidence in God. Therefore God gave to Abraham this good news: "Through you I will bless all the nations of the world". So it is that God will bless through Abraham all those who trust in him, the same way that Abraham did. This means that those who try to keep the law in their own strength, apart from God, are destined to fail.

The Old Testament states: "Cursed is everyone who does not obey in every aspect and detail everything the law ordains". The obvious impossibility of meeting such a requisite should make it clear that no one can base his relationship with God on such fulfillment. For the Bible says: "He that obeys the law will be saved by his obedience".

But Christ preferred to take our place, taking upon himself the failure and curse that falls upon anyone who does not obey the law. In that way he could save us. For the Bible says: "God will curse anyone that dies hanging on a tree". That is what happened to Jesus on the cross. He took the curse that was ours. For that reason the blessing that God promised to Abraham is also for those who are not Jews. So it is that those of us who trust in Christ receive the Holy Spirit that God promised us.

My brothers and sisters, I want to give you an example from daily life that anyone can understand. When a person agrees on a contract with someone and signs it, he cannot later cancel it or add anything to it. That said, the promises that God made to Abraham were for him and his descendant. The Bible does not say that the promises were for "his descendants", but for "his descendant", which is Christ.

What I mean to say is this: God's promise cannot be changed nor annulled by something added (like an additional clause added to a contract already signed), such as when, four hundred years later, when he presented the ten commandments and all the law to the Jews. For if God should give what he promised only to someone who obeys the law, then it would not be in fulfillment of his promise. But the fact is that when God assured Abraham that he would keep his promise, he asked nothing of him in exchange, nor did he specify any conditions.

Then, what is the purpose of the law? After making the promise to Abraham, God gave us the law to show us what we were doing wrong. But that law was valid only until Christ came, who is Abraham's descendant, to whom God had made the promise. God gave the law to Moses through angels, so that he might give it to us. But when God made the promise to Abraham he did not use messengers but did so personally, and it was received with faith.

That does not mean that the law is against God's promises. Absolutely not! The purpose of the law was to make evident before everyone that in our own ability we cannot live in relation to God nor have eternal life. The Bible makes it clear that sin dominates all of us, so that the gift that God promised was for those who would trust in Christ.

Prior to that, the law was like a protection that surrounded us until we learned that we could fully trust in Christ. The law was like the teachers and tutors in grade school, who care for and teach the children and protect them from dangers and distractions; they guided us and led us to Christ, so that God might accept us by our trusting in him.

But now the time has come when we can trust in Jesus Christ and develop a direct and personal relationship with God. You have trusted in Jesus Christ, and therefore all of you are children of God. For when you were baptized you were also joined to Christ and clothed in him, in fulfillment of God's original promise.

In the family of those of us who are in Christ there cannot be divisions between Jews and non Jews, rich and poor, men and women. All of us that belong to Jesus Christ are one in him. So that together those of us who are one with Christ constitute the famous "descendant" of Abraham, with rights to receive the promise that God made to him.

Let me show you the implications of this. As long as the son is a minor in age, he has no advantage over an employee in the family business. Even though he is owner of the inheritance, he is under the authority of the managers and administrators that run the business until the day in which his father puts him in charge of the business and makes him owner of it all. Something like that happened with us; before we came to know Christ we worked as employees under the authority of the managers and administrators of this world, without liberty to manage our own life.

But when the day arrived, as indicated by God the Father, he sent his Son, who was born of a woman and under the conditions of the law, so that he might redeem those of us who were under the law. In that way we have been set free to experience the inheritance that is ours. You can confirm now that you have been completely adopted as sons of God, since God himself gave you the Spirit of his Son, who calls out within you and enables you to talk with God in a relationship of confidence and intimacy like one who speaks with a loving father.

Doesn't that make clear this privilege of being able to converse intimately with God, for you are no longer employees but sons of God? And if you are sons, you are also heirs, with complete rights and access to the riches of your inheritance.

Before all this, when you still did not know God personally, you lived under the authority of false gods. But since you now know God, or rather, since God now knows you, I cannot understand why you allow yourselves to be dominated again by those false gods. For that is exactly what you do when you allow yourselves to be intimidated to scrupulously observe the traditions, the taboos and the superstitions associated with special days, seasons and years. It worries me to think that all my hard work among you could be for nothing.

Dear friends, what I really would like is for you to try to put yourself in my place, just as I put myself in your place when I visited you. You were very attentive and considerate with me then. You did not despise me, even though you knew that the reason for which I was detained and stayed with you was an infirmity that kept me from traveling and obliged me to remain in Galatia. This was the situation when I preached to you.

Don't you remember that, even though you had to attend a sick person who brought you many problems, you received me in your homes as if I were an angel of God? As you would have received Jesus Christ himself, if he had visited you! You attended me so well that, had it been possible, you would have even taken out your eyes to give them to me. What happened to all that joy? Is it that now because I tell you the truth I have become your enemy? I cannot believe it.

Those heretics that pretend to be your teachers try hard to please you, but their motivation is corrupt. They want to take away from you the liberty that comes from the grace of God. They want you to always depend on their approval and direction so that they can feel important.

It is good that you long to do the right thing, but not only when I am present. Can you not maintain the same concern for me and for my message when I am far away as when I am with you? Do you know how I feel at this moment, and how I will continue to feel until Christ's life becomes visible in your lives? I suffer, just as a mother suffers the pangs of childbirth. How I would long to be with you just now to talk with you in a different way, instead of having to express my frustration in this letter!

Now you who have become so enthusiastic to be under the law, tell me one thing: Have you not read what the Bible says about Abraham? It tells us that he had two sons, one of them by his slave (Hagar) and the other by his wife (Sara), who was free. The son of the slave was born simply as a consequence of Abraham's intercourse with her, but the son of his wife was born under the promise of God. These two cases can serve as an example. The two women reveal to us two kinds of relationship with God. Hagar represents the covenant of Mount Sinai, in Arabia. That mount is a figure of the city of Jerusalem, where a life of slavery produced slaves. But Sara represents the new covenant by which we belong to the Jerusalem from heaven, the city of all of us who are free. With reference to Sara, the Bible says:

"Rejoice, woman, you who were unable to bear children!

Shout for joy, woman, you who are barren!

And you, who never had them, you will now have more children than the one who has been married a long time!"

My friends, you are like Isaac, the son that God promised to Abraham. At that time, the son that Abraham had with Hagar (Ishmael) persecuted Isaac, who was born by the power of the Spirit, as a result of the promise. And now the same thing is occurring: those who want to continue under the control of the law persecute us who are the children of the promise. But the Bible tells us that God said to Abraham: "Put out of your house the slave woman and her son. Because the son of a slave cannot inherit what belongs to the son of the wife, who is free". We are not slaves of the law, but free. We are not like the son of a slave, but like the son of a free woman.

Jesus Christ has set us free! He has really set us free! So do not abandon that freedom nor allow anyone to try to return you to the slavery of legalism.

I want to be clear in this: at the moment in which any one of you submits to circumcision or to any other legalistic system, at that same moment Christ ceases to have any meaning for you. I repeat my warning: anyone who is circumcised is obliged to obey all the law. I presume that this was never your intention, but it is what happens. When you try to live on the basis of your plans and religious projects, you fall from grace and cease to be united to Christ. On the other hand, our relationship with the Spirit gives us the assurance that God accepts us because we trust in Christ. For in Christ neither external forms of religiosity nor the lack of such forms has any importance. What is important is something much more profound: our faith, expressed in the love that we give.

You were running very well! Who pushed you, turning you aside from the true path of obedience? This detour does not come from him who called you to this race in the first place. And please do not discard this as if it were irrelevant. With very little leaven one can leaven a lot of bread. God has given me confidence in my inner being that you will not desert. But the one who is troubling you, regardless of who that is, will suffer God's judgment.

Concerning the rumor that I am preaching the need to be circumcised (as I did before my experience on the road to Damascus), that is absurd. If I were preaching that, or a watered-down message, I would not be suffering persecution. Would to God that those who are bothering you with this idea would not only be circumcised but mutilated at the same time!

It is quite clear that God has called you to be free. But be sure to not use that freedom as an excuse to do wrong. On the contrary, help each other with love. For all of God's instructions can be summed up in one phrase: "Love others as you love yourself". That is true freedom. I warn you that if you fight and do each other harm you will wind up destroying each other. In that case, where would your precious liberty be?

My counsel is this: live in freedom, motivated and guided by the Spirit of God and you will have no desire to do wrong. For there is a root of sin and egotism in us that is contrary to what the Spirit of God wants to do, and the Spirit is opposed to our egotism. Therefore, you cannot live to do just as you please. But if you obey the Spirit of God, you are no longer obliged to obey the law.

The whole world understands the style of life that results from following our evil desires. Unfaithfulness in marriage, cheap sex without love, smelly accumulation of intellectual and emotional baggage, witchcraft and humanistic religions, egotism, fights, jealousy, gross competitiveness, divided families, envy, homicide, drunkenness, orgies, addictions, and I could continue. I warn you, as I have done before, that if you use your freedom for such things, you will have nothing to do with the kingdom of God.

On the other hand, what is the consequence of living filled with the Spirit of God? He produces fruit in our life and leads us to love others, to be always happy and live in peace. He teaches us to be patient, gracious and to treat others well. We feel no need to force our way through life for we trust in God. We become humble, loyal to our commitments and able to control our evil desires.

Legalism is incapable of generating these things; it only gets in the way. Those of us that belong to Christ have already seen our egotism and evil desires die on the cross.

Since this is the kind of life that we have chosen, a life guided by the Holy Spirit, let us assure ourselves that it is not simply an idea in our mind, or a sentiment of our heart. Rather let us put it into practice in our daily life, always obeying the Holy Spirit. This includes not comparing ourselves with others to see if we are better so we can be proud, or to discover that we are worse and give place to envy. We have things to do with our life that are much more interesting. Each one of us is unique.

Brothers and sisters, you are being guided by the Spirit of God. Therefore, if you discover that someone has fallen into sin you should restore him through forgiveness, being careful not to make critical comments, since it is possible that you yourselves may need to be forgiven before the day is over. When you face difficulties, help each other. That is the way to obey the law of Christ. If someone feels more important than he is in reality, he is deceiving himself.

Each one must examine himself and his own behavior. If approved, he can be satisfied with his actions, but without feeling superior to others. Each one is responsible before God for his own behavior. He that is being instructed in God's message should share with his teacher all the good that he receives.

Make no mistake about it, no one can deceive God. Each one will harvest what he has sown. Those that plant egotism, ignoring the needs of others (and ignoring God!), will harvest trouble, and that will be the only thing they obtain as a result of their life. But the one who sows obedience to God, allowing the Spirit to work in his life, will harvest eternal life.

So let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will see a good harvest, if we persevere and don't give up. Therefore, every time we have the chance, let us do good to others, beginning with those closest to us in our community of faith.

I want to emphasize the great importance of what I have said so far, as I myself write these final paragraphs with large letters. Those that want to oblige us to be circumcised only seek to have a good appearance before the Jews the easy way, so they won't have to suffer their persecution by proclaiming the message of the cross of Christ. Their words are empty. Even though they are circumcised they do not obey Moses' law. The only thing they want is for you to be circumcised so that they can later say with pride that they were able to convince you to do it.

However, I will only feel proud for having believed in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through his death on the cross it is as though I have already died to the world, and I am free from the need to please the world and fit my life to its norms. In reality, it doesn't matter whether one is circumcised or not; what is important is what God is doing in his life. He has created a new life of freedom. All those who live this way are the genuine people of God. Peace and grace to them! Frankly, I don't want anyone to bother me again with these disputes because I have in my body the scars that prove that I have suffered for belonging to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, may the Lord Jesus Christ reveal to you his love.

May it be so.

Apostle Paul