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**SERIES: WE ARE FREE (A Study of Galatians)**

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**TITLE: A Spiritual Interruption**

As someone who has spoken on college campuses, I've heard a lot of pushback to Christianity. As someone who has counseled many people in my pastor's office, I've heard people declare why they want to leave the faith. As an apologist, I've read many variations and distortions of Christianity. So today I want to challenge you with this question: If you could change *anything* about Christianity, what would it be? Would you add something to it? Would you take something away?

I ask, because from the very moment Jesus ascended to Heaven, and the apostles began to move out to take the Gospel to all the world, Christianity – true Christianity - was at risk of being changed. I think when we read the New Testament, we can see many variations being combated. There are two that were serious problems in Paul's time, and they are the same two that plague us today.

The first is what we call liberalism. Some people would call it licentiousness, or simply put: grace through faith provides us all a license to sin. In other words, Salvation is truly free; it is a one way ticket to Heaven. And because God is so loving and so gracious, He lets those whom He saved run wild, living *for themselves*, no matter how gross, how destructive, or how discrediting it is to the Gospel message. So that's liberalism.

But then there is another problem that plagues us today, and that is of legalism. Legalism is the thought that the Gospel message is great, *but* it falls a little flat. Legalism says yes, Salvation is a gift of God, but don't forget that you have to put in your work as well to *earn* Salvation, or to *keep* Salvation. It's that belief that the Gospel message is power, and powerful for Salvation, but don't forget to say your prayers, go to church, and take your vitamins.

You see liberalism distorts the Gospel by *removing* the power of Salvation, and legalism distorts the Gospel by *adding* to the power of Salvation.

When you read the New Testament, you read letters by different authors. When you read the Gospels, you get a picture of who Jesus is, what He had done, and why He came to Earth. The Gospels are far more than a biography – they are rich in history and theology. When you read the book of Acts, you see a beautiful history of the early church. When you read the letters of Paul, of Peter, of John, there is history, and there is very rich theology. When you read the book of Jude, you can see a passion to contend for the true faith. That very same passion of contending for the true faith is seen throughout the whole New Testament. And in the book of Galatians, you hear the cry of Paul to say, “Why are you changing Christianity?”

This is why we are beginning the study of the book of Galatians. Today we face the same problems that the Apostle Paul faced in his day: Changing Christianity - adding to it and taking away from it. The book of Galatians was written to combat that false teaching, that the grace that God offers through Jesus Christ is not sufficient. They were teaching that there is something else that you can and must do to make it work correctly. The central theme of Galatians and the entire New Testament is that **true freedom comes only through Jesus Christ.**

Author Merrill Tenney said this about Galatians: He said, “Christianity might have been just one more Jewish sect, and the thought of the western world might have been entirely Pagan had it never been written. Galatians embodies the germinal teaching on Christian freedom which separated Christianity from Judaism, and which launched it upon a career of missionary conquest. It was the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation, because its teaching of salvation by grace alone became the dominant theme of the preaching of the Reformers.” (*Galatians: The Charter of Christian Liberty*)

So today we begin studying Galatians. We will spend the next roughly two months digging into this rich book of life transforming theology.

Now, before we dig into Galatians Chapter one, let me just set the stage a little bit. Galatia was under Roman rule, and is part of modern Turkey. On Paul’s first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas established four churches in the southern part of this province in the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

Now this letter does not identify any specific churches, but we can be confident that Paul had personally ministered to these churches. And while in Galatia, Paul was stoned and left for dead by Jewish leaders, who followed him from Antioch and Iconium to Lystra. On Paul’s second missionary journey, Paul would visit these churches with Silas.

## **DISCUSSION:**

N: Now, let’s turn to my discussion partners Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. What are some of the most common distortions of Christianity that each of you run into on a daily basis?

C: I think the biggest one is probably that becoming a Christian somehow makes you void for making mistakes. So Heaven's full of forgiven people, not perfect people. And some people just don't get it. They don't want to get it. They think Christians are claiming to be perfect, and Christians are not claiming perfection. They're just forgiven, right?

N: Yeah. So I'm kind of surprised you even said that. I honestly don't hear that very often. I hear, “They’re hypocrites” and maybe that's the spin on it.

C: They use that word, [yeah]. I think they use that word a lot as an excuse, because they know the word hypocrite is in the Bible, and somehow they have this awesome Bible knowledge, you know. But you know, Christians are a bunch of screw-ups, and I've gotten it wrong a few times, and so probably more than a few, but I'm just saved. I'm not perfect. [Right]. Trying to be like Jesus - I mean, I'm going to fall short of that.

N: Well, thankfully He does it for us, so we don't have to stress about that. Okay Arnie, what about you? I mean, what kind of distortions of Christianity have you run into?

A: So, I remember as a nonbeliever, I used to sing that song - *Holy, Holy, Holy*. But I would sing it about Christians: “Holy, Holy, Holy; only I am Holy” - that's usually when somebody was rebuking me for my choices, poor that they may be. And then, probably the most prevalent is this prosperity thing. And you know, you've got the prosperity aspect, which is pretty pronounced. And I'm not saying that - I mean, that is an element that I see - but also this thing that Jesus is my good luck piece. So because I'm a Christ follower, everything should be perfect. And that's kind of a big distortion – the blessed life - you know, everybody talks about. And it's like, I just don't see that. When you're a Christ follower, you're called to the battle. But that's pretty prevalent. Or it used to be in the U.S. It may not be so much, now that our country's falling apart, but it sure used to be.

N: Well, I think you're still seeing it. You know, from my years as a pastor, I think the number one distortion of Christianity or the Gospel, was kind of what you were saying to a certain degree, about Jesus Christ being a good luck charm. But it was twisted a little bit, in that He's just our golden ticket to Heaven, and that how we live our life afterwards, doesn't really matter. It's all about checking a box, and saying *yes* to God, but it really doesn't change our lives. And I saw then as a pastor, and I'm seeing it now - as I talk with people online, and interact with people in various churches, you know, they say, “Yeah, I know God's Word says this, but God's grace is sufficient. So I'll do what I want.” And so, you know, we just think about all the variations of the Gospel and Christianity we all just discussed, and there's even more - this is exactly why Paul was writing this letter. He wanted us to understand what the true Gospel was, what it is, and what it does for us today, and for the years to come.

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**Now, let's dig into Galatians Chapter one, beginning in verse one (ESV):**

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—<sup>2</sup> and all the brothers who are with me, (Vs.1-2)

Paul begins in a typical ancient fashion of identifying himself as the writer. And then he says he's an Apostle. I think we don't really know what an apostle was, so let me unpack that term just a little bit. Technically speaking, an apostle was someone who was sent with a commission. They were an ambassador, or a messenger, and in the strictest sense, chosen and trained by Jesus Christ. Technically, it applied to the original 12 disciples. They were given the power to lay the foundation of the church, and even perform healings and cast out demons.

In a broader sense, the term apostle was also used for people like Barnabas, Silas and Timothy, and other early church leaders. But these people were more like messengers, and not people who were commissioned by and chosen by Christ himself. This is why Paul can include himself as a true apostle. Because Paul was not one of the original 12, he needed to defend his apostleship. Now if you remember, in Acts One, when choosing a replacement for Judas, one of the

requirements was that they witnessed a risen Christ. Paul himself had seen a risen Jesus. In First Corinthians 15, Paul lays out the true message of the Gospel.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (NIV) says, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

So Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 puts forward a compelling case that Jesus Christ not only died, but was risen. Christ appeared before more than 500 people, including the disciples, the half-brother James, Peter, and Paul himself. Jesus’ appearance to Paul is recorded in various places in Acts, as well as 2 Corinthians. So Paul is again defending his apostleship. There were these false teachers who were infiltrating and influencing the Galatian churches to believe a false Gospel, and part of their strategy was to say that Paul was no Apostle. He is just an ordinary man, who is running on his own authority, and by his own commission. That’s why Paul specifically says not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Gal. 1:1).

We need to pause here and think about Paul. When we first met Paul, he went by the name of Saul. And what was his nickname? Well for us, it’s The Persecutor. He was a persecutor of the church. At the end of Acts Chapter seven, we find the stoning of Stephen. Stephen is a believer, and speaking of the Gospel, and his payment is to be stoned to death. And listen to what Acts Chapter 8 says, beginning in verse 1 (ESV):

“And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”

Okay, let’s just stop here for a second, and admit how crazy this is. Paul is writing to the Galatian church. He is claiming to be an Apostle, one of whom Jesus would appear to and commission. Humanly speaking, *that’s insane*. Paul, who once went by the name of Saul, was a persecutor of the church. He was passionate about ravaging the church, dragging off men and women, to commit them to prison. Stop and think how crazy this was! This persecutor is *now* a church planter. What happened?

Well, he met someone who changed his life. Listen to the Damascus Road encounter in Acts 9. “ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you

persecuting me?”<sup>5</sup> And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”<sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”<sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.<sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”

Saul is out persecuting the church, and, on his way to carry on his business, Jesus appears before him. When I read this, I have to chuckle because this is what Jesus does for all of us. In our natural state, we are often in rebellion against God. We're off doing what we want to do, because we are our own gods. We are off living on mission for ourselves, and Jesus interrupts us. In His own way, Jesus said “Nat, Nat. Why are you persecuting me?” To that I said, “I'm not. I'm just living for myself.” And for reasons I'll never know, He said, “Nat, I'm going to interrupt your life, but this will be the greatest interruption you'll ever experience”.

What about you friend - what is your Damascus Road experience? You may not have been like Saul, out trying to intentionally destroy the church. But apart from saving grace, we are enemies of God. We are out living for ourselves and sin. In our sinfulness, we are attacking Christ. It's our sin that held him to that cross. But by grace, Jesus said, “I'm going to interrupt your life. Follow me.” We may not be apostles, but we are His ambassadors. Because of that, because Jesus interrupts our lives, we get to go and share the Good News, because Jesus Christ stopped us and called us. My question for you today is, “Where is Jesus calling you? And will you go?”

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N: Let's talk a little more about spiritual interruptions and callings with Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. Arnie, can you tell us about a spiritual interruption you may have experienced – one that changed your life?

A: Oh, I've had so many of them. Probably the one I remember the most, was the night in a storm off of Alaska. And I prayed the Sinner's Prayer, and gave my life to the Lord. And I remember the next day, I was driving the boat, and I started thinking, “Man, I sure may have jumped the gun here, because Christians actually have no fun”. And I just started rethinking my commitment, and the Lord spoke to me in a way that fortunately He's never done before. We got hit by a 50 foot wave – it threw us on our side - and we almost died. And it was like, “Okay, Lord, I hear you. You interrupted my life. You've got me thinking. And this thing is going to stick from now on.”

N: Those interruptions are incredibly important. What was it about that particular event that actually got your attention? Because I know I've got a friend who - I mean, he's lost a family member. He's been chased across a Mexican desert. He's been thrown from a motorcycle, and ran over by a car, and yet he just still doesn't get it. So, I mean, what was it about that experience that finally slapped you upside the head? What made it stick?

A: Actually, I think it's the sum total of all the other experiences where it didn't, it didn't, and finally it just - and it's the Holy Spirit, because it's like the light - Oh, wow - It goes on. Whereas six hours before I think I'm going to die, I give my life to the Lord, and then I start to doubt. So I really think it's just - it's the sum total of all those experiences. And maybe if you don't respond, you die. You know, I don't know.

N: Well, you recalled them. You remembered them, and no doubt about it. The Holy Spirit definitely used them to bring you to a place of repentance, and God has done amazing things through you so far. Cara, let's talk about this idea of spiritual interruptions for a little bit. What type of spiritual interruptions might we experience on a daily basis, and what do those interruptions do for us?

C: Well, my disruption in life was my health. That was, I was already a believer. I believed Christ was who He said He was, but I didn't feel anything. Nothing felt different. And then my health was messed up. And then I really understood that it doesn't have anything to do with me, but it has to do with a Holy God - making Him known and knowing Him. Could be a loss of a job, all things COVID-19, you know? So it could be anything - it could be a fender bender, to a cancer diagnosis, or the loss of someone close to you. I mean, all that stuff happens every day, right?

N: Yeah. It's happening every day. And the reasons - I mean, who knows what they could all be? But I think a lot of times, God is calling either people to repentance - for those who are far from Him - God uses those moments to shake them, like they shook Arnie - but I think for us as believers, it's getting us to refocus on that which is true, on our mission, who God is, our need for Him daily. And I even think it's for us to remember the Gospel. You know, it's so easy for us to forget the Gospel, and how we need it, even as Christians. And so I think God sends those interruptions to shake us up, and have us refocus. You know, as I think about that interruption that Paul had on the Damascus Road - What is it about that experience with Paul on the Damascus Road that sticks out to you; that kind of catches you off guard?

C: His two questions. "Who are you, and what do you want me to do?" I think that desire to abase shows that Saul's heart was changed. And, you know, we just talked about my disruption. I felt God's presence - nothing audible; I just - I felt His presence, and I understood that it wasn't about me. It was about Him. He answered the "who", and then I literally was like, "It's about glorifying You. So what do You want me to do?"

N: Well, what are your thoughts Arnie?

A: Yeah, I agree a hundred percent with Cara, that the one thing I've always wondered is, why he had such a strong experience, a strong interruption, and why we don't today? What do you think Pastor Nat?

N: In other words, why does Jesus not appear to us today? [Yeah]. Well, it says He's sitting at the right hand of God, or in some passages, He's standing next to the right hand of God. He's

coming back, but He sent the Holy Spirit, our Helper, to take His place. So we have God with us, within us. And so the reality is, I don't know if that would make a whole lot of difference, whether it's Jesus Christ standing in front of us, or being beside us, and calling us. So I honestly don't know what difference that would make, because I mean - think about the account of Jesus, and talking about, the rich man and Lazarus in that story there. He says, "Hey, I could send all these people you want, but it wouldn't change the hardness of their hearts. They're not going to see, and they're not going to believe." The same is true, whom God calls, He calls to the Holy Spirit. So it doesn't matter if it's a physical manifestation or spiritual; regardless, God is going to save those who He plans to save. And He's going to work with those in unique ways, by the work of the Holy Spirit. So would it be nice? Absolutely. But there is an ample amount of evidence that we have today for God's existence, for the existence of Jesus Christ and His Resurrection. So we have what we need to believe. The question is, will we believe it?