

# DESERTION, DISTORTION, DAMNATION

*SERIES: GALATIANS*

By Steve Zeisler

Last week, in an extraordinary television happening in this country, one hundred million Americans watched the movie, “The Day After.” The televised discussion that took place after the movie between people who had divergent points of view about the possibility of nuclear war was unprecedented. The evening underlined the fact that the issue of nuclear arms is one of grave importance. It is a high-stakes concern for the Presidential election hopefuls. What governments can do to prevent nuclear war, is, of course, much more important. This is perhaps the most critical problem facing governments in our day.

The book of Galatians is also about a grave and high-stakes issue. Last week, in our first study in this book, we saw that the gospel of Christ cannot be adulterated in any way. We have to put all our eggs in one basket; we cannot mix together human religion and life that comes from the Spirit of God. The point of the verses which we will study this morning is that not only do we have to make a choice, but the choice we make is of supreme importance. In God’s economy there is perhaps no more critical and high-stakes issue than retaining the purity of the gospel message and keeping it from being distorted.

Paul gets to the heart of the issue immediately in Galatians 1:6:

**I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is not really another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.**

If we were to picture these words being used in a court-room setting, three points would stand out by which we would be convinced that the purity of the gospel of Christ is a high-stakes issue. First, recognize in these words the deeply felt and personal involvement of Paul himself. That factor alone would suggest that his letter deals with very important material. Secondly, take note of the stern judgment returned in the courtroom. This is a clear and hard judgment, as we shall see. Thirdly, and perhaps most powerfully, observe the chilling sentence handed down following the judgment. We do not need any further evidence to convince us that the issue at stake is critical.

Let us look further at these three points. First, the apostle’s emotional and personal involvement with the truth he is writing about. Two things--what he does and does not say--will help us see the strain on his face, as it were, as he writes these words to the Galatians. In all of his general letters except one, Paul follows his opening remarks by using gentle and encouraging words, such as gratitude toward God for some aspect of the recipients’ lives, etc. The one exception to that pattern is the book of Galatians. Here he follows his opening remarks with the startling word, “I am shocked.” He is astonished; he is flabbergasted that the Galatians “are so quickly deserting Him who called [them] by the grace of Christ.”

He leaves out the expected commendation, the expected note of hope and encouragement because of his concern for the gospel. When your routine at the office is broken by a note from your boss saying he wants to see you immediately, you don't have to be told that something important is afoot. The routine has been broken; the expected course of events has been interrupted. In the same way, Paul's breaking with his usual style of letter-writing here gets our attention. Something serious is at stake, something that Paul has deep feelings about. Thus what he does not say, in this case, suggests to us that something is causing him great concern.

What the apostle does say, on the other hand, also indicates very clearly his concern. Immediately following his paean of praise to God in Galatians 1:5, "To whom be the glory forevermore. Amen", we find the words, "I am shocked." There is an astonishing leap from this word of praise to one of amazement. The word that is translated "shocked" is a very strong word in the Greek. It is used throughout the gospels to describe people's reactions as they witnessed the miraculous intervention by God in certain situations--miracles such as healings, the casting out of demons, etc. In Revelation, John used this word to describe his sense of being overwhelmed as he viewed the bloody and awful vision of Mistress Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots. He was shocked, amazed and astonished by what he saw. Paul is shocked at what has happened to the Galatians. He is not politely bringing to their attention certain things that are causing him mild concern. No, his emotional words have an urgency about them. He is deeply concerned about these people whom he loves.

As Christians, we need to express our sense of shock more often. The evangelical world is often more polite than it ought to be. Very rarely do we say to one another, "I am shocked to hear you say what you are saying. Your actions and attitudes make me deeply concerned for you." Gentleness, not delicacy, is the fruit of the Spirit. Face-saving politeness is not advocated anywhere in Scripture. Paul's sense of shock regarding the activities of the Galatians, whom he loved very much, should arrest our attention.

The second means by which we ought to be convinced that the gospel of Christ is a high-stakes issue is the judgment that Paul renders here concerning two different groups of people. These groups, the deserters and the distorters, are identified in Galatians 1:6-7: "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is not really another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ." The deserters are people whom Paul had evangelized and led to Christ in Galatia. On these young Christians who had been given a good foundation in the gospel he pronounces the wrenching judgment, "You so quickly have deserted God himself." He does not say, "You have deserted a theory about the truth," or, "You have changed your political affiliation." What he says is, "You have deserted the God who called you by the grace of Christ."

This is a terribly serious charge. No human failing is more universally despised, perhaps, than desertion. Everyone despises turncoats, traitors, people whose loyalty is properly and rightfully expected. Parents who desert their children, spouses who desert their mates, team members who desert the team, leaders who desert their followers, soldiers who desert the ranks are routinely and universally despised. This is a terrible judgment to lay at anyone's doorstep. Yet Paul says, "You deserted Him, the one who called you by the grace of Christ." That phrase, "the grace of Christ," directs us back to Galatians 1:4, where Paul says that Jesus "gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us out of this present evil age." This group had deserted their gracious God, who became man so that he might suffer on our behalf and thereby rescue us from the evil by which we were bound; they had deserted the giving, giving, giving grace of Christ by which they were called. The language Paul uses convinces us of the high-stakes issue threatening those in the Galatian churches.

As an aside, this may suggest something about Christian controversies in general. Christians are responsible to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." But Paul will go on in this section to curse people who claim to be part of the Christian community. These concepts, unity and cursing, are difficult to balance, but this paragraph in particular suggests a

helpful point of view, and that is, where differences among Christians involve one side deserting and walking away from the Lord, then unity is not possible. We cannot be united with people who are deserting their Master. On the other hand, when Christians differ about certain things--say, for instance, the gift of tongues, principles of hermeneutics, or the mode of baptism--yet when neither side deserts the Lord but rather are loving him, serving him and doing their best to follow him, in such cases we need to work to maintain unity. But when we sense that we disagree with others because of their deliberate desertion of the Lord, then we need to take a strong stand, as Paul does here. We need to be as shocked as Paul was with the Galatians.

The second group whom Paul analyzes and judges in this section are the distorters--the teachers, the leaders who were producing desertion among the ranks. They, the source of the false teaching, were the ones who were advocating desertion of the Lord. Here Paul makes some very insightful statements about distorters. He says, first, that whatever else it is they claim to be doing and saying it is not "good news"; the different gospel they preach is not really a gospel at all. "Gospel" means "good news," but there is nothing good about their news. Such distorters of the true gospel, those who would advocate human religion, who would want us to be approved by human institutions frequently present a message which they claim is an advance over the simplicity of the biblical gospel. They claim they are taking a step beyond that to a more sophisticated, more impressive gospel. They offer access to an "inner ring" of people whom God relates to in a more impressive way. But Paul says that this different gospel is no gospel at all. Do not be deceived by the package in which this so-called gospel is wrapped.

Secondly, Paul says that these distorters were "disturbing," (i.e., troubling and causing tension among the Galatians). Seeing through their disguise, he declares that legalistic, human-centered religion always produces tension. In such a religious environment people are uncertain about themselves; they are afraid they will be disapproved of. This is exactly the opposite of the "peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:3) which should be theirs. The mark of real Christianity is that people increasingly are at peace. As you penetrate further and further into their thinking you realize that they are more at peace than they ever have been before. They are less worried about the impression they are making; they are more secure because God loves them. The religion of the distorters, on the other hand, is exactly the opposite. The more you investigate, the more you get behind the outward things, the more you find tension, insecurity, guilt, self-hatred, trouble.

Further, Paul says, "They desire to distort the gospel." Ultimately, behind every false, twisted version of the Christian faith is somebody who wanted to twist it. It is not an accident. Behind it is some thinker; some source who does not like the gospel that says people cannot save themselves, someone who hates the message of the cross with its destruction of human pride.

In these verses Paul analyzes what has happened to the Galatian Christians. We see, first, his emotion as he expresses his sense of shock. Secondly, we hear the stern, powerful and hard judgment he renders: "Galatians, you are deserting your Lord, and you are being led astray by distorters who desire to ruin the gospel of Christ."

The third element in this account is the sentence, which the apostle pronounces following that judgment. Here are his chilling words: "Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed." Lest anyone should be unclear as to his meaning, Paul repeats himself in the following verse: "As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." The word "accursed" is the Greek word "anathema." It is used to translate a Hebrew word which is graphically rendered in the Old Testament, "devoted to destruction." "Let him be devoted to destruction, cursed of God," Paul declares. The curse of God, if not removed by repentance, results ultimately in damnation. Here we have stated in the

hardest and most striking terms what the apostle thinks of those who would deliberately deny people the gospel based on the grace of Christ, those who would find the stream and muddy it and ruin it for everybody else downstream from them. That kind of activity deserves the curse of God.

We need to make a couple of observations here. Notice that Paul does not say this of the deserters. Rather, he says it of the teachers, the leaders who know what they are doing, those who have thought about it, who have had every opportunity to believe the gospel themselves, who are clear as to the stakes involved and yet make the choice to ruin it for others. Here Paul is right in line with a point of view that runs throughout the Scriptures. Jesus said that anyone who leads little ones astray would be better off tying a millstone around his neck and casting himself into the sea. Teachers incur a stricter judgment. No matter who these teachers may be, whatever their names, their degrees or their background, teachers who deny the freedom, the grace and peace that come from the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf, and offer instead pats on the back given by elaborate human institutions--those people deserve devotion to destruction.

Secondly, we ought to recognize that this is not an emotional outburst by Paul. While his words in Galatians 1:6, "I am shocked," may well have been written with a degree of emotion, we cannot regard this curse in the same light. Just to make sure the Galatians get it right he repeats himself. There is a cold measuredness about what say he says: "I know exactly what I am saying. Those who would distort the gospel, unless they repent, deserve cursing; excuse me, let me say it again so that I can make myself very clear; they deserve cursing." No, this is no emotional outburst.

Thirdly, this is not a personal attack. Paul is not writing these words because someone called him names and now he is getting back. We know this is so because he includes himself: "...even though we, or an angel from heaven..." He would deserve the same fate, in other words. Anybody with understanding and knowledge, any teacher who desires to distort the gospel of Christ and accomplishes his desire deserves cursing.

In Galatians 1:8 the apostle is anticipating what historically has happened time and time again. Almost invariably the gospel has been distorted and twisted throughout the history of the church by one or another of two approaches. One approach is that someone will claim to have had an angelic vision, a heavenly encounter in which he was given authority to twist and distort what Jesus said and did. Joseph Smith claimed to have had an encounter with the angel Moroni, and, based on that, claimed he had authority to twist and distort the truth of the gospel. That is exactly what Paul is warning against here: "If an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed." Sun Myung Moon is another example of one who claims, on the basis of a heavenly encounter, to have authority to distort the gospel. There have been many other examples through out history of people claiming to have had angelic visions, supernatural encounters, spiritual insight, whatever, which permitted them to declare, "The rules have been changed. I have new information. Forget what the Bible says." But Paul anticipated all this in one of the earliest books in the New Testament.

Secondly, Paul says, "If we were to do so," i.e., if some group of people decides on the basis of the authority of their esoteric insight, on their weight as a human organization that they can distort the gospel, let them be accursed. How many times have we seen ecclesiastical groups, or academically important people claiming that scholarship is on their side, pronounce judgments on the gospel of Christ and proceed to distort it? C. S. Lewis spoke about "the assured results of modern scholarship," and "how soon scholarship ceases to be modern." "These men," he said, "ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts. The evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight." "Let such be accursed," the apostle declares--no matter whether they are nice people, clean people, well-educated people, angels from heaven, people you like, people you do not like, even people like ourselves, Paul says, as theoretically it could even come

from us. If anyone distorts this truth, if anyone muddies this stream, if anyone puts human activity in the place of the grace of God, then that activity, unless it is repented of, deserves “devotion to destruction,”--cursing.

Three concepts in this section of the book of Galatians should convince us that the purity of the gospel, that retaining the grace of God as the center of our spiritual life is an extremely high-stakes issue. First, this issue is so important, Paul is emotionally moved he expressed his sense of shock at what the Galatians are doing. Secondly, we will be convinced by the sternness of his analysis and judgment: “You are deserting your Lord, and you are distorting the gospel of Christ,” he declares. Thirdly, the sentence “Let them be accursed,” which he pronounces on the leaders and teachers who are distorting the gospel, is convincing evidence of the seriousness of this issue.

In Galatians 1:10 Paul checks his own attitudes, his own motivation for writing these words. He is saying, in effect, “When I say these things, do you think I am trying to win approval of people, do you think I am trying to gather a following? Am I appealing to men or God?” No, he says, “I cannot do both. I could never rightly serve God and man. It is impossible. If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.”

At a youth camp years ago I recall playing “Capture the Flag.” Two teams spread out through the woods and were given time to develop a strategy. There were two ways to advance in the game: a point was awarded for each warrior captured and put in jail, but the second option, sending a commando group to capture the flag of the opposing team, meant outright victory; the game was over. In the same way, in the Christian life we are called upon on occasion to skirmish with the agents of the opposition, to fight important battles and gain important territory--we take a stand on what is happening in our schools, where our nation is headed, etc. God often gives victory in these skirmishes so that we do indeed make spiritual gains. But Paul is not writing about skirmishes here in the book of Galatians; he is writing about the flag. If the Gospel is lost the game is over, no matter how many skirmishes we win. If we fail to remember that Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins by entering an evil world to rescue us, that our salvation is based on the grace of God and nothing else, then the flag of the gospel, the good news, has been captured and the game is over. Our certain hope is that this gospel of Christ will eventually carry the day, and by means of it we will eventually capture the flag and all the troops of the opposition, but we need to defend the gospel as well. If we are not a gospel-centered church, the game is over, however many battles we win.

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