

# RESCUE FROM AN EVIL AGE

*SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS*

**By Steve Zeisler**

One of the great announcements in the Bible is Galatians 5:1: “It was for freedom that Christ has set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” This is a clarion call to authentic discipleship. God made us for freedom. Christ redeemed us for freedom. We need to fight to keep our freedom!

Freedom is at the heart of every good thing. Without it there can be no true worship, no joy, no love, no honor, no courage. The best stories are always stories of freedom, whether they’re about love relationships, conquests, the discovery of the unknown, or renewal of what’s broken. Whatever high truth is told in any kind of work of art, it’s always about freedom.

But being so powerful, freedom is the most frequently counterfeited of human experiences. Because we long so much to know freedom, we are susceptible to being used by those who traffic in the words of freedom but never intend its reality. The free market can become a cover for greed, making an idol of money. Free speech can enable violent, childish, and wicked statements to thrive. The phrase “freedom to choose” is used to justify the killing of unborn babies. Free agency in sports can be destructive of teamwork. Freedom may be the rationalization behind the foolish behavior of a mid-life crisis or behind a homosexual-rights “freedom parade.” In these and other settings, the possibility of freedom becomes the tool of scoundrels. “Freedom fighters” are sometimes nothing more than vicious criminals.

But we are called in this powerful verse of authentic discipleship to love and defend freedom. And we are called to recognize that ultimately freedom comes because of what Christ has done: “It was for freedom that Christ has set us free....” The heart of our understanding of freedom must be distinctively Christian.

My hope in this message is to whet your appetite for a study in the book of Galatians. Galatians is a great book and its theme is a great theme. And my hope is that we will become freedom fighters in the best sense of the term.

By way of introduction, let’s look at Galatians 1:1-5:

**Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.**

## **A letter of passionate concern**

The first observation we need to make is that this is a letter. We can tell that by its form. In most cases today the practice is to sign a letter at the end, but in the first-century Roman world, writers of letters would announce their own name at the beginning (I think that’s a better way of doing it). Next they would identify the people to whom they were writing. Then they would give a word of blessing.

The fact that this is a letter should challenge us. When was the last time someone, prayerfully burdened for your soul and hopeful for your future, wrote you a letter of encouragement and concern? As Paul will say farther on, it's as if he's in labor that Christ should be formed in them (4:19), with such great concern does he write to his friends. And he will say of them, "You would have torn your eyes out and given them to me if you could have...." And Paul mentions that he writes not by himself, but together with brothers (and sisters) who are also concerned for these Galatian Christians.

Paul probably wrote this letter from Corinth to the churches of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in the southern part of the province of Galatia, during his second missionary journey. (There is a wide range of opinions on this that makes interesting reading but is not essential to understanding the book.) I believe it was probably the first New-Testament letter written. It addresses some of the earliest and strongest heresies that church leaders fought against, ones that needed to be resisted over and over again. And it was for the sake of the freedom Christ gained for us that the church resisted them.

Galatians is a hard book to outline. Paul uses logical arguments in some of his instruction, but sometimes he wanders off in reference to allegories that are subtle and difficult. He makes references to early Christian history that are hard to square with what we know from Luke's account in Acts.

Most of all, this is the feistiest book in the New Testament. Paul pulls no punches. He curses his opponents. He challenges the apostle Peter in public for his foolishness. He questions the sanity of his readers. He uses two visceral images that allude to knives. In 5:12 he says, "Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves." The context is circumcision, so the knife and the mutilation in question are arresting! In 6:17 he says, "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks [scars] of Jesus." He means, "Where the knives have cut me, and the stones have brutalized me, and the opposition has attacked me, those are *Jesus'* scars—so cause me no trouble!" This book is energetic and angry at times, and almost always passionate.

## **The price paid for freedom**

The opening verses, and indeed the whole book, are about the work of God. Paul begins this letter identifying himself, mentioning his friends with him, and greeting the Galatians, urging God's grace and peace upon them. But even these opening descriptions are not just about the people but about the work of God among the people.

Paul defends his apostleship in Galatians. An apostle is an emissary of God, and he speaks for God clearly and truly. "I am not an apostle because of human decree." That is his point here. "I didn't rise up the ranks and become an apostle. I didn't grow into the position. I was made an apostle by God the Father and God the Son, working together. They appointed me their emissary, and like it or not, I will speak for them. What I say in my apostolic ministry is true and you should listen to it. It is authoritative and you can trust it."

We live in a world that has so many voices, amplified with microphones, electronically conveyed, published in print. There are shouting voices, insistent voices, foolish voices, shallow voices. There's a rolling tide of words—yet which of them carries authority? Which of them gives life? Which of them answers the deepest questions? Which of them can be trusted? Only the words of those who have authority from God to speak. The book of Galatians is God's word, giving us clear and life-giving instruction.

The opening verses also extend a blessing both to those who received the letter then and to those who read it now: grace and peace. The good news is about restoration, making us what we want to be, breaking down barriers, accomplishing unity in love. Grace and peace are wonderful concepts.

Grace and peace come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (“who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father”). Rescue, deliverance from this present evil age! Once again we hear the language of freedom. We are free because Jesus has intervened to knock off our shackles, to break the power of the darkness in us.

But just what is “this present evil age”? Paul is surely not talking about the physical world. There’s nothing evil about creation. And it’s not human souls that are ultimately in view here. What he is talking about is the worldview that dominates our race between the fall of Adam and the return of Christ. It is the inclination to worship what we ought not worship, the certainty that our best will always fail, the reality that left to ourselves, we will ruin any beautiful thing, the tragedy that we are desperately hopeful yet shackled with the impossibility of achieving what we hope for. All our instincts to do things the way we do—the cultures we produce, the way we describe ourselves, the way we relate to one another or fail to relate to one another—all of these constitute a way of life—“this present evil age.”

Now, if rescue is the theme, there are a couple of helpful implications that we might observe. First, we don’t have to “just make the best of it.” We don’t have to try as hard as we can, toughen up, medicate ourselves against the pain, do our best to survive, win more of the competitions than we lose. Our Savior has come that we “might have life, and might have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

The second implication of rescue is that we can’t and shouldn’t expect to fix “this present evil age.” We shouldn’t expect that the election is finally going to fix the national problems. We shouldn’t expect that if just this one time the school board would adopt the right textbooks, our schools would become places flourishing with truth. We shouldn’t expect that if we can just stop the bad guys and promote the good, somehow we’ll get it right. It is an evil age that cannot be fixed. We need to be rescued from it.

The imagery is this: we are like the abolitionists in the years before the Civil War, guiding slaves along an underground railroad, the train to freedom. We inhabit an “evil age” as ambassadors of “the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins.”

When I was a youngster I used to love the weekly television show *Robin Hood*. Heroic comrades, characterized by joy and courage, fought against the evil usurper, Prince John, and his henchman, the sheriff of Nottingham. Robin Hood and his comrades served the rightful king (Richard), waiting for his return. They offered hope to the poor and suffering and imprisoned.

We too live in the midst of an evil regime but are not of it. We have been set free from it, and we serve a King whose return is certain. That is where we are left in this opening paragraph of Galatians. It was for freedom that Christ set us free. For nearly two thousand years the insights recorded in Paul’s letter to the Galatians have transformed ordinary men and women into freedom fighters. May this transformation take place again in us.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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