Strong deliverer: Galatians 1:1-5

Paul opens his letter to the Galatians with what is in many ways his standard style of greeting: he begins by identifying himself as an apostle of Christ by the will of God, and salutes his addressees by pronouncing a blessing of grace and peace upon them. How do you suppose God wants to manifest his grace and peace in your life, and in our life together as a church?

What is unusual in Paul’s greeting in this letter is that he emphasises the divine mandate for his apostolic calling. He was sent, not by any human commission or human authority, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father. From the outset of the letter, Paul is concerned to defend the divine authorisation of his apostleship against his critics and detractors.

It is also apparent that Paul’s understanding of God is defined by Jesus. In this passage, how does Paul portray God the Father and Jesus working in partnership with each other? In what ways does Jesus frame and shape your own understanding of who God is and of how he works?

Paul says that Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue or deliver us from the present evil age (1:4). Let’s try and unpack this a bit. What event does Paul refer to when he speaks of Christ giving himself? Why and how does this make to your sins?

In Galatians 1:4, Paul says that Christ gave himself to liberate us from the present evil age, and this is the only time in Paul’s letters that he speaks of salvation in these terms. This may well be because Paul wanted to undercut the traditional perception that Israel was righteous because they had and kept God’s law, while the rest of the world was sinful. By portraying the human plight in terms of the inescapable way in which we all participate in the present world order, Paul sought to abolish the ethnically-drawn contrast between righteous Jew and sinful Gentile. Indeed, the commentator Lou Martyn would argue that all such binary distinctions are characteristic of the present evil age (Galatians 3:28).

In Galatians 1:4, Paul implicitly contrasts this present age with an age to come, which will be characterised by goodness rather than by evil. This kind of hope is one of the characteristics of a Jewish apocalyptic perspective on the world. How much importance do you think Christians today should attach to the hope that this present evil age will be replaced by a glorious age to come? What contrasts could you draw between these two ages? How has Jesus rescued or delivered us from the present evil age? We sometimes sing about Jesus being our ‘strong deliverer’. Was Jesus’ act of setting us free a show of strength on his part? What other qualities did he display when he acted to deliver us?

Paul only mentions the resurrection of Jesus once in this letter (1:1). In traditional Jewish thought, the resurrection of the righteous would take place when the present evil age, marked by sin, evil and death, would be swept away by the glorious age to come. The resurrection of Jesus transforms this perspective: when God raised his Son from the dead, the powers of the age to come broke into this present world order. God is at work to set people free right here, right now! What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make to you? To what extent can we expect to find liberation from the present evil age in our own present experience?

Take some time to read and reflect on the words of Fanny Crosby’s hymn below. What elements of the hymn do you also find in Galatians 1:1-5? Reading the hymn in the light of Galatians 1:1-5, and Galatians 1:1-5 in the light of the hymn, do you gain any further insights into the meaning of the hymn or this passage of Scripture?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY! great things He hath done!

So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,

Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,

And opened the life-gate that all may go in.

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*

*Let the earth hear His voice!*

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*

*Let the people rejoice!*

*O come to the Father through Jesus the Son;*

*And give Him the glory, great things He hath done!*

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!

To every believer the promise of God;

The vilest offender who truly believes,

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Great things He hath taught us, great things He hath done,

And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son:

But purer and higher and greater will be

Our wonder, our worship, when Jesus we see!