

end'. This imagery is quite clear within verse 4, except that Paul talks about the present age as 'the age of the evil one in which we now live', a phrase which sharpens up the awareness of 'the evil one' in the present age. You will not find this translation common, because most Bibles prefer to avoid talking about evil in a personified way, and say 'the present evil age'. Paul, however, knew full well the dangers faced in that part of the world by Christians, and I believe this translation to be correct. In addition, this reading heightens our understanding of salvation, for by Christ, the power of the evil one has been overcome, not completely, but certainly through Jesus.

Sometimes we are very loose about what we mean by salvation. Paul was very clear. He says in this verse that we are saved by the free grace of God because Jesus died and rose again for us. This salvation brings us peace with God, because it breaks down the barriers between God and His people. Jesus has also 'rescued' us by lifting us out of the present age into a new 'world' or 'age' in which evil and sin are no longer dominant, and Christ is Lord of all. The triumphant conclusion has not yet come, but in the mean time, we may trust in Jesus for all things, and have confidence that He will make our salvation complete.

### Application

These few powerful verses begin Paul's letter to the Galatians. It is too easy for us to take the truths within this reading for granted because we are used to hearing them. I suggest that we should read these brief verses as Paul's supremely condensed message of salvation, presented at the beginning of the letter to remind the people to whom he wrote of the true Gospel, the power of his preaching and the circumstances in which the churches were established. It comes as no surprise that Paul concluded this introduction with 'to whom be the glory for ever and ever: Amen.' After this introduction, Paul gets straight down to the reason for his letter in the next verse (1:6).

How can we respond to this letter and what can it say to us? One of the important things it says to us is that we cannot forget where we have come from. It is fashionable today for people to begin new churches wherever they feel led so to do; churches spring up in various places attached to this group or that, and sometimes to none at all. However, all Christians must surely have one history which goes back to the Apostles, and unless this is so, we have no root to our church and fellowship. Neither is it adequate to simply say that we can read Scripture and connect with the true heritage of faith. The apostles passed on through the Church the true Faith, and this has been passed on through people and churches over two thousand years, building on the cornerstone which is Christ Himself (Ephesians 2:20). Indeed, each of us has been assisted to faith by others and we cannot exist as Christians without all those of faith who live around us. This is what the famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 12, means.

Paul faced the problems of individuals trying to manoeuvre the church into all manner of forms within his own day, and the pressures have never died down, for Satan is determined to damage the Church (God's people) as much as possible. Let us not tear each other down, but with Paul, build each other up on the Gospel of salvation which is our heritage and which we share with all Christians of our own day, and who have gone before.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. How can we make sure that those who minister in the church have a call which has been properly tested?
2. Look up a map of the missionary journeys of Paul and check out the churches of Galatia.
3. Do you feel that you have been rescued out of this evil world?

### Discipleship

This scripture is a challenge to us because we need to check that we understand each word of it before we continue! It is sometimes very important that, as a matter of Christian discipline, we should spend time with very condensed passages such as this and work our way through them. If you have the opportunity, try working your way through this text together with a friend.

### Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, save us by Your grace, we pray, and by Your Holy Spirit, lead us into those truths of Your Word we so desperately need to know and put into practice. We praise You for Your love, Your peace and Your grace, which mean so much to us: AMEN

### Prayer

The beauty of Your world astounds us, Lord God, and the cruelty of humanity also shocks us. Therefore, help us live according to Your Word, because it is the only truth for the world, the yardstick of honesty, the judge of integrity and the evidence of love and care. As we pray, show us how to hear and use Your Word; and in its light, may we live for what is right and good in this world of sin. Help us Lord God, we pray: AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: The Gospel

Pray today for the truth of the Gospel to be made known and debated within your own society. In too many countries, people act as if they know what they do not want, and they do not want Christians talking about and explaining their faith, intelligently. Pray therefore, against the evils which prevent this, and ask the Lord for opportunities to break through this barrier.

### Meditation

Some things are beyond my understanding.  
How is it that God, the maker of the world,  
The one and only God (there can be none other)  
Can come into His world and show Himself as love:  
Can demonstrate that love, and speak it and live it,  
And show love's passion for all that's good,  
And wrath against all that's evil and wrong,  
Only for people, who possess His gift of life  
To say with utter nonchalance: 'good for Him!'  
But let me live my life; and You, O God, live yours.

Is it possible to have a 'Happy Easter'?  
Can I celebrate this wondrous festival with joy,  
With chocolate, holidays (and buying many things),  
And let this festival be just another religious carnival?

My Lord; dear Jesus; have mercy.  
Have mercy on all of us who claim Your name  
For if we are not roused within our souls  
To something more than 'have a Happy Easter!'  
Are our souls not compromised?

Let me join the first disciples in their fear  
At what was happening, and may I be so empty,  
That I'm ready to receive the Holy Spirit,  
Changing me wholly into an apostle for the truth;  
The truth of God we find in Jesus Christ?  
And can you join me in that prayer?

### Bible Study - Galatians 1:1-5

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle (neither from men or on behalf of man, but by means of Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead) <sup>2</sup> and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> who gave Himself for our sins and to rescue us from the age of the evil one in which we now live, according to the will of our God and Father, <sup>5</sup> to whom be the glory for ever and ever: AMEN

#### Review

Have you ever written a circular letter? Paul's letter to the Galatians is a circular letter written to a group of churches in the region of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey. In this region was a group of churches which had been some of the first to be founded by Paul (Acts 13,14), including those at Antioch (in Pisidia), Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. He was particularly

concerned for these churches and for the purity of the faith they lived and preached. At the beginning, when the churches began, there had been a great deal of opposition (Acts 14:19,20). At some point later on perhaps towards the end of the 40's AD, Paul wrote to them with a pressing concern, and the result is the circular letter we now call 'Galatians'.

We will find out the reason for Paul's letter later on, but one thing is obvious from the very start; Paul was not happy. He had begun with the usual greetings found in a letter of those days ('grace and peace' – see 1:3), and went on to speak about the great salvation we have in Jesus (1:3,4,5), but if we compare this letter with others such as those to the Colossians or the Philippians, Paul's words are lacking in warmth. He does not greet the church with words of congratulation or appreciation of their faith; indeed, tomorrow we will find that the letter launches straight into controversy (1:6f.).

We can also tell that Paul was not entirely happy, because the very first thing he wrote about was his own qualification to write to the churches of Galatia and address them. Paul wrote, describing himself as an 'apostle', but began an explanation of what he meant by this (1:1) in a rather defensive manner. We will look more closely at this later, but what Paul emphasised was his call by Jesus, personally, as a witness to the risen Christ. Paul wrote very cautiously, and each word was chosen with care. In his day, the apostles of Jesus Christ were all people who had lived and worked with Jesus, and yet Paul had not; though he had been called by the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9,15) to do the work of an apostle. It is almost certain that soon after the churches were founded some people had questioned his calling and the fact that he described himself an 'apostle', so his bold assertion of this right at the beginning of the letter was Paul's way of calling the churches back to listen to him as the man God had used to bring them the Gospel. He challenged his opponents head on.

If this were not fascinating enough in itself, the rest of our reading contains a magnificent miniature description of the Gospel of salvation itself! The words 'grace' and 'peace' (1:3) were common Greek and Hebrew words of greeting, but in Paul's letter, he did not merely write these as if offering a private greeting; he wrote them as 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1:3). For Paul, to have peace with God was what salvation meant, and this salvation was available through the favour of God, that is, His 'grace', because of what Jesus had done in His life and death. Moreover, our salvation through Jesus Christ means that God has 'rescued us from the age of the evil one in which we now live ...' (1:4). In other words, God loves us so much that He has liberated us from dependence on the evil world in which we live and brought us into His own Kingdom through Jesus Christ!

So Paul was not writing to the Galatians merely about himself, but about the Gospel of salvation, and his opening message emphasised that as churches which he had founded, they should listen to what he had to say to them.

### **Going Deeper**

We will have to look at each of the four main parts of this opening text in Galatians; issues to do with Paul's apostleship, the churches in Galatia to whom he wrote and the background to the letter, and lastly the Gospel of salvation which Paul was so keen to preach and defend. It will become the central feature of the whole letter.

#### ***Paul's apostleship***

The word 'apostle' (1:1) means 'one who is sent'. In the New Testament, this word is used exclusively as a description of the twelve disciples of Jesus (remembering that Matthias replaced Judas – Acts 1:21-26) who were commissioned by Jesus to take the message of the Gospel to the world (Matt 28:16-20, Acts 2 etc.), and also Paul. The word could also mean anyone who is sent on a mission or task and we could use it in this way today, but the Bible does not do this. If you look up the word 'apostles' in a Bible dictionary, you will find that it always refers to the highest calling of all within the church which was reserved for these thirteen people, and no-one today can lay claim to a higher calling than these witnesses to the life and work of Jesus. If they could, we would now be under obligation to heed them rather than the evidence of the original apostles which is found within the Bible, and this is a dangerous road on which to travel, because the evidence of scripture is uniquely authoritative for the Christian people. The mainstream evangelical heritage of the church has never accepted that the supreme gift of apostleship has been given to anyone other than these people; and in the light of this, the Church has traditionally used a different word for people who are 'sent' to proclaim the Gospel and build on the work of the 'Apostles'; they are called 'missionaries' (the word 'mission' comes from the Latin word meaning the same thing, 'to send').

How is it then that Paul could call himself an apostle, when he had not witnessed the life and death of Jesus with the other disciples? Some did indeed say that Paul was not an apostle and should not use the term. But Paul always maintained that he had seen the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9f.) and been commissioned by Him personally to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. He also claimed that he had met the other disciples and gained their blessing for this unique call (1:18f.). Paul goes into the detail of this later on in Galatians (1:10-24), and he also speaks about this in some of his other letters (1 Cor 15:9, 1 Thess 2:7).

Because of the controversy Paul said at the start of the letter that his calling as an apostle was not 'on behalf of man ...' but originated from God the Father who had raised Jesus Christ from the dead (1:1). This was Paul's testimony and justification for being called an apostle.

#### ***The brothers, and Galatia***

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian churches not only from himself, but from 'all the brothers who are with me' (1:2). What did Paul mean by this? It could be that Paul wrote from one church to another, and used the word 'brothers' to allude to the fellowship where he was staying. Certainly, 'brothers' was a word used by early Christians to describe a fellowship of believers (Acts 2:37, 7:2 etc). Many translations today understandably changed this word to 'fellowship' or some other word which includes all people, which is quite true of the first Christian fellowships.

However, Paul often travelled together with others in a group, and it is more likely that those he mentioned here in Galatians were simply part of his party. Paul wanted people to know that he was no 'loner'. All his missionary journeys were shared with others, initially with Barnabas and then, after a sharp disagreement (see Acts 15:36-41), with Silas and probably Luke as well (Luke wrote Acts, and from Acts 16:11, he talks about what happened as if he was there too!).

#### ***The Gospel (1) – grace and peace***

Paul greeted the Galatian churches with the same greeting which he used in most of his letters, saying 'grace ... and peace ...'. If we could travel back to ancient times this phrase would seem odd to those who heard it. The word 'grace' is the Greek word 'charis' which was used as a general greeting in the world of the Roman Empire, and it expressed favour and good will. However, in the Jewish world, as well as other oriental cultures, the normal greeting was the word 'shalom' meaning 'peace'. By putting the two words together, Paul composed a greeting which brought together what for him was the ancient and the modern, the oriental and the Greek. It is possible that Paul was the first person to use this greeting, and it became Paul's favourite greeting (Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Phil 1:2, Col 1:2 etc.).

It becomes obvious that this greeting meant more to Paul than a mere pleasantry when we read on in verse 3; 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Paul spoke as if offering this 'grace and peace' from God! How could he do this? He did it because it was his mission and call as an apostle to bring the peace and grace of God to people. For Paul, 'grace and peace' was like shorthand for the Gospel of salvation (see above). What Paul was doing was intriguing and clever. At the very start of his letter he set out the stall of the Gospel he had preached to them when they were founded, most probably using these words because they were central to what he said and did. If you read Acts 13 and 14, you will find that Paul's first sermons there were based on expounding the grace of God which offered salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul also brought peace ('shalom') to people by healing the sick (Acts 14:8-11). But what he said was received with much violence from which they just about escaped with their lives (Acts 14:19,20). Peace and grace were loaded words, which stirred up the memory of Paul's founding of the churches to which he now wrote.

#### ***The Gospel (2) – rescue***

Paul went on to say more, and for the same reason. However, it is hard for us to understand today what people believed about the world in which they lived; so we must look at this in order to understand what Paul means by 'who gave Himself for our sins and to rescue us from the age of the evil one in which we now live, according to the will of our God and Father.' (1:4)

In Paul's day, Christians thought of themselves as living in 'the present age' which was the world in which they lived, as you and I still live today, dominated by evil and all the problems of the mortal world. They also believed that God had begun a 'new age' through the life and work of Jesus Christ, something the Bible sometimes calls the 'Kingdom of God'. However, the 'present age' was dying out, and the 'new age' had begun but would not be complete until Jesus returned in glory! In this way of looking at things, salvation was a matter of being rescued, and lifted out of the 'present age' into the 'new age', whilst accepting that the two continued side by side, until 'the