

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	3		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE GREAT EMANCIPATION

Deus absconditus is the Latin expression used in theology to refer to *the hidden or concealed God*. Luther speaks often of God as the *deus absconditus*. There is, wrote the Reformer, “No faith in, no knowledge and no understanding of, God, insofar as He is not revealed, are possible.”¹ God is transcendent because He goes beyond us and our temporal existence. Does this mean that God is “up there” beyond our reach? Is He distant and remote, too far away to be troubled by our cries? NO. God has made Himself known in creation (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:19-20). This knowledge of God, however, is incomplete; it is not redemptive. General revelation renders all inexcusable. Mankind possesses a knowledge of God which they wilfully suppress and so leave themselves without excuse (cf. Acts 14:16, 17; 17:27). General revelation is not salvific. Martin Chemnitz, therefore, very properly says that “without the knowledge of Christ and the Trinity, man’s knowledge of God is in reality *ignorantia dei* as far as the practical result, viz., the worship of God, is concerned.”² It is only in the Gospel that we know of God’s love for sinners. “The supreme truth which Christianity proclaims is not that God will punish the impenitent. Conscience and the Mosaic law had already proclaimed that, and Christianity simply reaffirms it. Its proper message is that man may be saved from sin and its consequences.”³ Note this stress on the cross of Christ in Paul’s opening salutation. Paul is not only concerned about the defense of his authority as an Apostle, he is deeply burdened over his gospel of Grace, and so he immediately directs the Galatians to the cross. The Judaizers have attacked his apostleship and his gospel of Grace. Now the battle is joined and Paul begins his demolition of the false teaching by focusing on the atonement.

- I. **THE ACT OF ATONEMENT.** The opening words of verse 4 underscore this facet, “who gave himself for our sins.” The verb translated “gave” is *dontos* (the compound verb *paradontos* appears in Galatians 2:20). “The idea involved is a delivering up of oneself for a specific purpose, and this conception of Christ’s mission was not only fundamental to Paul’s message, but was basic to his notion of apostleship. The one who had commissioned him was one who himself knew the meaning of sacrifice.”⁴ The words “for our sins” indicate that the sacrificial death of Christ was *penal* (our English word comes from the Latin *poena*, punishment. We speak of a *penalty*, a prescribed punishment for an offense). Our sins, before the presence of a holy and righteous God, demand the penalty of death – thus the death of Christ constitutes a *satisfaction* (another term that is drawn from Latin, *satisfaction*, a making amends or reparations) required by God for forgiveness to take place (cf. Romans 3:21-31; 6:23; Galatians 3:13). The preposition translated “for” (NIV) is *hyper*, and points to *substitution* (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; John 11:50). The death of Christ delivers us, not only from the condemnation under which we stand as sinners, but also from the power of sin over our lives (cf. Romans 6:1-11). Recently, James N. Beevers pointed out that, “Few modern songs have enjoyed the popularity and cross-denominational appeal of Keith Getty and Stuart Townend’s *In Christ Alone*. It may surprise you, then, that the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted in 2013 to strike the song from its hymnal over a *doctrinal controversy*. The church wanted to replace the line ‘til on that cross as Jesus died, **the wrath of God was satisfied** with . . . *the love of God was magnified*, an emendation the song’s authors refused. Though now 12 years old,

this story points to a profound, still fiercely-debated question: What did Jesus do on the cross? Did he suffer in the place of sinners to bear the wrath of God for humanity's sin (penal substitutionary atonement theory) or did he defeat Satan in an invisible victory over cosmic forces (*Christus Victor* theory)? The PCUSA's preferred *love of God was magnified* describes the moral influence theory, namely that Christ's death supremely demonstrated the lengths to which God's love would go, which inspires people to lives of service."⁵ This particular attitude stands in stark contrast to the overall teaching of Scripture. Herman Hanko captures it well, "Why does Paul describe the work of Christ in this particular way? The answer is found in Paul's deep concern for the result that the error being promoted in these churches would have if the people believed it. The error of the Judaizers involved the deepest truth of the faith: the excellency and sufficiency of the cross of Jesus Christ. The apostle's conviction is evident from Galatians 5:2, 4: *If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.* Already in the blessing Paul pronounces on the Galatians, he wants them to know the excellency of Christ's cross and the great work it accomplished for the church. *This work of Christ, by which you are rescued from this evil age,* Paul says to the Galatians, *is the work of Christ you are in danger of repudiating.*"⁶

II. **THE PURPOSE OF THE ATONEMENT.** This is stated in the words "to rescue us from the present evil age." The verb "rescue" (NIV) or "deliver" (NASB, KJV) is *exaireō*. A number of important things are involved: (1) The Greek subjunctive expresses purpose; (2) The verb is in the emphatic position in the Greek text, and this, notes S. Lewis Johnson, "underlines its force and strikes the keynote of the letter, freedom (cf. 5:1);"⁷ (3) The verb carries the idea of rescuing from danger, it connotes deliverance from the power of something or someone (cf. Matthew 5:29; 18:9; Acts 7:10, 34; 12:11; 23:27; 26:17); (4) The tense of the verb stresses the definiteness and completeness of the deliverance. The final words of the clause are "from the present evil age." Note that Christians are not taken out of this world (John 17:15) but are rescued from this present evil age. *Exaireō* literally means to pluck out (used in that sense in Matthew 5:29.) It suggests deliverance out of the power or grip of an adversary (cf. Act 7:10; 12:11). The same concept is found in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 when we are told that Jesus *rescues* us from the wrath to come. The Greek word here is *ruomenon*, to deliver from peril or danger. The realm from which God's people are rescued in Galatians 1:5 is this present evil age, while in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 it is the wrath of God. Leon Morris notes that the whole concept of God's wrath is unwelcomed to people today, but it is a theme that cannot be avoided. He goes on to say, "This is not to deny that wrath must be carefully understood. The wrath of God is no vindictive passion, and it does not imply lack of control, as in human wrath. But whenever we apply any term to God, even love, we must make the mental reservation: without the imperfections that characterize the human. Who can think that that puny thing that human love is at its best really gives us a picture of God's mighty love? But we have no hesitation in applying the term *love* to His activity. So with wrath. God's wrath is without the imperfections that seem bound up with the purest of righteous indignation among men. But it gives strong expression to the active opposition of a holy God for all that is evil. We cannot do without this conception."⁸

III. **THE SOURCE OF THE ATONEMENT.** Paul concludes by adding "according to the will of our God and Father." The death of Christ was according to "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). The Father sent the Son into the world in order to accomplish the Father's redemptive will. What does this tell us? (1) The death of Christ was not a tragic accident; it was planned by God. (2) The cross of Christ and its design and intent are traceable to the sovereign will of God. (3) The cross of Christ accomplished all that God purposed for it to accomplish. It does *not* merely make people saveable – it *actually* saves those for whom it was intended. Paul concludes with a doxology, ascribing glory to the Father. This addition of a doxology to the end of an introductory salutation is unparalleled in Paul's epistles. Why does the apostle place one here? Two possible reasons. (1) Paul's gospel summary prompted it. He could not speak of the work of the Saviour

without giving glory to God, (2) Note that Galatians does not have a thanksgiving at the beginning. This also is unparalleled in Paul's epistles. He has nothing to recommend in the Galatian churches; on the contrary, he will only express surprise and disappointment. Eadie notes, "The doxology is based on the previous statement: To Him, for His gracious will that wrought out our deliverance through His Son's self-sacrifice, be the glory *to the ages of the ages*. This last expression is not a pure Hebraism. See under Eph. 3:21. These ages of ages – still beginning, never ending – are as if in contrast to *this present age, an evil one*, out of which believers are rescued. And this blessed change is not of law or of works in any sense, but solely from His will as its sources, and by the self-oblation of Christ as its intermediate and effective means – means which have this rescue for their direct object – *voluntas Filii Patris voluntatem implet* (Jerome)."⁹ Morris adds, "Paul finishes his opening with a little doxology (the only doxology in Paul's openings to letters). To the Father of whom he has been speaking he ascribes *glory*, a concept of which he is fond (he uses it in all 77 times), but this is the only time he uses it in this epistle. Here it refers to the majesty, the splendour, of God. Its permanence is brought out with the conclusion, *forever and ever, amen*. This is often the conclusion to a prayer, and it makes a very suitable conclusion to this introduction to the epistle. *Amen* is the participle from the Hebrew verb meaning *to confirm*. It is taken over by the New Testament writers as a suitable way of bringing a prayer to its close. As we notice what Paul has said in this opening, it is proper that we should also notice what is not said. Paul usually has a thanksgiving for some aspect of the life of the churches to which he writes, and its absence from this opening is perhaps due to his concern over what was amiss in Galatia."¹⁰

CONCLUSION: "The Gospel is a rescue," writes Lightfoot, "an emancipation from a state of bondage."¹¹ The Judaizers, however, construed the death of Christ as simply another incentive to keep the law. In Paul's thought, the cross of Christ delivers us from all condemnation and does so without any assistance from us. Christ gave Himself freely for us and His cross work was (please note these words) a *voluntary penal substitutionary* (vicarious)¹² *sacrifice to satisfy* the claims of a righteous God against us. Aside from the Gospel, God is very much *Deus Absconditus*. But in the Gospel He is *Deus Revelatus*. He has revealed Himself in Christ and *this* sight of God is one that should cause us to sing *Amazing Grace*." Calvin put it best: "So glorious is this redemption that it should ravish us with wonder."¹³ Finally, the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf tells how his mind was changed on the subject of God's wrath: "I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. *My* villages and cities were destroyed, *my* people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love.

"A robust theology of the cross is what will withstand the storms, sufferings, persecutions, and hardships that Jesus promised would confront those who are his true followers. That is a hard promise – not the kind you'll find in a superficial pocket promise book. But along with his promise, Jesus left us this magnificent assurance: *Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world* (John 16:33, KJV)."¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Revell, 1957), p. 55.

² Cited by Francis Pieper *Christian Dogmatics* I (Concordia, 1950), p. 427.

³ G. T. Purves, *The Sinless Christ* (Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1902), p. 130.

⁴ Donald Guthrie, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 59.

⁵ J. N. Beevers, "Discover Penal Substitutionary Atonement in Hebrews," *The Gospel Coalition*, Dec. 5, 2025.

⁶ Herman Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty: Commentary on Galatians* (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), p. 26.

⁷ S. L. Johnson, *Galatians: The Believers Bible Bulletin* (Believers Chapel, 1978), p. 6.

⁸ L. Morris, *The First & Second Epistles to The Thessalonians* (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 65.

⁹ John Eadie, *A Commentary On The Greek Text of The Epistle of Paul to The Galatians* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 18.

¹⁰ L. Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (IVP, 1996), p. 38.

¹¹ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (MacMillian & Co., 1869), p. 73.

¹² Vicarious is the English form of the Latin *vicarial*, performed on behalf of or in place of. It is used of Christ who stands in the place of sinners to make satisfaction that otherwise would have been required by God from sinners in return for free forgiveness. Christ bears the full wrath of God in their place.

¹³ Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries* Vol. 11, translated by T. H. L. Parker (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 11.

¹⁴ Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel? A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (Tyndale, 2020), pp. 215, 216.