

INTRODUCTION

A lot of attention was given to the death of Steve Jobs on October 5. All the attention surrounding his death probably caused most of us to miss the fact that just three days later another American creative genius also died of pancreatic cancer. His name was Roger Williams, a brilliant pianist. His 1955 recording of "Autumn Leaves" is the only piano solo to reach #1 on the Billboard charts. He played in the White House for every President from Harry Truman through George W. Bush.

In 1966 he recorded the Academy Award winning song, "Born Free" from the movie by the same name. The movie was based on a true story of Elsa, a lion cub raised in captivity by Joy and Gorge Adamson. When Elsa was full grown, they released her back into the wilds of Kenya. A year later the Adamson's returned to Kenya and wondered if Elsa would remember them. Elsa, now with three cubs of her own, recognized the Adamson's and joyfully played with them.

It's a great story, and the song only added to the emotion of the movie. Those of us from that generation can still remember the beautiful melody: "Born free, as free as the wind blows; as free as the grass grows; Born free to follow your heart."

Although Elsa was raised in captivity, she would never have been happy in a zoo or an enclosure; she was born with a desire to be free. That's a great point of comparison to the Christian life. We were all born in bondage to our sinful nature, but there is something within each one of us that longs to be free from the guilt and shame of our past. Nicodemus asked Jesus how he could have eternal life and Jesus told him if he ever wanted to enter the Kingdom of heaven, he had to be born again. When we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus it's like being born again, and He sets us free! We aren't born free, but, thank God, we are born again free!

In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul wrote about the spiritual freedom we find in the gospel of grace. We're in a section of the letter where Paul is giving his personal testimony. In the last message we saw how God turned a terrorist into an evangelist.

In this section we'll see how Paul defended the gospel of grace.

Galatians 2:1-10. "Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an

apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

In this section, Paul fast-forwarded his testimony past his first missionary journey and recounted the time when he went to Jerusalem to debate over whether Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be Christians. This debate is described in Acts 15. “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.” (Acts 15:1-2)

The issue was settled once and for all that salvation is by grace through faith and not of works. It was a victory for truth, and a victory for the gospel of grace. In Paul’s comments we learn three important things about what God’s grace can do.

1. GRACE FRUSTRATES LEGALISTS who try to enslave others to rules

Paul wrote, “Some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.” (Galatians 2:4-5)

Did you know there were spies in the early church? They weren’t 007, they were Pharisees, double OH SO judgmental. We know the Jewish Pharisees gave Jesus a lot of grief. They accused Jesus whenever they thought He said or did anything contrary to the Law of Moses.

Acts 15:5 reveals there were some Pharisees who claimed to have become Christians—and they were subjecting Gentile Christians to the same critical scrutiny they directed toward Jesus. They didn’t like the fact that these new Christians had so much liberty, so they wanted to enslave them to legalism.

As we study the grace-way to salvation, we’re going to be talking a lot about legalism, which is the opposite of grace. C.J. Mahaney has provided a good definition of a legalist. “A legalist is anyone who behaves as if they can earn God’s approval and forgiveness through personal performance.” (*The Cross Centered Life*, p 25) Legalism is emphasizing rules over a relationship; it is focusing on Christian standards rather than Christ, the Savior. It’s all about law instead of love.

The theme of Galatians is how grace liberates us and legalism enslaves us. Later in the letter Paul writes, “But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.” (Galatians 4:9-11)

Some of the Pharisee/Christians were demanding that all Christians observe the Jewish feasts like Yom Kippur and Passover. They demanded that Christians obey the Sabbath Day rules, and the dietary rules. In other words, no bacon or ham at the men's breakfast!

The legalism that exists today isn't about keeping Jewish festivals as much as it is thinking that a Christian can earn God's love and acceptance by what they do or don't do.

There was episode of Ed Sullivan where a guy was spinning plates. He had some flexible rods mounted and on the top of each one, he would start spinning a plate. He spun one, then two, then three, until he had about twenty plates spinning at the same time. When some would start wobbling, he would run and spin them again. Disaster seemed inevitable. He would seemingly ignore a wobbling plate until the audience would start screaming, and he would quickly run over and give it a spin just in time!

That's a picture of legalism. Legalism is the belief that if I can just keep all my spiritual plates spinning, then I can earn more of God's favor. It's a great act for TV, but it's a terrible way to live the Christian life, because we keep adding plates to the act. Let's see, every day, I have to spin the Bible reading plate; then I've got to spin the prayer plate, and oh yeah, I've got to share my faith every day; I need to spin that tithing plate; and that missionary support group plate; and attend every event at the church—that's five or six plates at least. And if Sunday rolls around and I've kept all those plates spinning I can smile and know that God is pleased. But if a Sunday rolls around and I've let a couple of plates fall, then I know God isn't quite as pleased, and I have to promise I'll do better the next week.

Is your spiritual life like spinning plates? Or is more of a daily walk with Jesus where He dwells in you and lives His life through you? And sure, you'll be in His Word and talking to Him, and serving Him. But it will be out of a sense of joyful participation rather than joyless obligation.

2. GRACE CREATES FELLOWSHIP with like-minded believers

At the meeting in Jerusalem, the issue was settled and the result was fellowship. Paul wrote, "James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me." (Galatians 2:9)

The leaders gave Paul and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship." That just means they shook hands when they came to an agreement. So, when we greet each other by shaking hands, we're practicing a Biblical custom! Shaking hands is an ancient custom that grew out of two peaceful soldiers grabbing hands to prove that they didn't have a weapon.

Someone said: "When it was born in Jerusalem, the church was a fellowship. When it went to Greece, it became a philosophy. When it went to Rome it became an institution. When it went to Europe, it became a culture. When it went to America, it became an enterprise. How the Church needs to return to being a fellowship!"

Fellowship is an important part of our faith. Fellowship is so much more than two fellows in one ship. The Bible word for fellowship is *koinonia*, which means "to have in common." The

common language of the New Testament time was Koine Greek, which had been spread throughout that part of the world by Alexander the Great. *Koine*, meant it was a "common language shared by everyone." *Koinonia* is what all Christians share in common—a faith in Jesus.

Here's a quick trivia question for you. What is the largest living thing on the planet? By this I mean the largest single organism, plant or animal. You might think the mighty blue whale is, but at only 200 tons, it's not the largest. You might think a massive Redwood tree would be the largest, but the largest of them weigh in at only 2,000 tons. Give up?

The largest organism in the world is a grove of Aspen trees in Fishlake National Forest in Utah. Although there appears to be many trees, genetic tests have proven all the trunks share the same underground root system. The name of the grove is Pando (the Latin word for "it spreads") and this organism weighs in at over 6,000 tons, making it the largest single organism on earth.

The grove has been burned before and the trunks may die, but the root system survives underground, and new trunks grow from the living root.

Well, actually, there is an organism that's larger—the church. We aren't an organization; we're a living organism—the Body of Christ. And we all share the same root system, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is called the root of Jesse in Isaiah 11. There have been many attempts to stamp out the church throughout history, but through it all, the root has remained alive and strong, and today the Church is alive and well throughout the earth. It is made up of people of every tongue, every tribe, every language, and every culture. The root of the Church is Jesus, but the fruit of the church is fellowship.

I'm a Christian first, and a Baptist second, but I have a secret to share with you. Are you ready? God is doing great things through and among people who aren't Baptists. And we shouldn't be afraid to fellowship with like-minded believers who may not carry the label "Baptist."

Someone sent me this funny email: Some time ago I came upon a fellow who was on the edge of a bridge. He looked as if he was ready to jump. I ran over and grabbed him by the hand to see if I could save him. I said, "Are you believer in Jesus Christ?" "Yes!" he said, "But I don't have anyone to fellowship with." I was wondering if I have something in common with him, so I started asking him some questions. "I've learned that you can't be too careful. Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?" I asked. "I accept it." "Deity of Jesus?" "No doubt." Could it be that I was face to face with a fellow believer? Perhaps. So I continued my checklist. "Bodily resurrection of Christ?" "Absolutely!" Status of man?" "Sinners in need of grace." "The Bible?" "Totally inspired with no error." I was getting excited. "Conservative or liberal?" He was getting excited too. "Conservative." My heart began to beat faster. "Denomination?" He smiled and said, "Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensational Triune Convention." That was mine! "What branch?" "Pre-millennial, non-charismatic, King James, one-cup Communion." My eyes misted over. We had so much in common! I asked one more question. "Is your pulpit wooden or fiberglass?" "Fiberglass," he responded. I withdrew my hand and walked away as I said, "Go ahead and jump, you heretic!"

When I say "like-minded believers" I'm not referred to everyone who *claims* to be a Christian, because some groups are teaching a false gospel. But I can fellowship with anyone who agrees with these four essential beliefs: (1) Jesus is God; (2) Jesus is the only way to heaven; (3) Salvation is by grace through faith; and (4) The Bible is our absolute authority for truth.

One of the reformers, Philipp Melancthon said, "In the essentials, there must be unity. In the non-essentials, there must be liberty. And in all things, there must be charity."

There's a beautiful gem hidden in Malachi 3 about unity. We make a mistake if we think the only important part of Malachi 3 is about tithing. The Bible says, "Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name. 'They will be mine,' says the Lord Almighty, 'in the day when I make up my treasured possession.'" (Malachi 3:16-17)

Why can't all of us who fear the Lord sit down and talk together? God treasures unity and Christian fellowship. The night before Jesus was crucified He prayed a prayer for us. He said, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:23) King David sang, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters] live together in unity." (Psalm 133:1)

Fellowship isn't just nice; it's a necessity. I need you and you need me. You can't experience fellowship watching church on television or your computer. If you don't believe me trying hugging your television!

During Vacation Bible School a new student showed up one morning. The little boy had one arm missing and the teacher was nervous that one of the children might comment on his handicap, but nobody seemed to notice. At the end of the class, without thinking the teacher said, "Now, let's put our hands together and make a church. Here's the church and here's the steeple ..." As she watched the one-armed boy raise his right hand, there was a moment of horror in which she realized she had said the wrong thing. But the little girl sitting next to the boy just reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, "Here, let's make church together."

Go ahead and extend the right hand of fellowship with someone beside you. Say, "I need you, and you need me."

3. GRACE MOTIVATES US to be grace-full to those in need

"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." (Galatians 2:10) Paul left the Jerusalem conference with a victory for grace. They didn't have to require Gentile believers to be circumcised and become Jews. But does that mean there are no responsibilities for Christians? No rules? Jesus only gave two commands and the first was to love God with all your being and the second was to love your neighbor as yourself.

One way we love our neighbors is by caring for the poor. Paul said he was already eager to do

that before they mentioned it. Once you receive the grace of God you will naturally want to show grace to others, especially the poor.

There are over 300 verses in the Bible about caring for the poor. God says, "If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land." (Isaiah 58:10-11)

You don't have to look very far to find poor people in East Texas. Poverty exists in America and in East Texas. But sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the size of the problem, and we think there's nothing we can do. God isn't asking you to solve the entire problem of poverty in the world. But He is asking you to be a part of the solution.

It's like the kid who found thousands of baby starfish washed up on the beach. The seagulls were swooping down to eat them and the kid was throwing as many as he could back into the surf to save them from the birds. A man walking by said, "There are too many starfish and too many birds. You can't make a difference." The kid picked up another starfish and flung it into the water and said, "Bet I made a difference for that one."

And you can make a difference in a least one poor person's life. Get involved with our Good Samaritan Outreach Center, or volunteer for Boys and Girls Club of East Texas. In a couple of weeks, Pastor Emmy from Uganda will be here and he can tell you how you can make a difference in the life of an orphan in Uganda. If you have received God's grace, show God's grace. It IS more blessed to give than to receive!

CONCLUSION

God's grace really can set you free. I've just finished reading the book *Unbroken*. It's the amazing story of Louis Zamperini, a famous U.S. Olympic runner prior to World War II. During the war his plane crashed in the Pacific Ocean and after floating for 47 days, fighting hunger, thirst, and sharks, his raft washed up on a Japanese-held island 2,000 miles from where he crashed. As a POW he suffered unimaginable torture and hardships. One particular vicious Japanese guard, nicknamed the Bird, made his life a living hell. He tortured Louis daily, and had beaten him unconscious on several occasions. The Bird tried to break Louis physically and mentally—yet he remained unbroken.

The war ended, and Louis was liberated, but even after the war, he was still fighting personal battles created by post-traumatic stress. The war hadn't killed him, but stress was about to destroy him. His constant drinking and fighting threatened to destroy his marriage and family. His nightmares of torture caused him to wake up screaming almost every night.

Louis was obsessed with the idea of traveling back to Japan and finding the Bird and killing him for revenge. Every night the Bird haunted his dreams. He would wake up screaming at night during a nightmare fighting the guard. He was no longer a prisoner of war, but he was in a worse prison: He was imprisoned by his hatred and his desire for revenge.

In 1949 a young, lanky Southern Baptist preacher from North Carolina set up a tent near Louis' town and started preaching. His name was Billy Graham. Louis' wife attended and gave her heart to Christ. At first Louis resisted, but finally he gave in to her pleas, and he went to hear Billy Graham. On the second night he attended, Louis gave his life to Christ, and his life changed immediately. He went home that night and poured out his liquor and threw away his cigarettes and dumped his girlie magazines in the trash.

Here's how author, Laura Hillenbrand, described the next morning after Louis found God's grace: "In the morning, Louis woke feeling cleansed. For the first time in five years, the Bird hadn't come into his dreams. The Bird would never come again." (*Unbroken*, p. 388)

And when Louis experienced God's grace and was born again, he was set free. And Louis did have the chance to travel back to Japan—but not for revenge. Instead he visited some of his former guards who were Japanese war criminals. He shared about how Jesus had changed his heart, and as he reached out and shook the hands of the former prison guards and he told them that he forgave them in Jesus' name. God's grace had set him free to forgive.

And that's what the grace of God can do for you. We weren't born free, but, Praise God, we are born-again free!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes