

This Present Evil Age

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins in order to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever” (Galatians 1:4,5).

Let's not reduce the Gospel to a slogan! With much sadness, I fear we do that by claiming that the Gospel is this, To those who believe in Jesus, God offers the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of being in heaven. This statement is too reductionist, too simplistic, to be valid. I've discussed all that the Gospel involves in many Sunday School lessons over the years, but here let's focus on the great cosmic truth that God sent the Son to deliver us from the present evil age. This isn't just abstract positional truth, as a casual reading of the verse might suggest. It has major implications: It affects how we view our world, how we think, how we value things, indeed, how we live. Let's discuss it.

We must first understand a fundamental principle or truth, which is that life and blessing occur ONLY in the presence of God. To *not* be in God's presence is death. Thus, in the Garden when that first couple disobeyed God, dishonoring and offending Him, they were expelled from His presence to experience death outside of the Garden. Later, Lot chose to dwell not in the land of promise along with Abraham, but in the Jordan River valley, apart from God's presence; as a result he forfeited life and blessing. After the exodus from Egypt, the Nation of Israel was taken to the Land of promise to dwell there in God's presence and experience blessing. Because of disobedience, they were thrust from the Land, away from God's presence into Exile, which is a figure of death. At the end of Revelation, the saints of God dwell in God's glorious presence for an eternity of peace, joy, blessing, and life.

Thus, except for the Patriarchs, the Nation of Israel when they were in God's presence in the Land (from the Exodus to the Exile), and followers of Jesus indwelt by the Holy Spirit, *all people* from the time of the expulsion from the Garden, and *all the Gentile nations* from the time of the end of the Noahic Flood, on to the present, are apart from the presence of God and so experience death. Worse, in judgment God placed them under the sovereign rule and control of wicked supernatural beings who despise God and His righteousness.

The Son of God came to change this. He came to establish on earth the Kingdom of God. In this Kingdom, Jesus, the Messiah and King, Himself deity, would be physically present on a throne in Jerusalem. And so all citizens of the Kingdom would experience blessing and life, for a thousand years. But when the Son came, His own people rejected Him, so the promised Kingdom was postponed. Not cancelled, just postponed. And in this interim period, in the Church are followers of Jesus who will constitute the people of the Kingdom when the King returns. During this interim age, the Spirit takes up residence in followers of Jesus, so that God is present to impart life. Followers of Jesus are being prepared to be Kingdom citizens as they obey the Law of Christ, His words, commands, and teachings. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, is to prepare Jesus' followers to be in the Kingdom.

Anyone who is not following Jesus, thus not indwelt by His Spirit, is not in God's presence. All such people inhabit this present evil age, an age of death, sin and wickedness, an age under condemnation. All such people will continue to exist after they die, but be forever apart from God, in a place called hell, experiencing eternal (the "second") death. The Gospel therefore (in part at least) is to believe in Jesus, to lovingly follow Him, and so to be delivered from this evil age into the promised Kingdom. Only those who have had their sins forgiven, whom God declares just and is placed into the Body of Christ, can be delivered from this evil age and be fit to be in God's presence to experience life and blessing.

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To call this present age "evil" doesn't mean that there isn't good to be found in it. Of course, people can be honest, kind, compassionate, generous, and self-sacrificing, even altruistic. People can mimic certain of the biblical "fruit of the Spirit," such as self-control, gentleness, etc. John Calvin called all of this "civic [or civil] virtue." But this kind of "goodness" is only horizontal, that is, it's entirely at an inter-personal level. Those who practice this kind of virtue on one day may easily on another day be appallingly pagan, for that is their innate nature. The astonishingly rapid descent into wickedness and ghastly cruelty of cultured Germans (and others) during the Nazi era attests to the superficial nature of civic virtue. Civic virtues promote humanism and self-righteousness, and it substitutes extensively in the church for

holiness. But it isn't holiness at all; it's a pretense. Let's use extreme care in distinguishing this counterfeit kind of goodness from God's righteousness as revealed in His Word, which is done expressly to honor God.

This present age is evil because it wants nothing to do with God or His will. It despises His Word, His righteousness, His Son, and His Gospel. If not overtly anti-theistic, the people of this evil age are indifferent to God. (There's no such thing as "not religious" or neutral.) The people of this evil age spurn God's provision of escape, God's provision of life and blessing, made with love and immense personal sacrifice. And so all such humanity is condemned (John 3:36). The people of this age are primarily condemned not because of the evil that they do, although there's no limit on what evil can be done. The condemnation is rejecting God's Son, His gracious provision of escape from slavery to sin to the practice of holiness. Those who pass their lives in this present evil age reveal to God that they love evil, that they want to be dominated by Satan and his minions. They really, *really* do not want to be on the side of God, the side of good.

Those who populate this present evil age characteristically also live purposelessly. Intellectuals argue whether existential anxiety or nihilistic hopelessness is worse, because to them as well as to everyone else, life has no meaning and therefore no purpose. The purposelessness is thick and heavy, only trivially mitigated by holding to some religion or ideology. The pursuit of happiness is universal. Christians too, by the way, who can't find purpose in the Scriptures, drift aimlessly, selfishly, and thoughtlessly thru a fruitless and wasted life.

Satan's playground is here on earth, on *all* of earth, including the so-called civilized Western world. That's us. Politics, culture, and religion are his three super-favorite places to play. Christians who engage in these are trapped in Satan's iron grip. The Church, I should point out, has no champion in our nation's political sphere. Satan delights in raising up monsters only to replace them with other (worse) monsters. Engaging in politics and culture, especially, should be anathema to believers in the West.

Unbelievers seek much else of course, such as adventure, excitement, power over others, and entertainment. They're restless. They love speculation about unknowable matters. They treasure their opinions about everything. They even may seek something transcendent or spiritual to enhance their otherwise dreary lives. These are a few more features of this present evil age, mentioned here so that my readers can reflect on whether they've been delivered from it, or not.

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Let's think carefully now about how this verse affects us. In the same way that to have one's sins forgiven necessarily means that we're to eschew sin in this life, to be rescued from this present evil age means we're necessarily to live now, in this life, as Kingdom citizens. We're NOT to continue to sin. And we're NOT to continue to engage with this present evil age. Imagine: Someone is miraculously rescued from the open sea, from shark-infested waters and, after dutifully saying "Thanks," he jumps right back into those water! Bizarre? That's essentially what Christians who insist on being engaged with this present evil age are doing. The Gospel must, *must*, deeply affect us if we truly believe it.

Holiness isn't abiding by a list of do's and don'ts. If we're going to live in God's presence, we have to be conformed to God's character and will. That's what holiness is, and that's what has been enjoined on us. The Son came to reveal God, so holiness is Christ-likeness and obeying Jesus' teachings and commands. So we have to know Christ and know His will for us, and then live it. We cannot be indifferent, because that's what dwelling in this evil age is. Righteousness is fulfilling what God has revealed for us in the Word. We dare not be smug about this, nor suppose our civic virtues suffice. We need to know the Word of God and obey it, not for merit but to glorify God by living out the Gospel.

Unbelievers want to live in a bubble of selfishness. That's life in this present evil age. They find security in their own opinions, values, and beliefs. If we too are like that, we're still living in the present evil age. We've been commanded to deny self and to love others. **"Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others"** (1 Corinthians 10:24). Unbelievers also revel in their autonomy. That's a key feature of this present evil age. They suppose they're free of restraints and so can indulge themselves as they please. Tragically, our modern churches are saturated with this antinomianism; such Christians are deluded, for they're still dwelling in this present evil age. The Sermon on the Mount is for us! The Great Commission is for us! We are not here to live as libertarians but as servants and sons of God, mature and faithful, waiting for the coming Kingdom. And this: Unbelievers are insatiably filled with desire for the things of this world, for homes, careers, wealth, comforts and more, lots more. Our desire should be to know Christ ever more deeply,

and find contentment with that. Our desire should be to want to please God more than anything else that there is. Failure to do this means we're still dwelling in the present evil age. (And probably secretly trusting in our civic virtues.)

Unbelievers also want an ideal life. There are in the West two options vying for dominance: The "woke" vision and the MAGA vision. Both are idolatrous. The woke vision pursues a Utopia in which all are equal and justice prevails. The MAGA vision seeks a "golden age" of prosperity secured by making our nation "great" (an empire) among the nations on earth. Both visions depend on enlightened and empowered persons at the head of government. Both are counterfeits of the biblical Messianic Kingdom. A follower of Christ's great desire and hope, his obsession, should be for Christ to return and for His promised Kingdom to become a reality. **"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..."** and **"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all the rest will be given to you. . ."** (Matthew 6).

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Let's not miss the significance of the "in order to" in our verse. The rescue is *for* something, it's *to* Someone. It's not just from something, though that's how we typically understand it. The rescue is purposeful. Sinners are alienated from God. Forgiveness of sins is necessary *so that* we can be in God's holy presence in the Kingdom and forever. That's the purpose of the rescue.

The present rescue from God's deserved judgment of this present evil age reprises the salvation of Noah. Let's review that, because Noah's rescue was proleptic of our salvation. Noah was saved by God's gracious provision, the ark. Noah was righteous; that was the essential quality that allowed a holy God to rescue him from the just annihilation of that entire wicked civilization. Noah imaged God. And Noah was saved purposefully, to be blessed and enjoy God in a totally new kind of earth with a totally new arrangement of society. It was God's intention that Noah, out of gratitude would serve God, but he didn't. He couldn't. The Jewish Messiah is God's gracious provision for us. We have been made righteous by God's grace. That's why the forgiveness of sins, our justification, is so essential. It's our obligation now to image God by expressing His character and will, and to serve Him in His power. And we're rescued to be blessed and enjoy God's presence in the coming Messianic Kingdom, which will be a new earth and a radically new arrangement of things.

Forgiveness of sins is relational. It's not mere absolution. Rather, it's an entirely new relationship made possible by Christ. The "forgiveness of sins" is an umbrella term, a short-cut phrase, that encompasses everything that God has in grace done thru Jesus for us (that is, reconciliation, election, justification, adoption, union with Christ, indwelling by His Spirit, resurrection life, and more). So, this verse says, God has by grace brought us into intimate personal relationship with Himself so that we can be made anew and be blessed by His presence and so enjoy Him forever.

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It's tragic that the Church ignores the portent of the Ananias and Sapphira incident. We surmise, because we today do things as bad or worse than those two and we aren't put to death, that God doesn't care. Wrong! That episode is there deliberately to warn us against being "cultural" Christians. Let's review that incident: In the pagan Greco-Roman culture at the time, one gave a gift, perhaps even a very generous gift, for the prestige that the giver received. Ananias and Sapphira saw that Barnabas gave a gift to the church and thought that if they did the same (or a pretense thereof), prestige would surely accrue to them. They weren't expressing the Spirit, as Barnabas was, they were expressing that present evil age, the culture that they had absorbed. They weren't changed by Christ's words, they weren't new creatures in Christ. They weren't citizens for the Kingdom. They couldn't be in God's presence. They were worldly. The warning is there in Acts for all of us to see. And fear. Consequences will indeed occur, but in God's perfect time and in His way. The lesson is stark, we must grasp how heinous the present evil age is because the society we're immersed in doesn't see anything wrong. And we've absorbed and live out their culture instead of God's Word.

Following Jesus is demanding. It's radical. It's transforming – or it's not real. What's on offer isn't merely escape from God's wrath, but an eternity of participating with the Godhead in blessing, in love, joy and peace. We have only this one life to glorify God by exalting the Son in the ways we've just discussed. We have only this one life to show God that we're real Kingdom citizens, on His side, the side of good. Let's not waste it.