

This Present Evil Age, Redux

The Lord Jesus Christ “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4).

We just don't get it! If we even know our Scriptures, we fail (or worse, refuse) to meditate on them let alone allow them to control our lives. So this Sunday School lesson has to repeat what we've previously often discussed, with a focus on God's great purposes.

Standard preaching in almost all churches, evangelical and otherwise, is that Christ died so that, having forgiveness of sins, we can be in heaven when we die. No hell for us! OK, true enough. But it misses totally what Paul is proclaiming here. Indeed it misses the whole message of the Bible, it misses the point of the Incarnation and the reason for the Gospel. The problem with such modern pulpit teaching is that it leaves the clear impression that, as the purpose of salvation is some benefit way off in the distant unknowable future, we therefore are free to live this present life as we please. And we have immunity from whatever we do. This notion is not only unbiblical, it borders on heresy. Let's think about what God is doing in His creation.

Before creating this cosmos, God planned to redeem it. In God's omniscience, He knew that creating willful, morally free beings meant that evil necessarily would emerge to challenge His inherent goodness. His infinitely perfect justice and love would require radical means of dealing with evil and assure that in the end, good would prevail and endure without further challenge. And through it all, His glory would be manifest. To fulfill this would entail great personal suffering and loss, but the great supervening purpose of eternally defeating evil required it. So, humiliation, rejection, suffering, sacrifice and personal loss, all voluntary and motivated by love, became the basic principle driving redemption, that which differentiates good from evil. All history is the working out of God's great plan of redemption. To understand life on planet earth, we need to know what God is doing and carefully align ourselves with Him, because failing to do that by default places us on the side of evil.

Evil first manifested in heaven (Satanic rebellion), and it then corrupted God's very good physical creation (Genesis 3). So “this present evil age” began in the Garden and continues to today and on into the future until . . . until God steps into His creation again to inaugurate “the age to come.” This “present evil age” is one of hate, sin, violence, lies, pride, selfishness, idolatry, cursing, faithlessness, and (needless to say) suffering and death. It's an age of hatred of God, manifest either overtly or subtly by indifference to Him, by ignoring Him. The “age to come” will be an era of righteousness, peace and joy. It will be an era of life in all its intended fullness and a time of blessing and love. It will be an age of loving and glorifying God. It will occur proleptically on earth (the promised future Millennial Kingdom), but it then will extend more fully into eternity.

With Spirit-enabled insight, the Apostle Paul understood all this. His deep familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures, his awareness of the recent irruption of God in Israel, and the wickedness that saturated not only the Roman world but all prior history . . . It all came together in this one comprehensive thought. And that's how he opened his letter to the believers at Galatia.

Paul realized what the covering of the first two humans with skins in the Garden meant, and what the Flood meant. He grasped the reason for the promises to the Patriarchs and the call of Israel. He knew the writings of the Prophets, and it all made sense. He saw, with unique clarity,

why Jesus came, why He had to suffer and die and rise from the dead, promise to return, and then ascend to the Father. Paul was able to discern God's great purpose in all history: The atonement was to make us fit to be delivered from the evil age in which humanity dwelt, an age under God's wrathful judgment, so that we—or certain ones anyway—might be with God in a new age to come, in a new creation. Although he makes it explicit here in Galatians 1:4, this penetrating insight, this trenchant theology, underlies all Paul's letters. It's why his letters contain so much instruction how we're to live.

Everything in our world manifests "this present evil age." Everything! Yes, Christianity has imperceptibly infiltrated the Western world with certain biblical values, such as being tolerant of others, doing good to others in need, the importance of honesty, generosity and kindness, and lots more. These virtues are not redemptive but, in God's economy, permit His Plan to proceed. Except for overt practices of righteousness by followers of Jesus, everything else is corrupt. The evil is baked into our world so thoroughly that we fail even to recognize it.

It's not just that there are certain evil people, it's that our entire world system is evil. It always has been, and it's no different today in our dazzling modern world. The values we adopt, the worldview that controls us, our beliefs and ideals, our motives, our presuppositions and assumptions, our institutions, our government, our culture, our *everything* is evil. And as such, it's condemned. All of it. If you suppose I'm exaggerating, just read Revelation, Chapters 6-19. And Daniel chapter 2.

Our modern world is like a Christmas tree decorated top to bottom with glitzy tinsel, flashing colored lights and candy canes; the tree is dead, soon to be burned, but we, sensate beings all, adore it. Humanists delight in modernism, secularists and atheists celebrate it, and everyone is deceived—including evangelicals. What's the matter with us? Can't we see thru the glitz, the distracting cultural pleasures, the deadening comforts, the deceitfulness of patriotic fervor and the phoniness of pop religion?

We need to wake up to biblical (spiritual) realities! We dwell in an irredeemably evil age. It can't be reformed. It's been crying out for judgment since Genesis Chapter 4, when Cain slew his brother and abandoned the Lord to go off and found a city. In grace, God has done all that's necessary to make deliverance from this evil age possible. Not merely deliverance from the judgment that's to come, but deliverance *from its control over us*.

We need to immerse ourselves continually in the Word of God. Doing that, we discover the ways of God that we're to adopt and the mind of the Lord that we're to have as our own, and so allow to form within us the humble heart that desires more than anything else to glorify Him.

Romans 3:23 is mis-translated in almost all English Bibles. It's not, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God," but "For all have sinned and fail to glorify God." Our creation role in life is to glorify God. Sin prevents that. So God sent the Son into the world to loose us from the power of sin. He gifts us with His Spirit, with His resurrection life and with His Word. We have the empowerment to live delivered from the allure and deceitfulness of this present evil age. That's God's revealed will for us. Yes, obeying Christ, showing love for others and practicing biblical righteousness will involve personal sacrifice and loss and maybe suffering. That's the fundamental principle that must control us in order to glorify God. We can do it, if we want to. If we don't want to do it . . . may God have mercy on us.