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#125 - Situation, Theology, and Hermeneutics in Galatians

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Situation, Theology, and Hermeneutics in Galatians. Another bonus edition of the podcast featuring Tom teaching on his new video course on Galatians.

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Transcript

the ask anti-write anything podcast. Hello it's Justin Briley here once again with the show brought to you in partnership with anti-write online SBCK and Premier Unbelievable. I'm head of theology and apologetics for premier and this is the show where we bring you the thought and theology of renowned New Testament scholar Tom Wright and today bringing you the second of two bonus episodes with some of the teaching from Tom from a recently released video study course on Galatians.

It's based on that significant new commentary on Galatians that he published last year. Well this is the video course where you can get to enjoy his insights and do a lot of learning for yourself and the title of this talk that we're featuring today is situation theology and hermeneutics in Galatians. Good news is our friends at anti-write online are offering an exclusive podcast listener discount for this Galatians course \$10 off the usual price but that's only available to the end of July okay only available to the end of July so

get in there quick if you want to enroll and get that discount.

That's at ntwriteonline.org/askentiwright where the exclusive podcast discount is a bit of a long link don't worry it's with the show notes with today's podcast. If you want more from the show you can also check out our own website features Tom and many other contributors loads of resources to help you understand, defend and share your faith with confidence that's at premierunbelievable.com you can register for our newsletter as well as all the bonus content you get by doing that and the newsletter itself you also get the link to ask Tom a question here on the show and we've got some of your questions coming up very soon so the link for both the discount to the course and for our newsletter is with today's program for now here's Tom continuing to open up for us the book of Galatians. So having sketched what the situation in Galatia in southern Turkey would be like with the pressure from local people with the pressure from local Jews who had not converted to believe in Jesus and particularly with pressure coming from Jerusalem where they were facing really very difficult times.

All of that is necessary I think for reasons of history and theology and exegesis understanding the letter. Without some sort of hypothesis like what I sketched in the previous session I don't think we can make sense of the twists and turns of this letter particularly actually when we get to chapters 5 and 6 but not only there. So from all this and let's just try now to get the big picture sorted out we can see six concluding points which show us the way into the letter.

Each of these points will be expanded as we go forward to the exegesis itself. First point is to do with Paul's self-defense. There is a long autobiographical section in the first two chapters.

This is rare in Paul. There's a bit in 2 Corinthians where he talks about himself because again he's been under threat and under attack in that letter but usually he only alludes to himself briefly and in passing. But here this long autobiographical section in Galatians 1 and 2 is a cleverly constructed argument.

It explains that Paul actually got his gospel from Jesus himself not from intermediaries and it echoes the language of the prophets as it does so. And Paul draws this down into very personal terms at the end of chapter 2 because for him as a devout Pharisee to say, "Through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God." That's a way of saying the Messiah's death and resurrection are the basis of the new reality that God is creating for the Jew and also the Gentile. And thus he says, "I have been crucified with the Messiah.

I am however alive, but it isn't me any longer. It's the Messiah who lives in me." So you see Paul's self-defense finally turns out to be a vivid explanation of the gospel itself. That forms the platform for what he goes on to talk about in chapters 3 and 4 in particular.

So he's defending himself against the charges that he just got his gospel from Peter and

James and the others and that he left bits out and muddled it up, saying, "No, I got it from Jesus. It was my own gospel that was given to me by Jesus himself and this is the effect that it's had." So that's the first point. And the second point is the meaning of Jesus' death.

This comes at crucial points in the letter. Not only chapter 1, verse 4 and 220, which we've looked at, but also chapter 3, verse 13, famously where the Messiah became a curse on our behalf and then at various points in chapters 5 and 6 ending with that decisive line, "Through whom, through Jesus, the world is crucified to me and I to the world." You see, for Paul, Jesus' death isn't simply a one-off transaction in which my moral failings are punished on the cross, though that does express one part of the larger meaning. Jesus' death is the cosmic event at the center of world history.

Jesus' death is the means by which God the Creator has overcome the powers of the present evil age and has opened the way for the new creation which began, fittingly, with Jesus' own resurrection. So that's secondly the meaning of Jesus' death. By the way, there isn't very much at all in Galatians about resurrection.

It doesn't mean Paul has forgotten it. It's just not germane to his particular arguments in this letter, much more about resurrection, for instance in Romans or 1 Corinthians. Third point, the significance of Abraham in the argument of the letter.

The Galatians, Jesus' believers, need to know that they are genuine members of Abraham's family, irrespective of the Mosaic Law. They need to know when they ignore the pagan worship going on all around them, that they are authentic, bona fide members of the family of Abraham, which has been promised by the Roman authorities immunity from the compulsion to that public pagan worship. They can in other words hold their heads up.

We are genuine members of Abraham's family without any need to take on the works of Torah or for the men to get circumcised and thereby to pretend to a Jewish ancestry. The last line of chapter 3 is emphatic. If you belong to the Messiah's people, you are Abraham's family heirs according to promise.

God has done the new thing he always promised, but if you were to take on Israel's Torah by getting circumcised, what you would basically be saying would be that the new world has not been launched, that the present evil age in which Torah has a particular task to perform is still going on. So for them to become Jews to take on Torah to get circumcised would be to deny the very thing which is central to Paul's gospel, that in the Messiah's death and resurrection the old world has been dealt with and the new world has been inaugurated. And this leads to the fourth crucial point, that this isn't about what we call comparative religion.

It's all too easy to talk about Judaism and Christianity as though they are two different

religions, as though Paul is comparing two systems and deciding that Christianity is the superior one. That's not what he's talking about at all. That way of looking at things is a modern construct, really a post-18th century construct with little relevance in Paul's world.

Paul's gospel is not about comparative religion. Oh, there was this thing called Judaism but we leave that behind because we've now got something called Christianity. No.

Paul's gospel is what we might call Jewish eschatological messianism. In other words, the Messiah has come, the new age has been inaugurated, the hope of Israel has been fulfilled and this as the prophet said is for everybody. With the difference to anything that had been there before in Jewish eschatological expectations, the difference that the Messiah had been crucified and raised from the dead.

No one saw that one coming. And the point is that a messianic claim is absolute. If Israel's God has at last sent the long-awaited Messiah, this means that the new day has dawned.

Imagine in the middle of the second century or the first third of the second century when the movement came up which we associate with the man called Simeon Ben-Kozibar, the last great Messiah of that period, aka Bar-Kokfar, the son of the star. He launched his revolution in 132 AD and then in AD 135 the Romans came and finished it off a three-year kingdom of God movement and it was not a take it or leave it. It was not a matter of, oh, some people think Bar-Kokfar is the Messiah and some don't but it's not a big deal.

It's just a matter of personal religious opinion. No, of course not. If God has sent the Messiah, then if he's the true Messiah, then Israel is redefined around him and by him and anyone who doesn't join in is ruling themselves out altogether.

That's the logic of eschatological messianism. A messianic claim is absolute. If it's false, it's a dangerous deceit.

People look back at Bar-Kokfar and said he was a false teacher. Obviously he was because the Romans caught him and killed him. Guess what? That's what they said about Jesus as well.

But if it's true, if he is the Messiah, then God's new world is being born. A crucified Messiah, as Paul says, was a scandal for Jews and sheer madness to non-Jews. But that's the heart of it.

So the fifth point by way of introduction to what's going on in the letter is about gospel and ethics. We'll get to this in chapter 5, but let's be clear up front that Paul's gospel is not about saying you just have to believe and then it doesn't matter how you behave. Yes, the works of the law are no longer the markers of God's people.

But those works of the law, that refers to the Torah-based markers of Jewish identity. The identity of Jesus followers is given by the Spirit and the Spirit is visible in the fruit which is born. The uncompromising ethical challenges then in chapters 5 and 6 in no way undercut the gospel message of the earlier chapters.

And we'll see soon how that works out. Sixth and finally by way of introductory points to give us an orientation into the letter. Galatians insists upon a vital point which traditional Protestant exegesis has managed to ignore almost completely.

Galatians is about the unity of the church across traditional ethnic boundaries. That unity was what Paul and Barnabas had celebrated in Antioch, a unity which had been threatened, according to Galatians 2, by those who came from James, because of whom C. Fess and others withdrew from table fellowship with Jesus believing Gentiles. And that table fellowship was now being threatened in Galatia as well.

So Paul's insistence that in the Messiah there is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, no male and female towards the end of Galatians 3 is his decisive affirmation of the cross-cultural messianic family embodying and symbolizing God's restoration of all creation. You see, by focusing on the idea that justification by faith meant going to heaven when you die because you believe, the churches of the Reformation and ever since have managed almost totally to ignore this central Pauline theme of cross-cultural unity. Our churches have split and split and split again and most people today don't care, don't even realize there's a problem.

New churches are planted without any thought for other Christian work in the region. We have become used to churches of the alike, churches where everyone looks alike and sounds alike and shares a culture which is the real identity of that church. In relation to which Christian allegiance is just a spiritual add-on.

We will say more about this as we go along, but this puts down a vital marker, not least for applying Galatians to our churches in the Western world in the 21st century. So with these six points, welcome to Galatians. I hope we've done enough to enable you to see why Paul begins the letter as he does.

So to conclude this introductory session, let's just read the first five verses of chapter one and see how the letter does a kind of vertical take-off. Paul starts with a run. Paul an apostle and then at once he wants to add, "My apostleship doesn't derive from human sources nor did it come from a human being." It came through Jesus, the Messiah and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

In other words, the very apostolic ground on which Paul stands has been contested and he is throwing the challenge right back. And then verse two, he says he's joined by the family with him. I think Paul is writing this letter when he's back in Antioch, which as a church was living the truth, the multicultural Jesus believing truth that Paul is going to

write about.

And so in verse three, he sends grace and peace to the churches in Galatia, grace and peace from God our Father and Jesus the Messiah our Lord. And he adds the all-important verse four with its double edged theology of Jesus' death. Look at it carefully.

He gave himself for our sins, that is basic, but it's not simply to complete a legal transaction, but rather to defeat the principalities and powers which had held sway over the world precisely because of human sin. So Paul says, "God did this, gave his son for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age." And this is the long awaited new exodus. Paul is announcing that it's happened, something new has burst into God's world and that all and sundry can now become part of God's eschatological new creation.

And this was, this is at the end of verse four and on into verse five, according to the will of God our Father, to whom be glory forever our men. Why does he put it like this? He will soon be describing the overarching divine purpose in quite a challenging way, but the rival teachers have accused him of inventing a new system, quite alien to Israel's biblical faith and story. Paul says, "No, what's happened in Jesus is the work of Israel's God, the creator.

It isn't some new idea that would leave Israel's scriptural story behind and head off in a quite different direction. Tragically, very often the church has done exactly that. So verse five, this is all designed to bring God glory." That's always Paul's aim, a chorus of praise from around the world.

Truly, the world runs on worship. To that extent, the pagans were right. How you worship and who you worship matters a very great deal.

It shapes your community. Things in the world will change for good or ill depending on that worship. So the gospel of Jesus, Israel's Messiah and the world's Lord calls the whole world to worship the one true God.

And Paul knows that when that happens, opposition will come as it had already come in Antioch and Galatia. But even so, in and through all that, God will be glorified. Things really will change.

The life of love and joy and peace and caring for the poor will grow. To become as it's done to our own day, a previously unimagined power in the world, the power of the God of love. The power of his son who Paul says, "Loved me and gave himself for me." The power of the spirit of the son who gives life and love to God's people.

So as in this course, we now launch into Galatians, let me suggest that before we get to the next session where we'll start the Exegesis in detail, it's worth taking time to read and pray through the whole letter and keep the big picture in mind as we plunge into the details. Thanks for being with us on the show today. You've been hearing one of Tom's

sessions from a new video study course.

If you'd like to enroll in that Galatians course for yourself, our friends at NTWrite Online are offering an exclusive podcast listener discount for it, \$10 off the usual price. NTWrite Online.org/AskNTWrite to access that offer, but the link is with today's show notes. But that's only available to the end of July, that offer.

So if you want to get hold of it, do make sure to do it right away. We'll be back to something more like the usual format next week, but for now, thanks for being with us and see you then.