

A Gospel Start to the New Year

By Pastor Christopher Seah

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,
who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age,
according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*
(Galatians 1:3, 4 ESV)

Each New Year carries its own joys and challenges. For some of us, a new year promises new friends, new activities and hobbies, new toys. But others are not so excited. We come to the New Year with a dreadful sense of the challenges awaiting us. Perhaps this may explain why some people party and get “stoned” on New Year’s Eve: It is nice to have a drug to soften the pain that faces us.

Now, I do not know what will face us. When 2013 began, I did not know that my darling wife would fall and injure herself. The year 2013 proved to be a difficult year for my family. Others have struggled in other ways: Health problems, the loss of loved ones, conflicts with relatives, etc. But should we be completely surprised? Grief, sadness, and weakness are the realities of life in this world of sin. God does not promise absolute freedom from suffering in this age.

But God does not want Christians to be discouraged by suffering either. The Christian is called to live a life of faith. Faith is one of the virtues of the Christian life. To live by faith is to live by the opposite of sight (2 Cor 5:7). Living by faith is not living by presumption, blindness, or chance. Instead, it is living by the truths of God’s Word concerning realities that we cannot yet see. And the great reality that we do not see with our own eyes—the great Reality by which we are to order our lives—is the Gospel, the good news of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ more than two thousand years ago.

Galatians 1:3, 4 offers a good presentation of what this Gospel is. Here, Paul pronounces a blessing—“grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...”—over the Church. As an apostle, Paul speaks on behalf of the Great King. As such, the blessing does not originate with Paul but with God himself.

Then we are told what the Lord Jesus Christ has done: He “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age...” This is the great work that was done for us which we have not seen with our own eyes. Yet it is the work that we are called to believe; the work on which we are to found our entire lives. Jesus gave himself to pay for all our sins! He died as the propitiation, the appeasement sacrifice, to satisfy the justice of the good and holy God (cf. Rom 3:25; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10).

But interestingly, Paul does not choose at this point to explain the work of Christ in terms of sacrifice, something which he does elsewhere in Galatians (2:21; 3:13). Instead, he explains the work of Christ in terms of liberation: “to deliver us from the present evil age...” In other words, Christ died to liberate us from this present evil age.

The present evil age is this world or time in which we live. It is the world of godlessness, which leads to fear on the one hand and greed on the other. The world is godless in the sense that it loves perverse things. It is godless also in the sense that it wants to think and live *without* God. Godlessness is life independent from God. But when we are godless, we have no sense of ultimate security because our destinies rest in our own hands. The universe is an empty, foreboding place. So life becomes all about us. Since our survival is in our own hands, we are afraid to lose. We become anxious and easily frustrated. We thrive on envy or anger. We go from one extreme to another. Like a drunk driver on the early hours of New Year’s Day, we careen from one side of the street to the other; either we become pleasure-seeking to the extreme or else we become workaholics, deathly afraid of what could happen if we would simply rest.

But the good news is that Jesus died so that we don’t have to be God-less. In fact...

- Jesus died so that we can be reconciled to God and his life-giving love.
- Jesus died so that we don’t have to take our lead from this world.
- Jesus died so that we don’t have to be exhausted either by our pursuit of pleasure or consumption in work.
- Jesus died so that we can live in true freedom that no one can take away from us.

But it is hard to live in freedom. Years of living godlessly have taught us to be afraid. But if we live in fear, we cannot live in freedom. Nor can we live in love. To live in love and freedom, we need to keep the Gospel always before us. We need to keep reviewing the Gospel, reading about it in Scripture and in the writings of trusted teachers. If the only voices we allow ourselves to hear are the voices of advertisements, complaining, or scolding, it only makes sense that we find it difficult to live in freedom and love. But for the sake of the Body of Christ, we need to embrace the Gospel and live by it. There are others who need us to live in freedom and love. There are others who need us to speak Gospel strength into their hearts. To that end, may I recommend three Gospel-centered books you may find helpful?

- (1) *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* by Tullian Tchividjian
- (2) *The Gospel-Driven Life* by Michael Horton
- (3) *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* by Walter Marshall

All good books to help you preach the Gospel to yourself!

We must remember however that Jesus did not come merely of his own accord. According to Paul, the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age “according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” God the Father himself wanted reconciliation. And because God loves us in Jesus Christ, we can rest. We can be at peace. We can now show grace to others. We can afford to ignore the incessant angry, demanding voices of our culture. And if we cannot afford to entirely ignore them, we can at least put them in their place—and deal with them with grace and peace. We want to live out of the freedom of the Gospel, no more out of fear.

I wish us all a Gospel-driven year. My hope for us this year is that we would all grow a little more in our ability to live by faith in Jesus Christ. Remember that Gospel-driven living requires you to look away from yourself and others. It is all too easy to focus on the world around us. We are also all too conscious of our own sins. We are only too overly-conscious of the sins of others. But living in grace, peace, and freedom means not going with those voices that accuse us and accuse others to us. Living in Gospel grace, peace, and freedom means that we keep our eyes on our Lord Jesus Christ, resting in him alone for forgiveness, holiness, and eternal life. ❖