

True Freedom: Grace Changes Everything

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[0 : 00] Okay, well, I guess you watched the tennis US Open final last Saturday night. Emma Ranakanu, who was the winner, 18-year-old, who had success in the US Open.

If you didn't see it, you probably have heard about it. It's been on the news most of the week. And Ranakanu is one of the first qualifiers, if not, I think, the first qualifier to actually win the US Open or the Grand Slam.

And she was awarded prize money of 1.8 million. And in the space of a week, she, I guess, has become a global phenomenon with 1.9 million Instagram followers.

Almost as many as me, but she's getting there. She's described as a sponsor's dream because she just seems to have it all for a sports star, someone so young.

And they have tipped her as being one of the most, the highest paid or most highest paid sports women of all time. But apparently, I read that her sporting success and potential as a brand has leapt ahead of any trademark protection.

[1 : 10] In other words, it's been reported that Emma Ranakanu has taken the decision to trademark her name. And apparently, within hours of her momentous win, a lawyer applied to safeguard the rights to Emma Ranakanu, as well as Emma and Ranakanu, just to protect her as a registered trademark.

And apparently, registering her name as a trademark increases the ability to control who uses the name, but also increases the potential in securing all kinds of lucrative sponsorship deals.

And I guess we can understand this because why would she want anyone else using or misusing her name and then benefiting from it and her losing out because of it?

So it's all about brand promotion. Now, you might be wondering, what's Emma Ranakanu got to do with Galatians? Well, there's a sense in which, as Paul writes this letter to the Galatians, he is writing it to protect the brand.

What is the brand? Well, the brand is essentially the gospel of grace, the good news of Jesus Christ. Because it's what the Apostle Paul preached to the Galatians when he first went and planted churches in Galatia.

[2 : 25] He preached the gospel of grace. Gospel simply means good news. He preached the good news of Jesus and churches started. But some false teachers came in, often called Judaizers, and what they did was they brought in a different brand.

They brought their own version of Christianity, a false or fake or counterfeit version. And the Galatians were believing what these false teachers were saying.

The false teachers were essentially telling the Galatian believers they didn't just need to have faith in Jesus, which is what we all need, faith in Jesus. But they were saying they also needed to follow the Jewish law, the Jewish rules and regulations like circumcision, if they were to become proper Christians.

And so they had essentially changed the brand. They had essentially turned the gospel, that we are saved by God's grace, into a message about earning our salvation through the things we do, through religious observance, through different rituals.

And so as a result, the Galatian Christians were in danger of losing the freedom that they had in Jesus and becoming slaves again. And so what Paul does is he writes this because the true gospel message, the original perfect brand, if you like, was under attack.

[3 : 51] And because it was under attack, he also, as the gospel messenger, was under attack too. He was accused essentially of preaching a message to please people, a message that didn't require observance of the law.

And that's why he says in verse 10, am I now trying to win the approval of human beings or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Jesus Christ.

And so then from there on in Galatians, the passage that we read this morning from, this afternoon rather, from chapter 1 verse 11 on into chapter 2, Paul, the apostle, defends his gospel and he wants to prove that he received this message directly from God.

He didn't invent it. He didn't hear it from anybody else. He got this message from Jesus. And so the section that we're reading this afternoon is really an autobiographical section.

Remember, this is a letter. And so Paul writes a letter. And in this letter, he's speaking about himself and his own life. If you like, he's sharing his testimony or he's giving his story.

[5 : 06] And the reason he's telling his story is because he wants his readers to know that the message he was preaching and teaching came from God. It's God's message.

Unlike the message of these false teachers, which was a man-made human message. Okay, so the false teachers had essentially turned the gospel into this message that we're saved, not by God's grace alone, but we're saved by what we do.

And so what Paul wants to do is show how God's amazing grace and God's grace alone, not Paul's works or his religious observance, how God's grace completely and utterly transformed his life.

And that's why this message, this message of the good news of Jesus, is just as relevant to us today as it was when Paul wrote this letter. Because there is only the grace of God coming to us and the message of Jesus Christ that can change our hearts, change our lives from the inside out.

That's what happened to Paul. And that's what can happen to any one of us as well. So we're going to look at two simple points this afternoon. First of all, how grace changed Paul.

[6 : 22] And we're going to see three things. And then secondly, we'll think about how grace changes us. So first of all, how grace changed Paul. And Paul speaks about revelation in chapter 1, verse 11 and 12.

So let me just read. He says, I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it.

Rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. So Paul wants to make sure, and he wants to make it clear, that the gospel he received was by revelation.

And so he emphasizes this with a triple negative. First, he says, the gospel he preached is not of human origin. Second, he says, I did not receive it from any man.

And then third, he says, nor was I taught it. And then he drives his point home by saying, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. It was revealed to him.

[7 : 21] And this could be that Jesus revealed the message to Paul, or Jesus is the message, or both. Because Paul's message is from Jesus, and it's a message about Jesus.

And it was revealed. And that's why Paul can't be accused of making his message up, or of learning it from somebody else, because nobody witnessed to Paul. Paul had never been on a Christianity Explored course, or an Alpha course, to hear it being taught.

No, he got his gospel, the good news of Jesus, by revelation. Paul expands on this in verse 16, but the point is that the message had a divine, and not a human origin.

And that's why the Galatians, the people he's writing to, needed to understand this, and they needed to know the message was from God, so that they didn't turn away to this man-made message, which was a false message that could never save anyone.

And so Paul's authority, unlike the authority of his opponents, came from God. And so he proves this as he tells his story. And so before we get to his story, I guess it's worth us just thinking about the revelation that Paul received.

[8 : 38] Because if the gospel that Paul preached is direct revelation from Jesus Christ, then it is the truth. And if it's the truth, then we need to listen to it, and then respond to it.

Because this message, if it's true, is the only way that you and I can be accepted by God. Only divine revelation can tell us how we relate to God.

We relate to God on his terms. We don't make up our own terms for how we relate to God. And that's what seemed to be going on with these false teachers. Because everything else, if it isn't God's revelation to us, is mere human speculation.

It's made up from people's minds. And so the problem with the Galatians was that they were turning from a God-revealed message to a man-made message instead.

In other words, they were believing a distorted version of Christianity, which wouldn't do them any good at all. So, essentially, there is one apostolic gospel.

[9 : 49] There is one Christianity. It can't be changed. It's what we've got here. And Paul is saying it was revealed to him. And so we find it today in books like Galatians.

We find it in the rest of our Bibles. And yet still, people will try and discredit Paul today. Maybe by trying to drive a wedge between the Apostle Paul and Jesus Christ, saying things like, well, we like all the things that Jesus said, but some of the things that Paul said we're not so sure about, so let's just leave Paul and discount him and dismiss him.

But we can't do that if Paul got his message from Jesus. And so the issue is, will we accept the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ as we find it in our Bibles, or will we rather follow man-made messages of a human origin instead?

Do we accept what Paul says here and what the rest of the Bible teaches as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Because to reject Paul's gospel is to reject Jesus Christ.

Okay, so that's the revelation. The next thing is the transformation in verse 13 to 24. So to prove the divine origin of his message, Paul describes who he was and what he was doing before God called him to himself.

[11 : 15] So only God's grace could have transformed somebody like Paul. Only God could have changed his life. And so Paul says, verse 13, 14, For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. Okay, so Paul, to prove the divine origin of his message, he describes who he was and what he was doing.

Paul was a hardcore Jew. He was a fundamentalist. He had a zeal for observing all the Jewish rules, all the Jewish regulations. He says, basically, he was the creme de la creme of his generation.

In other words, Paul saying, don't tell me about the observance of the law. I have been there. I have done that. I have bought the t-shirt. I know exactly what it is like trying to keep the law.

I know what it's like because I believed that if I kept all the law, it would put me right with God.

That's how God would accept me. In fact, Paul's saying, you can tell how much I rejected Jesus by the way I persecuted his church and tried to destroy it.

[12 : 37] But then something happened and everything changed for Paul. And he tells us in verse 15 and 16. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.

So Paul wants to make it clear to his readers that it was God who changed him. He didn't change his life himself. It was God who did it. His transformation was absolutely nothing to do with him or because of anything that he had accomplished.

And that's why Paul here isn't really focusing on himself. He wants the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ to take center stage.

And you can tell in his language because he switches away from himself as the subject and God is the subject of what he's saying. So he says in verse 13 to 14, I persecuted the church of God.

I was advancing in Judaism. And then the focus turns to God and what God has done in verse 15 and 16. And so to prove how this was all due to God's grace, Paul goes away back to the beginning.

[13 : 54] So first of all, he says, God set me apart in my mother's womb. He's saying even before he had done a single thing, God, by his grace, chose him.

And so long before Paul met Jesus, remember on the Damascus road, God set him apart in his mother's womb. And then secondly, he says, God called me by his grace.

So God summoned Paul and received Paul, brought him into his service and gave him a job to do. So even though Paul fought against Jesus by persecuting his people, God's grace extended to Paul.

God didn't reject Paul, even though he was rejecting Jesus. Instead, God showered Paul with undeserved kindness. And then thirdly, Paul says that God was pleased to reveal his son in me.

And I guess we might expect that he would say God was pleased to reveal his son to me. But literally, Paul says that God's son was revealed in me.

[15:02] And so Paul's not just talking about how the risen Lord Jesus revealed himself to him on the Damascus road. He's also talking about how Jesus actually entered into his heart and transformed his life from the inside out.

God chose him and called him, revealed Jesus to him so that Paul could personally experience Jesus in his life. And so if you're new to Christianity and you're wondering what it's all about, Christianity is not just about what you take in in your head.

It's not just about head information. That somehow, if you can be reasoned to believe or see the truth about Christianity, then it will change your life. That does.

That is how it works. Our minds do need to understand and believe and trust and know about the good news of Jesus. But it also is an inward thing.

Jesus Christ transforms our lives, not just our minds, but our hearts. And we know him because he's a person. We are brought into a relationship with him.

[16:12] We follow him. He transforms us from the inside out. So Christianity is not just about our heads, it's also about our hearts. It transforms our lives.

And that's what happened for Paul. And that's what Paul is trying to articulate here. And he's telling us this because he's wanting us to see that he didn't deserve any of this.

He had nothing to deserve it. This was all God's sheer grace towards him. And the gospel of grace emphasizes what God does for us.

He does it. It's not what we do ourselves. Because that's the only way somebody like Paul, despite his appalling persecution of the church, could be forgiven by Jesus and commissioned to be his apostle.

So Paul is telling this story to leave his readers in no doubt that God saved him by his grace. God completely transformed his life.

[17:15] Nothing else could explain Paul's transformation other than the fact that God did it. And he wants to say to his readers, his apostleship, his message were from God that he preached the truth.

And so he says, God was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles. So Paul's job was to preach Jesus Christ to those people who weren't Jews.

Which is a miracle because a Jew like Paul would never have preached a message that didn't require observance of the law for salvation unless God changed his mind and unless God changed his heart.

And God did that. And so that's why Paul goes on to say in the rest of chapter 1 that he didn't consult anybody about his message. He didn't go to the apostles, so that they could teach him the message.

He didn't need to because the message had been revealed to him. So he was an apostle in his own right and he didn't need the other apostles to rubber stamp his message.

[18:21] And even if they wanted to hear what Paul had to say for himself, they didn't get the chance. In verse 18 to 20, it says that Paul's first contact with the apostles was three years later, three years after God transformed his life.

And even then, his contact with the apostles was only for 15 days. And even then, it was only Peter and James that he saw. And so the point is, he's saying, nobody taught me the Christian message. It was given to me directly by Jesus. And then in verse 21 to 24, the churches praised God because of Paul, the one who was the persecutor, had now been transformed and now he was preaching this message.

So then proclamation. Well, Paul was a persecutor of the church. He turned into a preacher of the gospel. And so remember verse 16, God called Paul by his grace so that he might preach Jesus among the Gentiles.

And then verse 23, we read, the man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. So God's grace changed everything for Paul.

[19:38] God converted him, then God commissioned him to go and share the message of Jesus. So Paul's personal experience of God's grace then propelled him out into the world to share that good news of grace.

So that's how God's grace changed Paul. But we need to think, well, how does this apply to us? Does God's grace change us? How does God's grace change us?

How can God's grace change somebody like me? You might be asking that. You may have found yourself in church thinking, if I walk into church, I'll be struck by lightning. That's how bad I am. God will never receive somebody like me. And yet Paul is here telling his story so that we can see that God received somebody like him. Therefore, there's hope for every single one of us. So the grace of God changed the apostle Paul's life. And of course, Paul was unique. He was an apostle. He had a unique commission, a unique calling. And yet he tells us this story because it's the same grace of God.

[20 : 46] That changes people like us. So there's no other gospel. There's no other message that can so radically transform our lives than this one.

And that's what the Galatians needed to be reminded of. They needed to be told it was God's grace rather than their observance of the law that would save them. In other words, it would be God who would save them, not they would save themselves by the things that they were doing.

And so trying to obey the law, believing it would put them right with God, was essentially to lose their freedom in Jesus Christ. It was to make them slaves again. And that's why Paul is telling them not to be deceived by this twisted version of Christianity.

He's wanting to protect the brand, if you like, because they were being duped into and deluded into following a different brand. And it was dangerous. And so there's no way any of us can be accepted by God apart from His grace towards us in Jesus Christ.

And that's why we've got Paul's experience here. He is the prime example of somebody who both needed God's grace, but also somebody who did actually receive God's grace.

[22 : 04] And so before Paul was converted in his past life, he was really two things at the same time. He was very, very, very religious. An extremely zealous, religious rule keeper.

He was at the top of the class and he was proud of it. And yet despite his strict observance of the law, he acknowledges it wasn't enough to put him right with God.

So if ever you think that God will accept me, the more good things I do, it's rubbish because Paul was up there. He'd done the most, more than anyone could ever do.

And he's saying that still wasn't enough. He tried to do everything possible, but he knew he could never make himself good enough for God after he'd experienced God's grace.

And so there's no better example than Paul to show that God saves us by His grace alone.

Salvation is not through our religious performance.

[23 : 05] It's not through our good works. It's by God's grace. God doesn't accept us because we're good religious rule keepers who spent our lives doing loads of good deeds.

The grace of God and the gospel is that God comes to us in Jesus to do for us what we could never do ourselves. And it's worth emphasizing this because so many people believe the lie that God accepts me because I'm religious.

God accepts me because I've gone to church all my life. God accepts me because of the good things I try and do. Surely I'm good enough for God.

But it isn't a religious performance. If it was, Paul would have made it, but he's saying here he didn't. It didn't work for Paul because that's not the way that God accepts us. So Paul was very religious on the one hand, but at the same time Paul was also violently opposed to the church of God.

And so there's a sense in which Paul was irreligious too. He was religious, but he was also irreligious because he intensely persecuted the church and he tried to destroy it. His life's mission before he was arrested by God's grace was to exterminate Christianity.

[24 : 23] And his zeal was so misplaced that he was actually fighting against God's son. He couldn't be more opposed to the God he thought he was serving.

And yet despite Paul's behavior, God called him by his grace. God chose him. So Jesus stopped him in his tracks and turned his life around or turned his life the right way up.

So only the grace of God could change somebody like Paul. And that's why we need to grasp that it's only God's grace that can change somebody like you or somebody like me.

Whatever we're like. Whether we regard ourselves as being religious or irreligious. It's the gospel of grace that tells us we're all sinners and we're only saved by what God does.

Not what we do. And we're saved not because we are better than other people. Our salvation doesn't depend on what we do but what Jesus has done through his death and resurrection.

[25 : 30] So the grace of God works in our minds and it works in our hearts to transform our lives. And so your background whether good or bad counts for nothing when it comes to God's acceptance of you.

It doesn't matter what you've done. That is not the determining factor in whether you can be welcomed into God's family and become one of his children.

God's grace reaches out to any kind of person. And so we should never think that anyone is beyond having their life transformed by God.

Because no one is so good that they don't need the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ and no one is so bad that they can't receive the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So no one should ever think that they're good enough for God. And no one should ever think that they're too bad for God. I used to say to my children when they were small I love you I've always loved you and there's never anything that you can do that would make me stop loving you.

[26 : 42] And I said it to them because I didn't want them to grow up thinking that they had to somehow earn my love or my love for them was based on how well they performed in life.

Because that is generally how relationships work in this world isn't it? You're loved and you're accepted by people on the basis of how good you are or how well you perform.

But that is never the case with God. God loves us because He loves us. His love and His acceptance of us isn't based on our performance but on the performance of Jesus Christ.

It isn't based on our good works but on the good work that Jesus Christ has done through His death on the cross. And so we need to respond to God's grace by placing our faith in Jesus.

And so can you see how Paul's story is a powerful witness to the grace that is at the very heart, the very core, the very center of Christianity? That is Paul's story.

[27 : 49] But the question is well, what is your story? Because every person here has a story. Our life is shaped by our backstory.

Where we are today is a consequence or a result of the things we've done in the past. By who we've been, by what we've done, by our successes, by our failures.

And yet, that is only part of our story. But it needn't be what defines our future or the rest of our story. Paul told the Galatians how the amazing grace of God radically transformed him.

He couldn't earn it. He didn't deserve it. But God did it. And so the question is, has your life been transformed by the grace of God?

God could do it for Paul. God did do it for Paul. And so he can do it for you and me. All you need to do is to receive God's loving grace by placing your faith in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 56] Christ. We can't earn it. We don't deserve it. It's God's free gift to us. And then, when we have experienced God's grace in our lives, then we don't just sit back and do nothing.

Paul's not saying here, it doesn't matter whether you obey God or what you do just as long as you have faith in Jesus. That's not what he's saying. But this dynamic of grace means that as soon as we grasp it in our heads and it sinks down deep into our hearts, the dynamic is that grace then sends us out into the world to share Jesus with other people.

Because when we know Jesus Christ, like Paul, then we will long for others to meet him and have their lives changed by him too.

and have your of right King. He's going to call the power to others and if he sees His grace and he sees his high His high he is listening to The power and his high and his high approach is His high will cause and his high He'll watch His way He'll see balls you you want to