

PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

INTRODUCTION

What does Freedom in Christ look like?

It is important to know that “freedom” is in the center of two dangerous and ever-present ideals: legalism and license. On the one side, Legalism, is the theology of the Gospel being necessary for salvation, but only to a point. There must be Gospel/Jesus “plus” something.

For example: Jesus “plus” baptism is necessary for one to be saved. Or Jesus “plus” our own human effort. Or Jesus plus speaking in tongues. And, in the days of the early church, the Jewish believers were forcing the Gentile believers into a Jesus “plus” circumcision theology.

The trap is considering Jesus plus anything is needed in order to receive the salvation from God.

The other side of the coin is license. License is where Christians have received freedom through salvation; therefore, they can live in sin and be justified by Christ's death on the cross. God's forgiveness of all sins; past, present, and future. They feel that anything they do is already covered by the saving work of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

Much of the New Testament writings focused on these two issues, vacillating between these two heresies: legalism and license.

The church at Galatia was no exception. They had their toes in the water of balancing these two ideals.

Paul writes a much-needed epistle to bring to an understanding that the correct theology of salvation through grace is found in between legalism and license.

The book of Galatians is one of my favorite studies in the New Testament. Galatians is packed with theology, practice and teaching of the how to live the Christian life.

I ask you not to “read” this book as if by completing it, God will grant you a special blessing for having done so. Instead, let us study it. Let us read between the lines, observing what is going on between the ink on the page and the page itself. Place yourself in the shoes of the Apostle. I ask you to feel his passion and love for the Galatians, because of the love he has for his Savior.

Galatians is filled with real, first century life situations. Take off the robe of the bias a 21st century Christian will have simply by the understanding what the Galatian church was going through. All the while, how would you handle confronting the church. Could you confront in love? Could you correct in love for those doing wrong? Until we place ourselves in the time and conditions of those 1st century Christians will we truly understand the love of Christ through the love of the Apostle Paul.

AUTHOR

The author of Galatians is the Apostle Paul. There is no debate concerning that.

Survey of the New Testament

Galatians 1:1 Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the brothers who are with me,

Paul reveals so much about himself in this letter. We are introduced to his former life in Judaism. His conversion on the Damascus road, his calling he received from the resurrected Christ and his basis for salvation through grace. Through his experience, the Holy Spirit writes about grace as the only means of salvation. And, through salvation, how to live a life that would be pleasing to a righteous God.

Paul's Letters

Some of Paul's letters were written to churches in the cities of Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Colossi, which the Apostle Paul planted

Other letters were "General Epistles," meaning they were written to a general audience. For example, the books of Romans and Galatians.

DATE

Chronologically, Galatians was written before Paul's letter to the Romans. There is no reference to the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), which would have supported Paul's this letter to the Galatians. After all, the purpose of the "Jerusalem Council" was determining if the Gentile believers were under the Law, read "to be circumcised or not."

The council took place in A.D. 48/49, and Paul evangelized South Galatia in A.D. 47/48, A.D. 48 A.D. is a reasonable date for this letter. The traditional date of writing the Galatians between 48 – 54 A.D.

The question of the date is directly related to the question, "which Galatians."

WHERE WAS IT WRITTEN FROM?

We have no record of where Paul wrote this letter from. However, tradition says that he wrote this letter from Antioch if it is for the churches in Southern Galatia (48-49 A.D.). If to the churches in Northern Galatia, it was written from Ephesus (54 A.D.) or Macedonia (55 A.D.)

PURPOSE AND CONTENT

In a nutshell, the purpose of this epistle were problems rising from the membership.

The purpose for Paul writing this long letter to the believers in Galatia is that he received a report that false doctrine was being inserted to these fledgling congregations. The Apostle lets us in on what is happening early in the letter: some were preaching "a different gospel" "contrary to the one" he presented to them (1:6-9).

Ga 1:6-9 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If

Survey of the New Testament

anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

It takes Paul until the latter half of the letter to bring out what this “different gospel” and “gospel contrary to the he preached.” The problem was legalism. These Judaizes were presenting a gospel that included faith in Jesus Christ and “circumcision” (5:2-4; 6:12-13).

Problem #2 was that these men were challenging Paul’s Apostleship and therefore challenging the message of Paul’s preaching. Paul opens this epistle defending his apostleship as being one by Jesus Christ and God the Father (Ga 1:1, 10-12)

Ga 1:1 Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead

Ga 1:10-12 10 For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. 11 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. 12 For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Those causing the problem were “born again” Jews, that could not let go of their former life...adding circumcision must be performed on the Gentile converts. These men knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, they believed in His death, burial and resurrection, was necessary for salvation, but they added part of the Law, making the atoning work of Jesus insufficient for salvation without circumcision.

AUDIENCE

The epistle addresses the audience in the opening of this letter, “unto the churches of Galatia” (1:2), and addresses its readers as, “Galatians” (3:1).



Who were the Galatians? First off, unlike Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and Colossi, which were cities where Paul wrote to individually, Paul doesn’t write to a single church in a city called Galatia. Galatia is in a region in what we call Turkey today. In the map below, Galatia is in dark

green, and you can see that it includes the cities from the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas.

Looking at a variety of maps of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey, it is evident that the precise location of the churches of Galatia is not clear (Ga 1:2). Before 25 AD, northern Asia Minor (Ankara, Turkey today) is "ethnic" Galatia. This area was settled by migrating Gauls in the third century BC.

In 25 AD Caesar Augustus reorganized Asia Minor, enlarging Galatia to the south. This would then become "Provincial Galatia", as it was a Roman Province of Galatia. Therefore, any mention of "Galatia" in two decades, when this letter was written, would probably include all of Galatia to Paul.

Southern Galatia includes the cities of Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, cities where Paul and Barnabas visited and set up churches (Acts 13-14).

Of further note, we do not have a record of Paul planting churches in what would be "northern Galatia."

I am in favor of the churches of Galatia being those in southern Roman "provincial Galatia" for the following reasons:

1. The Asia Minor that Paul knew would be expressed in the map above.
2. Paul mentions Barnabas in the book of Galatians (Ga 2:1, 9, 13)
3. Paul does not mention Silas, who accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey, in the book of Galatians
4. Paul only traveled with Barnabas and John Mark from about 46 to 48 A.D., on his first missionary journey which visited the cities in the "province" of Galatia.
5. Luke spells out the cities that Paul and Barnabas visited on their first missionary journey (Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, Acts chapters 13 & 14) which are in southern Asia Minor.
6. We have no mention of Paul planting churches in northern Galatia.

NOTE: In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, it is the Galatians that wanted to declare Paul a "god." Interestingly enough, it is this same group that wanted to stone him the following day.

WHAT IS THE CENTRAL MESSAGE?

Paul must refute the Judaizers who were leading the church away from sound doctrine, reestablish his Apostolic authority, and call the church to walk in faith and freedom found in Christ.

Within the six (6) chapters, we find a very frustrated Paul. From the opening of the book, we are greeted by a "father's" approach to an erring child. Normally, Paul would begin his letters

with his normal greeting and then break into a section of thanksgiving to God for who he is writing to. Not so for the churches in Galatia.

1. Paul gives a treatise on justification by faith in Christ and not through the works of the law (Ga 2:16, 21).

Ga 2:16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Ga 2:21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

2. In the middle of the epistle, Paul strongly rebukes them once more:

Ga 3:1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.

3. Paul gives a warning to those that are adding works to the grace of Jesus

Ga 3:10-14 For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." 12 But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— 14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

4. Paul states the purpose of the law:

Ga 3:19-22 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. 20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. 21 Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. 22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

5. His task is to correct the church from a perversion of the Gospel he preached unto them. Paul declared:

Ga 4:8-11 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years! 11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

6. Paul charges the false teachers with hypocrisy by trying to force the law on others, that they could not keep themselves

Ga 6:13 For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

OUTLINE

From the Faithlife Study Bible¹, a very simplified outline:

- Paul's defense of his apostleship (1:1–2:21)
- Paul's defense of his gospel (3:1–5:12)
- Application of his viewpoint (5:13–6:18)

THEOLOGICAL AREAS

Christ's death has brought in the age of the new covenant (3:23–26; 4:4–5, 24), in which believers do not have to become Jews or follow the outward ceremonies of the Mosaic law (2:3, 11–12, 14; 4:10). To require these things is to deny the heart of the gospel, which is justification by faith alone, not by obedience to the law (2:16; cf. 1:6–7). In this new age, Christians are to live in the guidance and power of the Spirit (chs. 5–6).²

Paul applied the Gospel message to the Galatian's daily life, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

CHRIST PORTRAYED

Galatians 3:1-2 (KJV) O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? 2 This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

Paul portrays Christ as crucified. As they had not seen Jesus crucified, this was important to the continued ministry of Paul.

Secondly, Paul emphatically represents the Holy Spirit as an active part in each of their lives.

OLD TESTAMENT CONNECTIONS

Genesis 16:15; 18:10; 21:2

Exodus 12:40; 20:19

Leviticus 19:18

Deuteronomy 4:2; 5:5; 12:32; 21:23; 27:26

2 Samuel 19:27

Job 13:9

Psalms 125:5; 143:2

¹ John D. Barry et al., Faithlife Study Bible (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

² Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2241.

Survey of the New Testament

Proverbs 30:6

Ecclesiastes 7:20

Isaiah 2:2; 32:15; 44:3; 49:1, 5; 54:1; 65:17

Jeremiah 1:5; 9:14; 11:3

Ezekiel 11:19

Daniel 9:24

Joel 2:28

Habakkuk 2:4

KEY VERSES

Galatians 2:16 (KJV) Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Galatians 2:20 (KJV) I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Galatians 3:11 (KJV) But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, [it is] evident: for, The just shall live by faith.

Galatians 5:1 (KJV) Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Galatians 4:5-6 (KJV) To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. 6 And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

Galatians 5:22-23 (KJV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

Galatians 6:7 (KJV) Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

KEY WORDS/PHRASE/THEMES

Key Themes: (Taken from the ESV Study Bible)³

1. In his sin-bearing death, Christ is a substitute for all Christians, whom he brings into a new realm of freedom and life. (Ga 1:4; 2:20; 3:13)
2. This gospel of Christ is for humanity, but there is no sense in which it has its origin in humanity: it comes only from God. Paul is himself an illustration of this: his

³ IBED, 2242

- conversion to Christ and his apostleship were not through human consultation but through the direct revelation of Christ. (Ga 1:1, 11–12, 15–20)
3. The gospel is appropriated not by works of law but by faith, which is the route to justification. (Ga 2:16)
 4. To require circumcision and other Mosaic ceremonies such as dietary laws and Jewish holidays as a supplement to faith is to fall back from the realm of grace, faith, and freedom, and to come under the whole law and its curse, since comprehensive observance of the law is impossible. (Ga 2:12–14, 16; 3:10; 4:10; 5:3)
 5. OT Scripture itself testifies to the truth of justification by faith, both in the life of Abraham and in the prophecy of Habakkuk. (Gen. 15:6; Hab. 2:4)
 6. The Christian life has its source in the believer having died with Christ to sin, and thereby having renounced the flesh. (Ga 5:24; 6:14)
 7. The Spirit is the source of power and guidance in the Christian life, and the work of the Spirit produces love and faith. (Ga 5:6, 16, 18, 25)
 8. The Christian life consists not in pleasing people but in pleasing Christ our master and being willing to suffer persecution for the sake of his cross. (Ga 1:10; 6:12, 14)

PAUL

Paul, whose original name was Saul, was a native of Tarsus, a city in southeast Asia Minor not far from southern Galatia. He was raised in a strict Jewish family and was steeped in traditional Jewish legalism. He had been educated under the famous rabbi Gamaliel and carefully trained in Jewish law (Acts 22:3). He was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Phil. 3:5–6). Before his conversion he “was advancing in Judaism beyond many of [his] contemporaries among [his] countrymen, being more extremely zealous for [his] ancestral traditions” (Gal. 1:14).

Despite his strong legalism and traditionalism, Saul does not appear to have been a religious hypocrite, as were so many other Pharisees. He was spiritually blind and was an enemy of God and His people; but he was not hypocritical. He sincerely believed and adhered to traditional Judaism as God’s way of life for His chosen people. Like many other Jews of his day, Paul truly loved the traditional law and sincerely sought to keep every commandment, to observe every ceremony, and to offer every sacrifice that the covenant of Moses required. He was a legalist of the strictest kind, but he was honestly trying to please God by obeying what he thought was God’s will and does not seem to have been trying to impress others with his religiousness.

Defending himself before the Sanhedrin, the apostle declared, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day” (Acts 23:1). Although by that time Paul had been a Christian for many years, the context suggests that his statement about having a good conscience before God included his life before conversion. When he persecuted Christians, causing many of them to be imprisoned and put to death (Acts 22:4–5; 26:10–11), he doubtlessly did so with the sincere conviction he was doing God’s will (see Acts 22:3). Although he

Survey of the New Testament

“was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor,” he nevertheless was “shown mercy, because [he] acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13). Long before Saul of Tarsus became a zealous and dedicated legalist God “had set [him] apart even from [his] mother’s womb, and called [him] through His grace” (Gal. 1:15).

The apostle spoke of legalism from firsthand experience, and he also spoke of grace from firsthand experience as well as from firsthand revelation. More than any other apostle he understood the bondage of the law and the freedom of grace.⁴

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN PAUL’S LIFE:⁵

4 B.C. Birth (about the same time as Jesus)

A.D. 32 or 33 Conversion on the road to Damascus

46–48 First missionary journey

50 Council at Jerusalem

50–52 Second missionary journey

54–57 Third missionary journey

57 Arrest in Jerusalem

61 First imprisonment in Rome

62 Release from prison

62–66 Traveling and writing

67 Second imprisonment in Rome

68 Execution under Nero

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), xii.

⁵ Bruce B. Barton, *Galatians*, *Life Application Bible Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1994), xiv.