



GALATIANS

THE GOOD NEWS OF GRACE

BY
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GALATIANS

Introduction to the Book of Galatians

Author

Paul

- Former Pharisee and persecutor of the church
- Apostle called by Jesus to minister to the Gentiles

Date and Place

It isn't clear where Paul was when he wrote the letter, but it was most likely written between AD 48-50.

Original Audience

Paul wrote to a group of churches in Galatia, a region in central Turkey.

Purpose

To remind believers of the one true gospel: God's grace is sufficient for salvation, and God's grace transforms our whole lives.

Anchor Verse

"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."

Galatians 2:16

Where are we?

The letter to the churches in Galatia is one of the most theologically rich books of the New Testament because Paul hammers home the saving and transforming power of God's grace. In his book, *Galatians for You*, pastor Tim Keller says that in this short letter, "Paul outlines the bombshell truth that the gospel is the A to Z of Christian life. It is not only the way to enter the kingdom; it is the way to live as part of the kingdom."

For many hundreds of years, life as a member of the people of God was governed by a litany of ceremonial and civil laws. The people of God were a nation, and God dwelt in their midst in the temple. Thus, these laws set the Israelites apart from other nations. The sacrificial purity system kept them clean so that a holy God could dwell in their midst. But this arrangement was never meant to be permanent: one day, the nation of Israel would be used by God to bring His presence and His blessings to all nations.

When Jesus came to live, die, and rise again on earth, He was the fulfillment of this promise. Through Jesus, the people of God would no longer be a nation; instead, people of all languages, cultures, and nationalities would be united as adopted children of God. Further, Jesus became the once-and-for-all sacrifice: through His death, those who believe in Him are made clean. Animal sacrifices and purity codes were no longer needed. Through Jesus' blood washing us clean, the Holy Spirit can come and dwell in us, His new temple.

The Galatians were asking what these changes meant regarding the significance of that old law code that had governed the people of God for so long. Galatians explores what Jesus' death means for our redemption, as Paul reminds us that we are saved by grace alone, and what that means for every part of our lives here on earth.

Who wrote the book of Galatians?

The letter claims to be written by Paul and addressed to the churches he planted in Galatia (vv. 1-2). Theologically, the letter to the Galatians echoes Paul's other writings, and most evangelical scholars affirm Paul's authorship.

When and where was it written?

There is no scholarly consensus regarding the exact date when Galatians was written, or where Paul was when he wrote it. However, the letter was probably written between 48-50 AD, either just before or after the first Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (48/49 AD). During this council, which is detailed in Acts 15, Peter, Paul, James, and the other apostles discussed whether Gentiles were bound to follow Mosaic law. Given that this is one of the major issues Paul addresses in Galatians, it seems most plausible that Paul would have mentioned the result of the council in his letter to the Galatians. Therefore the letter can probably be dated to AD 48, just before the council.

To whom was it written?

Once again, there is some scholarly disagreement regarding Paul's original audience. Galatia is a region in central Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), but geographic, demographic, and historical barriers split the region into northern and southern parts. Though we cannot be certain which group of "Galatians" he addressed, it seems more likely that he wrote to the southern Galatian churches, which Paul founded (Acts 13-14) (Carson and Moo). In either case, he wrote to both Jewish and Gentile believers and addressed the controversy that had divided the two ethnicities. Because Paul was writing specifically to Christians, we know that his words still apply to believers today.

Why was it written?

The churches in Galatia consisted of Jewish and Gentile Christians, and after Paul left, racial and cultural divisions arose. Specifically, a group of Jewish leaders (sometimes called "Judaizers") were trying to convince Gentile Christians that they were still bound to the Jewish code of laws that governed the people of God in the Old Testament Law. Notably, that meant that Gentiles would have to change their diets and be circumcised in order to be part of the people of God. These false teachers incensed Paul because they were adding requirements for salvation rather than trusting that we are saved by grace alone. Paul wrote to set the record straight and remind all believers—Jew, Gentile, and even us today—that nothing we do can add to or subtract from our salvation because we are saved entirely by God's grace through Christ's death on the cross. Not only did he write to remind the Galatians of the true gospel, but he also wrote to remind them how the gospel transforms their everyday lives.

Why does this matter for our students?

- God's grace is sufficient; no amount of good works, rule following, or legalism will make God love you more. This good news allows us to rest from our striving and live freely in God's grace.
- The gospel not only saves us, but it also sets us free and transforms us, making us into a completely new creation. There is great hope for newness and transformation in the gospel.
- Students are constantly bombarded by ideologies claiming to tell the truth about the world. Paul argues that the central truth about the world is the gospel. We can trust Paul as authoritative, sent, and taught directly by God.

What are the main themes?

- **Saved by grace, not by works:** The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross—his death in our place—saves us from our sins. His sacrifice, and the salvation that comes through it, is not something that we receive by our own merit, but it is a gift of grace. There is nothing we can do to earn it. We need only to receive it by faith in Him.
- **One true gospel:** Throughout the book, Paul argues against false teachers who have taught a different "gospel" that contradicts the one he taught the Galatians. But Paul makes it clear that the gospel he preaches wasn't his own creation but was revealed to him directly from Jesus. As such, there is only one true gospel, which is the good news of salvation by grace alone. Anyone who adds to or contradicts that message is a false teacher.
- **Adoption as sons and daughters:** As a gift of our salvation, we are adopted as children of God and heirs to His promises. We are no longer enslaved to the law, but we are set free. Moreover, because we are His sons and daughters, God has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us on earth.
- **Living transformed by grace:** Not only does God's grace save us, but it also transforms us and fills us with the Holy Spirit. God's grace transforms our communities as well, breaking cultural and ethnic barriers and inviting us into the united family of Christ.

Outline

I. THE TRUE GOSPEL (1-2)

Lesson 1: No Other Gospel (1:1-24)

- Paul defends the true gospel

Lesson 2: Acceptance, Conflict, and Identity in the Family of Christ (2:1-21)

- The gospel of grace saves us, changes us, and unites us

II. THE GOSPEL AND THE LAW (3-4)

Lesson 3: The Limitations of Living Under the Law and the Freedom Found in Faith (3:1-25)

- The gospel tells us that we are made right with God by faith alone, not by anything we do

Lesson 4: More to the Promise: Gospel Adoption (3:26-4:31)

- Christians are free because we are sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ

III. LIFE IN THE SPIRIT (5-6)

Lesson 5: Freedom and Fruit (5:1-25)

- The Holy Spirit applies the gospel to our lives and frees us to love God and love others

Lesson 6: A House Divided Cannot Stand: The Call for Christian Community (5:26-6:18)

- Christ is all we need. Our identity should not be determined by what we are doing, or what others think of us, but who we are in Christ

Tough Topics

LAW

Throughout Galatians, Paul references "the law" numerous times, but he uses the term in a few different ways. Identifying Paul's varied meanings with these words is a vital part of understanding the nuance of Paul's argument. As a leader, pay close attention and help your students notice the way in which Paul uses the term in each instance.

We must understand that Jewish law (or Mosaic law or Old Testament law) was a part of the old covenant, which God gave to Israel when they escaped Egypt. Jewish law can be categorized in three ways: ceremonial laws (like dietary restrictions and circumcision, which governed worship in the temple), civil laws (instructions for communal life such as for ruling and governing the nation), and moral laws (moral guidelines for the people

of God, such as the Ten Commandments). For Jews in the Old Testament, each was equally important. However, now that we are under the new covenant, there are some laws by which we are no longer bound.

Though in other parts of the Bible, "law" can refer to God's Word as a whole, that is not the case in Galatians. Most often, when Paul uses the term "law," he refers to the ceremonial laws that governed worship in Israel. Moreover, he often uses "circumcision" as a stand-in or a symbol of the ceremonial law as a whole, as this was the most important marker of covenant obedience for Jews. The ceremonial laws governed worship in the temple when God's presence dwelt among His people there. Priests mediated sacrifices, which symbolized purification for sins, so that people could continue to be in the presence of a holy God in the temple. When Christ came to fulfill the law (Mt 5:17), that meant the Jewish sacrificial system (ceremonial law) was no longer our path to being right with God or to salvation. In Galatians 2-4, Paul repeatedly hammers this point home. His opponents, the Judaizers, argued that Jewish law was needed in addition to faith in Jesus, but Paul is clear: God's grace is sufficient, and we are saved by faith in Jesus alone (Gal 2:16). The Judaizers demanded that all Gentiles be circumcised as part of Mosaic law, and Paul firmly rejects this claim.

Paul goes on to emphasize that this free gift of salvation does not give us license to live and act as we please. In Galatians 5:16, he writes, "walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." In the next several verses, he outlines how Christians are to flee works of the flesh and instead "live by the Spirit," and he encourages us to walk by the fruit of the Spirit. So not only are Christians to flee from legalism (adherence to Jewish law as a path to salvation), but we are also to flee rebellion or hedonism (doing whatever we please). Under the new covenant, no aspect of the Mosaic law serves as a path to salvation or as an indicator of who are the people of God. However, Paul argues that the Jewish moral law is still relevant to us today. These moral guidelines are not a way to define who is and is not a child of God (they are not a means of salvation), but rather they describe what life as the people of God, transformed by His grace and indwelt by His Spirit, will look like.

Your students may wonder why Christians still follow some laws mentioned in the Old Testament (like the Ten Commandments and laws governing sexual ethics) but not others (like laws preventing the consumption of shellfish). Jesus sums up the entire law as "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:37-39). No part of the law can save us, but as followers of Jesus saved by grace, our actions will reflect hearts that have been transformed by the Spirit, and the moral law offers a guide for how we should act.

OFFENSIVE GRACE

The book of Galatians can be summed up in one word: grace. While God's grace revealed on the cross might not seem very controversial, in reality, the gospel and its implications can be hard to fully accept. False teachers had infiltrated Galatian churches and insisted that Gentile believers needed to follow Jewish law (including being circumcised) in order to be saved and live like a Christian. While following God's moral laws might not seem like a bad thing, the Galatians had elevated law-abiding to an ungodly status. They were trying to add to God's provision of grace, and they made an idol out of the law. As a result, they were simultaneously rejecting God's grace and trying to earn God's approval with their actions. For religious people, the Gospel is offensive because it tells us that we are so much more sinful than we ever realized, and only God can pay our debt for us. For many, this is a hard pill to swallow.

On the other hand, Paul's opponents would argue that living by "grace" was really just a cover for living sinfully. After all, if God saved you by Jesus' death on the cross, what incentive is there to live an upright life? Paul anticipates this counterargument and instructs Christians how they are to live. Just as the gospel is offensive to the religious, the gospel convicts the rebellious for their sin. Though we are no longer bound to the law, we are called to walk in step with the Spirit, pursuing God's heart rather than our own desires. Ultimately, the gospel of grace is good news for both the self-righteous and the sinner. We are more broken than we will ever know, but we are also more loved than we could ever imagine. Christ's work on the cross is sufficient to justify us before God, and when we recognize and accept that He has made us into new creations, then we will walk in step with the Spirit out of love and gratitude.

CIRCUMCISION

The term "circumcision" is an important and recurring term in Galatians. It may seem taboo for many students, and girls in particular may be uncertain about its exact meaning. Leaders should define the term at the beginning of the series.

As mentioned above, circumcision was a part of Jewish ceremonial law, and the clearest sign that a man was a part of the Jewish nation. In Genesis 17, God renewed his covenant with Abraham and instructed him and all of his male offspring that "you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins" (Gen 17:12). The ESV Study Bible notes, "Circumcision, which involves cutting off the foreskin of the penis, creates a mark that would not normally be visible to others." While this was not an entirely new practice in the ancient world, and it did have some hygienic benefits, it was most importantly a physical sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his offspring. Abraham had to put his hope in God rather than his own flesh, and circumcision served as a reminder that God's promise hinged on Abraham having a son. Males who were not circumcised could not be a part of the covenant, which is why it was so hard for the Judaizers to let go of this practice. However, under the new covenant, circumcision is no longer required as a symbol of the people of God. (Many scholars argue that baptism is the sign of the new covenant, and is a kind of "circumcision of the heart." But neither baptism nor circumcision is a path to salvation.)

Additional Resources

- Carson, D.A. and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Zondervan, 1992.
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- Keller, Timothy. *Galatians for You*. The Good Book Company, 2013.
- Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Galatians*. Translated by Erasmus Middleton. Kregel Classics, 1979.
- Sproul, R.C. "Which Laws Apply?" Ligonier Ministries, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/which-laws-apply/>.