

Overview of Galatians

With Study Questions

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5/19/2002*

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We often, and necessarily, study books in the Bible a very small piece at a time. This is necessary with most books since they're intricate and complicated. One of the dangers, though, is losing the context of the book – not seeing the forest for the trees. As we embark upon our study of Galatians, let us begin with an overview of the entire epistle – allowing for brief remarks at certain portions of the text.

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 brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:³ Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ,⁴ who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,⁵ to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul will spend a great deal of time in the first two chapters of Galatians arguing for his own authority. The church was, and is, always assaulted by false doctrines. Those doctrines find their way into the church when the authority of God's word is brought into question. Paul asserts apostolic authority. Hanging in the balance is a proper understanding of Jesus giving Himself for sins. Jesus is the one who rescues, or delivers us. Over and above the will of man, this is according to the will of God who receives all the glory.

⁶ I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel,⁷ which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

The message of the church is its primary call. The gospel is often threatened, changed, weakened or, as we read here, perverted. Those who twist or diminish the value of the gospel are accursed. So unique was Paul's apostolic office that he is willing to make a distinction between the gospel he preached as an apostle versus the gospel he might preach in the future.

¹⁰ For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.¹¹ But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me

is not according to man. ¹² For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The message Paul brings to the church is not concocted by men, but by the revelation of God Himself. Paul does not allow his message to be viewed as anything less than God's word. He will now give a brief account of his conversion and the method by which he received the message; more specifically how he did not receive the message. We will read that he wasn't merely appointed by the apostles. If that were the case he wouldn't have any more authority than those in the churches of Galatia that were perverting the gospel.

¹³ For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to destroy it*. ¹⁴ And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace, ¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (Now *concerning* the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) ²¹ Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which *were* in Christ. ²³ But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once *tried to destroy*." ²⁴ And they glorified God in me.

After many years Paul became more associated with the other apostles.

2 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with *me*. ² And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. ³ Yet not even Titus who *was* with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. ⁴ And *this occurred* because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), ⁵ to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

Paul, Barnabas and Titus finally go up to Jerusalem (which would be the hub of the Christian faith). Here we begin to see the specific problem. There

were people in the church who were seeking to augment, or add to, the necessary requirements for salvation – namely being circumcised. Paul’s argument is that even in Jerusalem, where all the apostles were, there was no compulsion to be circumcised. What we’ll have to realize as we study Galatians (since none of us have probably ever felt the compulsion to be circumcised to be approved by God) is that conditions for salvation (or the approval of God), apart from Christ, have always found their way into the church. There are many modern circumcisions.

⁶ But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man – for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me. ⁷ But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised *was* to Peter ⁸ (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), ⁹ and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰ They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

Paul here is revealing that his ministry is fully approved by those who these churches recognized to be the pillars of Christianity – Peter, James, and John. To affirm the certainty of his calling as an apostle, Paul reveals what might be considered shocking to most of his readers; the confrontation of Peter – the rock.

¹¹ Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; ¹² for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before *them all*, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?”

Some people have a pre- versus post-Pentecostal view of Peter. Pre-Pentecostal Peter was weak and denied Jesus; post-Pentecostal Peter was full of power. There were some differences, but it doesn’t seem to be a matter of personal power. Here we read of Paul confronting Peter because of Peter’s fear of those people who were perverting the gospel.

¹⁵ We *who are* Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, ¹⁶ knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

Paul now reveals the heart of the book, the heart of the gospel—justification by faith. Men are declared righteous before God by faith in Christ rather than anything they do.

¹⁷ “But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, *is* Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. ¹⁹ For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

This passage will require an in-depth study. Paul will repeatedly teach that justification by faith, though it has nothing to do with our own morality, wisdom, righteousness, etc., is not a license for sin. His main point here is found in verse 21 where we learn that thinking righteousness comes through human effort results in the conclusion that Christ died in vain.

3 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? ² This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? — ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ⁴ Have you suffered so many things in vain — if indeed *it was* in vain?

Churches are in danger of this bewitchment—the idea of salvation by faith in Christ, but the maintenance, or completion, of salvation by human effort. This is why the gospel must be preached, not only to the unsaved, but to the saved as well. Pulpits must continually preach the gospel in its fullness. It is in our nature to think that at some point God cuts us free to finish the race on our own. There are many modern day “circumcisions” that have found their way into the church; we will discuss them.

⁵ Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, *does He do it* by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” ⁷ Therefore know that *only* those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” ⁹ So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

Here we must understand the nature of the problem in Galatia. Jewish Christians (Judaizers) were in the church and were seeking to make gentile Christians become circumcised in order to somehow complete their Christianity. But the message, even to Abraham (the father of the Jews), was salvation was by faith.

¹⁰ For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” ¹¹ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” ¹² Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.”

¹³ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), ¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

If one is seeking to find favor with God through human efforts, they are required to do it all. This means they must never do anything wrong and they must do everything right. The person who cannot manage this is cursed. Of course this is a battle we lost at conception. But Jesus became a curse for us that we might receive the promise through faith.

¹⁵ Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though *it is* only a man’s covenant, yet *if it is* confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. ¹⁶ Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ. ¹⁷ And this I say, *that* the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance *is* of the law, *it is* no longer of promise; but God gave *it* to Abraham by promise.

We learn here that when Paul writes of the law he is writing of the Mosaic economy (the Law of Moses). There was a gross misunderstanding and misuse of the Law of Moses. God made a promise to Abraham and his Seed – Christ, a promise of righteousness by faith, not works. The fact that 430 years after

Abraham, God gave the law to Moses does not annul the promise of justification by faith. The law was misused then and it is misused now.

¹⁹ What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. ²⁰ Now a mediator does not *mediate* for one *only*, but God is one. ²¹ Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. ²² But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

The Law of Moses had a specific purpose; it was a tutor to lead to Christ. When the time comes we will discuss what this does, and doesn't, mean. But clearly the design of the law was not to be a means by which we obtain righteousness before God.

²⁶ For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Here we see an often-misused passage. When it comes to standing justified before God – receiving His promises; what matters is faith in Christ. There is nothing significant about being Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, or female. No human merit, race, standing, gender, etc., avails anything; only faith in Christ matters when it comes to these things.

4 Now I say *that* the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, ² but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. ³ Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" ⁷ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

The slave works for his wages and never inherits anything but dies penniless. The son (adoption) by the Spirit cries out Abba, Father thus recognizing that God is our daddy or papa.

⁸ But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹ I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

Sons shouldn't live as slaves.

¹² Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I *became* like you. You have not injured me at all. ¹³ You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. ¹⁴ And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, *even* as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?

Paul here reminds them of their first apprehension of him and the gospel he preached.

¹⁷ They zealously court you, *but* for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. ¹⁸ But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you. ¹⁹ My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you.

The false teachers are seeking to exclude their students from the true gospel. Paul speaks here as a loving, yet firm, father. He has doubts about them.

²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³ But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴ which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar — ²⁵ for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children — ²⁶ but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. ²⁷ For it is written:

*“Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.”*

²⁸ Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. ²⁹ But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. ³⁰ Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” ³¹ So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

Even those who supposedly held to the Old Testament show they don't understand it. Paul uses the example of Ishmael and Isaac. One is the child according to the flesh, the other the child according to the promise.

5 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. ² Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. ³ And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. ⁴ You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵ For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

The liberty of which Paul writes is a liberty that frees us from looking at our own efforts in order to have the genuine salvation that comes from above. If we start looking at our own efforts Christ profits us nothing – we're on our own, we must keep the whole law.

⁷ You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is. ¹¹ And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased. ¹² I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!

Those who adulterate the gospel shall bear judgment. God vehemently dislikes being falsely represented. Paul's words here are quite strong; those who preach circumcision should finish the job.

13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! 16 I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. 17 For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.

With such a gracious grace, it would be natural to think that behavior doesn't matter at all. This is not the case—it never has been. Freedom in Christ, freedom from the law, does not mean license to disregard God's law altogether. It is a freedom from law-keeping to merit salvation. Those who have received the Spirit of adoption will evidence that in their behavior.

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

These are not carnal Christian Paul addresses; they are not Christians at all.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24 And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

The necessary fruit of those who are saved is revealed here.

6 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. 5 For each one shall bear his own load. 6 Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.

Here we see instruction on interaction and confrontation in the church.

⁷ Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. ⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Clearly justification by faith is not a license for sin. God will not be mocked. The necessary fruit is necessary indeed.

¹¹ See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand! ¹² As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these *would* compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. ¹³ For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. ¹⁴ But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.

Paul reveals the motivation of the false teachers. They wish to boast of their converts. Paul would boast only in the cross of Christ from which comes the new creation.

¹⁶ And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

There is the true Israel and the false Israel.

¹⁷ From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁸ Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

Paul's benediction is preceded by his comments on having been beaten for his faith. Even the beatings he took were not worthy of righteousness before God. A man is justified by faith and faith alone.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose the Apostle Paul spends so much time authenticating himself as an apostle (page 2)?
2. What is the main call of the church (page 2)? How is this kept pure?
3. How did Paul view his message?
4. Discuss Paul's confrontation with Peter. What does this tell us about Peter or Paul (page 3)?
5. What is the heart of this epistle (pages 3, 4)?
6. What type of thinking would inevitably suggest that Jesus died in vain (page 4)?
7. Discuss the bewitchment of the Galatians (page 4)?
8. How did Abraham understand salvation (page 5)?
9. Discuss the use and misuse of the law (pages 5, 6).
10. Paul talks about slaves and heirs, the son of the bondwoman and the son of the freewoman. What is his point in these passages (pages 6, 7)?
11. How do we understand our liberty in Christ (page 8)?
12. Discuss God's attitude toward those who pervert the gospel (page 8).
13. Does justification by faith mean behavior doesn't matter at all to God (pages 8, 9)?
14. Discuss the fruit of the flesh versus the Spirit (page 9).
15. What is meant by "God will not be mocked" (page 9)?
16. What was the motivation for the false teachers (page 10)?