

FAITH IN CHRIST SETS US FREE

Introduction to Galatians Study

Key Verse: 5:1

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Author, Date & Place of Writing

Apostle Paul wrote this Letter to the Galatian churches. It contains detailed information not found in the Book of Acts, which makes its precise dating problematic. In 2:1–10 Paul mentions a trip he took to Jerusalem to meet the apostles and to confirm the gospel he had been preaching among the Gentiles in Syrian Antioch (2:2). This trip could refer to Paul’s journey with Barnabas, mentioned in Acts 11:30. In 2:11 he mentions a trip Peter made to the church in Syrian Antioch, which is not recorded in Acts. At that time Paul confronted Peter and even Barnabas for being afraid of the circumcision group (2:12). Yet in this Letter Paul does not refer to the Jerusalem Council’s ruling and letter about circumcision (Ac15:3–29). He probably would have done so if he had written Galatians after that Council’s convening. So, most likely, Paul wrote his letter after his first missionary journey, while he was at his home church in Syrian Antioch, circa A.D. 48-49, before attending the Jerusalem Council (Ac15:12).

Historical Background of the churches in Galatia (based on Acts 13:13–14:28)

Galatia was a region in Asia Minor in the Roman Empire (see map¹). According to Acts, there were four churches in the southern region of Galatia that Paul pioneered on his first missionary journey: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. It is likely Paul intended all these churches to read this letter.

The Holy Spirit had set apart Barnabas and Saul (later called Paul) to go out as missionaries (13:2–3), and soon the Holy Spirit led them to the province of Galatia (13:4,13). The first city they went to was Pisidian Antioch. Paul’s first message was successful, and, a week later, the whole city gathered to hear God’s word (13:42–44). Then the Jews became jealous and began to abuse and oppose Paul (13:45). But the Gentiles were glad and honored the word of the Lord, and the word spread through the whole region (13:48–49). Finally, the Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and had them expelled (13:50).

Next, Paul and Barnabas went to Iconium and spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed (14:1). But the unbelieving Jews were angry and stirred up persecution (14:2). Nevertheless, Paul spent considerable time there speaking boldly for the Lord, and God confirmed their message with signs and wonders (14:3). When a plot developed against them, they fled to the cities of Lystra and Derbe, where they continued to preach the gospel (14:5–7).

At Lystra they healed a lame man who had faith (14:8–10), and the Gentile crowd who were used to worshiping Zeus became so emotional that they thought they were gods and tried to sacrifice to them (14:11–13). It was not easy to preach the gospel in that idol-worshiping culture. Then Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium showed up and won the crowd over, and instead of worshiping, they stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead (14:19). But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city with resurrection faith, and the next day, he and Barnabas left for Derbe (14:20). In this way the church in Lystra was

pioneered. And in Derbe, through their gospel preaching, they won a large number of disciples (14:21). On their journey back to their home church in Syrian Antioch, they visited all the churches they had pioneered, appointed elders, with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord, and encouraged them to remain true to the faith, saying, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (14:21b–23). In their mission report in Syrian Antioch, they concluded that God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles (14:27).

In the course of pioneering these churches Paul simply preached the gospel, that we receive the forgiveness of sins and are justified by faith in Jesus, not by observing the law (13:39). This is the message that seemed to have made the Jews so angry. Mostly, Gentiles heard the gospel message, were glad and believed. But the Jews opposed it, thinking Paul was abandoning the Law of Moses (which they had doggedly adhered to) and taking away Gentile members from their synagogues. After Paul and Barnabas left, the Jews worked hard to poison people’s minds against Paul and continued to attack his gospel ministry. It was in the context of this conflict that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian churches.

Paul’s purpose in writing

Paul had a sense of urgency about the Galatian churches. After he had left, Judaizers had come and were trying to compel believers in Jesus to be circumcised in order to be saved (6:12; cf. Ac15:1). Judaizers were not non-Christian Jews hostile to the gospel, but ethnocentric Christian Jews insisting that Gentiles who had accepted Jesus be circumcised according to the Law of Moses. They had already infiltrated the Syrian Antioch church and had caused controversy regarding circumcision (2:4). Paul had gone to Jerusalem and fought strongly against the circumcision group in order to defend the truth of the gospel (2:5,11–14). The Judaizers’ purpose was to win the Galatians over to their side and alienate them from Paul (4:17). By having Gentile Christians circumcised, they were trying to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ (6:12b) and to boast about their flesh (6:13). To Paul, Judaizers were perverting the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:6–7), and, in reality, undercutting the necessity of Christ’s death (2:21). Paul taught that circumcision would take away the believers’ true freedom in Christ and make them slaves again to the law (2:4; 4:9; 5:1). In fact, the Galatians were already starting to observe special days, months, seasons and years (4:10).

To bring them back to their senses, right after greeting them, Paul rebuked them for turning to a different gospel (1:6; 3:1,3) and reminded them of the gospel he had preached. He repeatedly proclaimed the gospel that we are justified by faith in Christ Jesus, not by observing the law (2:16,20–21; 3:8–9,11,24,26; 5:4–5). He wrote this letter to help the Galatians remain in, and act in line with, the truth of this gospel (2:5,14). He reminded them that they had already begun the Christian life by believing the gospel they had heard from him and receiving the Spirit (3:2–5). He also taught that to go back to observing the law would be like reverting to infancy and slavery (3:23–4:7). He admonished them to stand firm in Christian freedom (5:1) and to live by the Spirit, not by the sinful nature (5:16–18)

Characteristics

- 1) The style of Galatians is both polemical, and at the same time, apologetic. It contains some strong language (1:6,8–9; 2:6,11,13,21; 3:1,3a; 4:9,15,20; 5:2,4,10b,12,15,26; 6:17), as well as sharp contrasts (e.g. 1:11–12; 3:2; 4:7,22–31; 5:1,16; 6:7–8,15). Paul also uniquely mentions his confrontation with Apostle

Peter and Barnabas over the issue of eating with Gentile believers (2:11–21). He wrote in this way in order to bring the Galatians back to the truth of the gospel;

- 2) Because the Judaizers had been trying to alienate the Galatians from him, Paul defended his apostleship. He mentions how he had received the gospel by direct revelation from Jesus Christ (1:12). He also mentions how his apostleship and the gospel he preached had been confirmed by the apostles in Jerusalem (1:18–19; 2:7–10). On this basis, Paul was an apostle of Jesus with spiritual authority;
- 3) Paul references the Old Testament stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (3:6–9,14,16,29; 4:21–31) to show that his message of justification by faith and becoming children of God is rooted in Scripture. He also quotes the Law of God (3:10,12,13; 5:14) and discusses its purpose and relationship to the promise (3:15–25);
- 4) Paul is writing to churches that he himself had pioneered. So he mentions his personal love relationship with them (4:12–16) and his great desire to restore them spiritually (4:19–20). He writes them in large letters with his own hand (6:11) and begs that no one cause him trouble any more, because he bore on his body “the marks of Jesus” (6:17), most likely a reference to the scars he had as a result of his stoning in Lystra;
- 5) Paul uses the expressions “crucified with Christ” (2:20), “crucified the sinful nature” (5:24), and “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14). When we are crucified with Christ, Christ lives in us, transforms us into his image, and fills us with his love, so that we no longer live for self or the sinful nature, but for him (2:20; 4:19). This inner change affects our relationships with others and with the world (6:14). Paul personally experienced the transforming power of the crucifixion of Christ (6:15) and proclaimed it as normative for all Christians;
- 6) Galatians is comparatively short, written to address one specific controversial issue. Thus, it was not intended to be a fully developed exposition of the gospel, as was the case with Paul’s Letter to the Romans. The ethical instructions in Galatians are comparatively brief (6:1–10).

Central Issue of the Letter

As mentioned earlier, Paul wrote Galatians mainly to prevent the Gentile believers from submitting to circumcision. If they did so, Paul says they would be alienated from Christ (5:4). So throughout this letter Paul proclaims repeatedly that we are justified by faith in Jesus, not by observing the law (2:16, etc.).

However, this was not a license for Gentile believers to live by their sinful nature. When we live by faith in Christ, we receive the Spirit (3:2,5,14) who gives us true freedom—freedom to serve one another in love, not to indulge the sinful nature (5:1,13). So, to live by faith in Christ, we need to learn how to live by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit (5:16,25). When we live by the Spirit, we are no longer under the law; we bear the fruit of the Spirit, and against such things there is no law (5:18,23b).

In Galatians Paul also taught that by faith in Jesus, the Seed (3:19), Gentiles inherit the same spiritual blessings as the seed of Abraham (3:6–9,14,29). When they

accept the gospel of justification by faith in Jesus, all kinds of people can become children of God, clothed with Christ and one in Christ (3:26–28).

Significance of the Epistle to the Galatians in Christian History

Apostle Paul's absolute teaching in Galatians that we are justified by faith in Christ, not by observing the law, severed the Christian movement from the control of Judaism and opened the door widely for the gospel to be spread to peoples of all nations. Among all the apostles, Paul uniquely grasped the vital importance of justification by faith and its implications for Gentile evangelism. If this truth had been compromised, Christianity would have remained a sect of Judaism and its spread would have required Gentiles to adopt Jewish traditions and culture, which would have drastically limited its growth (Ac15:19).

After many centuries, when ritualism and legalism in the church had almost snuffed out the flame of the gospel of Jesus, a German priest named Martin Luther read Paul's Letter to the Galatians. In it he discovered the absolute truth of justification by faith alone for salvation, which inspired the Protestant Reformation. Christians could again experience God's grace in Christ and be free from all kinds of ritualism and legalism. So Luther called this Epistle "The Magna Carta of Christian Freedom."

During the modern Missionary Movement, which began in the early nineteenth century, many Western missionaries insisted that native peoples adopt Western civilization and culture, along with the Christian faith. This stifled gospel work worldwide and led to many misunderstandings. Once again, Galatians spoke to a generation of Christians. A study of Galatians opens the door for peoples of many nations and cultures to believe the gospel of Jesus without submitting to cultural imperialism.

The Purpose of our Study

- 1) *Justification by faith alone*: Through our study of Galatians we want to learn the truth of the gospel newly, that we are justified only by faith in Jesus Christ, not by observing regulations. There are still those who would impose rituals and legalisms on Christians, which are particularly stifling to new believers. Legalistic ideas may seem easier than trusting in Jesus alone and living by the Spirit. But gospel faith is essential in raising healthy disciples of Jesus. Through this study may God make us clear about our gospel faith and ministry and set us free from ritualism and legalism.
- 2) *Christian freedom*: The issues of legalism and freedom that Paul grappled with are timeless, and just as relevant now as then. Especially in Western cultures, many people misuse the concept of Christian freedom to justify immorality and avoid practical commitment to Christ and his church. In our study of Galatians we want to learn how to live by faith in Christ without legalism, and what the true meaning of the freedom he gives us is. We want to learn how to live by the Spirit and use our Christian freedom not to please our sinful nature but to please the Spirit (6:8).

PAUL’S POLEMICAL CONTRAST OF “THE GOSPEL” AND “A DIFFERENT GOSPEL”

THE GOSPEL	A DIFFERENT GOSPEL	REFERENCE
I. Origin by revelation from Jesus Christ	I. Man-made teaching	I. 1:11–12
II. Justified by faith in Jesus Christ	II. Cursed by observing the law	II. 2:16; 3:10–11
III. Receiving the Spirit by hearing the gospel	III. Trying to attain the Spirit by human effort	III. 3:2–3
IV. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law	IV. Cursed by observing the law	IV. 3:13
V. Children of God/heirs by grace	V. Slaves under the law	V. 3:18; 4:3,7
VI. Known by God	VI. Living under weak and miserable forces	VI. 4:9
VII. Sons of the free woman born by the power of the Spirit	VII. Sons of the slave woman born in the ordinary way	VII. 4:22–23
VIII. Freedom in Christ	VIII. A yoke of slavery	VIII. 5:1 (2:4)
IX. Preaching the cross of the gospel and being persecuted	IX. Preaching circumcision to avoid persecution	IX. 5:11; 6:12
X. Serving one another in love	X. Biting and devouring each other	X. 5:13,15
XI. Living by the Spirit	XI. Living to gratify the desires of the sinful nature	XI. 5:16
XII. Fruits of the Spirit	XII. Acts of the sinful nature	XII. 5:22; 5:19
XIII. Sowing to please the Spirit— reap eternal life	XIII. Sowing to please the sinful nature— reap destruction	XIII. 6:7–8

Outline of Galatians

- I. Greetings (1:1–5)
- II. The gospel Paul preached (1:6–2:10)
 - A. No other gospel (1:6–10)
 - B. The gospel through revelation from Jesus Christ (1:11–24)
 - C. The gospel confirmed by Christ's apostles (2:1–10)
- III. Justified by faith alone (2:11–3:25)
 - A. Paul defends justification only by faith in Christ (2:11–21)
 - 1) Paul rebuked Peter's compromise of the gospel (11–14)
 - 2) Jew and Gentile alike are justified only by faith (15–16)
 - 3) Paul's personal testimony of living only by faith in Christ (17–21)
 - B. Living by faith, not by observing the law (3:1–25)
 - 1) The Spirit given only through believing (1–5)
 - 2) Abraham justified only by faith (6–9)
 - 3) Redeemed from the curse of the law (10–14)
 - 4) God's unchanging covenant with Abraham (15–18)
 - 5) The promise given by God (19–20)
 - 6) The law put in charge until Christ came (21–25)
- IV. Children and slaves (3:26–4:31)
 - A. Heirs by faith in Christ (3:26–4:7)
 - B. Warning against Judaizers (4:8–20)
 - C. Children of the free woman, not the slave woman (4:21–31)
- V. Standing firm in Christian freedom (5:1–26)
 - A. Faith expressed through love (1–6)
 - B. The bad influence of the Judaizers (7–12)
 - C. Serve one another in love (13–15)
 - D. Live by the Spirit, not by the sinful nature (5:16–26)
 - 1) The Spirit in conflict with the sinful nature (16–18)
 - 2) The consequences of living by the sinful nature (19–21)
 - 3) The fruit of the Spirit (22–23)
 - 4) Keep in step with the Spirit (24–26)
- VI. General admonitions (6:1–15)
 - A. Carry each other's burdens (1–6)
 - B. Sow to please the Spirit (7–8)
 - C. Do good to all (9–10)
 - D. Boast only in the cross of Christ (11–14)
 - E. What counts is a new creation (15)
- VII. Doxology (6:16–18)

