

GALATIANS

© 2017 Daniel F. Goepfrich

Galatians is possibly the earliest letter we have from Paul.¹ Unlike most of his other letters, this was written to “THE CHURCHES OF GALATIA” (1:2) rather than to an individual congregation. Paul visited² these churches during his first missionary tour (Acts 13-14), before returning to Antioch and subsequently defending God’s work among the Gentiles at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). The purpose of that council was to decide what Gentiles were required to do to fully participate in the Church. Specifically, the debate was over the circumcision of Gentiles. After much debate, the apostles and elders finally determined that only belief was necessary, as with the Jews, yet they encouraged the Gentiles to refrain from a few practices that would unnecessarily offend the Jews among them (Acts 15:19-21).

Paul’s letter to the Galatian believers is a treatise on justification by grace through faith alone, second only to Romans in its importance to our understanding of the doctrine of salvation. The entire letter is an explanation and defense of that doctrine because the Galatians were turning away from it due to a contingent of Jewish legalists who demanded that they accept circumcision as a part of salvation or spiritual maturity. If this letter were written later in Paul’s ministry (as some infer from 4:13³), after the Jerusalem Council, it seems he would certainly have referred to that decision to shut down the claims of his detractors. Instead, Paul’s entire argument was based on the doctrine of justification which came to him directly from Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures.

Chapter one does not follow the pattern of Paul’s other letters, or those of the day, in that he did not offer a word/prayer of thanksgiving after his greeting. Instead, he jumped immediately into the purpose of his letter – “I AM ASTONISHED THAT YOU ARE SO QUICKLY DESERTING THE ONE WHO CALLED YOU BY THE GRACE OF CHRIST AND ARE FOLLOWING A DIFFERENT GOSPEL” (vs. 6). “So quickly” seems to indicate that it had not been long since they had accepted the gospel that they were turning away from, though the Greek word can also mean “so easily.” Paul noted that they had deserted, not just the gospel, but the Savior himself, and began to follow “A DIFFERENT GOSPEL,” another message they had been given by those who would “DISTORT THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST” (vs. 7). This brought Paul’s fiercest condemnation – eternal hell for those who preach a heretical message of salvation (vs. 8-9). Today, this includes many false gospels in religions like Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, and so many others.

It seems that Paul’s accusers painted a picture of him as a “hit-and-run” charlatan. As some of his other letters show (especially 2 Corinthians), they claimed that he did not genuinely care about his listeners,

¹ This is certainly debated, but it makes the most sense to me when all the available facts are considered.

² While it is possible that he founded them during this tour, it is also possible (and more likely) that he founded at least some of them during his tenure in “SYRIA AND CILICIA” (1:21), years before Barnabas called him to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).

³ They see Paul’s statement, “I PREACHED THE GOSPEL TO YOU THE FIRST TIME” (NASB), to mean that he had been there at least twice before writing this letter. Even so, he easily could have been there more than once in the fourteen years of ministry (2:1) preceding this letter.

changed his message to gain favor with his audience, and was in it primarily for what he could get out of it. It seems they also continued to attack his authority as a genuine apostle (vs. 1). His response was measured but firm.

First, he stated that one cannot work to please both people and God (vs. 10). Second, he insisted that his message was not fluid. In fact, it did not even come from a fluid source, from whom he could have received the wrong message. Instead, Paul's message came from Jesus himself (vs. 2, 11-12). Third, his own story of dramatic life change proved that he broke close ties with his former colleagues and intentionally stayed away from the apostles in Jerusalem so he would not be swayed by anyone's doctrine except the Savior's (vs. 13-24). When he finally did begin to meet with the other apostles, it was with only a few of them and only for a short time. Fourth, he declared that God had chosen him for this very specific ministry, that his previous life was utterly opposed to that calling, and that it required direct intervention by God to set him on the correct path. Thus, anything his opponents claimed could only make him more, not less, insistent on his message.

Chapter two records yet another visit Paul made to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas and Titus (vs. 1-5). The fact that Luke never mentioned Titus in Acts makes it difficult to make a certain determination, but the "FOURTEEN YEARS" Paul mentioned makes it possible that this was the famine relief visit in Acts 11:30. This interpretation is preferred because this visit was "ONLY . . . A PRIVATE MEETING WITH THE INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE" rather than all the apostles and elders and congregation at the Jerusalem Council.⁴ In this meeting, Paul made sure to emphasize that he preached justification by grace through faith alone and did not insist on circumcision for Gentiles (vs. 6-10). The other apostles agreed with his message and agreed that he and Barnabas "WOULD GO TO THE GENTILES AND THEY TO THE CIRCUMCISED." (This also implies that their Acts 13-14 missionary tour had not taken place yet.)

In a show of "goodwill" for Paul and Barnabas' ministry in Antioch, Peter made a visit there (vs. 11-14). Although he had good relations with them for a while, including eating meals with them, when "CERTAIN PEOPLE CAME FROM JAMES"⁵ he began to pull away from the Gentiles. This hypocrisy grew to such a level "THAT EVEN BARNABAS" got caught up in it. Because of the public humiliation these Jews imposed on their Gentile brothers, Paul publicly called them out.

Paul used the recollection of this event to segue into his first major doctrinal statement of the letter's body and introduced his main thesis: "WE KNOW THAT NO ONE IS JUSTIFIED BY THE WORKS OF THE LAW BUT BY THE FAITHFULNESS OF JESUS CHRIST" (vs. 16). To the Jews God gave the covenants, promises, etc. (Romans 9:1-5), and Jesus said that "SALVATION IS FROM THE JEWS" (John 4:22). Paul's emphasis that he was a Jew "BY BIRTH" (literally, "by nature") rather than "by conversion" was to show that he was not justified by any of those. Even a Jew must believe in Jesus, something Paul expands in detail in Romans.

⁴ Some of this depends on whether "FOURTEEN YEARS" goes back to Paul's salvation, including the "THREE YEARS" of 1:18, or if it follows consecutively after those three years. In the latter case, this visit may be the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, meaning this letter must have been written later. I prefer the former view.

⁵ There are some who believe this means that James instigated this display. While this was possible, there is nothing else in Scripture to corroborate this charge.

One debated point in this passage and several others in Paul's writings has to do with the phrase "THE FAITHFULNESS OF JESUS." Although this is often considered the best translation of the Greek text, most translations offer "FAITH IN JESUS." This seems to do damage to Paul's meaning, emphasizing our faith rather than his work.⁶ Much has been written on this, and it is impossible to work through the whole debate here.

Chapter three begins the second of three sections, this time with a question of accusation against Paul's readers. Based on their movement away from faith toward works, Paul believed that they had been put under a spell of sorts. Verses 1-5 are a figurative snapping of Paul's fingers or shaking them awake from a spiritual trance. Had they so quickly (1:6) forgotten that they were saved through faith so that they were now willing to require circumcision for new converts in their churches, from their communities?

Using his favorite example (see also Romans 4), Paul pointed them to Genesis 15:6, where Abraham – the great father of the faith – simply believed, centuries before the Law was given (vs. 6-14). At the same time, Paul introduced Abraham's spiritual family, consisting of those, and only those, who simply believe as he did. This family included Gentiles, as God had promised in the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:3). Paul also pointed out that one cannot obey only parts of the Law to be declared righteous. In fact, when one places himself under any part of the Law, he places himself under the entire Law and is subject to every part of it. Yet even that cannot provide eternal salvation because the Law could never accomplish that. This is why Christ had to die, becoming a curse under the Law so he could free people from the Law and receive the promised Spirit.

In verses 15-22 he used classical Greek logic to unquestionably show the difference between the physical promises (plural) that God made to Abraham and his physical descendants and the spiritual promise (singular) that he made to Abraham and everyone who believes. Because the Law came after God made these promises, it could not invalidate the promises. Instead, God designed the Law to protect the Israelite people from defecting from him so they could one day receive the promised Spirit through faith in Jesus. Under the Law, neither a Gentile, a slave, nor a woman could receive an inheritance. In Christ, however, all people can receive the Spirit through faith, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (vs. 28). No believer is left out of this spiritual inheritance because we "ARE ALL SONS OF GOD THROUGH FAITH" (vs. 26).

Sadly, many today who attempt to use this passage to eliminate functional roles in the home or church (female elders, feminist theology, etc.) completely miss the context of spiritual inheritance and are bringing their false theology to the passage for their own purposes. Others go so far to teach that God has even removed the distinctions between male and female to support their depraved belief that God approves of homosexuality in the Church.

Chapter four continues the second section of the letter and the explanation of the inheritance available to all who believe in Jesus. Verses 1-7 contain the wonderful truth that Jesus was born at just the right time in just the right manner to accomplish everything God wanted to do, namely, to adopt rebel humans back

⁶ The Greek text of 2:16 reads in part ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου, "so that we might be declared righteous by faith/faithfulness of Christ and not by works of law." To translate the first half "by faith in Christ" loses the effect of the parallel between "faithfulness of Christ" and "works of law."

into his spiritual family and make us free. This is important because we are all enslaved in sin by nature (vs. 8-12; Ephesians 2:1-3), but in Christ we are freed from that. Paul wondered, then, why someone would place himself under any kind of restrictions again.

Verses 13-20 break from Paul's explanation of his doctrine to a personal appeal to his original readers. He reminded them of how they had received him. Even though he was violently ill, they were not repulsed by him, but rather received him and his message as if he were Jesus himself. In fact, Paul noted that they would have gouged out their own eyes and given them to him if they were able.⁷

This chapter (and the second section) closes with an allegory (an extended metaphor), in which Paul likened the old covenant to Hagar and Ishmael.⁸ While he was a legitimate physical son of Abraham, Ishmael was not the son through whom God's promises would be fulfilled. In the same way, while the Law, symbolized by Mt. Sinai, was legitimately God's way of leading Israel during that time, it was never meant to bring righteousness or salvation. As Hagar and Ishmael were slaves in Abraham's household, those who subject themselves to the Law are slaves to it.

Sarah and Isaac (along with Mt. Zion), on the other hand, represent the only true way of salvation, through Jesus. As they were free persons in Abraham's household, those who come to God through faith in Jesus find freedom from the Law. Why, then, would someone place himself back into slavery when he had been set free?

Chapter five begins the third, and final, section of the letter, in which Paul gave practical application of how we should live out our freedom in Christ. He insisted that it was "FOR FREEDOM [THAT] CHRIST HAS SET US FREE" (vs. 1). He could not emphasize enough how foolish (3:1) they were for placing themselves into slavery by adding circumcision to faith (vs. 1-6). They had become so deluded by the Jewish legalists that they had forgotten that physical circumcision (or lack thereof) had no spiritual value in Christ – "THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IS FAITH WORKING THROUGH LOVE." Paul became so agitated at the thought of his friends falling for the legalists' false teaching he opined, "If these legalists like circumcision so much, why don't they just finish the job!" (vs. 12)

The key is to use our freedom in Christ for Christ and his purposes, namely, serving one another like Christ (vs. 13). We do this by lining up behind the Holy Spirit and keeping in step with him (vs. 16-26).⁹ Paul thought it important to remind them that every believer has two natures that are mutually opposed to

⁷ This offhand remark in verse 15 possibly hints to Paul's "THORN IN THE FLESH," a constant reminder of his weakness and immense privilege (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

⁸ This is the only place in the New Testament that we find the English word "allegory" or its Greek source, ἀλληγορέω (*allegoreō*). An allegory is an extended metaphor, usually with several pieces connecting the two things being compared. This should not be confused with the allegorical method of interpreting the Bible that requires looking "deeper" than the literal meaning of the text, usually due to perceived errors or problems that the interpreter has with the text. The literal interpretation method allows the use of allegory and metaphor as legitimate uses of the language. The allegorical interpretation ignores the literal meaning of the text or supplements it with additional, "spiritual" meanings.

⁹ The word translated "BEHAVE IN ACCORDANCE" in vs. 25 is a military term referring to how soldiers march in line behind the leader. Paul's point was that, if the Spirit has given us life, we should line up behind him and stay in step with him like a soldier marching in formation.

one another, that these are in constant warfare with one another, that we can “feed” only one of them, and that each one bears fruit in keeping with its source. “THE WORKS OF THE FLESH ARE OBVIOUS,” producing all kinds of sinful behavior. “THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT,” on the other hand, is less conspicuous but still in line with its source. Notice that this fruit comes from the Spirit, not from ourselves (we cannot manufacture it or force it to grow) and that its purpose is for serving one another.

Chapter six closes this letter with some final instructions and thoughts on living out the fruit of the Spirit. Because believers will still be overtaken in sin, it is important that the congregation restore sinning brothers and sisters back to the faith, in the gentleness of the Spirit, and help them carry their burdens as they grow (vs. 1-2). At the same time, each person is responsible for lining himself up with the Spirit, not thinking he is better than the others, because we are each responsible for ourselves before God (vs. 3-5).

Understanding this balance is important because the way we decide to live (flesh or Spirit) will come to full fruition (vs. 6-8). Like a harvest our actions we will reap *what* we sow, *later* than we sow, and *much more than* we sow, so the apostle encouraged his readers to sow life and godliness through the Spirit. Because living for Christ in this world is a difficult task, he encouraged them to persevere, to not waver, and to do good for someone whenever the opportunity arises (vs. 9-10).¹⁰ His closing thoughts returned to those who were enslaving themselves under the Law by submitting to circumcision (vs. 12-15), and he offered a final plea that they would stop their foolishness. In keeping with the comment about his eyesight in chapter four, Paul noted that he wrote with his “OWN HAND” which required him to use “BIG LETTERS” so he could see them. That, along with his handwriting, was probably a mark of authentication that the letter was truly from him (Philippians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17).

Verse 16 is often used to attempt to prove that the Church (or all believers) make up the “true Israel” or “spiritual Israel” because of Paul’s phrase “THE ISRAEL OF GOD.” This belief system teaches that God has chosen to replace Israel with the Church or that the Church is the spiritual extension of Israel. No matter the phrasing, they believe that the promises God made to Israel will be fulfilled in the Church, not national Israel.¹¹ Given the context of the rest of the letter, where Paul made a clear distinction between believing and unbelieving Jews (Israel) and all believers in Christ (Church), the grammar shows that Paul put his blessing on two groups: “ALL WHO WILL BEHAVE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THIS RULE” (believing Gentiles) and “THE ISRAEL OF GOD” (believing Jews). The structure of the sentence does not allow for these to be combined into one group in this verse.¹²

¹⁰ Paul thought our focus in doing good should prioritize “THOSE WHO BELONG TO THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH.” Even still, that does not mean to ignore unbelievers. We should help them as well, “WHENEVER WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY.”

¹¹ This is often called “Replacement Theology,” and it is found in the broader form of Covenant Theology and in much Reformed (Calvinistic) teaching. Ironically, it is also found in much liberal theology, because the replacement or removal of Israel as God’s chosen people is a satanic doctrine that has infiltrated many religions and denominations, encompassing those who are otherwise conservative and liberal alike.

¹² Paul used the preposition twice: εἰρήνην ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς καὶ ἔλεος καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ, “*peace and mercy upon them and upon the Israel of God.*” Grammatically, these must be two distinct groups.