

The Epistle to the Galatians – The Gospel of Grace

Introduction

The Gospel of Jesus Christ. What is it? And who is it for? If you posed this question to the unchurched stranger on street, you'd likely get the answer that the gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But for those of us in Christ, the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ the Son of God has laid down His sinless life as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of particular sinners, resurrected on the third day, and is now seated and reigning on His throne. The great hope of every Christian is the day when all the redeemed will live with Christ in sinless, glorified bodies, and worship Him forever. By His work on the cross, He has conquered death, and has justified unrighteous and ill-deserving sinners. Those who were once His enemies are now His bride, and all of this is the result of the grace of mercy of God alone. That is the gospel in a nutshell. It is great news! There is the greatest hope, for the utterly hopeless! This is the hope that is found in scripture. This is the gospel news that we have heard and believed. The gospel is what we want to bring to the world. The error that many Christians make is they see the gospel as introductory, as 101, as entry-level, as "ABC". They want to move beyond the gospel once they know it. It's not that Christians stop loving the gospel, it's just that they many times look for something deeper, something fresher, something at the Master's degree level. The problem in this thinking is that the gospel is not only introductory, but it is to be the strength of the Christian for the entirety of their life. The gospel isn't ABC, it's A to Z. The gospel is to be central to all Christian theology and obedience. No other religion in the world offers the hope of the gospel. No other religion has such a good news! The gospel is what distinguishes Christianity from every other religion.

If you were to research every religion in the world, and reduce their doctrines down to reach one common denominator, you'd conclude that all religions are the same – except Christianity. How could I ever conclude that Islam, Hinduism, and Taoism are the same when we all know they're so different? Well, it's not that their teachings are identical, but they do share a common principle: They all promise the hope of blessings in this life, peace in this life, or heaven in the next life in return for good deeds. Every religion in the world at its core has a works-based salvation. There is only one religion in the world that differs, and that is Christianity. It is the only religion in the world that offers a Saviour from sins, a Redeemer to mend together into an eternal union His chosen people with Himself. Christianity is the only religion in the world whereby the one and only true God, creator of Heaven and Earth, has chosen to show mercy and graciously saved sinners based completely upon His own good pleasure. This is the good news of the gospel! When a sinner rightly perceives how wicked he is, he consequently knows how hopeless he is, and yet Christianity gives him that hope! Salvation is free! God's mercy and grace are free! Christ is the only satisfier of the soul! Jesus says, **"But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again."** (John 4:14)

Unfortunately, this isn't the free gospel of grace that is held in many Christian churches. There are many sects of Christianity that have abandoned the gospel of salvation full and free, or at best have slowly wandered away from it to a message of salvation by works (or at best some awkward blend of grace and works). According to Wikipedia, the Christian population of the world is estimated at 2.42 billion people. Half of those people are estimated to be Roman Catholic (1.285 billion). (There are an estimated 75-105 million Baptists) Therefore, half of the self-professed Christian population today holds to the very doctrines of works-righteousness that sparked the Protestant Reformation calling the church back to the gospel five-hundred years ago! But let's not get the impression that all Protestants have

championed the gospel of grace either. The ugly fact is that many Protestant churches, although they wander far from Catholic theology, failed to land at biblical theology. The purpose of this lesson isn't to name those errors, my purpose is simply to point out that the Christian church (and I use that term cautiously) has always been in the fight for truth. Why do I use the term 'church' cautiously? Because buildings aren't churches, God's elect who congregate to worship are. Not every meeting of people who claim the name of Christ are churches. There are countless buildings where people meet to do "church", and they are led by wicked men and women. The teaching from their pulpit is secular and philosophical, heretical and even blasphemous at times. It is necessary for Christians to not only recognize those places but expose them, and pray for those people who are devoid of the gospel within them. Every bible-believing church needs to be alert, and armed with the Word of God, ready to make a defense for the hope that it in them. Ready to take the gospel to the world. Every Christian needs to keep the gospel central.

This was the issue within the churches of Galatia. Although they were founded upon the gospel of grace, they **"quickly desert[ed] Him who called [them] in the grace of Christ and [turned] to a different gospel—not that there is another one,"** but there was a letting down of the guard, and infiltrating the church were those who, **"trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ."** (Gal. 1:6-7) Contrary to our world's philosophy today, there aren't many gospels, there aren't many paths to Heaven. There is only one, and His name is Jesus Christ. The Galatians needed to be instructed, they needed to be pointed in the right direction, they needed to hear and believe the gospel of grace. And so do we! We need to hear this book, and cherish the free gospel of God's grace, the free gift of salvation found in Christ alone! I pray that with God's blessing, we will all benefit greatly in our effort to study through this short book. Let's take some time now to get into the context of this letter before we study it.

SHIPPING AND RECEIVING

The author and sender of the letter is universally accepted as being the apostle Paul. There's really no debate about that, but who were the Galatians? The answer to that question isn't quite so simple, but I'll try to boil the lengthy debates down into terms that even I understand. Galatians 1:2 gives us our first clue, **"To the churches of Galatia"**. Our first clue as to the recipients of this letter tells us that there wasn't just one recipient. Galatia was a region, not the name of a church. So as long as we know that, we know who received the letter, right? Not quite. Galatia was significantly big. At its peak, it stretched from the Black Sea down to the Mediterranean. (Modern day Turkey from top to bottom) There has been much debate concerning the spread of the gospel at this point in history across the Galatian region. So how far could the letter have gone? We can't turn to the letter itself for clues. There's no mention whatsoever of its intended destination. The debate amongst the bible-brains seems to be about whether or not the letter reached the northern half of Galatia, or whether it stayed in the south, the Roman Province of Galatia. Many commentators have closed the door completely on the northern region, since there's no evidence that Paul or the gospel had been there at that time. But silence on an issue is not conclusive proof that the letter didn't make its way there. There are two possible verses that proponents of the northern view use to teach us that Paul reached these northern areas (Acts 16:6 and 18:23), but the reference to the region of Galatia is very general. Other than those two vague verses, there is never another mention in the book of Acts to the gospel intentionally being taken to the northern region of Galatia. In all of Paul's journeys, his strategy always seemed to be to visit the main cities along the major routes. For him to have gone that far north would have been a significant deviation of what we know he typically did. Considering the limited resources and funds that

Paul had on his missionary journeys, it also would have been challenging for him to take the gospel up there where travelling was much more difficult, and the efficiency of bringing the gospel to the people would have been difficult because of the sparsity of the people in the land.

It seem most likely that when the term Galatia is used, it is speaking primarily of the political center, the Roman province of Galatia in the south. We know from Acts 20:4, that both Gaius and Timothy who supported him, were from Derbe, a significant city in the south. Paul and Barnabas are recorded in scripture as visiting this southern region. On their first missionary journey, they visited Perga in Pamphylia, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Interestingly, on their second journey, while traveling through Mysia, they attempted to go to the northern region of Galatia (Bithynia), **“But the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.”** And on their third missionary journey, the closest they came again to the north was Antioch for the third time. With that data, is it impossible for the northern Galatians to have been converted (even through Paul) and been recipients of this letter? No, but there’s no evidence that they did, and it sounds unlikely at best. The Galatians are very likely the converts of the compilation of Paul’s journeys through Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, and many other small towns in the developed and multi-cultured region of south Galatia. Paul mentions Barnabas in this letter three times (2:1, 9, 13). It would have been strange for Paul to mention someone by a familiar name, to people who wouldn’t have a clue who he was. The southern region would have known Barnabas quite well.

So why split hairs so much about geography? Because I want to paint the picture in your mind of the busyness and complexity of the time and area. There was a lot going on in south Galatia at that time. They were facing pressures and influences against the truth of gospel, problems that most likely weren’t going on in the north. It’s the difference in culture between the heart of Windsor, and the country road of Colchester. In the churches of Galatia, there were those who were blending their old practices with the gospel, and therefore leaving no room for the cross. Paul isn’t addressing Galatia vaguely, but he’s writing to address a particular problem in a particular region, and that’s important to understand at the outset.

WHAT’S THE LETTER ALL ABOUT?

We live in an age of texting and email. We constantly send messages to people that are light-hearted. The entire point of Twitter is designed to get people to communicate using less than 140 characters, so you end up with quick messages that many times don’t get to the point, or even have one at all.

Times were a smidge different in the first century. Letters took time to write, and took time to get around. No one wrote letters without a reason, and Paul had a good one to write Galatians. As I’ve already said, there was some serious pressures that were becoming a problem in the churches of Galatia. Word of these problems had obviously reached Paul’s ear, and he sought to reform these believers back to the gospel. He wasted no time getting to the point. After five brief introductory verses Paul sharply comments, **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you!”** Somehow, in some way, an anti-gospel teaching snuck into the church, and the people abandoned Christ. We know that circumcision had some part of it, Paul says in 5:2, **“if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.”** Paul clarifies his point in the next verses, **“I testify again to every man who accept circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”** A gospel of salvation by obedience to the commands of God had entered in and pushed Christ out. Paul

questions them in 3:2, **“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”** The Galatians had a serious problem, and Paul was clearly agonizing over their present state. He wonders if his efforts to feed them spiritually had failed in 4:11, **“I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”**

WHO IS THE AGITATOR?

Galatians 3:1, **“Who has bewitched you?”** Who was behind this invasion of gospel truth that prompted this letter? To begin, it wasn’t simply one person, Paul says that there are, **“some who trouble you”**. (1:7) Paul speaks about them in every chapter of this letter, 2:4-5, **“Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.”** 4:17, **“They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.”** 5:10, 12 **“I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is...I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!”** 6:12-13, **“It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. 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.”**

Paul speaks about them in every chapter, but he never mentions their names, and I believe for a couple of reasons. The first reason is because both Paul and the Galatians were well aware of the problems and the people behind them, and it therefore wasn’t necessary for Paul to waste time naming specific people and problems. You may have noticed, like I did, that Paul said at the end of 5:10, **“whoever he is.”** We shouldn’t let that mislead us into thinking that Paul didn’t know who has behind the problem. To put it in our modern vernacular, Paul is saying, *“I don’t care who he is!”* Paul said is similarly in 2:6, **“And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me).”** These agitators were numerous, and influential, and Paul is calling them out. He doesn’t care who they are. The debate amongst theologians as to exactly who the agitators are is quite extensive, over my head (even after much reading), and in my opinion, not beneficial to attempt to teach through. The traditional understanding of the agitators is that they were Jewish Christians who held tightly to their roots and super-imposed their religious roots in Judaism into the Galatian churches. These heretics were nothing more than Judaizers who held observance of the law and circumcision over the heads of all Gentile Christians if they ever wanted to be saved, and achieve a full Christian status. These heretics perverted the gospel, and prompted the sharp rebuke, and call for all true believers to trust solely in the gospel which they were instructed by Paul in.

WHEN WAS THE LETTER WRITTEN?

Ronald Y. K. Fung spends 19 pages of his commentary answering this question. In all of my study of scripture, I’m not sure if I’ve ever seen anyone take so long to answer the question of the dating of a book. The argumentation may fascinate you, which is why I bring it up, but in my judgment it’s not necessary for this class to spend so long on the question.

There are two items of particular importance from the letter that will help us to nail-down the date of this letter: (1) the implication from 4:13 that Paul had already been with the Galatians on two other occasions, and (2) Paul identifying that he had already visited Jerusalem in 2:1-10.

Galatians 4:13, “**You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first.**” The Greek expression used is (*to proteron*) which can be translated as the first of two visits. If Paul were referring to the first of three or more visits, he would have used the word (*protos*). Based upon this, many are comfortable to place the writing of this letter sometime after Paul’s first missionary journey.

The text of 2:1-10 I believe, helps us to narrow down a date. There is quite a debate concerning what visit to Jerusalem that Paul is referring to in Galatians 2, and which side we land on can change the timing of the book. There are many great minds (Lightfoot, Lenski and Meyer) who believe that the account of Galatians 2 is referring to Paul’s trip for the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. While other (Ramsay and Bruce) see the account as referring to Paul’s famine visit of Acts 11:27-30 and 12:24-25.

The account of chapter 2 with the Jerusalem Council is persuading: The same churches of Jerusalem and Antioch are involved. Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James are mentioned in both chapters. The topic of Gentile circumcision is the basic issue in each, and in both chapters, Gentiles were exempted from circumcision. It’s also noted that it wasn’t until Acts 13:1-2 that Saul was set apart for ministry, so Acts 15 is the likely chapter that Galatians 2 is referring.

But what about the argument for Acts 11 and 12? I think there’s a plausible case for it too. The same two churches are involved. This trip to Jerusalem (Acts 11) would have been Paul’s second trip there post-conversion, the first recorded in Acts 9. The “only” exhortation of 2:10 that they “remember the poor” fits better with Acts 11 than Acts 15. The Jerusalem Council concerned a problem and sought an official response, no such problem is mentioned here. Galatians 2 mentions only two delegates (Paul and Barnabas), the same two who finished their service in Jerusalem in Acts 12:25. There were Paul, and Barnabas, and some others accounted for in Acts 15. The Galatians 2 visit to Jerusalem was made in response to divine revelation, possibly in response to the prophecy of Agabus of a great famine over all the world, which prompted a Jerusalem visit by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27-30) Also, Paul and Barnabas spoke “**privately before those who seemed influential**” (2:2) which again lines up better with Acts 11 than Acts 15, where it was a public Church Council.

I hardly summarized the debate well, nor did I solve it. But here is why I side on the second view that the Galatians 2 trip is referring to Acts 11: There is no reference in Galatians 2 to the Jerusalem council, which dealt specifically with issues in the letter to the Galatians, and would have been important to include in instructions. And the use of the word *to proteron* is clearly Paul’s second visit, the word would have been different if it were his third, which accords with Acts 11. Therefore, If we compile the argument, Paul wrote this letter after his first missionary journey, but before the Jerusalem Council, leaving around A.D. 49, likely the earliest of Paul’s writings.

WHY DID THE GALATIANS FALL AWAY SO SOON?

One of my hopes throughout this book is to stress to you the similarity between the Galatians, and us today. Our tendency as we read books and watch movies is to delve into the main character, we love to be the hero in the story, but I want us to meet the Galatians in their fallen human condition, and realize that they’re not all that different from us today.

Why would they fall away so quickly? Paul has already spent some time with them laying the foundation of the gospel. They had been built up and properly equipped to live in this dark world as the

light of Christ, and yet they have quickly deserted Him! Paul was astonished at it. (1:6) He says in 1:8 that he had already preached the gospel to them, so they had no case for ignorance. The Galatians were foolish. They had done something like the Israelites of the Old Testament had done, and intermingled the truths of God with lies, creating a hybrid form of false worship. How they could go from the one extreme of Paul's foundation in Christ, to this extreme blew Paul's mind. He asked who bewitched them? (3:1) Literally, Paul could think of no logical way that they could have arrived where they were without being brainwashed, or hypnotized into errant thinking. He had warned them before to walk by the Spirit, and not to operate in the works of the flesh, because those who live by the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God. (5:21) Yet here we are, reading the letter that addressed them in their state of wandering. How could this happen so quickly?

One reason that I will offer up, is a reason that I am convinced that Christians all around us would still do today, and that is to escape persecution. We read books about martyrs today, and praise God for their faith. We also pray that we would never face what they did. We have it rather good here in North America presently, losing your job might be the worst thing that could happen to you in Canada for your faith. Probably the most common form of persecution that Christians will face, is they will be made fun of, or lose friends because they're "weird". In case you're internal lawyer is hard at work defending your piety, honestly and quietly ask yourself how aggressive of an evangelizer you are.

This Galatian church didn't need a copy of Foxe's Book of Martyrs to understand what persecution was, they were founded upon it. In Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas were preaching the gospel in the Jewish synagogue in Iconium (South Galatia), many Jews and Greeks believed! (Acts 14:1) In fact, this might be the first step of faith that many of the readers of this letter would take. But what happened? The people were divided between those who accepted Christ, and those whose hatred toward Christ was elevated. The same sinful humanity that murdered the Saviour, sought to stone Paul and Barnabas for their gospel message. The Galatians, though they believed, knew first hand that following Christ would mean in certain cases immediate, and mortal consequences. In verse 5 of Acts 14, they sought to stone Paul and he fled to the surrounding countryside, in verse 19 of the same chapter while at Lystra, they did stone him, and dragged him out of the city assuming they killed him. The Galatians knew what it was to suffer, they knew persecution for walking in Christ was certain. Paul attempted to strengthen them in Acts 14:22 by telling them to **"continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."** So I say again, before we shake our heads in disgust over the early depart of the gospel from these Galatians, what would you do? They were certainly responsible for their sinful departure, but I wonder how many would continue to meet as believers even secretly if persecution was so great. I'll tell you who would, genuine believers in Christ.

Allow me to offer another reason for their quick desertion of the gospel. And I believe this reason can live alongside the first reason: Works righteousness. Remember that many believers would have been recent converts from Judaism, a works-righteous religion that rejected Christ. Judaism was also a showy religion with its holy days, and feasts and audible prayers, and good works. It's quite the pill to swallow to come to Christ where you empty yourself of all merit, and admit your bankruptcy before God. Biblical Christianity has no room for salvation through works, and keeping sabbaths and holy days, eating certain foods on certain days, etc. Having come from a Roman Catholic background (as many of you also), I can attest first-hand the difficulties that I had understanding salvation by faith alone, in Christ alone, to God's glory alone. I wrestled in my mind over the necessity of my works. Fallen human nature always desires to glory in the flesh, as Paul mentions in (6:13).

But let me offer you one more thought as to why they have so quickly deserted, and this thought it borne out of a Mark Dever sermon that I heard at T4G, perhaps the first one I attended? The topic of his sermon had to do with the importance of preaching the gospel soundly to those in the church, and ensuring that those within the membership rightly understood, believed and lived out the gospel before becoming members. Dever was not requiring moral perfection or superiority before membership, but he was requiring (as we do) that classes be taken so that people know and agree with the major doctrines of the church before signing on. The danger that he proposed happens in many churches (especially young churches) is that they preach [not the gospel] but a message geared to culture that draws crowds. But the danger to adapt the message to promote comfort, security and fellowship brings about a large number of “Christians” in churches who aren’t saved. But the danger doesn’t stop there either, because when most of your church isn’t saved, they fire the good preacher and hire a false one. We’ve seen that repeated over and over again in churches today. So I offer one last reason for their departure could be the lack of biblical training, and righteous living week in and week out.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

WHAT IS THEOLOGICALLY CENTRAL TO THE LETTER?

You may have already reasoned by the graphic that I’ve chosen for the slides announcing this class, that the theme of Galatians is God’s grace to us in salvation. Or perhaps the verse that I chose to place on the cover of your duotang told you that the theme is “Justification in Christ alone”. You’d be right if you already concluded that, but let me unpack that theme a little more here.

Paul answers the question as to how and why we are accepted by God, but he handles so many more topics that flow out from our justification. He talks about our salvation through Christ, our union with Christ, our unity as believers in Christ, our liberty in Christ, the promise of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, and Christian living in light of being in Christ.

R. Alan Cole says concerning the theme of this book, *“Our new standing is achieved only by faith in Christ (2:16), which is also faith in the cross as God’s chosen means of reconciliation (6:14-15). This faith in the finished work of Christ results in the promised gift of the Spirit (3:2), who is ours because we have become sons and daughters of God (4:6), and this brings in turn the new freedom of the Spirit (5:1). But, because faith in Christ also means union with Christ (2:20), this new liberty can never become license to do as we please: the faith that justifies is a ‘faith working through love’ (5:16). This union with Christ by faith unites all humankind; differences of sex and race and status have become irrelevant in Christ (3:28), as has even the religious distinction between ‘circumcision’ and ‘uncircumcision’, Jew and Gentile (5:6). No reader of the letter can doubt that this is Paul’s message to the Galatians and, in this sense, justification by faith does indeed lie at the very heart of the letter, although the doctrine itself may not be stated in Galatians as clearly and unequivocally as in Romans 5:1, at a later period. But after all, Romans is basically a theological treatise, while Galatians is an emotional appeal.”*¹

IMPORTANT ISSUES IN THE LETTER

- The Cross is central, but that doesn’t make the law evil. The false teachers were adding laws to obtain salvation. Paul doesn’t make light of the law, he doesn’t dismiss it as irrelevant, he sees the law as important, just not the path to salvation. The law was given that we may obey the

¹ Cole, R. Alan, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Galatians* IVP, 1989 (p. 44)

law, not that we might prove our worthiness to enter God's kingdom through it. So it is important that we not throw the baby out with the bathwater when we consider the law, simply that we give the law its proper place.

- Circumcision is referenced 13 times in this letter. Building off the previous point of the law having its right place, we need to remember that Paul had nothing against the act of circumcision. He was circumcised, he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). Paul takes up an issue with circumcision in this letter, but it's in regards to the attainment of salvation through circumcision. Paul will not compromise the gospel and mislead people to think that circumcision had any part whatsoever with justification. It was necessary for Timothy to be circumcised in order to gain the ear of his Jewish hearers, in order that they might hear and believe the gospel.
- The flesh is mentioned 18 times in this short letter. We live our life in the flesh, but we as Christians aren't to be living by the flesh, but rather, in the Spirit. You cannot live both ways, you are either living in the flesh, or by the Spirit, they are mutually exclusive. (5:17)
- Paul refers to the 'faith' 22 times in this book (14 times in chapter 3), the third highest total in the entire NT (behind Romans and Hebrews), again impressive considering the short length of the letter. Paul references Abraham's faith nine times, he never references any of Abraham's good works. He is stressing justification by faith alone.
- Paul speaks of 'promise' eight times in chapter 3 and twice elsewhere in the book. He speaks of the promise made to Abraham (3:16), and points out that a promise made 430 years before the giving of the law is not rendered void by the coming of the law (3:17). Paul tells the Galatians that the law and promise are not contradictory. The Holy Spirit given to believers is another promise of God (3:14).

This letter is so, so rich!!! I hope that this introductory lesson has excited your soul. I hope that the Spirit is stirring your heart to return weekly so that we can dig deep and grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray often for the Lord's blessing upon us as we journey through His Word together.