

# Galatians

## *Set Free for Freedom*

### **Background**

Paul's letter to the Galatians is believed to be his earliest letter, having probably been written in AD48 or 49). Galatia was a region of Anatolia, now modern Turkey, (which Paul visits in Acts 13-14).

### **Greetings (1v1-5)**

Paul's greeting mentions two key issues in this letter:

- Paul's authority – he reminds them he is an apostle of Christ.
- Paul's gospel – he reminds them of the gospel of grace they believe.

It appears that both of these had been challenged by false teachers. In his letter Paul defends the gospel, and his authority to proclaim it.

### **There is No Other Gospel (1v6-10)**

The Galatians are turning to another gospel. But there is no other gospel – anything else is no gospel at all. Someone had been confusing the Galatians (details of what they were saying emerge through the letter). Paul calls a curse down on anyone who preaches a different gospel, whoever it is.

### **Paul's Gospel came directly from Jesus (1v11-24)**

Paul takes care to point out that he hasn't pinched the gospel from someone else – it was revealed to him. When Paul encountered Jesus, his life was completely changed; previously, he had been “advancing in Judaism,” but then he was sent to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. He didn't check his message with anyone – he went off and preached it in Arabia, then had a brief visit to Jerusalem, then carried on to Syria and Cilicia. There was no time, even on his trip to Jerusalem, to learn everything he preached. The gospel he preached came directly from God.

### **Paul's Gospel was endorsed by the other Apostles (2v1-10)**

After fourteen year, when Paul finally met with the apostles in Jerusalem, he explained the gospel he had been preaching to the gentiles. He took with him Barnabas (a Jew involved in the mission to the Gentiles) and Titus, a converted, uncircumcised Greek. Some “false brothers” had raised the issue, but Paul didn't give in to them and Titus was not circumcised. (The same kind of false teaching is now at work among the Galatians).

When Paul met privately with the leaders in Jerusalem. None of them added anything to Paul's message – it wasn't lacking anything. Indeed, they commended the team to their mission to the Gentiles.

### **Paul vs Peter (2v11-21)**

Paul then met Peter, an opposed him publicly because of his behaviour. Peter changed his behaviour in front of visitors from Jerusalem. Usually he would eat happily with gentiles, but the visitors arrives he separates himself from them (as do others, following his example). Paul says he is not acting in line with the true gospel. Peter is acting as if his actions make him right before God, which goes against their faith in Jesus Christ.

At the end of chapter 2, Paul introduces the heart of the gospel – **justification by faith**. Neither the Jews nor the gentiles are to put their trust in the law, but rather in the gospel. This leaves Paul open to accusations that he is encouraging immorality – he nips this in the bud right away – Absolutely not! The gospel is not just about changing our legal status and nothing else – it goes hand in hand with a changed life. Paul's life is changed as well as his status.

### **You Foolish Galatians! (3v1-25)**

The Galatians are turning back to trying to make themselves righteous by the law instead of being justified by faith. This is ridiculous to Paul, and he tells them! He appeals to their own experience of life as Christians (v1-5). Then he points out that, actually, nothing has changed. The law has not been done away with. Rather, it is part of a much larger picture.

Abraham (before the law) was originally counted righteous by faith in a promise (Gen 15v6). God's plan was always that the gentiles would be reached with the gospel, and they would be included in the promise by faith. The other alternative is observance of the law, but it is impossible. All who rely on the law are under a curse (v10), because no-one can keep the law. In dying for us, Christ redeemed us from that curse, so that the Gentiles (and the Jews) might be included in the promise to Abraham.

The law was introduced 430 years later, not to set aside the promise, but to confirm it and show how necessary it is. It “lifts the lid of man's respectability” (Stott). The law was added until Jesus arrived, and it provoked faith by showing the depth of our sin and the holiness of God. He uses two illustrations, that of a prison and a 'tutor.' The Jews were held captive by the law, but not in an entirely negative way – it pointed and guided them to the coming of Christ.

### **Sons of God (3v26-4v7)**

Through belief in Christ (3v26-29), we are all sons of God – there is equality, because we all approach God on the same terms, to become heirs of the promise through Christ. Paul says the law was like a guardian until Christ came. We were slaves to it, then Christ came to redeem us. Now we are fully sons and heirs – this is the goal which was in view with both the promise and the law.

### **Paul's Pastoral Concern for the Galatians (4v8-20)**

In the light of knowing God, the law is weak and miserable, so why turn back to it? They are willingly going back into slavery, and their faith has degenerated back into works. They have changed since Paul first met them – their joy has gone.

Paul pleads with them: “become like me, for I became like you.” Paul was willing to become like a Gentile. Now he wants them to rejoice, as he does, in the freedom of the Gospel.

### **A Helpful Illustration (4v21-31)**

Paul uses the story of Hagar and Sarah to illustrate the difference between living under slavery and living under the promise. Hagar, Abraham's slave, represents slavery, the present Jerusalem under the law. Sarah (although unnamed) represents children born of a promise, the new Jerusalem. Although Ishmael persecuted Isaac (Gen 21v19), ultimately it is the child of the promise who shares the inheritance. We are mad to choose slavery over freedom and becoming part of the promise through faith!

### **For Freedom! (5v1)**

We've been set free for freedom – so don't then choose to be slaves! Paul tells them that if they decide to be circumcised, Christ is of no use at all, because they will have to keep the whole law. They have rejected grace. He tells them that faith is not about **being** righteous, but about **being made** righteous by Christ (v5). In Christ, neither circumcision or uncircumcision has any value, only faith expressed through love.

He returns again to the false teachers, but he is confident that the Galatians will see the truth. And he reminds them that this is offensive, and that's why some are preaching a false gospel.

Paul goes back to the charge that Christians are free to do what they like. He emphasises what freedom doesn't mean: don't use your freedom to sin! Instead, use your freedom to love each other.

The way to use freedom properly is to live by the Spirit – this will stop you fulfilling the desires of the sinful nature (as did the law). The Spirit gives us another option, different to legalism and immorality – there is a third way! Live by the Spirit! Paul present them with two (familiar) lists – a list of acts of the sinful nature (v19-21) and the fruit of the Spirit (v22-23). In those who

belong to Christ, the sinful nature has been crucified, and we instead live by the Spirit. The important thing is to keep in step with the Spirit.

### **Living the Gospel (6v1-10)**

Paul explains how Christians should treat each other. Those who are spiritual should restore each other when caught in sin. Carry each other's burdens (a practical application of "love your neighbour") to fulfill the new code Christians live by, the **law of Christ**. We will see the consequences of living for one nature or the other (v7-10).

### **Paul takes over... (6v11-18)**

Paul takes up the pen and finished the letter himself. Some people want the Galatians to be circumcised to avoid persecution, so they can be proud of their flesh. Paul, however, never wants to boast about anything except the cross. Flesh is pointless – new creation is what matters. That goes for everyone, who are all part of the Israel of God.

Paul ends where he started – the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Some Questions...**

Why might some people be tempted to add to the gospel?

What might this look like?

How does the law fit into the lives of Christian?

Why is "justification by faith" so important (and brilliant!)?