

GALATIANS

1. Introduction and overview

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Do you know anyone who is so used to being in a certain situation that he just refuses to step into a new changed situation even if it is much better than the old one? Yes, many people hate to change because it requires getting out of 'comfort zone'. As we get older, we often use this phrase – "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

If a slave chooses to remain as a beaten and starved slave though he was set free; somehow he thinks that he is better off with the current situation than the new change he is facing, it would be very hard for us to understand.

Instead of taking a lungful of sweet, fresh, cool, and pure air of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the believers of the churches of Galatia thought they had to return to the dark, dank, filthy dungeon of legalism.

Please don't think that this letter from apostle Paul should be considered what happened only in the first century and has nothing to do with our 21st Century Christianity. Actually, it has everything to do with us.

We still have many modern-day Pharisees around us alive and well; we still have staunch legalistic stances of DOs and DON'Ts for little petty unimportant matters amongst many believers of Jesus Christ. I am not talking about those cults which fence in their followers with intimidations and fear tactics. I am talking about some Christian denominations that insist speaking in tongues; being slain by the 'Holy Ghost'; being baptized by their own denomination only are a part of the requirements for salvation in Jesus Christ, etc.

By the way, the Books of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians were written for the churches of the big cities. But Galatia was a region, not a city. The region expands from the northern region of Asia Minor all the way down to the Mediterranean Sea.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

Galatians 1:1 Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead),

Apostle Paul identifies himself as the author of this letter in 1:1. He not only reveals his name, but also he wants the readers to know what kind of authority he carries – as an apostle with the direct authority from the Lord Jesus Christ.

According to many biblical scholars, the apostle wrote this letter somewhere around A.D. 48-53 while he was in Antioch after his first missionary journey. Thus, the Book of Galatians is considered the first epistle of Paul.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

This letter to Galatians is an impassioned letter. Paul had heard that the Galatian Christians were falling away from the true Gospel of grace and turning to a legalistic approach to salvation. He wished to turn them back to the freedom of salvation by faith alone.

I can almost see in my mind's eyes that apostle Paul is standing in front of the believers of the Galatian churches with two fists on his hips and the veins on his temples popping up and forcefully asking them, "Which part of 'NO HUMAN EFFORT' do you NOT understand?"

In doing so, he argued that not only is the sinner saved by grace, but the saved sinner also lives by grace. Grace is the only way to life and the way of life.

Here is one phrase for this Book's theme: "Justification comes by faith in Christ Jesus, not by works of the law." Here is the key verse for the Book of Galatians:

Galatians 2:16 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.

C. THE GALATIAN SITUATION

Shortly after apostle Paul planted the churches in Galatia, a group of legalistic Jews began to attack his message. These Jews, a.k.a. Judaizers, had incorporated Christ into their religious system but rejected the idea that He alone saves. They also insisted that it was necessary to belong to the Jewish people in order to receive the full blessings of God. To be a Jew as a Galatian Gentile, they were told to have a circumcision done, follow sabbath observance, and eat only kosher food and much more.

Why did this legalistic bondage appeal to the new converts of the Galatian churches? It is because they were experiencing a loss of social identity, since their new faith in Christ excluded them from both the pagan temple rituals and events that came from their former pagan culture. So they sought identification with the Jewish people – God's people – by observing the law.

D. THREE ISSUES FROM THE BOOK OF GALATIANS

These are fundamental to our faith:

1) The Definition and Defense of Justification by Faith

Except for the Book of Romans, Paul's letter to the Galatians contains perhaps the clearest and most concise articulation of the Gospel in Scripture. Salvation comes by faith in Christ alone; it is God's gracious gift given to undeserving sinners. This truth is the bedrock of our faith. Our understanding of it can make the difference between a life of spiritual freedom and one of bondage.

2) The Function of the Mosaic Law

The Law does not save us, because none of us can keep the Law perfectly, although legalists would have us believe we can. Discarding legalism, however, doesn't mean we despise the Law. The Law is good; it has a purpose. God gave us the Law to serve as a "tutor" to show us our sin and drive us to the grace found in Christ Jesus.

3) The Balanced Christian Life

The Gospel frees us from legalism – trying to work our way to God by keeping man-made religious rules. But the Gospel also keeps us from drifting into libertinism – taking our freedom in Christ to unhealthy or unloving extremes. As those saved by grace, we are now free to love and obey Christ as well as love and serve one another. We're free – not to do whatever we want, but to do what God wants.

E. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Paul's response to Judaizers' heresy is sharp, sarcastic, even angry. He minces no words in exposing the legalists for who they are.

The Book of Galatians can largely be divided into three sections neatly:

1) Personal words from Paul – Chapter 1 and 2

Right from the get go, the apostle points his index finger to the sternum of the believers of the Galatian churches and lets them know that his message is not from his own, rather from the Lord Jesus Christ.

With a little bit of sarcasm, the apostle lays on them in v6-7:

Galatians 1:6-7 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.

Unfortunately, he had to remind the Galatians readers of the Gospel that he taught with the authority from Jesus in v12:

Galatians 1:12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

As testimony to this truth, Paul listed some of his personal experiences: his background in Judaism and his conversion, his visits to Jerusalem after his conversion, and his open rebuke of Peter. Such things verified his message and ministry. Paul wanted them to know exactly who this man was that the Lord used to write this challenging and convicting letter.

2) Doctrinal Teaching – Chapter 3 and 4

In this section, having established that his Gospel is God's Gospel, Paul turns again to the Galatians' defection and draws a sharp distinction between law and grace.

The Law, rather than saving us, was given to show us God's standards and our sin; it served as a "tutor" to bring us to faith in Christ. And it is Christ's grace, not the Law, that made the Galatians – and us – part of the family of faith, where neither race, gender, nor social status provides any advantage. We are all co-recipients of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:23-25 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.

Then, Paul pleads with them to turn back the message he had preached to them, away from the weak and worthless elementary things.

3) Practical Exhortations – Chapter 5 and 6

Apostle Paul would not let the Galatian believers go without practical exhortations and applications to use in their daily grind after almost 4 chapters full of doctrinal teachings. So he turns his attention to a defense of the life of Christian freedom. This will answer the Judaizers' objections that living by grace promotes lawlessness and loose living.

Galatians 5:13-16 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.*

Unlike the false teachers, who want to boast in circumcision instead of the Cross, Paul desires to boast only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. For it is the Savior who died on that cross – not the practice of circumcision – that creates new life.

Galatians 6:14-15 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.

F. THREE ENDURING LESSONS

1) No one is immune to the temptation to drift from the true Gospel.

If apostle Peter drifted from the true Gospel due to peer pressure from the legalistic Judaizers, so can we. The first step in getting us to drift is for someone around us to question the truth and for us to tolerate that question. When we get soft on the truth about the Gospel, drifting has begun before we know it.

2) Some things are worth a vigorous defense.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is preeminently worthy of a vigorous defense. We need to major in major, not in minor.

3) All of us began at the same place, same level – sinner. Every one of us is saved only by grace, nothing else.

There is no room for pride when we realize that the ground leading to the cross is level.