

Introduction to the Letter to the Galatians



The Plan

Having made our way heroically through the book of Deuteronomy, we take a natural forward step into Paul's letter to the Galatians. It will be beneficial for us to allow our new found understanding to influence our reading of Galatians. We have learnt that the scope of the law is wide ranging; that many of its instructions are good and 'make sense'; that they have the possibility of revealing to us something of the character of God; that they were intended to create a people that were distinct and that reflected the character of their God. Significantly for our reading of Galatians, we read that the Law came as a gift to them as a people, after a gracious act of God in choosing them and rescuing them. As we move to the 1st century, we need to note that "the Law" did not mean a simply list of laws that must be kept, but the first five books of our bible, "the Torah", culminating in Deuteronomy as a covenant document. In fact, it could be that "Torah" would be a better word to use than "the Law".

This and the items below are intended to help see the flow of the letter and to understand that the letter is first of all primarily 'occasional', i.e. written to a particular people at a particular time and place. This is crucial to best understand and appreciate it. Again, why not focus on the book in your own devotions. Start off by reading the book through in one sitting, and then work through it more slowly, bearing in mind the points made here and any other book that may help. Use different translations if you can. Read the relevant passages in the week before each Home Church gathering. We are looking not just to understand it better, but to be able to live it better.

Introduction

Paul planted churches in the southern province of Galatia on his first missionary journey around AD47. Acts 13-14 records Paul's time in the region, seeming to tell a story of initial great success and influence among both Jews and gentiles, only to be cut short by non-believing Jews stirring up trouble. Based on the letter to the Galatians it seems that the resulted churches were predominantly made up gentiles. Although we know little about the Galatians themselves, it is clear that they had a good relationship with Paul, valuing him and his ministry greatly.

A few years later, however things are changing. It seems that Jewish Christians are infiltrating the churches and upsetting the status quo. They are insisting that in order to be fully part of God's people, you must also live under "Torah". By saying these things they were directly challenging Paul, his apostleship and the gospel message he was travelling around preaching. Needless to say Paul is a little upset. He rights a letter to the Galatians defending himself and his message and explaining why these infiltrators have, in fact, no gospel at all. This direct, clever and fiery letter wastes no time on airs and graces, but goes straight to the point: return to the Gospel of Christ. What results is one of the most important documents ever written, as it fights for the survival of genuine Christianity. This letter is crucial for our understanding of Grace, Freedom and the Spirit-led life.

Things to look out for

- 1) **Slavery or Freedom** – Paul constantly returns in this letter to the fact that life outside of faith in Christ is slavery. He is scarily direct in his confrontation with those who say that faith in Christ needs to be supported by Torah observance. To do that is to return to a 'yoke of slavery' [5:1] but more than that he compares people under Torah as the children of Hagar, i.e. Ishmael, and those in Christ as the children of Abraham. Quite a switch and quite an accusation. Combine that with the desire that those who enforce circumcision should actually emasculate themselves and you have quite an emotive mix! But it is not just the Jews who were slaves, Gentiles too were slaves to 'those who are not gods'. By contrast to live in Christ is to live in freedom. Free from external qualifications before God, free to be called children of God. As a son not a slave, those in Christ are free to receive the inheritance of the blessing of Abraham – righteousness before God through faith and to be a blessing to the nations.

- 2) **Grace** – In the light of people who are suggesting that faith in Christ is not enough, Paul goes on the attack in defence of a message of Grace. These ‘Judaizers’ were not denying Christ as Messiah, but were convinced that fulfilling Torah was also necessary for right-standing with God. Paul says NO! Grace plus nothing means acceptance before God. You cannot add to grace and still have grace! Grace says you must trust God for salvation – and that, they say, is risky! Those who cannot fully trust God, hold onto a trump card of “faithful religious observance” just in case. But the trouble is that this trump card negates grace because it plays to pride and self-righteousness, the very things that distance us from God. Paul carefully outlines how they in no way earned anything that God gave them – whether the Spirit or miracles – there is no clever tricks to make them happen. They happened when all they had was a faithful trust in Jesus.
- 3) **Gospel** – Paul is utterly convinced by the Gospel that he preached to the Galatians, that the Gentiles could have full share in the blessings promised to Abraham without having to become ‘Jewish’. Rather the singular trust in Jesus is sufficient. This is evidenced by the work that God performed amongst them when Paul was first there. Their experience of the Spirit in their midst was sufficient evidence that Paul was telling them the truth. This gospel centres on the cross. Any efforts to add to grace by religious observance is to boast in something other than the cross.
- 4) **The Spirit-led Life** – The Galatians’ freedom from slavery released them from the hold of religious observance and the need to fulfil their own desires. It released them to enjoy a Spirit-led life. This Spirit-led life is the opposite to any other way of living. It is a constant expectation that the fruit of the Spirit will increasingly be evident in their life together. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This life in the Spirit is something we are to consciously grow in “by keeping in step with” Him.

Running Order

- 1) **Greeting (1:1-5)**
- 2) **Paul’s Concern for the Galatians (1:6-9)**
- 3) **Paul defence of his apostleship (1:10-2:21)**
 - a) Paul’s call is from God (1:10-24)
 - i) Paul’s conversion and call is from God
 - ii) And distinct from the other apostles
 - b) And yet endorsed by them (2:1-10)
 - c) Paul is convinced enough to challenge even Peter (2:11-21)
- 4) **Paul’s defence of his message (3:1-4:31)**
 - a) Abraham, Faith and the Spirit (3:1-14)
 - i) Your experience is the evidence
 - ii) People of faith are children of Abraham
 - iii) Freedom from the Law’s curse
 - b) The Law and the promise (3:15-22)
 - c) Freed into Sonship (3:23-4:7)
 - i) The promise comes through faith
 - ii) Entering sonship
 - d) Paul’s appeal to his family (4:8-20)
 - e) Two children; two covenants (4:21-31)
- 5) **Life in Christ (5:1-6:10)**
 - a) Freedom in Christ (5:1-13)
 - b) The Law and the Spirit (5:13-26)
 - c) Bearing one another (6:1-10)
 - i) Bearing one another’s burden’s
 - ii) Practical Support
- 6) **Conclusion: Boasting in the Cross (6:11-18)**