

# Pauline Epistles: GALATIANS

## INTRODUCTION

The book of Galatians was written by Paul most likely around 49 AD. The Church of Galatia was made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Some legalistic Jews had refused to fully welcome Gentiles into the church and believed that they would have to follow the commandments of the Torah before being fellow heirs with Christ.

Paul's letter to the Galatians was meant to call out this "different gospel" that was untrue. Paul asserts that works cannot save a person or add any value to their identity. We are justified by faith alone. In the end, the issue is not whether a person is circumcised but whether he is a "new creation" (Galatians 6:15). Salvation is the work of the Spirit, and we must be born again. External religious rites such as circumcision are of no value in the new covenant.

## IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Have you ever heard of the prank that some siblings play in which they claim that their younger sibling isn't actually a part of the family but rather adopted? They try to make the younger sibling feel like he is not really a part of the family. That's exactly what some Jewish people were doing at the time to Gentiles in the church. Instead of treating them like brothers and sisters in Christ, they believed that the Gentiles would need to work their way into God's family before they could be considered siblings.

In a similar way to how parents have to put a stop to these childhood pranks, God had to put a stop to these lies that the Jewish people were spreading. In Galatians, God used Paul to set the record straight.

## BOOK ORGANIZATION

Chapters 1-2: Legalism  
Chapter 3: Law  
Chapters 4-6: Liberty

## JESUS IN THE BOOK OF GALATIANS

"Jesus paid it all.  
All to him I owe.  
Sin had left a crimson stain,  
He washed it white as snow."  
—*Jesus Paid It All*

The words of this age-old hymn echo the premise of Paul's reminder to the church of Galatia throughout the book of Galatians. If it weren't for Jesus, everything that Paul was writing would be false, and we would still be subject to the law. However, we are not justified by the law, but by the perfect sacrifice of Christ on the cross. His death, burial, and resurrection prove that we no longer have to be bound by the law but can instead walk in freedom because of the sufficiency of

his sacrifice. No matter how hard we try to scrub sin out of our lives, Christ is the only one capable of washing us white as snow.

## **BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF GALATIANS**

### **OBSERVATION**

- Throughout Paul's epistle to the Galatians, saving grace—the gift of God—is juxtaposed against the Law of Moses, which cannot save.
- The themes connecting Galatians to the Old Testament center on Law vs. grace: the inability of the Law to justify (2:16); the believer's deadness to the Law (2:19); Abraham's justification by faith (3:6); the Law's bringing not God's salvation but His wrath (3:10); and love as the fulfillment of the Law (5:14). Believers are the spiritual children of Sarah, not Hagar—that is, we are children of the freewoman, not children of the slave; we have more in common with Isaac, the son of promise, than with Ishmael, the son of human effort (4:21–31).

### **INTERPRETATION**

Literary context:

- Author: Paul
- Original Audience: Church in Galatia
- Where Galatians fits in Scripture: The book of Galatians was likely one of the first New Testament books written and most likely less than 20 years after Jesus' ascension to heaven. The Epistles, including Galatians, were meant to remind various groups of the truth of the gospel.

Historical context:

When Paul wrote the letter to Galatia, it had most likely only been a few decades since Christ had returned to heaven. Paul had committed to following Jesus around AD 33 (see Acts for context on Paul's conversion) and a little over 15+ years later is when this book was possibly written. Paul's letter to the Galatians was likely written to the churches he had established during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:1–14:28). He probably wrote the letter from his home church in Antioch.

Cultural context:

Before the arrival of Jesus, the Jewish people had lived by the laws set forth in the Torah for thousands of years. They had believed that the covenant that God made with Abraham was specifically meant for the Jewish people and that no one else could take part. What some Jews in Galatia failed to understand is that Jesus had fulfilled the law and that he made it possible for anyone who trusted in him to become a part of the family of God.

### **APPLICATION**

- How should our view of "good works" change in light of Christ?
- How can we sow unity in the Church instead of division?
- What does it look like to walk in freedom in Christ?
- What lessons can we learn from Paul's letter to the Galatians? Do you find yourself identifying with the misconceptions that the Galatians believed?

## PRAYER

- Ask God to examine your heart and reveal any ways that you may be trying to justify yourself by faith + works instead of solely trusting in Christ's finished work on the cross. Ask God to help you fully accept and trust in the freegift you have been given through Christ.
- Ask God to give you the words for the devotional you are about to write. We could never understand the Bible or write anything worthwhile by our own strength, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have all the words we could ever need.
- Ask God which fruit of the Spirit could be further cultivated in your life over the next few months? Pray for discernment on potential next steps.

## CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF GALATIANS

"If the life of the man should be blameless as the life of Christ, yet if he preaches to you other than the gospel of Jesus Christ, take no heed of him. He wears but the sheep's clothing and is a wolf after all. Some will plead, "But such and such a man is so eloquent." Ah! Brothers, may the day never come when your faith shall stand in the words of men. What is a ready orator, after all, that he should convince your hearts? Are there not ready orators caught any day for everything? Men speak, speak fluently, and speak well in the cause of evil, and there are some that can speak much more fluently and more eloquently for evil than any of our poor tongues are ever likely to do for the right. But words, words, words, flowers of rhetoric, oratory—are these the things that saved you? Are you so foolish that having begun in the Spirit by being convinced of your sins, having begun by being led simply to Christ and putting your trust in Him, are you now to be led astray by these poetic utterances and flowery periods of men? God forbid! Let nothing of this kind beguile you."

—Charles Spurgeon

"There is a law, of course, but it does not apply to those who bear these fruits of the Spirit. The Law is not given for the righteous man. A true Christian conducts himself in such a way that he does not need any law to warn or to restrain him. He obeys the Law without compulsion. The Law does not concern him. As far as he is concerned there would not have to be any Law."

—Martin Luther

"He then sets himself to assert and maintain the great gospel doctrine of justification by faith without the works of the law, and to obviate some difficulties that might be apt to arise in their minds concerning it: and, having established this important doctrine, he exhorts them to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free, cautions them against the abuse of this liberty, gives them several very needful counsels and directions and then concludes the epistle by giving them a just description of those false teachers by whom they had been ensnared, and, on the contrary, of his own temper and behavior. In all this his great scope and design were to recover those who had been perverted, to settle those who might be wavering, and to confirm such among them as had kept their integrity.

—Matthew Henry

## Sources

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