

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Galatians

Is a person saved by faith alone, or by a combination of faith plus works? Paul's letter to the Galatians proclaims that salvation is through faith alone. It also emphasizes freedom in Christ to live by the power of the Spirit, knowing that our relationship with God is not based on our performance but on the finished work of Jesus Christ. So we are truly free, not to serve our sinful nature, but to love and serve our Lord and others.

Setting

When Paul and Barnabas set out from Antioch of Syria on their first missionary journey, they headed across the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea through Cyprus, across the Taurus Mountains of Pamphylia, and into the south of the Roman province of Galatia. There Paul and Barnabas established churches in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe ([Acts 13:13–14:28](#)). Many believed the Good News, but the message also aroused opposition and persecution. Paul and Barnabas then returned to Antioch of Syria, reporting on what God had accomplished “and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, too” ([Acts 14:27](#)).

From the results of Paul’s ministry in Galatia and from Peter’s experience with Cornelius and his household in Caesarea (see [Acts 10:1–48](#)), it became clear that salvation was available to Gentiles as well as Jews on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ. Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to become full members of God’s family. They had only to put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.

Even so, in the period before the council in Jerusalem (AD 49 or 50; [Acts 15:1–41](#)), controversy over the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the church became more heated. When Peter returned to Jerusalem from his groundbreaking work among Gentiles in Caesarea, he faced immediate criticism and pressure from Jewish compatriots who opposed his eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. He answered with an account of the Spirit’s work, which temporarily stilled the criticism ([Acts 11:1–18](#)).

Some Jewish Christians continued to believe that Gentiles should practice Judaism in order to be Christians. Those who believed this are often referred to as “Judaizers.” Some of these Judaizers went to Galatia and began claiming that Paul’s teaching about the Good News was inadequate. They denigrated Paul’s status as an apostle, declaring that he had learned the Good News from the “real” apostles in Jerusalem. They asserted that Paul had changed the message, and that his version of the gospel had never received the apostles’ sanction. The Judaizers argued that Paul’s law-free gospel was incomplete, and they claimed that the real gospel required Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep other aspects of the law. Largely in

response to the challenge brought by the Judaizers, Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians.

Summary

After briefly identifying himself and greeting his recipients ([Gal 1:1–5](#)), Paul launches directly into his thesis: The Good News that he preaches is the only true Good News ([1:6–7](#)), he is a genuine apostle of Christ ([1:1, 10](#)), and his opponents will suffer God's judgment for their false message ([1:8–9](#)). The rest of the letter centers around these assertions.

Paul first demonstrates that he is a genuine apostle of Christ, preaching the true Good News ([1:11–2:21](#)). To this end, Paul reminds the Galatians of the kind of person he used to be ([1:13–14](#)) and recounts his conversion experience and his calling by God ([1:15–16a](#)). Paul received the Good News as a direct revelation from Christ ([1:11–12](#)) rather than from the other apostles in Jerusalem ([1:16–24](#)). Still, the other apostles recognized Paul's apostleship and message ([2:1–10](#)), and they had nothing to add or change. Further, Paul displayed his genuineness in an instance when Peter and some others compromised the Good News contrary to their own principles ([2:11–21](#)).

Paul then makes an argument that his presentation of the Good News is scriptural and true ([3:1–5, 12](#)). The Galatians had experienced the Spirit by faith ([3:1–5](#)), so they—like all who have faith in Christ—would experience the same blessing that Abraham received ([3:6–9](#)). By contrast, trying to be righteous by keeping the law only brings a curse ([3:10–12](#)). Christ rescued us from that curse and made God's blessing available to all who have faith in him ([3:13–14](#)). God's promise to Abraham shows that the promise is given on the basis of faith, not law ([3:15–18](#)). God's demand for righteousness was fulfilled by Christ, not by keeping the law, and those who have faith in Christ become recipients of God's promise to Abraham.

The law's purpose is not to make people righteous or to make them recipients of God's promises. Instead, it brings awareness of sin and points to Christ and faith in him ([3:19–22](#)). Now that Christ has come, those who have faith in him are God's children and heirs of his promises ([3:23–4:7](#)). In light of this, the Galatians' return to trusting in the law was a dreadful return to slavery ([4:8–11](#)), so Paul personally appeals to them to reconsider ([4:12–20](#)). He draws an analogy between Hagar and Sarah and the old and new covenants, showing that Christ brings freedom, not slavery ([4:21–31](#)). God's people must live in freedom ([5:1](#)), reject a

reliance on obedience to the law for salvation ([5:2–4](#)), and live by faith ([5:5–6](#)), because a message of salvation through the law is not from God ([5:7–12](#)).

Finally, Paul shows the Galatians that Christian freedom is not a license to sin, as some might claim. Instead, it is the only way to overcome sin, to live in Christ's love, and to experience the Spirit's power ([5:13–6:10](#)). Freedom provides an opportunity to love rather than to sin ([5:13–15](#)), and the only way to overcome sin is to live by the power of the Holy Spirit ([5:16–18](#)). Living by human effort cannot overcome sin, because the sinful nature can produce only sinful actions ([5:19–21](#)). By contrast, living in the power of the Holy Spirit produces good fruit ([5:22–23](#)). Paul gives several examples of the Spirit's leading in the lives of God's children ([5:24–6:10](#)).

Paul ends his letter with a postscript in his own hand ([6:11–18](#)). He appeals again to the cross of Christ, reiterates his central message, bestows God's mercy and peace on those who follow his teaching, reasserts his apostolic authority, and closes with a benediction that extends "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" to the recipients of his letter.

Author

Galatians has always been recognized as a genuine letter of Paul. It harmonizes well with the account of Paul's mission in Acts and the other letters, and it authentically reflects Paul's conflict with Jewish Christians who sought to make keeping the Jewish law a necessary element of Christian faith for Gentiles. Galatians has a message similar to that of Romans, but as an earlier letter, Galatians gives us a glimpse at the early stages of this intense, personal conflict. Here we feel the heartbeat of Paul's care for the church.

Recipients

Some biblical scholars believe that Paul wrote to an ethnic group called “Galatians,” who lived in north central Asia Minor and were related to Gauls and Celts. Others believe that the recipients of Paul’s letter were groups of churches within the Roman province of Galatia, a much larger area than ethnic Galatia. The Roman province included in its southern districts a number of cities that Paul visited on his first missionary journey (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe).

Paul does not seem to have spent extended time in ethnic Galatia to the north (see possible references in [Acts 16:6; 18:23](#)), whereas we do have record of extensive and repeated missionary activity by Paul in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia ([Acts 13:13–14:25; 16:1–5](#)). The available evidence suggests that the Galatians to whom Paul wrote this letter were most likely those whom Paul evangelized on his first missionary journey.

Date

Paul wrote Galatians either shortly before the council at Jerusalem ([Acts 15:1-29](#)) in AD 49 or 50, or sometime after the council, perhaps during his third missionary journey (AD 53-57).

Traditionally, scholars saw [2:1-10](#) as Paul's description of the council at Jerusalem. However, close examination reveals serious differences between [ch. 2](#) and [Acts 15:1-41](#). It is hard to reconcile Paul's account of two visits to Jerusalem ([2:1](#)) with the fact that the council in [Acts 15:1-41](#) was really his third visit. Neglecting to mention his second visit ([Acts 11:30; 12:25](#)) would seriously weaken Paul's argument that he had minimal contact with the apostles in Jerusalem. Furthermore, if this letter were written after the council, it would be hard to imagine why Paul doesn't mention the council's decision, which directly addresses the issue in Galatians. After the council, in fact, Paul gladly carried news of its decision to the churches he visited ([Acts 16:4](#)). It is thus difficult to believe that [Galatians 2:1-10](#) describes [Acts 15:1-41](#) and that Galatians was written after the council at Jerusalem.

By contrast, there are relatively few difficulties in identifying the occasion described in [Galatians 2:1-10](#) with [Acts 11:30](#) and [12:25](#). This would suggest that Paul wrote Galatians shortly before the council, perhaps in AD 48 or 49, right at the time when the controversy over circumcision was escalating in the church (see [Acts 15:1-2](#)).

Meaning and Message

The problem that arose in Galatia was a familiar one in the first-century church, and it remains a problem in the church today. Are we truly saved by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, or is something more necessary on our part?

Paul's letter to the Galatians establishes the completeness of the Good News—that salvation is available to all purely by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and not by observing the law. It also establishes the unity of God's people: No division exists between Jews and Gentiles or between other classes of people. We all come to God and gain new life by the same means: through faith in Christ. Galatians establishes our liberty in Christ: We fulfill Christ's law not by human effort but by living in faith and love by the Holy Spirit. Finally, the letter establishes our need for the grace of God, which rescues us from the curse of sin, gives us new life and the promised Holy Spirit, and makes us God's children, empowered to fulfill Christ's law of love.