

GOD WITH US
Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 1 – Galatians
In Defense of the Gospel of Grace
Galatians 1-4

Introduction

Paul and Barnabas traveled through the Galatian region on their 1st missionary trip, planting churches in various cities (Acts 13,14). After proclaiming the gospel, they strongly urged the new believers “*to continue in the GRACE of God*” (Acts 13:43). Yet, for these new believers, holding on to their freedom in Christ would not be so easy. Sadly, after Paul and Barnabas completed this first trip and returned to Jerusalem, other teachers went to the Galatian region contradicting Paul’s message, saying that these new believers in Jesus must be circumcised and submit to the Laws of Moses to be fully saved. In short, they preached a message of *works* instead of *grace*. The Galatian believers submitted to this new teaching, causing Paul great anguish. The letter to the Galatians was Paul’s firm response, intended to refute this false teaching and to re-establish the Galatian churches on the foundation of GRACE, not works.

Chapters 1-4 teach that Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) alike are saved by grace through the redemptive work of Christ, His death as the eternal penalty for humanity’s sin, not by adhering to the Laws of Moses. Chapters 5-6 teach that we are sanctified (grown to think, feel and act more and more like Jesus) as we walk in step with the Spirit and His promptings, not by trying to bring our sinful natures into conformity with the Laws of Moses.

Galatians is the first ‘*defense of the gospel of grace*,’ written by the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul. It is still relevant in every generation, because as humans we have a desire to add more requirements and expectations on ourselves and on others. Galatians frees us from “the performance trap,” teaching us to continually be thankful that we are accepted in the sight of God through the costly sacrifice of His Son. We are to live in awe and gratitude of His amazing grace, while loving God and loving others as our true response to His unconditional, lavish love.

The message of Galatians has had a powerful impact on church history. The spiritual awakening of Martin Luther (father of the Protestant Reformation) came as he studied Galatians. Luther affectionately referred to Galatians as “his wife.” It was the message of Galatians that brought peace and assurance to John Wesley (the British revivalist in the 1700’s). It is no wonder that Galatians has been called “the Magna Charta of Christian Liberty.” The study of Galatians (along with Romans) is foundational to a proper understanding of Christian doctrine, especially the doctrine of *salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ*.

Outline of Galatians

Salutation: 1:1-5

Defense of Paul’s Apostleship: 1:6 – 2:21

Defense of the Gospel of Grace: 3:1 – 4:31

Defense of Spirit-led Liberty: 5:1 – 6:18

Salutation: 1:1-5

Greco-Roman letters typically began with a formal “salutation” where the writer greeted (saluted) the recipients. Paul’s salutations usually give hints as to the main themes of his letters. In Galatians, the salutation focuses on two ideas: 1) Paul’s role, as a messenger (‘apostle’ = ‘sent one’) of the gospel was granted to him *by God*, not by men; 2) The complete sufficiency of the *grace of God* in taking away our sins by the death of Jesus. Jew or Gentile can now experience God as “Father,” Christ as “Savior” and the Holy Spirit as “Sanctifier.”

First, Paul’s divinely given role:

“Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead) . . .” (1:1).

The false teachers said that Paul was a self-appointed messenger, thus his message did not carry divine authority. Paul refutes this lie in the first 2 chapters as he reminds his audience of the *source* of his message: it came to Paul from God, not from men.

Secondly: The central theme in Galatians deals with the sufficiency of Jesus’ death on the cross as God’s sole means to rescue us from the grip of sin. Paul introduces this theme in his opening greetings:

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen” (1:3-5).

If Jesus, the perfect and sinless Son of God, gave Himself to pay the debt for our sins, what else can we add to that? Do we not minimize the cross of Christ and insult the grace of God when we say, in effect: *I can save myself by means of obedience to a set of laws?* Jesus rescues us; we do not rescue ourselves!

Defense of Paul’s Apostleship: 1:6 – 2:21

Galatians is a defense of the gospel of Grace. Yet, Paul must first defend his God-given role as an authorized *messenger* of that gospel. Thus, he spends much time initially defending *himself and the calling that God placed on his life*.

- Paul sets forth the problem: 1:6-10

After Paul’s initial proclamation of the gospel of grace in their region (and their acceptance of his message), the Galatians had deserted the gospel of *God’s amazing grace* for a twisted gospel.

Paul pronounces a dual “anathema” (curse) upon the Jewish false teachers who had distorted God’s message of grace to the Gentile world. There is no other letter where Paul expressed such outrage as he did in this letter. Protecting *true doctrine* was critical in Paul’s mind. False teachers were the enemies of God.

“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed” (1:6-10).

Paul defends the gospel of grace with two major lines of argument. First, he reviews *his own personal history* and how he received the message of grace in the first place (chs.1&2). Second, he will look back to the O.T. and make the *theological case* that even Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, was saved by God’s grace, not by obeying the Law (chs.3&4).

How do people, today, fall into the 'Galatian error?' It happens whenever we add to or subtract from the message of the amazing grace of God, demonstrated to us in the cross of Christ. When we add some system of "good works" or "ritual ceremonies" as prerequisites (or additions afterwards) to being saved from the penalty of sin. Or, when we minimize the sole sufficiency of the redemptive work of Christ by saying that there are other means of salvation, other religious figures who can help us 'find God.' Whenever we add to or subtract from the cross of Christ, we fall into the Galatian error. At the root of our resistance to grace is human pride! Grace = "unmerited favor." It is difficult for us to admit that we cannot save ourselves, that we are helpless and need a Savior. Remember, the saying, "God helps those who help themselves" did not come from God. It came from Benjamin Franklin and is the opposite of the gospel message! Paul wrote elsewhere: **"For while we were still HELPLESS, at the right time Christ died for the UNGODLY" (Romans 5:6).** We all need God's amazing GRACE!

- The Divine Source of Paul's message: 1:11-2:21

The false teachers said that Paul was not a *divinely authorized* messenger, thus his message was not true. They argued that *their* message had the authority of Jerusalem behind it, and that Paul had made up his message about the grace of God for Gentiles. (Note: This was the subject of the Jerusalem Council, Acts 15, that took place not long after Paul wrote Galatians. The people that Paul and Barnabas had heated debates with at the Council were representatives of the same group that attacked his message in Galatia. Read Acts 15 for the full background to this controversy.)

Paul responds to this challenge to his authority with 3 points.

1) He received his message through a direct revelation from Jesus Christ (1:11-24).

"For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11,12).

Paul recounts the historical sequence of his conversion and subsequent years growing in his faith. It was 3 years after his conversion that he first met Peter and James in Jerusalem, during a brief 15-day visit. It was 14 years before he spent more time with these Christian leaders in Jerusalem (2:1,2). His point is that his

message came *from God*, not *from human authorities* in Jerusalem or elsewhere.

(Note: Paul is here referring to James, the Lord's brother, not James the brother of John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples. James, brother of John, was martyred earlier as recorded in Acts 12:1,2. James, brother of Jesus, arose to become the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He also wrote the book of James.)

2) The Jerusalem Church leaders later confirmed his message (2:1-10).

On his later visit, Paul submitted to the Jerusalem leaders the substance of the gospel message he was preaching among the Gentiles, and they *confirmed the validity of his message*.

"... seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Peter and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (2:7-9).

Thus, any charge that Paul's message was *different than* the message preached by the Jewish-Christian leaders in Jerusalem was false. Peter and Paul preached *the same gospel*, just to *different audiences* (Peter to Jews, Paul to Gentiles).

Regarding 'circumcision'- this was a ritual practiced by some cultures in the ancient world, but it became central to the Jewish faith. God established circumcision as a sign of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:13). Modern use of circumcision, for medical purposes, began in England and the U.S. in the mid 1800's.

3) Paul had to earlier defend the gospel message when the Jerusalem leaders compromised it (2:11-14).

Paul refers to an incident when Peter came from Jerusalem for a visit to Syrian Antioch, the center of the Gentile Christian movement.

"But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with

the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy" (2:11-13 NLT).

When Peter was taking meals with Gentiles (something Jews never did) he was signaling that *any walls of distinctions between Jewish and Gentile Christians were gone*. But when other Jewish-Christian brothers from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch, Peter changed his behavior, sending the false message that Jewish Christians were somehow superior to or separate from Gentile Christians. Paul strongly confronted Peter and others on the mixed messages they were sending to Gentile believers.

Paul's point? He had not made up some strange gospel of his own choosing; rather, he was the defender of the true gospel, *even in the face of wavering from the most revered leaders, Peter and others from Jerusalem!*

Notice that Paul spent 14 years "in Arabia" before he stepped into the spotlight of public ministry. Growth takes TIME. And not just time; but time spent learning, studying, applying God's Word, learning to walk with God, learning about the character of God and the ways of God. Abraham waited 25 years before God gave him a promised son. Moses spent 40 years on the back side of the desert before become Israel's leader. David spent more than a decade running and hiding from Saul before he became king. Paul spent 14 years in Arabia. There is no 'fast track' to spiritual maturity. Walk with God day by day, right where He has you. Learn to trust Him in this stage of your journey. Take the small steps of faith He places before you today. Over time, you will experience His maturing work in your life . . . and you will see that He uses you in ever-increasing ways to bear fruit for His glory.

- Summary of Paul's defense of his apostleship: 2:15-21

Paul summarizes his historical defense of his apostleship with several key statements that refer to *his own standing in grace*.

" . . . a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified" (2:16).

No one, not even Paul, could be made right with God (“justified”) by obedience to the Law. We all fall short of God’s righteous standards; thus, a guilty sinner (Paul included) can only be declared right with God through trusting in Jesus Christ.

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (2:20).

Even Paul the apostle, once a devout, Law-oriented Jew, now lived by *trusting in the finished work of the Son of God*, not by trusting in his own efforts to obey the Law. (In Romans 6 Paul writes about how our sinful nature has been ‘crucified with Christ.’ This means that ‘positionally’ we are 100% forgiven and ‘right with God.’ At the same time, Paul will write in Romans 7,8 and in Galatians 5 about the *ongoing struggle* we have, in this life, to ‘put to death’ the old sin nature. Justification (being set free from the penalty of sin) is instantaneous, when we trust in Jesus for our salvation. Sanctification (being set free from the power of sin) is an ongoing process, as we learn to live by the power of the Spirit Who dwells within us.

“I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (2:21).

Here was the crux of the issue for Paul. If he, or anyone else could be saved by following the Law, Christ died needlessly. Any attempt to build a system of salvation by works runs directly against God’s design to save us from sin through the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross.

How firmly have you embraced God’s grace for your own life? Are you standing firm in the grace of God? Are you deeply enjoying the richness of His unconditional love for you? The more you grow to know what the Bible really teaches about GRACE, the more the answers to these questions will be ‘Yes!’ Remember, it took Paul many years to fully embrace all that grace meant, once he had his personal encounter with Christ. Paul did not want the Galatians to be robbed of their security in Christ. He was trying to reestablish them on the only secure foundation – the GRACE of GOD given to us through the CROSS of CHRIST. How about you? Are you enjoying AMAZING GRACE?

Defense of the Gospel of Grace: 3:1 – 4:31

Paul has defended *his role* as a messenger of the gospel. Next, he turns to a theological, Old Testament based defense and explanation of *the gospel of grace* itself.

- The Theological Argument: 3:1 – 4:7

This is a highly theological section of Paul's letter. I will summarize the main points of 3:1 – 4:7 in order. I encourage you to read each passage along with these brief explanations. Using the *New Living Translation* will help simplify the meaning for you.

3:1-5 The Galatians had first received the Holy Spirit when they placed their faith (trust) in Jesus as Savior. Why were they now turning back to a system based on good works/self-effort/Law?

3:6-9 God's promise to Abraham was that he would be the father of *many nations*, not just the Jews. The Gentiles who had believed in Jesus were now part of the *many nations* aspect of God's promise to Abraham. They were on equal footing with the Jewish Christians and should not see themselves as second-class citizens.

3:10-12 Those who were attempting to be justified (made right with God) through trying to obey the Law stood condemned, because *no one obeys the entire Law perfectly*. "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23).

3:13-14 Jesus, through His death on the cross, redeemed us from the condemnation that was upon us as guilty Law-breakers. He took the curse against sin upon Himself. He fully paid the penalty of sin.

3:15-18 The Law of Moses (Exodus 19ff) was given 430 years *after* God made His promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). This *later Mosaic covenant* does not invalidate the *earlier Abrahamic covenant*. Abraham could not have been made right with God by a system of Law that came 430 years after him!

3:19-25 What does the Law of Moses accomplish, then, if it is not the means to salvation? The Law acts as a tutor pointing us to our need for a Savior. The Law holds us accountable for our sin, showing us our need for a substitute sacrifice; but it cannot take away our sin or make us right with God. We cannot even manage to fully obey the most important "Ten Commandments" (Exodus 20:1-17)! The Law, like a mirror, shows us our sin; but it can never wash away our sin.

3:26-29 If we belong to Christ, then it does not matter if we are Jewish or Gentile. We are all “children of Abraham” *through faith in Jesus*. Gentiles do not need to ‘jump through extra hoops’ in order to be full heirs of God’s promised salvation.

4:1-7 While we were “children” we were kept under the guardianship of the Law; but now that Christ has come, He has removed us from being under the Law and we are now sons and daughters of God, indwelt by the Spirit. We call God “Father!”

- Paul’s Deep Concern for the Galatians: 4:8-20

Having made a detailed argument for salvation by grace, Paul now shares his *heart* for the Galatians believers. He was deeply troubled that they had been deceived and brought back into slavery to the Law.

“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain” (4:9-11).

Paul reminds the Galatians of the deep love they showed him when he first met them. They would have “*plucked out their own eyes and given them to Paul,*” if that were possible. (A statement that has led scholars to believe that Paul had an eye disease that troubled him throughout his ministry.) The false teachers wanted to enslave the Galatians and count them as their “converts.” Paul, on the other hand, had formed a sincere and deep bond of love with these people. He was perplexed as to what had caused them to abandon their affection for him and doubt his message and motives.

Paul truly cared about people. This is why he so strongly shared TRUTH with them in his letters. He wanted his ‘spiritual children’ to stand firm in the truth of God’s Word. He “spoke the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), even when the truth he spoke was painful. How is your heart for people? Is God growing in you an ever-deepening burden for peoples’ spiritual condition? Is He deepening your compassion for those who do not yet know Jesus? Is He widening your love for younger believers who need to be mentored and grounded in God’s truth? Are you willing to speak difficult truth to people so that they can experience the riches of God’s grace?

- The Allegory of Sarah and Hagar: 4:21-31

Paul ends his defense of the gospel of Grace in an unusual way. He presents an *allegory* (a story with hidden meanings or parallels). Though the allegorical method was common in his day, Paul rarely used it. Galatians 4:21-31 is the clearest example of Paul's use of this method of teaching.

The two wives of Abraham, **Sarah and Hagar**, form the basis of the allegory. Sarah pictures the "free woman" who brings forth children of freedom (e.g. freedom from the Law, freedom in Christ). Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Abraham and Sarah (who became a surrogate wife to bear children, due to Sarah's infertility), is the "bond woman" who brings forth children of bondage (e.g. bondage to the Law, slavery to rules and regulations). Paul's point? The false teachers who claim that they are bringing the "truth" from Jerusalem are really like Hagar – producing children in bondage to the Law. Paul, and other apostles who preach the true gospel of grace, are like Sarah – producing true children of God, who are free in Christ. What should the Galatians do with those false teachers? The allegory gives the answer:

“Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman” (Galatians 4:30, see Genesis 21:10).

In other words: Drive those false teachers away from the Galatian churches and come back to the TRUE foundation: Salvation by GRACE through FAITH in Jesus Christ!!!

Discussion Questions

1. WHY is the message of Galatians (defense of the gospel of GRACE) so important in our world, today?
2. How does the message of God's amazing GRACE impact the way that you think about your personal relationship with God? Look at 1John 4:18,19 and Romans 8:1 and 8:38-39 to help spur your thinking and discussion.
3. Does Paul's passion for the gospel of God's grace impact your desire to protect that gospel and to spread it to those in your sphere of influence? If you could share this gospel of GRACE with 1 person, who would you choose to share it with?