



Surveying the Pauline Epistles

GENERAL EDITOR

PAUL D. WEAVER

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The editor can be reached at: paulweaver@wol.org

For information on how you can acquire the entire book, visit:

www.pauldweaver.com

GALATIANS

AUTHOR¹

The author identifies himself as Paul in the introduction (1:1) and conclusion (5:2). The content is consistent in its doctrine and vocabulary with other Pauline epistles. There is universal acknowledgement by scholars that the apostle penned this epistle.² Longenecker calls it, “the most uncontroverted matter in the study of Galatians...”³

RECIPIENTS

While the authorship of Galatians is virtually unanimous, the recipients are not. There is great debate as to whom the book of Galatians is written. Paul indicates that he is writing to the churches residing in Galatia (1:2), and by Paul’s statement, they were known as Galatians (3:1). Guthrie points out that the debate is relatively recent, “it was assumed by all commentators until the nineteenth century that Paul established churches in this northern district and that this epistle was written to a group of communities there.”⁴

¹ The introductory information for this chapter was adapted from Paul Weaver’s *Introducing the New Testament Books*, CreateSpace Publishing, 2015. Paul is the Academic Dean of the Word of Life Bible Institute.

² External evidence supports Pauline authorship as well. In the early second century the book of Galatians was included in a corpus of Pauline writings. Justin Martyr, Polycarp, and other church fathers identified Paul as its author. Additionally, 1 Peter, The Epistle of Barnabas, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen either quote from or reference this epistle, and it is listed as Pauline in the Marcionite and Muratorian canons.

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 1vii.

⁴ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 465.

The problem surfaces when one realizes that there is both a geographical region of Galatia as well as a Roman designated political region. While the location does not impact the purpose and message of the book, it does change the timing of its writing.

Where were the churches located to which Paul was writing? The more ancient Northern Galatia Theory holds to the Northern Geographical Region, and the more recent Southern Galatia Theory⁵ contends Paul wrote to the churches in the southern portion of the political region known as Galatia. This is where the cities of Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe were localized.

The Northern Galatia Theory

The Northern Galatia Theory, championed by J. B. Lightfoot⁶ believes Paul was writing to a geographical region of Galatia where an ethnic group of people once known as the Gauls lived. This theory contends that Acts 16:6 and Acts 18:23 record Paul's ministry to this area during his second and third missionary journeys. According to this theory, prior to Paul's writing this epistle, he would have visited the region twice, and the epistle would have been written after the Jerusalem Council (refer to the "Place and Date" section below).

The Southern Galatia Theory

The Southern Galatia Theory is widely held by modern scholars. It contends that this epistle is written to the churches that Paul would have established on his first missionary journey and was written prior to the Jerusalem Council. Support for this view includes Luke's record of Paul's journey to and

⁵ The first known scholar to write about a southern theory is J.J. Schmidt in 1748. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 7.

⁶ For a clear and concise list of Lightfoot's arguments see Longenecker, *Galatians*, 1xiv.

establishment of churches in the southern region on his first missionary journey, and his visiting of them on his second missionary journey.

Galatia was the provincial title for the entire region which included the southern portion where the cities of Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe are localized. No main roads ran through North Galatia, and would not make sense for Paul to have left from Lystra (Acts 16:1, 6).⁷

The biblical record indicates Paul's strategy was to focus on main roads and main centers of the Roman Empire. South Galatia was more developed than the North.⁸

The mentioning of Barnabas and his trip to Antioch (Gal. 2:1-9; 2:13) would only be significant to a Southern Galatia audience, since Barnabas was with Paul only on his first missionary journey and not on his second and third. It is also clear that in the South the Judaizers were influential, which will be discussed further under the occasion.

For these reasons, the Southern Galatia theory is preferred and an earlier dating of the book of Galatians is required.

PLACE AND DATE

Based upon a Southern Galatia audience, Paul probably wrote this epistle at some point after he established churches on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:14-20; Gal. 4:13), possibly while in Antioch reporting to the church located there concerning what great things God had done (Acts 14:27). Here Paul and Barnabas “stayed for a long time” (Acts 14:28). This would have been just prior

⁷ Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 2.

⁸ Ibid.

to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15; AD 49). An AD 48-49 dating of the book of Galatians is probable, making it one of the earliest books of the canon.⁹

PURPOSE

Prior to the Jerusalem Council, the responsibility of Gentiles to the Law was uncertain. In addition to this, many Jewish believers were still following the law as much as they could. The relationship of the church (comprised of both Jews and Gentiles) to the law would be finally ratified at the Jerusalem council.

Paul had received some report concerning Jews who were teaching another gospel (1:6-7; 5:10, 12). It appears that these Jews, often referenced as Judaizers, were imposing additional requirements for salvation/justification in addition to faith in Christ. These conditions included obedience to the law (3:4, 10) and observing of certain holidays (4:10). These individuals were trying to impose the law upon Christians.

Paul instructs the Galatian churches that they were justified through faith and must also continue by faith, not by the works of the law (3:3-5). In response to the teachings of these Judaizers, Paul writes to instruct the Galatian churches that God justifies everyone only on the basis of their faith in Christ and not adherence to the law.

MESSAGE

God declares man to be righteous not based upon the works of the law but on the basis of faith in Christ's righteousness; therefore, they must also live by faith and not according to the works of the Law.

⁹ Only James is written earlier according to this writer's estimation, although some would date the book of James later.

OUTLINE OF GALATIANS

- I. Introduction (1:1-5)
- II. A Defense of Justification through Faith (1:6-2:21)
 - A. A Rebuke and Warning (1:6-9)
 - B. A Defense of the True Gospel (1:10-2:21)
- III. An Explanation of Justification through Faith (3:1-4:31)
 - A. Faith and the Law (3:1-5)
 - B. Abraham, an Illustration of Justification through Faith (3:6-14)
 - C. The Law and Promise (3:15-18)
 - D. The Purpose of the Law (3:19-25)
 - E. The Basis of Becoming Sons of God (3:26-4:7)
 - F. Concern for the Galatians (4:8-20)
 - G. Hagar and Sarah Representing the Old and New Covenants (4:21-31)
- IV. The Application of Justification through Faith (5:1-6:10)
 - A. Believers Have Been Set Free from the Law (5:1-6)
 - B. A Rebuke of Those Enslaving Believers to the Law (5:7-12)
 - C. A Command to Live by the Spirit (5:13-26)
 - D. A Command to Care for One Another (6:1-10)
- V. Conclusion (6:11-18)

SURVEY OF GALATIANS¹⁰

I. Introduction (1:1-5)

Paul begins Galatians with the typical elements of a first century Greek letter. He includes himself as the author specifying that he is an apostle, sent by God and not men. This is a statement of authority which anticipates what is to come. Paul addresses the letter to the churches in Galatia along with a brief greeting of “grace and peace.” Verses 3 and 4 preview Paul’s message to the churches of Galatia by stating the true gospel. This is the receiving of God’s

¹⁰ The survey portion of this chapter was written by one of Word of Life Bible Institute’s adjunct faculty, Rhome Dyck., Rhome is the founder and director of Sacra Script ministries <https://sacrascript.org/>.

undeserved “grace,” which brings the blessings of “peace.” Paul also includes a specific praise for God. However, what is conspicuously absent from the letter is an expression of thanksgiving. Galatians is the only Pauline New Testament letter that does not have a thanksgiving message and its absence sets the tone for the rest of the letter.

II. A Defense of Paul’s Message of Justification through Faith (1:6-2:21)

With a strong statement of authority by Paul in the introduction, he begins to address the critical issue at hand: the gospel. Having labored among these people personally, he is shocked that those who presented a different gospel would so quickly undermine his apostolic authority. He recounts his personal history after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus to demonstrate that he did not learn the gospel from men but received it directly from Jesus. Paul’s message was affirmed by the other apostles and culminates in the truth that all believers have been crucified with Christ and live by faith in Jesus.

A. A Rebuke and Warning (1:6-9)

Paul begins with a tone of bewilderment and rebuke for his audience who had deserted the true gospel for another message that did not provide any good news. The result of this different teaching within the Galatian churches was deception and perversion. He sternly warns his audience by means of a hypothetical situation. Should an apostle like Paul or even an angel from God change the gospel message, they are to be eternally condemned. His point is that any change to the true good news of salvation in Jesus is so severe that the result is an eternal curse.

B. A Defense of the True Gospel (1:10-2:21)

Paul's defense of the true gospel is rooted in his own testimony. He reminds the Galatians that he did not come with a message to please people or a message that he created. Paul recounts God's transformation in his life from a persecutor of the church to a proclaimer of the truth. He lays out the time frame to show that he spent very little time in Jerusalem, so he was not taught the gospel by other apostles. Paul's purpose is to underscore the fact that he did not get the gospel wrong because he inherited it from others. On the contrary, his message to the people of Galatia is the message that Jesus gave him directly.

Titus serves as an example of a Gentile believer in Christ who was not compelled to be circumcised (2:1-5). Paul explains that there were Jews in Jerusalem who also wanted to change the good news and require Jewish circumcision from Gentile believers. However, Paul and the other leaders did not give into these people and their gospel perversion. Rather, the central authorities of the Christian faith, Peter, James, and John affirmed Paul's ministry to the Gentiles and the message he proclaimed.

The Apostle Peter's visit to Paul in Antioch serves as another example of Paul's authority (2:11-16). Peter initially ate with the Gentiles implying that he was not keeping the Jewish dietary laws. However, once other Jews came from Jerusalem, Peter was afraid and separated himself from the Gentiles. Paul confronted Peter and his double standard of eating with the Gentiles and then changing and trying to require that the Gentiles now follow Jewish food laws. This serves as another illustration that the good news of salvation in Christ by faith does not require Gentiles to become Jews and practice Jewish customs.

Paul then emphatically explains the truth of the good news (2:17-21). Believers in Christ are not made right with God by eating or abstaining from

certain foods nor from performing certain customs such as circumcision. Attempting to earn God's favor through these customs only proves one's sinfulness. It also denies the sufficiency of Christ's death. Rather, Paul shows that his former self, who attempted to earn God's favor through law keeping, died with Christ. Now the new Paul is alive by faith in Jesus and no longer by the keeping of the law. This is the message that Paul had originally proclaimed among the Galatians, serving as a reminder of how freeing is the good news of salvation through faith alone.

III. An Explanation of Justification through Faith (3:1-4:31)

Paul moves from defending his gospel message of faith, to illustrating it by several different means. He reminds his audience of their own personal experience, the example of Abraham, the testimony of Scripture, the legal practice of covenants, and ultimately the purpose of the law. In explaining the law, Paul uses imagery of the law as a jailer, a slave-attendant, and an adopted son with inheritance rights. All these examples and illustrations are to help the Galatians to see that adding Jewish practices to the gospel of forgiveness by faith in Jesus Christ is neither possible nor sensible.

A. *Faith and the Law (3:1-5)*

Paul's deep concern for his beloved Galatians bursts out with an emotionally charged reminder. Jesus was proclaimed as crucified for their sins and now they are acting foolishly as if they are under some kind of spell. Paul questions them about how they received the Holy Spirit. This is to remind these believers that obtaining the Spirit did not come by keeping the law but rather by belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It made no sense for the Galatians to suffer for their faith if they were now supposed to work for God's favor and

forgiveness. After sharing his own personal testimony, Paul confronts the Galatians with personal questions about their own testimonies. Their experience confirms that salvation is by faith and not by keeping the law.

B. Abraham, an Illustration of Justification through Faith (3:6-14)

Abraham serves as a very clever example for salvation by faith. The Galatians were deserting the true gospel for a more Jewish-flavored version. However, Abraham as the father of the Jewish people believed in God and it was that faith that made him right before God. By quoting from Genesis 12:3 and 18:18, Paul shows the Galatians how they can be children of Abraham without embracing Judaism. Paul's point is that the Galatians are saved by faith just as Abraham was saved by faith. He furthers his point by using references from the law (Deut. 27:26; Hab. 2:4; Lev. 18:5) to show that by trying to keep the law, the Galatians are under the curse of breaking it. By faith, the Galatians received the Holy Spirit. Not only can they receive forgiveness for their sins through Christ's death and resurrection, both Jewish and Gentile believers have the presence of God by means of the Holy Spirit living in them.

C. The Law and Promise (3:15-18)

Paul turns to an everyday example of covenants to explain the role that the law is to have. God made promises to Abraham and to his offspring. Paul highlights that offspring is referring specifically to Christ rather than all of Abraham's offspring. It does not make sense for God to give Abraham an inheritance through a promise, and then 430 years later, ignore His covenant with Abraham. Paul eliminates the idea that those who were corrupting the Galatians could say that the law replaced God's covenant of promise with Abraham.

D. The Purpose of the Law (3:19-25)

Having shown that the law is insufficient, Paul explains the purpose of the law. First, he states that the law was intended to be temporary. It only applied until the promise to Abraham was fulfilled, which occurred at Christ's first advent. Furthermore, the law is God's standard. It shows that no one meets God's requirements for holiness and, therefore, all need a Savior who can fulfill the law. Deuteronomy 33:2 states that the Lord came from Sinai with myriads of holy angels who were involved in giving the law to Moses (see also Acts 7:53 and Heb. 2:2). These angels were mediators between God and Moses. Moses served as the mediator between God and Israel. Paul is stating that the law involved mediators but the promise made to Abraham came directly from God's son Jesus, who is fully God. First, Paul describes the law as a jailor who keeps people locked up until Christ came to set them free (22-23). Then Paul explains the law as a nanny who takes care of people until Jesus arrived (24-25). Both illustrations help people to see the law as temporary. Clearly, the Galatians needed to understand that the law was not meant for the church age and it did not help in saving or maintaining salvation.

E. The Basis of Becoming Sons of God (3:26-4:7)

The Galatians did not realize their privileged position before God. By believing in Jesus, they were God's own sons and daughters. Paul uses the imagery of baptism and clothing to explain that believers are all equal before God. There is a oneness for all followers of Christ who enjoy the status of sonship. Furthermore, everyone who believes in Jesus is already part of Abraham's family and does not need to be circumcised.

Paul follows this explanation with an analogy that was very familiar to those living in a Roman culture. In wealthy families, a boy was under the

authority of slave guardians and trustees until the boy's father would literally adopt his own son. While his birthright made him an heir to the family estate until the appointed time, the boy lived as a slave to his masters. Paul uses this illustration to explain people's relationship to the law before Christ came. However, once the time of the believer's adoption came, Jesus literally bought the believer out back from under the law to be full sons and daughters of God. The receiving of the Holy Spirit assures both Jewish and Gentile believers of the Father-son relationship, and therefore the believer can legitimately call God, Father.

F. Concern for the Galatians (4:8-20)

Paul appeals to the Galatians by reminding them of their lives before meeting Christ (8-11). They were enslaved to demonic spirits, because they believed those spirits were deity. Paul's argument is that the Galatians now know and are known by the one true God who has set them free from their sin. Therefore, it makes no sense to give up freedom for enslavement again to that which is not deity. While there is nothing wrong with celebrating Jewish festivals and holy days, the Galatian's motivation was to complete their salvation. This was making it appear that Christ was insufficient to save. In exasperation, Paul wonders whether he wasted his time since that is the exact opposite of the true gospel that he preached.

Out of a deep love and affection for his Galatian converts, Paul makes a second appeal from his own life. As a Jewish man, Paul found salvation and freedom in Christ. Like his Galatian audience, he was no longer under the Jewish law. Therefore, the apostle calls these believers to be like him: free in Christ. Paul reminds them of their love and acceptance of him while he ministered to them in Galatia. The Galatians extended such love to Paul that they would have given him

their own eyes, were that possible.¹¹ However, now the Galatians are treating Paul like an enemy. Out of love for the Galatian people as his own children, Paul wants their passion to be for the right purpose. Paul is hurt because his beloved children are rejecting the gospel and ultimately rejecting Christ by their actions.

G. Hagar and Sarah Representing the Old and New Covenants (4:21-31)

Paul now makes a third appeal to the Galatians to abandon their legalism. He reminds them of the story of Abraham, and the two sons he had by two different women. Hagar was a slave who bore Ishmael by natural means. However, Abraham's wife Sarah was a free woman who was not able to have children until God miraculously opened her womb. God had promised Abraham a son from Sarah 25 years earlier even though Sarah was already too old to have children. Paul uses this story as a way to interpret the two different covenants. Hagar represents the covenant God made with Moses on Mount Sinai, outside the Promised Land. Furthermore, Hagar is like the first century city of Jerusalem where people live by the rules of Judaism. All those who live under the law are slaves just like Hagar. Conversely, believers in Christ belong to the heavenly Jerusalem who is represented by Sarah. Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that they were like Isaac. They came to God because of God's faithfulness to provide salvation through His son Jesus. Just like Ishmael tormented Isaac, those under the law persecute those who are free in Christ. The climax of Paul's appeal comes from Gen. 21:10. It states to cast out the slave woman and her son. Paul uses this analogy to refer to those false teachers who are teaching Jewish legalism. As believers in Christ, the Galatians are not from Hagar but from Sarah.

¹¹ It is this verse that causes some to speculate that Paul's illness or thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7) may have been related to his eyes.

IV. The Application of Justification through Faith (5:1-6:10)

In this final section of Galatians, Paul explains the application of the gospel in daily Christian living. He highlights the freedom that Christ gives the believer and warns of the constant threat to freedom from those who want to enslave people to legalism. Paul culminates his message by picturing the Christian life as an ongoing walk with the Holy Spirit who leads and guides the believer into all righteousness. The Holy Spirit empowers the Christ follower to overcome sin and exhibit relentless love for each other, manifested through support, encouragement, and service.

A. Believers Have Been Set Free from the Law (5:1-6)

Paul begins this final emphasis of the letter to the Galatians with the call to stand firm in the faith because Christ has set the believer free. The idea is that Jesus saved them so that they could live in an ongoing state of freedom. The freedom Christ purchased for the Galatians included freedom from legalism. The apostle uses several examples of the dangers of legalism for believers. First, he states that to embrace circumcision as a requirement for salvation is to live as if Christ's death was unnecessary. Secondly, Paul reminds his audience that to follow one aspect of the law such as circumcision, logically means that they must embrace the entire law. Having to keep the entire law in order to be saved, or to stay saved, makes one a slave to the law. Thirdly, Paul states that to attempt to be justified by keeping the law effects one's relationship with Christ. The only way to be in fellowship with God is a life of faith by the Spirit. This life of faith pours out acts of love. Paul does not care about circumcision unless someone is

requiring it for salvation.¹² In essence, Paul is saying that by the Galatians now considering embracing circumcision and Jewish law, this enslavement to the law and rejection of Christ will make them unloving towards each other. It is the exact opposite of what Paul was to them when he first visited them and proclaimed the true gospel.

B. A Rebuke of Those Enslaving Believers to the Law (5:7-12)

Paul turns his attention to those who were spreading this message of enslavement. He paints a word picture of a runner who is doing well and then is cut off by another runner. Paul's warning is that the people who are doing this are nothing like their God, who has called them to a life of faith. Paul gives another familiar word picture to his audience, that of yeast (5:9). Yeast represents legalism and a little of it works through all of the dough. The point is that even a little bit of legalism destroys the beauty of salvation and the joy of the gospel. Either Christ paid for the believer's sins or the believer must pay the penalty himself or herself. Paul is sure that his spiritual offspring will understand and return to a life of faith while promising punishment for those promoting legalism.

Paul reminds his beloved Galatian believers that the message he preached was causing him persecution. This is because the message of the cross is offensive. If Paul had been preaching circumcision, no one would be offended because people would not have to admit that their own efforts could not make them righteous before God. As if exasperated by the whole issue, Paul suggests

¹² It is significant that Paul had Timothy circumcised while in Galatia (cf. Acts 16:3). In that instance, Timothy was willing to give up his personal freedom for the sake of ministry impact. Paul did not have Timothy circumcised as a means to earn righteousness. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul was not teaching that circumcision in and of itself was wrong, but he was opposed to the teaching that it was a requirement for salvation. If it was a requirement, so was obeying the entire law, and no one apart from Christ is capable of meeting that standard.

that if God was pleased by having a little piece of skin cut off, the agitators should go ahead and become eunuchs. Maybe that would make God even more pleased.

C. A Command to Live by the Spirit (5:13-26)

The Christian life is to be a life of freedom rather than legalism, but that freedom does not mean indulging in the sinful nature. Rather, the purpose of the Christ-purchased freedom is for the believer to be in loving service to others. In fact, this love for one another is a summary of the entire law. The Jewish agitators had brought bickering and fighting amongst the Galatian believers and Paul feared that if it were not stopped, they would destroy each other. Paul provides another word picture to describe the Christian lifestyle. He calls believers to walk in the Spirit as an antidote to sinful living. It is a picture of following God's Spirit down a daily path and being empowered by the Spirit in that task. Paul is quick to acknowledge the war within each believer, between sinfulness and obedience to God. However, receiving guidance from the Spirit frees people from being enslaved to legalism.¹³

Paul reminds the Galatians of the sinful nature which resides in every person. The list of sins that the apostle gives is devastating and represents the types of things that people do who are not filled with the Holy Spirit. He contrasts the first list with a second list showing what walking by the Spirit actually produces. The word picture Paul uses, is that of a tree producing good fruit. This list represents what God desires and produces in all who follow and obey Him. The fighting that the Galatians were doing is the exact opposite of the fruit which the Spirit produces. Therefore, Paul uses strong language stating that believers in Jesus have crucified their sinful nature (5:24). The calling is repeated. Paul

¹³ In the first century, lists of moral and immoral behaviors were very common.

exhorts the Galatians to live by means of the Holy Spirit, walking with him to avoid the bickering and fighting that legalism produces.

D. A Command to Care for One Another (6:1-10)

Having established the Christian life as a journey alongside the Spirit of God, Paul reminds the Galatian believers to help restore those who have fallen into sin. This help is to be given by those who are walking with the Spirit. The underlying goal is that believers must help each other (Rom. 15:1-3), which is what Christ commanded (Matt. 22:39). While free from Jewish ceremonial law, Paul reminds the Galatians that they are not free from the commands of Christ, which are to love one another. However, “helping” another can lead to conceit rather than compassion. Paul encourages the Galatians to examine themselves continually to ensure that they do not become arrogant. As all those who are walking in the Spirit are responsible for helping, Paul underscores that supporting one another is only possible when each person does their part.

V. Conclusion (6:11-18)

Paul concludes with a stern reminder to those who had been corrupting the gospel. He underlines the importance of his message by mentioning the large letters with which he writes (6:11). Paul also reveals the motivation behind those who demand circumcision. They fear persecution because of Christ. Obedience to the Mosaic Law was a way of complying with Roman law.¹⁴ Secondly, these gospel distorters wanted to boast about enslaving the Galatian believers.

Paul uses this concept of boasting to say that the only reason for boasting is to do so in Christ Jesus. Believers in Christ are united to Him in faith and are

¹⁴ Jews who identified themselves by circumcision were protected by the Roman authorities. Judaism was legally allowed, unlike Christianity.

to die to the world just as the world has died to them (6:14). Boasting in the cross of Christ offended the Jews, amused the Gentiles, and proved circumcision irrelevant for those who put their faith in Jesus. However, dying to the world and living for Christ results in God's peace and mercy. Paul ends the letter to the Galatians with a request to end the personal attacks against him.¹⁵ Finally, Paul blesses his beloved Galatian believers with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Even his closing blessing is a beautiful picture of the true gospel message he first preached to these brothers and sisters.

¹⁵ Paul bore marks on his body of numerous persecutions and trials that testified to his faith in Jesus (2 Cor. 11:23-27).