

Wednesday Evening Bible Study

November 15, 2020

Introduction to Galatians

Text – Galatians 1:1 - 2

Introduction to Paul's Letters

Key Verse: Galatians 3:11

"But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith." (Galatians 3:11)

It is important at the beginning of our study of this first epistle of the Apostle Paul to discuss this unique literary style used by Paul to communicate the Word of God to Christians and churches for the past two millennia. In Paul's time there was a great deal of letters, known as literary epistles: that were actually produced for the general public even though they may have been addressed to specific individuals or groups. According to John Polhill: "Aristotle produced literary epistles of this sort, as did Epicurus. Perhaps the best known are the "moral epistles" (*Epistulae Morales*) of Seneca, a contemporary of Paul. For centuries these literary epistles were regarded as the prototype of Paul's letters. They were the main Greco-Roman letters that had been preserved. Literature tends to be kept over time; private correspondence rarely is."¹ Archaeologists have also unearthed many private letters dating back to the first century that pertained to personal matters or business transactions. Paul's letters, however, fall into a category somewhere in between these two. His letters were definitely personal and geared specifically to certain situations and specific people. They were the authoritative correspondence of an apostle, representing him in his absence. It was suggested that "Paul's letters were a new type of epistle, that of the "encyclical," which became a pattern for later bishops and popes in addressing their churches. Though intended for specific congregations, Paul's letters always had an eye on the larger Christian community."²

Paul's letter were intended to be read aloud to the churches for the benefit of the many people who could not read; and they were to be shared with other congregations:

"And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea." (Colossians 4:16)

Thirteen New Testament letters are all "signed" by Paul, though some were written through an amanuensis (Romans 16:22). The *Epistle to the Hebrews* may also have been written by Paul, but is anonymous. With Hebrew, there are fourteen Pauline epistles.

¹ John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 120.

² *ibid.*

Approximate Timeline of Paul's Letters:

| <u>Letter to:</u> | <u>Approx. Date</u> | <u>Where From</u> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Galatians (region; churches) | 49 AD | Possibly Antioch |
| 1 Thessalonians (city; church) | 51 AD | Corinth |
| 2 Thessalonians (city; church) | 51 AD | Corinth |
| 1 Corinthians (city; church) | 55 AD | Ephesus |
| 2 Corinthians (city; church) | 57 AD | Philippi (in Macedonia) |
| Romans (city; no church yet) | 58 AD | Corinth |
| Ephesians (city; saints) | 61 AD | Rome (prison) |
| Philippians (city; saints) | 61 AD | Rome (prison) |
| Colossians (city; saints) | 61 AD | Rome (prison) |
| Philemon (person; in Colossae) | 61 AD | Rome (prison) |
| 1 Timothy (pastor) | 63 AD | Macedonia; possibly Laodicea |
| Titus (pastor) | 65 AD | Necropolis (west Macedonia) |
| 2 Timothy (pastor) | 67 AD | Rome (2 nd . time in prison) |
| Hebrews (the Jews) | 61 or 67? | Rome |

Introduction to Galatians

Someone has once said that this little letter to the Galatians was the rough draft for Paul's masterpiece on the subject of salvation – *The Letter to the Romans*. While Romans does go into greater detail in establishing some of the principles contained in Galatians, I would hardly call this critical little Book a rough draft. It is a masterpiece in itself.

Donald Campbell says this about Galatians:

"In the early church, as the separation between Judaism and Christianity was taking place, the letter to the Galatians no doubt helped clarify that cleavage. Centuries later it played such a key role in the Reformation that it was called 'the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation.' This was because its emphasis on salvation by grace through faith alone was the major theme of the preaching of the Reformers. Luther was especially attached to Galatians and referred to it as 'his wife.' He lectured on the book extensively and his Commentary on Galatians was widely read by the common people."³

³ Campbell, D. K. (1985). "Galatians." (J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck, Eds.) *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

John Wesley was saved after meditating and studying its truths. Some have said that the Letter to the Galatians is the sketch, which laid the foundation for the masterpiece of Paul's Letter to the Romans. Another has said that Galatians is a proclamation of emancipation against legalism of any kind.

This is a unique letter among Paul's writings in that it is a very stern letter, containing no praise whatsoever for the churches of Galatia. Even 1st Corinthians, which is also a very strong letter, contains some commendation for the Corinthians. This letter is pure correction; not for conduct as with the letters to the Corinthians, but instead it corrects the most dangerous attack that can be leveled at Christianity: an attack aimed at the very foundational truth that salvation comes through faith alone, and not through any merit from the works of the law.

Paul would have some strong words of correction to the Church regarding this false doctrine that was creeping in:

"O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?"
(Galatians 3:1-3)

Galatians has been rightly called "The Magna Carta of Christianity".

Facts About Galatia (See Map)

The Roman province of Galatia (organized in 25 BC) extends in the north almost to the Black Sea, and in the south almost to the Mediterranean Sea. "They were a Celtic people who had migrated to that region from Gaul (modern France) in the third century b.c."⁴ Paul visited the cities of southern Galatia, and established churches there. The original area of Galatia consisted of just the northern part of the Roman province, and did not include the area where Paul travelled on his first journey. However, he did travel through northern Galatia during the second journey, but no specific churches are mentioned in Acts as being started there. The Gaul's, who gave the area its name, settled this northern section before the time of Christ.

Background

The Epistle to the Galatians was the earliest of Paul's letters. It was probably written in between Paul's first and second missionary journeys.

⁴ John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1786.

The Book of Acts, in chapter 13 records Paul's call by God and the commission given by the Church at Antioch to take the gospel to Asia Minor, including the region of Galatia.

Acts 14:21 – 23 sums up the activity that had taken place on this first journey:

"And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."

(Acts 14:21-23)

When Paul returned home to the Church at Antioch after his first missionary journey, he soon received word that there were problems surfacing. There was an attack made on the gospel.

Turn to Acts 15

"And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1)

The legalists and Judaizers had begun to add to the pure message of salvation by faith. They taught that in order to be saved you must believe on Christ, but you must also be circumcised. They also were teaching that you must live according to the Law of Moses in order to be in fellowship with the church. This is an attack against the gospel. Salvation is through Christ alone, not Christ plus circumcision, not Christ plus baptism, not Christ plus any kind of good works; it is faith in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, plus nothing.

It is my belief that *The Letter to the Galatians* was written at this time. These Judaizers and legalists were following Paul around, and presenting themselves as official representatives of the Church at Jerusalem, and they were corrupting the simplicity of the gospel and confusing the saints in Galatia. *Galatians* was most likely written in the time between the first and second journeys, after *The Council at Jerusalem* referred to in Acts 15:1 – 29. The references to Jerusalem in Galatians 2:1 – 10 probably refer this Council. One thing is for certain – both the Jerusalem Council, and the letter to the Galatians both deal with the same subject – legalism.

There is, however, a division of opinion among theologians as to when this epistle was written, and where it falls in the chronological sequence of events in Paul's life. You will notice on our timeline that we have placed the writing of Galatians around 49 or 50 AD, after the Jerusalem Council and before the start of the second missionary journey; shortly before 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written. J. Vernon McGee, among others, holds the

opinion that Galatians was written from Ephesus during the third journey, after Paul had seen the condition of the churches in Galatia on his way.

Three Purposes of the Letter

I. Paul Defends the Argument of Salvation by Grace through Faith

The main theme for the Letter to the Galatians is “*the just shall live by faith*”, which is the central theme to the Christian faith. (Galatians 3:11) Paul teaches that the Law served as a schoolmaster (v. 3:24), proving to us that we could not keep it.

See Galatians 1:6 – 10; 2:15 – 21; 3:1 – 13; 5:1 – 12

II. Paul Defends His Authority as an Apostle (vs. 1:1 – 2:14)

It seems that Paul frequently needed to defend his authority as an Apostle. In this letter, Paul actually went as far as to mention his rebuke of Peter, which was appropriate as the illustration gave weight to Paul’s main argument that Christians were no longer bound to the Law.

III. Paul Directs in the Practical Application of Faith (vs. 5:13 – 6:10)

As is the case in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, this letter built a doctrinal case for salvation by faith in the early portion, and then concludes with a practical application. The sinner is not only saved by faith plus nothing, but he also lives by faith. Galatians instructs the believer to “walk in the Spirit” (vs. 5:16 – 26). It also deals with relationships between believers (vs. 6:1 – 5); and gives principles regarding giving (vs. 6:6 – 10).

Illustration – Harry Ironside

Some years ago, I had a little school for young Indian men and women, who came to my home in Oakland, California, from the various tribes in northern Arizona. One of these was a Navajo young man of unusually keen intelligence. One Sunday evening, he went with me to our young people's meeting. They were talking about the epistle to the Galatians, and the special subject was law and grace. They were not very clear about it, and finally one turned to the Indian and said, "I wonder whether our Indian friend has anything to say about this."

He rose to his feet and said, "Well, my friends, I have been listening very carefully, because I am here to learn all I can in order to take it back to my people. I do not understand all that you are talking about, and I do not think you do yourselves. But concerning this law and grace business, let me see if I can make it clear. I think it is like this. When Mr. Ironside brought me from my home we took the longest railroad journey I ever took. We got out at Barstow, and there I saw the most beautiful railroad station and hotel I have ever seen. I walked all around and saw at one end a sign, 'Do not spit here.' I looked at that sign and

then looked down at the ground and saw many had spitted there, and before I think what I am doing I have spitted myself. Isn't that strange when the sign say, 'Do not spit here'?

"I come to Oakland and go to the home of the lady who invited me to dinner today and I am in the nicest home I have been in. Such beautiful furniture and carpets, I hate to step on them. I sank into a comfortable chair, and the lady said, 'Now, John, you sit there while I go out and see whether the maid has dinner ready.' I look around at the beautiful pictures, at the grand piano, and I walk all around those rooms. I am looking for a sign; and the sign I am looking for is, 'Do not spit here,' but I look around those two beautiful drawing rooms, and cannot find a sign like this. I think 'What a pity when this is such a beautiful home to have people spitting all over it -- too bad they don't put up a sign!' So I look all over that carpet, but cannot find that anybody have spitted there. What a queer thing! Where the sign says, 'Do not spit,' a lot of people spitted. Where there was no sign at all, in that beautiful home, nobody spitted. Now I understand! That sign is law, but inside the home it is grace. They love their beautiful home, and they want to keep it clean. They do not need a sign to tell them so. I think that explains the law and grace business."

As he sat down, a murmur of approval went around the room and the leader exclaimed, "I think that is the best illustration of law and grace I have ever heard."⁵

Map of Galatia



⁵ H.A. Ironside, *Illustrations of Bible Truth*, Moody Press, 1945, pp. 40-42.