

GALATIANS 1-6: OVERVIEW OF GALATIANS

INTRO: I think we are all familiar with the saying, “**You can’t see the forest for the trees.**” IOW, we can be concentrating so much on the details that we don’t see the big picture. Reading our Bibles can sometimes be like that. We can read and study a particular passage so that we can lose sight of the overall story of the book we are in.

Therefore, sometimes it’s a good idea to sit back and try to get a bird’s-eye view of the books of the Bible. When we do this, it can help us to see how the individual pieces fit together. That is what I propose to do today.

One of the most important books of the NT is the book of Galatians. One reason for this is that Galatians, perhaps more than any other book, describes the uniqueness of Christianity. Every other religion in the world essentially is a list of laws and rules which enslave people. Christianity is different. In Christ we have been freed from slavery to the law and to the flesh. That does not mean that Christians are lawless. Instead, Christians have the “law of Christ” inside of us, and through the internal guiding of the indwelling Holy Spirit we are being transformed to live like Christ.

Galatians does essentially three things: (1) It establishes Paul’s apostleship; (2) It is an eloquent defense of the “gospel”—the fundamental Christian doctrine that people are saved only by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ—and this makes the entire Christian family one, regardless of their background; and (3) It discusses the implications of salvation by God’s grace through faith in Christ. We are to live a new life by the faith that flows from the working of the Holy Spirit in us. So that is what we are going to look at.

O/S: First we will look at the background of the book; then we will look at Paul’s apostleship, the gospel, and the implications of the gospel for our lives.

I. Background

Galatia was one of the provinces of the Roman Empire. It was located between the provinces of Asia and Cappadocia in the central part of modern Turkey. Most biblical scholars hold that Galatians was written by the apostle Paul, probably about the year AD 48, shortly before the important council held in Jerusalem that is reported in Acts 15. If that is the case, Galatians likely was Paul’s first epistle and perhaps the first NT epistle written (the other likely candidate would be the book of James). On Paul’s first missionary journey, reported in **Acts 13-14**, he visited the towns of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in southern Galatia. Those congregations likely were the addressees of Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

There was a specific reason why Paul wrote this book. After Paul and Barnabas had evangelized the southern part of Galatia, some Jewish Christians came into the area. These people are often called “Judaizers.” The Judaizers were doing two things: first, they were claiming that Paul’s authority was inferior to that of the other apostles such as Peter and James, and second, they were spreading the false teaching that Gentile converts must live as Jews and undergo circumcision and submit to certain aspects of the Mosaic law in order to be saved

Paul realized that adding anything to the gospel is deadly, because then it is no longer the gospel. As a result, Galatians focuses on the gospel, namely, what it is and its implications for our lives. But he begins by accrediting his own apostleship.

II. Paul's Apostleship

Paul begins his epistle in v. 1 by saying [READ]. When Paul was writing, the conventional way of beginning a letter was for the writer first to identify himself, as Paul does here. Paul does this in all of his other epistles as well. However, given the background and context of the epistle to the Galatians, what he says here is actually quite loaded with meaning. Paul's apostleship had been challenged by the Judaizers. So he does not begin this letter by calling himself a **"bond-servant"** of Christ as he does in **Romans, Philippians, and Titus** or a **"prisoner"** of Christ as he does in **Philemon**. Instead, he calls himself an "apostle," but then does more: he emphasizes that his apostleship was **"not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead."** He is clearly accrediting his own authority by emphasizing that his position as an apostle did not come through any human agency but came directly from Jesus Christ and God the Father.

In v. 10 through the end of chapter 2 Paul continues to recount his own history to establish his authority as an apostle. In vv. 10-12 he says [READ]. By repeating that **"the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man"** and **"I neither received it from man nor was I taught it,"** Paul is emphasizing his *divine* commission which came directly from Jesus Christ. He returns to this point in vv. 15-16.

In vv. 13-14, Paul discusses his pre-conversion life. He points out in v. 14 that he **"was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen."** IOW, he had nothing to gain by becoming a Christian. In fact, his entire life as a Christian was one of persecution and suffering, as he recounts in **2 Corinthians 11**. Yet, it was all worth it, because now he has Jesus. This is important because the willingness to suffer and ultimately die for one's beliefs—as was true with Paul—reveals the sincerity of one's beliefs. What Paul is saying here shows that he had no ulterior motives for what he was doing and teaching.

In vv. 16-20 he points out that, 3 years after his conversion, he *did* meet with Peter and James in Jerusalem and stayed with them for 15 days. He then says [READ vv. 21-24]. What he is telling us is that Peter and James knew him and knew of his activities on behalf of the gospel. Also, the truth of his message was validated by all kinds of *other* believers and churches—and particularly by believers who had been predisposed *not* to believe him.

In 2:1-10 Paul recounts that he *again* went to Jerusalem and met with Peter, James, and John. In v. 2 he says he specifically **"submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles."** Then he adds in v. 9 [READ]. IOW, no one can doubt Paul's apostleship, since the **"pillars of the church"** themselves had acknowledged that Paul's apostleship was on the same level of authority as their own. He received "the right hand of fellowship" of Peter, James, and John. IOW, they fully accepted and approved of him and what he was teaching. Further, they commissioned Paul to keep on preaching and teaching to the Gentiles just as he had been doing all along.

In fact, in 2:11-14, Paul recounts how he even had to withstand and rebuke Peter to his face because Peter was not walking in line with the gospel when he had stopped eating with Gentiles. In short, Paul has shown us: (1) the nature of his life and his conversion to Christ, (2) the fact that Christ personally appeared to him and revealed the gospel to him, (3) the substance of his teaching, (4) the fact that the recognized leaders of the church all acknowledged the truth of his message and his apostleship, and (5) the fact that he even corrected Peter when Peter fell into error.

All this demonstrates that he is an apostle of the highest order. Not only that, the Galatians *knew* that because they knew him. He points out in the middle of **chapter 4** that they had had a close relationship with each other. That is why in **1:6** and **4:9** he is amazed at how quickly the Galatians have turned from the gospel he had taught them to follow the teaching of the Judaizers. This leads us to the gospel itself.

II. The Gospel

What is the gospel? The word “gospel” is a Greek word which means “good news.” The word “gospel” was not originally a Christian term but was used in the Greek and Roman world for good news of a great historical event that changes the listeners’ condition and affects their lives, such as a victory in war or the ascension of a new king. When Christians took over the term “the gospel,” it now refers to the good news of the *greatest* event in the history of the world, namely, the good news of what God has done through Jesus Christ to reach us. The gospel is not advice about what we must do to reach God.

The gospel is the good news that God has done for us what we never could do for ourselves. God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the life we should have lived. He perfectly obeyed God the Father in everything. He was **“tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”** That qualified him to step into our shoes and, on the cross, die the death we should have died, take upon himself our sin, and pay the penalty for our sin that otherwise we would have to pay but never could. Since we are sinful creatures, we never could earn our salvation on our own. All we can do is believe in who Jesus is, believe what he has done for us, and in faith and repentance turn to him as the Lord of our lives. As Paul puts it in **2:15**, we are not **“justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.”** He says the same thing in **3:21**, namely, that the law was never able to impart life.

And God will save us. IOW, he forgives us all our sins. But he does more. Jesus not only took the sin and punishment we deserve onto himself, but he also imputes *his* righteousness to us—IOW, all the good that he deserves is imputed to us. He thereby re-establishes a right relationship between God and us. But that is not all. When we come to faith in Christ, the Bible says that God takes our hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh—IOW a heart like his own. **1 Cor 2:16** also says that we receive the mind of Christ, and he gives us the Holy Spirit who comes to live inside of us. In Christ we therefore have the means to live new, restored, faithful, and good lives. As he says in **2:20 [READ]**. That is the gospel.

As I mentioned earlier, the gospel is the heart and soul of the book of Galatians. **Chapters 3-4** are, in my opinion, two of the most important chapters in the entire NT. The reason is that these two chapters not only focus on the gospel but show how it has been the essence of God’s plan from the very beginning, beginning with Abraham. So let’s take a look at that.

In 3:2, Paul asks the fundamental question: **“Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”** That is a rhetorical question. The answer is obvious. We receive the Spirit through faith. What Paul is doing is contrasting Christianity with every other religion in the world. There are many religions in the world: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age beliefs, etc. But there are only two *kinds* of religion: Christianity and everything else.

What I mean is, every other religion except Christianity essentially holds that if you want God, or the gods to accept you and take you to heaven or nirvana when you die, it is up to you—to do enough good deeds, make enough sacrifices, deny yourself enough things, then hope that you will be accepted and go to the good place when you die. That way of thinking is doomed to fail, because God is perfect. He holds us to the standard of perfection (as Jesus said in **Matt 5:48**, **“Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect”**). But we all know we are not perfect: we can’t even meet our own standards, let alone God’s. That is why Jesus came to the earth. He was perfect. So he did for us what we never could do for ourselves. All we can do is believe that and receive it. And Paul makes this clear in the rest of **chapter 3**.

In 3:6, he quotes from Gen 15:6: “Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” He then applies that to us in vv. 7-9. He says in v. 7, **“Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.”** In v. 9 he likewise says, **“Those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.”** In fact, in vv. 10-14 he points out that no one is justified by the law but are under a curse. But Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Then, in the rest of chapter 3 through 4:7 he contrasts the covenant God made with Abraham with the law of Moses and shows how God’s plan of redemption all fits together. In v. 16, Paul even picks up the grammar of the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis and says [READ v. 16]. Amazingly, he is pointing out that, even at the beginning of God’s plan of redemption, Christ was the ultimate meaning of the covenant. Paul makes the same point in 4:21-31, where he notes that the whole story of Israel was, in essence, an allegory pointing to Christ and the church.

The Law of Moses came 430 years later, and does not invalidate the covenant which was previously ratified by God. In 3:23-25 Paul tells us that the law was only temporary—it only applied until Christ came. He says [READ vv. 23-25].

The word translated “tutor” or “guardian” is the Greek word *pedagogue*. A pedagogue was a slave in a Roman household in charge of the minor children, until they reached maturity. His job was to instill good behavior in the child and punish wrong behavior. That’s what the law of Moses or any other law does: it can only tell us what to do and what not to do and provide punishments for violations. But law can never change people’s hearts. And it cannot give us the means or ability or desire or will to do as we should. Law is simply an external standard to which we are supposed to conform.

That is where Christ and our faith in him—the gospel—is fundamentally different. At the beginning of chapter 4 Paul points out in vv. 1-7 [READ].

What he is saying is that in Christ, we are no longer minor children. We have been redeemed. We have been adopted. We are no longer slaves in bondage to the law of Moses, but are sons. We have been brought into a close, personal relationship with God that we could never have on our own. The word “Abba” denotes an intimate loving relationship.

The business about all being sons is particularly good news for women. The reason is that Paul is using something from his own culture to make his point about how radical the gospel is. In his culture, only sons—particularly the first-born sons—could inherit, and only men or boys were adopted. Women were largely second-class citizens. What he is telling us is that, in Christ, women now have equal status with men as adopted, first-born “sons of God.” As a result, he summarizes in 3:28 [READ]. There is nothing else like this in any other religion in the entire world. So, what are the implications of the gospel for our lives?

III. The Implications of the Gospel

In chapters 5-6 Paul discusses the implications of the gospel for our lives. The foundational principle of our faith is stated in 5:1, **“It was for freedom that Christ set us free.”** This freedom includes freedom from the struggle of trying to keep the law, freedom from the struggle of trying to gain or keep God’s favor, and freedom from the guilt and shame of our sins, because we know that we are accepted by God as the result of what Christ has done for us. Thus, the gospel frees us to live as God created us to live, free to live an **“abundant life,”** as Jesus said in **John 10:10**. We have been freed to live lives pleasing to God and fulfilling to us, unencumbered by sin and the man-made rules and regulations that bind so many. Instead, we now have the Holy Spirit inside of us to empower us to live as we should. All of this this

separates Christianity from every other religion in the world.

Paul argues that all peoples' lives are either based on grace or law, faith or works. There is no third alternative and the two concepts—grace/faith or law/works—cannot be combined. If a person opts for salvation by works and the law, then, as he says in **5:2**, **“Christ will be of no benefit to you.”** Further, he points out that a person cannot “pick and choose” which of the requirements of the law to obey. In **v. 3** he says, if you place yourself under one of the requirements of the law then you are **“under obligation to keep the whole law.”**

Faith is different. “Faith” is more than just a mental “belief” in something. In **5:6** Paul summarizes that the most important thing is **“faith working through love.”** He adds in **v. 14**, **“the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’”**

“Faith working through love” describes the nature of what that true saving faith is. As Martin Luther said, **“If faith lacks love it is not true faith.”** Or, as John Piper puts it, **“Saving faith always gives rise to love and love gives evidence of genuine faith.”** IOW, true, saving faith involves our whole life and expresses itself through love. The reason is that God is love. We are called to be like him. And through the working of the Holy Spirit in us, he is slowly-by-slowly changing us and making us just like himself.

The either/or nature of our lives is made clear throughout chapters 5-6. In these chapters, Paul contrasts the **“deeds of the flesh”** with the **“fruit of the Spirit.”** He summarizes the deeds of the flesh in **vv. 19-21**. They are all self-centered and do not lead to unity and harmony among people but rather to division and exploitation. The fruit of the Spirit is the exact opposite. He says in **vv. 22-23 [READ]**. Following the leading of the Spirit results not only in personal well-being, but also in unity and harmony among people.

Note that the fruit of the Spirit is headed by “love.” Love, by its very nature, is others-centered. Love is practical. The result, as Paul says at the end of **chapter 5**, is that we will not become **“boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.”** Instead, **6:2** says, **“Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”** He summarizes the gospel life in **6:9-10** as follows **[READ]**.

And look at how he ends—v. 18 [READ]. He ends with “grace”—the same way he began in **1:3**, where he said **[READ]**. As he has stated throughout this book, our life in Christ is all about grace. It is only through God’s grace that we receive God’s peace. That grace, and the peace it brings, transforms us.

PROP: What all of this is telling us is: **The gospel—and only the gospel—is the key to a transformed life.**

CONCL: As I mentioned at the beginning, Galatians is, in my opinion, one of the most important books in the NT. The reason is that it is focused, with laser-like clarity, on the gospel—what the gospel is and what the gospel implies for our lives. It is the gospel that separates Christianity from every other religion and worldview that exists now or has ever existed. And it is all the work of Jesus Christ—who he is, what he has done, and what he is continuing to do through the Holy Spirit in us. If we let this soak down deep into us and permeate every aspect of our being, it will transform us from the inside out. As we live out the implications of the gospel, we will be God’s agents to help transform others into Christlikeness. That is what the gospel is intended to do. It is the greatest and highest calling we could ever imagine.