

By the Hearing of Faith

An Overview of Galatians

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Galatians is an emotional letter from Paul to a church he had ministered to in person. His beloved brethren were in danger of being led astray into a false system of salvation combining faith in Christ and the works of the Law. The false teachers, appropriately labelled Judaizers, were undermining Paul by denying his apostolic authority. Paul wrote to deliver the Galatians from the damning influence of the Judaizers and his arguments are just as relevant to the church today.

Paul's greeting (1:1-5) is somewhat longer than usual and immediately draws the reader's attention to two main points, his apostolic authority (1:1-2) and that salvation is in Christ alone (1:4). He transitions to his argument by emphatically stating there is only one gospel (1:6-9). Anyone preaching a different type of gospel (1:6-7), or preaching anything contrary to the gospel he has preached is to be accursed (1:8-9).

Paul next makes a careful defence of his apostolic authority (1:10-2:14). First he recounts the nature of his calling to salvation and to his apostleship (1:10-24). Then he demonstrates his equality to the other apostles and cites their approval of his gospel message (2:1-14). Many believe these Judaizers claimed to have been taught by the Jerusalem apostles. Paul however was not taught the gospel by men but directly by Christ (1:11-12). Furthermore, his calling to ministry was directly from God and he did not even meet another apostle until three years after his conversion (1:15-19).

It was another fourteen years before he again met with other apostles (2:1). At that time, Peter, James, and John gave him their full approval (2:9-10). They recognized that he preached the same gospel they did and acknowledged him as their equal (2:7-9). They also agreed with Paul concerning freedom from the ceremonial Law as evidenced by the fact that Titus, a gentile, was not compelled to be circumcised (2:3-5). Paul's forceful public rebuke of Peter confirmed his full apostolic authority (2:11-14).

With his apostolic authority re-established, Paul defended his gospel of grace against the gospel of works of the Judaizers (2:15-5:6). Justification, or a right standing before God, either derives from faith in Christ or the works of the Law. Wasting no time, Paul immediately establishes that justification comes through faith in Christ, not by the works of the Law (2:15-3:5). The first part of this section (2:15-21) should be interpreted in light of Peter's false attitude (2:11-14) and some suggest this is a quote of Paul's address to Peter. Given this, and that the Galatians were mostly gentiles, the 'we' of 2:15 must be Peter and Paul. They of all people knew that justification came through faith in Christ, not the

works of the Law (2:15-16). In fact, if the Law could bring righteousness there was no need for the cross (2:21). In 2:19-20 we see how God can justify us even though His Law condemns us. In His life Christ perfectly fulfilled the demands of the Law and in His death He bore the penalty for the sins of the elect. Through our union with Christ the demands of the Law have been met in both respects, Christ was obedient on our behalf and He was punished on our behalf. This is why elsewhere Paul points to the cross as the reason God can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Christ.¹ Our justification however is not merely our being declared righteous. It includes our being given a new righteous nature and disposition to holiness in our new life with Christ living in us (2:20).

Pivotal to Paul's case is 3:1-5. The chief difference between the saved and unsaved is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Galatians knew the Spirit is received by the hearing of faith and not the works of the Law (3:1-2, 5). Nevertheless they were in danger of making justification the end result of a lifelong process combining both faith in Christ and the works of the Law (3:3). Succumbing to such a false gospel would indicate they were never truly saved (3:4).

Paul next presents the example of Abraham, the father of all heirs to the covenant of the promise of God (3:6-29).² Abraham was justified by faith (3:6) and his true descendants are those of faith (3:7-9). The Law was given long after the promise to Abraham and so cannot alter the covenant of promise (3:16-17) but can only bring cursing because obedience to it must be perfect (3:10-12).³ It cannot bring life, only condemnation by revealing the divine ideal of righteousness thereby revealing the utter futility of attempting to obtain righteousness by works (3:19-23). It thus points us to the cross as the only way to acceptance by God (3:23-24). Accordingly, faith in Christ who became a curse for us is the only means of salvation (3:13-14; 25-29).

Paul then uses a cultural analogy (4:1-11). In Christ, the elect receive redemption from the Law and adoption as sons (4:4-5) at which point the Spirit is received and the difference between the heirs and slaves is realized (4:6-7). The legalistic observance of ritual by the Galatians concerns Paul that they desire to turn back from sonship to slavery and so perhaps they are not really saved (4:8-11).

Paul interrupts his defence with an exhortation for the Galatians to return to their foundation (4:11-20). He next argues by way of allegory from the Law that the Law brings bondage but grace brings freedom (4:21-22). He concludes his defence with an ultimatum (5:1-6). If they receive circumcision they are under moral obligation to keep the Law perfectly (5:1-3). This would set aside the work of Christ, dropping them out of the sphere of salvation by grace (5:4). The saved

¹ Rom. 3:19-26.

² See Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-8.

³ See also James 2:10-11.

however wait for the hope of righteousness by the Spirit by faith (5:5). This faith is demonstrated through love in which the whole Law is fulfilled (5:6).⁴

Before moving on to principles of Christian living, Paul again encourages the Galatians to cling to their foundation (5:7-12) with confidence they will finish well (5:7, 10). Paul notes that grace is not license for disobedience (5:13-15). Obedience to the moral Law is proof of our new love and life.⁵ We are not saved by our obedience but if we lack obedience we are not saved. This is driven home as Paul presents clearly defined standards by which we can assess our status before God (5:16-24).⁶ In the Greek, 5:16-18 indicates that by habitually walking by the Spirit there is no possibility we will fulfill the desires of the sinful nature of the flesh by continually doing whatever we wish. Those who habitually practice the deeds of the flesh are not heirs of the kingdom (5:19-21). A saved person will commit individual acts of sin but they will not be habitually sinful. Habitual sin is the sign of an unregenerate person. Notice the shift from ‘works’ of the flesh to ‘fruit’ of the Spirit. Salvation is God’s ongoing work in us, not the result of our ongoing works. The proof of salvation lies in a life characterized by the qualities Paul lists (5:22-23).

With the flesh crucified, those in Christ should live disciplined lives led by the Spirit with humility and introspection (5:24-26). Our lives should demonstrate love for our brethren (6:1-10) as we help each other with our moral weaknesses (6:1-5), provide for the needs of those who faithfully minister to us (6:6), and persevere in our ministry to others (6:9-10).

Paul closes in his own handwriting (6:11-18), showing his personal concern for the Galatians. He sums up the main issues of the letter (6:11-15) and pronounces his benediction (6:16-18). In the Greek, ‘brethren’ is the last word of the epistle apart from ‘amen’. Paul reassures the Galatians that they are his beloved brethren.

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⁴ See also Mat. 7:12; 22:36-40; and Rom. 13:8-10.

⁵ Compare John 14:15, 21, 23-24.

⁶ Recall that Jesus repeatedly taught that good fruit was proof of a good tree and bad fruit of a bad tree. See Mat. 7:15-23; 12:33 and John 15:4-6.