

Galatians: An Overview

Galatians 1:1-6:18

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Galatians Chapter 1:1-10

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead—and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

Let us pray.

O Lord our God, may all glory be unto Your name. We thank You that we have in our possession the precious word of God, a word which is a sure anchor for our soul, a more sure word of prophecy that we can rest our confidence in. So I pray, Lord, that You would send Your Holy Spirit to awaken our understanding, to bring light to the pockets of darkness within our own minds, that we may see Christ all the more clearly and worship Him all the more fully for the redemption that He has purchased for our salvation. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I want to this morning begin a general overview of the book of Galatians before we consider some of the particulars of this epistle. Someone has said before that the best way to do a puzzle piece is to look at the picture, and so we need to interpret the whole or look at the whole before we can

interpret the parts. And so those little pieces, as we go through passage by passage, must be considered in light of the entire epistle and the overarching themes that are here in this epistle.

The book of Galatians undoubtedly is the greatest exposition and defense of justification by faith in Jesus Christ, and also not only of the justification for our salvation by faith in Jesus Christ but also the unfolding of the purpose of the law in redemptive history. When we come to this epistle, we are looking at an epistle that unfolds this understanding of the purpose of the law in relationship to what God was seeking to fulfill in redemption throughout history through His covenant promises.

But also what it teaches us is that a man or a woman cannot be made right with God apart through faith alone in Jesus Christ. And these two things come together and they expand really throughout this epistle and unfold these great riches of the gospel really like no other epistle in the New Testament. This has in many respects been called the epistle of the Reformation. It was Martin Luther's one of his favorites, and he said this about it. He said, "The epistle to the Galatians is my epistle." He says, "To it I am as it were in wedlock. It is my Katerina von Bora," which was the name of his wife. And what he simply was saying is that this epistle was so precious to him, so dear to him, that he felt wedded to it. It was such a part of his life. It so shaped the way that he thought. In fact, this epistle has been called the battle cry of the Reformation.

Luther lectured through this epistle in 1516, a year before he nailed his 95 theses. And so you could see how these truths are so important for the recovery of the truth of the gospel. These truths are fundamental. They are to be like the bedrock upon which our faith rests. In fact, the truths that are considered in this epistle are nonnegotiable truths. These are things that must be held to, defended, understood. These are things that if we get wrong, the consequences are great and quite severe.

And what is the story of Galatians? You know, the Galatians' story is an interesting one. Phil read some of that to us this morning. But the Apostle Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey set out from Antioch in Syria and made their way through the lower parts of Asia Minor. But they came to Antioch Pisidia, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. You read about some of those things in Acts Chapter 13 and Acts Chapter 14, which I encourage you to do in your own time. But this region was considered the South Galatian region.

Now there is debate whether this is the North Galatian region or to the South Galatian region, but I'm not going to enter into that today but just simply say that I'm coming at this from the approach of the South Galatian

argument for the South Galatian region. But Paul and Barnabas entered into that South Galatian region and they preached the gospel there, and the gospel had such a powerful effect in the towns and the villages that they proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ. In fact, many people came to Christ as we saw even read to us this morning, powerfully received. They brought powerful inroads into those towns and into those villages. In so much that as long as well as with that powerful reception came powerful and vehement opposition, and particularly from what was the Jews.

The Jews did not take well to the teaching and preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which taught that Christ is Messiah and all that the prophets and the scriptures have said before culminated and pointed to Him. They didn't like that. And so the Jews stirred up the Gentiles and they sought to drive them out of the city, and the apostle Barnabas and Paul and Barnabas moved from place to place preaching the same message. But these Jews continued to follow them to the different places and stir up the different ones and cause havoc and cause persecution for Paul and Barnabas.

But this gospel spread and many were converted right throughout the South Galatian region, and by the end of Acts Chapter 13, actually end of Chapter 14, what ends up happening is they end up in Derbe and they start trekking their way back through the very same places that they were persecuted, going back to those churches that were established by the preaching of the gospel. And they went about strengthening the disciples. And the Bible also teaches that they appointed elders in every church in those cities that they preached Christ in and there were churches formed.

Which at the end of this journey, if we could say this first missionary journey, the dating would probably be around 48 AD to 49 AD. At the end of Chapter 14, it says they came all the way back to Antioch in Syria and there they stayed there for a long time. And then in the next chapter, we have the Jerusalem council and the concerns that came up regarding circumcision and the gospel and the Gentiles being received into the church or as the people of God.

And why this is important is because we need to understand and comprehend the problem that is happening here. You see, these churches that were planted in this entire region are the churches plural to which this letter is addressed. In verse number two of Chapter one, it says to the churches of Galatia. It is not one church that's being addressed here but that churches of that entire region that were established on that first missionary journey that they went back and appointed elders in those churches.

And what had happened after Paul had left them and Barnabas had left them is that there started to be a corrupting influence that was permeating

the church. And Paul somehow got word and understood that there was this corrupting influence that was corrupting the message that Paul and Barnabas proclaimed to them and that they suffered for, and the message that really established them as believers in Jesus Christ.

And this corrupting party is known to us as the Judaizers. And this epistle really tries to deal with the influence of the Judaizers. You say, where do we get the idea of Judaizers from? Go to Chapter two, verse 14. The commentators particularly like to help us understand that this is where the term or the designation Judaizers comes from. Galatians Chapter two, verse 14. It says, "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew, live after the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?'" That word, those words "to live as Jews," is one word where we get the word Judaizer from, or to Judaize.

And what Paul is talking about here with Peter is simply saying, "Hey, you know, they're Judaizing. You're trying to cause these believers, these Gentile Christian believers, to live as Jews." And this also appears in the book of Esther when it talks about that many were becoming Jews. After that situation in the book of Esther, also that phrase is used again. And the idea here is that the Judaizers were a group of influencers and people within the churches of Galatia that were trying to cause the believers to live as Jews. That's the whole idea of Judaizers.

Now their beliefs were not—they weren't people of Judaism. They were people of the churches. In fact, it is important to realize that these people were also professing Christians. They were not those that necessarily rejected Messiah, Christ as the Messiah. In fact, it seems like what Paul is saying here that they are very much a part of us, but they're not really of us because they have great distortion to the truth that we proclaim. And so he's not saying that these are Jews that deny Messiah that are in the church. Otherwise, they wouldn't be in the church. They would have been a clear distinction between those people. They would have understood. They were opposed in the gospel from the early days in Acts Chapter 13. They wouldn't join themselves to believers.

But these were Christians that were influenced by the Jews and they became Judaizers. They were people that would profess Christ, that would seek to turn those who had their liberty in Christ under the law and under the old covenant, and they were seeking to infiltrate the church. They were Christian. And the way that we can determine this is, look at Galatians 2:4. The same people that are Judaizers in Jerusalem, where they were in Jerusalem, also identified as a similar people here. It says, "And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in, who came by stealth to

spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage." And so they were called false brethren, which means there obviously was a profession of some kind of idea, identification as brothers.

Also, in Galatians 6:12-13, Paul says that these people don't want to suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. Now, if the Jews rejected the cross of Christ wholesale, why would they be trying to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ? They wouldn't be persecuted for the cross of Christ. But these ones, particularly, were seeking to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ, and therefore they were trying to amalgamate Judaism and Christianity together so that they wouldn't suffer persecution, which also indicates that they had a form of godliness. They had a form of truth. They had some kind of gospel that was perverted.

Which brings us to the third understanding of this, is in Galatians 1:6-7. Look what he says here in Galatians 1:6-7. He said, "You've turned away so soon from Him who called you into the grace of Christ to a different gospel," he says, "which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." What they were bringing, these Judaizers, was a perversion of the gospel of Christ. It was a distortion of the gospel of Christ. It wasn't an utter rejection of the message of Messiah, which makes it all the more difficult, isn't it, to identify?

Part of the strategic subtlety of Satan is to infiltrate heresy and false doctrine by running along the lines of truth and, if we could say, going down certain bypaths that will lead people out from that road with these false teachers to head away from Christ. These people were legalists. Ultimately, their message was a message that was adding works to grace. They were adding law to gospel, and they were trying to put new covenant believers under the rules and regulations of the old covenant law. And therefore, they were bringing, as what Paul says, these people under bondage.

And one particular hang-up that they had was the hang-up of circumcision. And to them, circumcision was still, as it was back in the days of Abraham, that if you wanted to become part of the covenant people of God, you must be circumcised. Faith in Jesus Christ is not enough to be regarded as one who belongs to God. Faith in Jesus Christ is not enough to be an evidence of one who is part of that new covenant. Rather, they thought to themselves, and rather they tried to infiltrate the church by teaching, you still need to do what Abraham did to all his offspring, and that is circumcise. If you want to really be the children of Abraham. If you want to really be part of the family of God.

And so these were legalists. And the manner in which they approached the church was subtle. In 2:4, as we read, he says they were bringing things

in secretly. They were spying out liberties. This is what they were doing over there in Jerusalem. This is what they were doing also here in Galatia. This was not just a Galatian problem. It ended up being a church problem, which you see addressed in different parts and in different epistles. They were also persuasive. You can see how the influence that they even had on Peter led Peter to act in hypocrisy, which led Barnabas to act in hypocrisy, and all the other Jews to act in hypocrisy by separating themselves from the Gentiles, the believing Gentiles.

You can see how they were so persuasive that they would even persuade, for example, the Apostle, or cause fear in Peter at least, so they would act in a way not according to the truth of the gospel. And people were led about by their dissimulation and by their hypocrisy, and it caused them to separate from people that God had brought together in one in Christ Jesus. But these people, not only were subtle and persuasive, but they also were zealous. Amazing how zealous they were. In Chapter 4, look with me in verse 17. Chapter 4, verse 17. It says, "They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them." And so here are these people that were zealously courting these believers to bondage, essentially. Not to good things. And they were excluding people. That's their idea, the practice of separation, drawing disciples after themselves, cutting them off from their other believers in Jesus Christ. And they were doing this in a way that was zealous. It was not like, "Come on, let's sin, and let's live like this." It was about holiness. It was about truth. It was about the word of God. It had a form of vigor and seriousness that was about the very thing that they were doing. And they're part of its persuasion, I'm sure. But Paul regards them as troublemakers.

And he says a very strong warning that was read at the beginning. He says that they should be accursed. Twice he repeats it. "Let these people be accursed. Let them be excommunicated. Let them be cut off from the people of God because they are propagating and perverting the gospel of Jesus Christ." Where did these people come from? Well, as I mentioned before, most likely from that Jewish opposition. After Paul left and those churches were established, all those Jews that were poisoning the minds of the Gentiles, as was read to us this morning, it's very likely that they were continuing to poison the minds of the people in the church. And there was a sub-following of Judaism in the church through the Judaizers.

And so when we come to this epistle, it's important for us to realize that Paul is addressing these very people who had this very powerful influence upon the churches that he established there in South Galatia. And Paul basically says to the people of Galatia, the churches of Galatia, he says, "There is only one gospel. There's no two gospels. There's only one gospel." And he says it in Galatians 1:6-7, "You're turning away to a different gospel,

which is not another." There is only one true gospel of salvation, the gospel that Paul received from God, in Chapter 1:11-12, which changed his life, which he also elaborates in Chapter 1, which was recognized by the other apostles in Chapter 2.

And he says, "This is a gospel that teaches justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ," which affects the lives of those that believe in Jesus Christ in such a way that their experience is changed. That's Chapter 3. He says, "When you received the Spirit, did you receive it by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?" He's saying the justification by faith in Jesus Christ, this one and only gospel, not only is truth, but it's truth that ought to be effectual in your life so that it's an experience so that you can testify and see that it's changed you. Now you have a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Now there is a power that is in you which was not there before.

And then he says, "Not only is it something that affects and is recognized in one's experience," but in Chapter 3, he goes on to say, "This gospel is not something new that Jesus Christ revealed to me alone on the road to Damascus. This gospel goes all the way back even before Abraham but was established even in the Abrahamic covenant. The one who the Jews proclaim as the chief head of the family of Israel, yet him, Abraham, this gospel is tied into the covenant promises made with him because Abraham believed God, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness, long before Abraham was circumcised."

And then he goes on to say that the Mosaic law in Chapter 3 only served temporarily for a time until this new, if we could say, dispensation or covenant was introduced by the blood of Jesus Christ. And Paul says there's only one gospel. And it's a gospel that he received, the gospel of justification, but a gospel also that makes us sons of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. He says that in Chapter number four, he says it's a gospel of freedom. In Chapter five, those that are part of the gospel, this gospel of Jesus Christ, they are children of the free, not children of the bondwoman.

They have a command. This gospel commands them to stand firm in the liberty that they have received and not to be entangled again in bondage. This gospel has a power. This one and only gospel has a power. And in Chapter five, he says, "This is the power of the Holy Spirit, that if you walk in the Spirit, you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh." This is a gospel that brings men and women in, not only to sonship but into a living, vital relationship with the Holy Spirit Himself that causes them to walk in the ways as the new covenant promises testify.

A gospel whose law is love, Chapter number six, he refers to. And at the end, he goes on to say, "A gospel that is worth glorying in, worth suffering

for, worth walking according to." And he ultimately says, "This is the gospel of grace," as he gives the benediction at the end.

So when we come to the epistle of Galatians, we need to come to understand the trouble that was in the church and the pains that the apostle Paul goes through to iron that problem out for the sake of the people of God. You say, "Why the book of Galatians out of all the New Testament epistles? Why the book of Galatians, that all the books in the Bible?" Let me ask you this: Why the gospel? You could essentially say the same thing. The Galatians is a book that helps us understand with freshness, with detail, what is this blessed gospel of Jesus Christ which has come to us, which has saved us, which we are called to walk in. This is what the Galatians, the book of Galatians, is all about.

You see, the gospel is the center of our faith. The gospel is the guiding instrument for our lives. And if you get the gospel wrong, you are like a ship that goes out by a few degrees; even just a few degrees, on a long enough journey, that ship will arrive at a different destination. And so it's important, as God's people, that we are not thinking, "Oh, why go through the gospel? We know it already." I can assure you, we do not know it as well as we ought to know it. And we don't know it so detailed in such a way that we can identify false teaching and heresy that could put us two clicks off course and lead us to a destruction in hell.

And the minute the church of Jesus Christ thinks that we got the gospel down pat because we think of it only and solely as a message, and if we can repeat that message, then we're fine, we've missed it. The gospel is more than just a message. It is a truth that ought to pervade the way that we think, the way that we approach God in our relationship, the way that we read the entirety of the scripture. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just simply a message that we believe in order to get saved and we put it on the side and we go about living our own life for God in the power of our own strength. It is the heart and soul and the center of all that Christians do. We believe gospel. We live gospel. We talk gospel. We pray gospel.

And it's so easy as the church of God to think, "Oh, the gospel is just something to be preached." And yes, believe that one point in time in your life, but that's it, I'm done with the gospel. Now let me find something else in the scripture. You go to any epistle in the New Testament, and you'll find in the first section of it, the gospel. You know what you'll find in the other section of it? Applications that should be in our lives because of the gospel. Commandments that are resultant because of the gospel. Effects of that gospel.

And as Christians, we must never get enough of this gospel. We must

bury ourselves in it. We must wash ourselves in it. Our minds must be cleansed by it. We must preach this gospel to ourselves day in, day out, that we might continue, like the Apostle Paul, to glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why do we break bread? The gospel. Why do we worship Jesus Christ and God the Father and God the Holy Spirit? Because of the gospel. And it's our duty as the people of God to approach this epistle with a hunger and a renewed zeal to understand what it is exactly that Jesus Christ has done to accomplish our redemption, and what it is exactly that we are commanded to believe, that we are instructed to obey, and how this gospel should shape the way that we act and think and talk and live.

It's not enough to say, "I love Jesus," or "I believe in Jesus." The epistle in Galatians teaches us that it's not enough just to profess Jesus. It's not enough just to say you love Jesus. It's not enough. We must believe the right things about Jesus. Who is this Jesus that we believe? And do we have this Jesus, but we don't have true faith in him? The book of Galatians helps us understand that.

Doctrine matters. A lot of people think to themselves, as long as you have a testimony... You can go to almost every religion in the world and find testimonies of people that will tell you that their lives have changed since they came to Islam, since they came to Hinduism or Buddhism. It has kind of shaped their lives in the way that they think, that they've had some changes in their life. What the book of Galatians teaches us is that a testimony is not sufficient. What is sufficient is a right understanding and belief in this gospel of Jesus Christ that saves. For there are many that say, "I believe in Jesus," or "I love Jesus," but they don't understand who this Jesus is and what it actually means to believe in him in such a way that we are not depending on the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.

There are many who say, "Lord, Lord, I prophesied in your name, I've cast out devils, I've done many wonderful works." And Jesus will say to them, "I will profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, you that work iniquity." You say, "But look at their lives. They were doing things." But Jesus is simply saying, "I never knew you." There was no living, true relationship with God through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

And so let us not just think that the gospel is something that is so simple in such a way that we are not to learn about its depths and examine our understanding of it. Of course, it is not a complicated message, and you will see as we go through this, you're not going to find anything that's complicated about it. But remember, just a few clicks in the wrong direction,

you end up at a wrong destination. And we'd be foolish to think that there are no Judaizers in the church of Jesus Christ today. There are still many that are propagating distortions and perversions of this very gospel. They proclaim a gospel of prosperity. There are those that proclaim a gospel of works. There are those that proclaim a gospel saying, "Yes, it's all of grace," and you think, "Oh, it's all of grace." But then you start to probe a little bit deeper. "Grace means do this and do that because that's how we receive grace."

And we'd be foolish to think that just because someone says the right things, we need to probe further and ask, "What do you mean by what you are saying?" And we cannot do that unless we understand the implications and the extent of the gospel of Jesus Christ and all those subtleties of Satan that are bypass that cause people on the road to destruction.

And Christians also need this. Why do we need this as Christians? Your assurance of salvation. The way you respond to condemnation in your life. The way you deal with sanctification in your spiritual life. The way you understand Christian freedom. And what God has done not only to purchase us with His blood but to make us free in our obedience to God through loving our Lord Jesus Christ. It will affect the way that you read the Old Testament and all related issues that affect the way that we walk with our Lord.

If Peter needed to be reminded of it, then don't we? Let us not think that we've got this down pat. Peter's hypocrisy was a direct result of his misunderstanding of the implications of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And let us not be guilty of the same.

So my prayer for us all is that we would gather together here on the Lord's Day to come together and to remember and to think and to challenge ourselves and to build ourselves up on the foundation of the very thing that has made us who we are today: believers in Jesus Christ. Let us pray.