

# Introducing Galatians

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Littlebourne - 7th April 2024 - Galatians 1:1-5

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We're starting this afternoon a new book of the Bible, having finished Acts. We're going to make our way through what is considered the earliest written book of the New Testament - Galatians.

Galatians is the first of the epistles, the letters, of Paul. It's dated somewhere around AD 48. We know this to be the time period, because we know that the Jerusalem Council took place in around 48-49 AD, which, though it would be very beneficial to Paul's arguments, doesn't get an explicit mention, so probably hasn't happened yet. Paul talks about going to Jerusalem, which he had done before, but doesn't talk about the council's decision, which was right in line with this letter. The letter is sent to the churches of Galatia - an area which Paul went to in around AD 47-48. So this letter is dated to that short period between these events - between Paul evangelising the Galatians and the Jerusalem Council.

This also fits with what Paul says about the Galatians in chapter 1 verse 6:

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel*

It's a very quick thing - Paul has visited maybe at most a year beforehand, and they're already going astray, so much so that Paul has heard about this and writes this letter.

To put this into context in Acts, this would have taken place sometime after Paul visited the province of Galatia in chapters 13 and 14 and the council of Jerusalem in chapter 15.

## Galatians Overview

So what's Galatians about? The letter starts with the first five verses we're looking at today - a salutation.

Then, from chapter 1 verses 6-10, Paul explains the reason for his writing. He's writing because the Galatians are giving up on the gospel they were given - and Paul isn't having it. There has been some sudden substitution of the true gospel for a false one - those who were assured by Paul that salvation is a free gift of grace, have started to think otherwise.

The Galatian error is in thinking that their own works can contribute to their salvation. This is the crisis that Paul addresses.

Then, the substantive part of the book is Paul's answer to this crisis. From chapter 1 verse 11 all the way into the 6th chapter, Paul makes his arguments against the error the Galatians are holding to.

He starts with an explanation of his own authority on this matter - that he possesses the apostolic authority to give them the true gospel, in chapter 1 verse 11 to chapter 2 verse 21.

Then Paul directly asserts his view of things in the next chapters. He shows the plan of grace from the example of Abraham, and from other scripture. He makes clear that works of the law get you nowhere in terms of peace with God. He contrasts the law and promise. He says that you can rely on yourself for salvation or you can rely on Christ - and only one of those ways works.

From around chapter 5 verse 13, Paul turns to practical concerns about how to live out the gospel. Since he has gone hard against the false view that works will help in our salvation, it's important also to offer some correction against the opposite error that might occur - the error that since good works don't matter in our salvation, they don't matter at all. Rather, Paul says, those of us who are given new life by the Spirit should be consistent with that new life and live in it, doing works of the Spirit.

Finally, from chapter 6 verse 11 to the end of the letter, Paul concludes with a final warning and a benediction, a blessing for the Galatians, who will hopefully have listened to his words and committed to the right way Paul was presenting.

So that's what we have to look forward to over the coming months. But the thrust of the book, something of a summation of what is to come, is here in the first 5 verses.

## v1-2

*Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the brothers who are with me,*

*To the churches of Galatia:*

First, we see who is writing - Paul. He describes himself as an apostle - this will be an important argument later. Paul feels the need at the very beginning of the letter to defend his authority in writing them this letter. He is an apostle, someone who is sent. The word literally means 'sent one', a representative, envoy, messenger.

Apostle as a word gets used in a technical sense to mean those that were the divinely appointed founders of the church - the twelve disciples for instance. But it also is a way for Paul to say that he's one that was sent to them - he didn't bring them his own message for his own reasons, he brought the message he was given, for the reasons of his master.

Paul says he's an apostle "not from men nor through man" - as if to underscore that he has been divinely appointed to this task. He's not sent by his church in Antioch, though they support him in his mission. He's not someone appointed by the twelve in Jerusalem, though that would be a good position to be in too. He's sent directly by 'Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead.'

It's Jesus Christ and God the Father that sent Paul on his missionary journey that passed through Galatia and brought the gospel to these people. Paul is making abundantly clear that the message he presented to them was not something he made up, not something he had no warrant to bring and not something that conflicts with God's views on the matter. He instead was given this task directly by God, so that he could bring them the good news that he too received from Christ directly, when he was transformed on his way to Damascus.

Paul's apostolic authority will be a big focus in the first two chapters of Galatians, and we see it already a focus at the start of this letter. It's likely that one of the claims floating about in Galatia was that Paul wasn't really a legitimate apostle. Look at his earlier life. Was he one of those that saw Christ in the flesh? Was he one of those there at pentecost? This is a view that Paul has to overcome before he can get to his main arguments, as we see later in chapter 1.

Lastly in verse 2, he says 'and all the brothers who are with me'. Paul is not alone in his convictions about the gospel, that he will outline further on. Paul stands as one of many that are concerned about the Galatian churches.

Then who he is writing to - the churches of Galatia. As I mentioned, these are most probably the churches that Paul helped found as he went on his first missionary journey.

Verses 3-5 now go on in a manner that is familiar in Paul's letters - he writes a very quick blessing and doxology.

### v3-5

*3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

We find in all of Paul's letters an introduction that blesses the recipient with grace and peace. He sometimes writes the sentence longer or shorter, but his phrase 'Grace to you and peace' is consistent in all his letters.

Grace - an undeserved act of kindness - in Greek *charis*, from which we get the word charity. Paul uses this word more than any other writer in the New Testament. It's a foundational concept for him and his letters - that all that God has given us in Christ is undeserved and given freely. Likewise, peace - peace with God, through Christ. Paul will write in Romans 5 (v1-2):

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

The blessing of grace and peace is at the heart of the gospel that Paul seeks to restore the Galatians to. Paul expands on this, explaining how this came about:

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 **who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father**, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever.*

The foundation of this grace and peace with God is in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who gave himself for our sins. The grace and peace the Paul proclaims is accessible through the death and resurrection of Christ - He took our sins upon himself, that they might die with Him, and He rose again in victory over all sin, that we too might be victorious over sin in Him. We are delivered from the present evil age - the present world of sin, and are welcomed in to the world that is being built - the new earth, the resurrected earth that is coming into shape.

And this was all the will of God the Father - Paul will later on show us the gospel from the Old Testament - showing us that God's will all along was for this to happen. A key part of the message of Galatians is in how we are to view the law and the gospel - we often think of the Old Testament times as times of law, and then Jesus comes and brings gospel and grace. But Paul will tell us that there was grace from the start - that the unchanging will of God is that men are saved by grace through Christ.

Lastly, Paul takes this and makes it a doxology - *δοξολογία doxologia*, from *δόξα* 'glory' and *-λογία* 'saying' - a glory saying. Paul says "Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ..., to whom be glory forever and ever".

## **An abrupt introduction**

Compared to other introductory comments in Paul's letters, this one to the Galatians is very abrupt. The first letter we have of Paul's to another church that was in danger - the Corinthian church - starts in a similar way but then includes a paragraph of thanks to God for them. He's going to write about how they are messing up, but in that case, he starts with kind words before going into the arguments.

In almost all of his letters, he does this - he introduces himself and who he is writing to, and then writes some expression of gratitude or encouragement - but not in Galatians. In Galatians, he rushes to the important task at hand. The topic is one of seriousness and urgency, and we'll see Paul uses quite a fiery tone in the coming chapters.

The purpose of the letter then, is not just to tell us about some theology, or to keep in touch with the churches he planted. Paul's purpose is to safeguard the souls of those that he perceives are leaving the faith. It couldn't be more important.

## **Conclusion**

This first five verses, this introduction sets the scene for us - we know who is writing and to whom, and we see the central issue - Paul gives us a brief, but clear explanation of the gospel - "grace and peace through Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins". This is the issue at the heart of the letter, that salvation is because of what Christ has done, rather than what we do.

This might seem elementary - this is really something we surely don't need to be taught today too? Haven't we got this much clear at least in the past two thousand years?

But the temptation away from the gospel is something that has cropped up again and again in church history - here at the very beginning of the church, we'll see in chapter 2, Paul uses strong words against Peter, who it seems was still insisting that people follow some ceremonial law - food, circumcision and the like. This is Peter, who got the gospel first hand from Jesus Christ, who stood up and proclaimed that gospel at Pentecost. Even he could get this wrong.

The countless heresies that have been condemned as the church has worked out what is true and false over the course of centuries - every major heresy ends up being something that either diminishes Christ's saving work, or elevates our own efforts. The big arguments in church history have all been about the gospel - whether it's gnosticism, montanism, docetism, arianism, modalism, pelagianism (especially pelagianism), or many others, they all end up altering the gospel.

In the 16th century, this was most apparent, in the Reformation, when the church in Europe had accrued a set of beliefs in the powers of the sacraments and our own works for salvation. Galatians was a major influence on the thinking of the reformers, showing them the errors in their time. They didn't have quite the same problems with the law that the first recipients of the letter had, circumcision for example, but they faced the same principles at work.

And the issue is present today too - how many people think that in Christianity, you're saved by some vague 'being a good person'? If that's the impression the world has about Christianity, where did they get it from? In part, unfortunately, they get it from us, from Christians, who do a poor job articulating the gospel and a poor job believing it. But they also get it from their human nature.

Our sinful tendency is to think that we can do things ourselves - that we don't need God. Our sinful tendency is to say 'I know better'. Just like Adam and Eve in the garden, we hear the gospel and think 'did God really say that?' Our seeking for our own glory in things means we assume that we ourselves must play some part in our salvation - that we must contribute something. 'Sure God does the major work, but I get some credit somehow.'

So the issue in Galatians has never gone away - it's an issue that every single Christian will wrestle with and an issue we need to be constantly reminded of. This letter is as relevant today as it was to the Galatians who first received it.