



Week 6: Paul's Letter to the Galatians (A whole book study)

A personal relationship with God is much more important than getting your doctrine sorted out — or is it?

Paul is writing here to Christians with an undisputed personal experience of God (he can even use it to further his argument; look at 3:2), and yet he is deeply concerned that they have started to believe something other than the gospel he preached to them — with potentially disastrous consequences; read 5:2-4.

We may not have the same problems as the Galatians, but we still need to be clear on the basic issues of the gospel and how to recognize error, so that we too may avoid those consequences.

Scholars disagree about which churches in Galatia Paul was writing to, and when this letter was written, but it seems probable that these churches were the ones in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe founded on Paul's first missionary journey. (If you have time, either now or at the weekend, read the accounts in Acts 13-14.) It may have been written just before the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) which dealt with a similar problem to the one Paul is tackling here.

If you want to go into the letter in more detail than is possible here, *The Message of Galatians* by John Stott (IVP) will be a great help.

Day 1. A bird's-eye view

The idea of this series is to get a grasp of the overall themes of this letter, so start by quickly reading the whole letter.

Don't worry if you can't understand all of it — you can go back and work on the difficult bits later.

1. As you read, jot down anything you can find about the problems Paul was tackling in the Galatian churches, and also their consequences.

Pray for your own church, that it will be kept from false teaching, and that the leaders will have the wisdom to recognize error and teach the truth.

Day 2. The argument from history

Galatians 1 – 2

By preaching a gospel different from Paul's, his opponents were challenging his authority to preach.

1. What does Paul say in these chapters about where he got his message from?
2. It would seem that his opponents were claiming the authority of the apostles in Jerusalem for their teaching (but see Acts 15:24). How does Paul refute this claim?
3. In 2:11-21 Paul records an incident which caused a public disagreement with Peter (Cephas in RSV) over the basis of fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Why do you think Paul reacted so strongly?
4. What basic principle was at stake?

Praise: The heart of Paul's gospel is that Christ died for our sins (see 1:4; 2:20) — surely something worth defending! Take time now to thank God for this.

Day 3. The argument from Scripture, 1

Galatians 3: 1-25

Try to write a brief summary of each of the paragraphs in this chapter before reading on!

Here is one suggested outline to help you along if you get stuck. Don't read it first!

- vv. 1-5 The Galatians' personal experience — they received the Spirit by faith, not by keeping the Law.
- vv. 6-9 Abraham, too, was justified ('put right with God' in GNB) by faith, and promised that through him the Gentiles would receive the same blessing.
- vv.10-14 No-one can keep the Law perfectly, so trying to be justified that way only leads to condemnation. Justification comes through faith, because Christ redeemed us from that condemnation by taking it on himself.
- vv. 15-18 God's promise to Abraham came before the giving of the Law, so the Law cannot change it.
- vv. 19-25 The Law was given to restrain and discipline us until the promise should be fulfilled in Christ.
- vv. 26-29 The Galatian Christians have been justified through faith in Christ. Therefore they are all the true descendants of Abraham, without distinction between them.

If you had trouble with your outline, go over the one above and compare it with the passage, until you have got the flow of the argument fixed in your mind.

Pray that God will enable you to study scripture and not just read it without digging deeper into its meaning. (2 Tim 2:15)

Day 4. The argument from Scripture, 2

Galatians 3:26 – 5:1

1. 'So you are no longer a slave, but a son' (4:7, NIV). What does Paul say in

3:26 - 4:11 about the results of this new relationship?

2. 4:8-20 are a 'personal aside' about Paul's relationship with the Galatian Christians. What was Paul's attitude to these churches?
3. How did this contrast with the attitudes and motives of the false teachers? The argument in the last part of the passage (4:21 - 5:1), though difficult for us, is the kind that would have been familiar in the Jewish rabbinical schools, and thus presumably to Paul's opponents. To follow it fully you will need to know quite a lot about the Old Testament (*The Message of Galatians* would be useful here!).
4. Leaving aside the details, what point is Paul making by using this argument?

Praise and Thanksgiving: Re-read 3:26 - 4:11 and thank God for the privileges of being in his family.

Day 5. The moral argument

Galatians 5 and 6

If they were not bound by the Law, it would have been easy for the Galatians to use their freedom in Christ as an excuse for immoral behaviour (5:13). Indeed some of Paul's opponents may have used this as an argument against his doctrine; look at Romans 6:1.

1. What encouragements did Paul give the Galatians, to help them live holy lives?
2. How could the Galatians decide whether or not they were living by the Spirit?
3. 6:1-6 talks about how the Galatians could help each other in this life in the Spirit. What principles can you find here for helping other Christians?

Pray: Take time to think through the different areas of your own life in the light of what you have learnt about living by the Spirit. Ask God to help you “keep in step with the Spirit.” (Gal 5:25)

Weekend

Read through the whole letter again. Now that you have done some more work on it, you should be able to follow Paul's train of thought in more detail than the first time you read it.

Can you think of any modern situations where people are tending to make mistakes similar to the ones the Galatians were making?

Are there modern equivalents to being circumcised and keeping the Law?

In the light of this letter, what should our attitude be to those involved in error, either in teaching false doctrine (1:6-9), or being taught it (4:8-20)?

What principles can you find in Galatians to help you?