

The Heart of Paul's Theology

LESSON
TWO

PAUL AND THE
GALATIANS



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The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson Two

Paul and the Galatians

INTRODUCTION

I once heard a story about a woman who got married when she was just a young teenager. Being so young, she really wasn't ready for her new adult life. Before long, she grew anxious and started missing the familiar comforts of childhood. So, one day while her husband was at work, she sneaked back to her parents' yard and hid in her old playhouse. When her husband finally found her that evening, he held her trembling hands and gently led her back home. He knew living as an adult was difficult for her, but he also knew that she had to leave her childhood behind. A new day had come in her life, and it was time for her to enjoy the wonders and challenges of adult life with her husband.

In the first century something similar happened in the Christian church. Most early Christians were Jews who had grown up under the tutelage of the religious customs and laws of Judaism. But when these Jews started to follow Christ, their relationships with God changed. They reached a level of spiritual maturity because they had received a fuller revelation of God in Christ. But after a while, some of these early Jewish Christians missed the security and familiarity of their old Jewish practices and began to mix their Christian faith with outmoded elements of their heritage and to insist that others must do the same.

This second lesson in our series on *The Heart of Paul's Theology* is entitled "Paul and the Galatians." In this lesson, we're going to see that the Galatian churches had regressed into spiritual childhood by reviving certain practices of Judaism. And we're also going to see how Paul reacted to these backward-looking Christians.

Our study of Paul and the Galatians will divide into three parts. First, we'll look at the Background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Second, we'll look at the content of his epistle to the Galatians. And third, we will examine how the letter revealed Paul's central theological outlooks, his doctrine of the latter days, or eschatology. Let's look first at the background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

BACKGROUND

Paul wrote all of his letters as he traveled from place to place. So, to understand the things Paul wrote to the Galatians, we need answers to some basic questions about the historical situation in Galatia. We'll explore this subject in two ways. First, we'll review Paul's contact with the Galatians during his first missionary journey. And second, we will look at some of the specific problems that motivated Paul to write to them. Let's look first at the background of Paul's first missionary journey.

FIRST JOURNEY

This journey began around A.D. 46 after God told the church in Syrian Antioch to set aside Paul and Barnabas for special missionary work. Paul and Barnabas began their journey by sailing to the isle of Cyprus. Beginning in the eastern city of Salamis, they proclaimed the gospel from synagogue to synagogue as they moved to the western city of Paphos.

From Cyprus Paul and Barnabas sailed to Perga, and then moved inland to Antioch in the region of Pisidia, which at that time was a part of the Roman province of Galatia. After hearing Paul preach the gospel in the synagogue there, many of the Jews responded positively. But within a week, unbelieving Jews incited the city against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town.

From Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas moved further east in the province of Galatia, and stopped first in the city of Iconium. When they preached in the synagogue there, many Jews and Gentiles came to faith, but the church was not firmly established because Paul and Barnabas quickly left the city when unbelieving Jews plotted to murder them.

Their next stop was the city of Lystra, where Paul managed to start another church. In Lystra, Paul healed a man who had been lame from birth. But when the people of the city saw this miracle, they mistook Paul for the god Hermes and Barnabas for Zeus. They tried to offer sacrifices to the missionaries, but Paul and Barnabas explained that they were mere men. Thereafter, some unbelieving Jews arrived from Iconium, and were able to turn the disillusioned citizens of Lystra against Paul and Barnabas, but God spared Paul's life and he moved on once again. Paul and Barnabas traveled east in Galatia as far as Derbe where many people trusted Christ. In Derbe, Paul finally had time to organize the church by appointing elders.

But Paul was still deeply concerned for the Christians in Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. So, at risk of life and limb, Paul and Barnabas returned to each of these cities. They strengthened the fledgling churches and explained that the kinds of sufferings the believers had seen in Paul and Barnabas were the sort of tribulations all Christians should expect to endure as they further the Kingdom of God. From Pisidian Antioch, the missionaries made their way back to the coast, preaching in the cities of Perga and Attalia. And from Attalia, they sailed for Syrian Antioch.

Now, in the book of Galatians, Paul referred to his time in Galatia. So, we know that he wrote this epistle sometime after his first missionary journey. But it is important to note that the epistle to the Galatians doesn't mention the well-known meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15, which took place later. The assembly in Jerusalem addressed some of the same issues as Paul's letter to the Galatians, and Paul would have appealed to this assembly to support his views if the assembly had already taken place by the time Galatians was written. So, it seems likely that he wrote Galatians in A.D. 48, within a year or so of leaving Galatia but before the Jerusalem council was held.

Now that we've seen how the book of Galatians relates to Paul's first missionary journey, we should look at the specific problems in Galatia that concerned Paul.

PROBLEMS

What were the conditions of the Galatian churches? What had happened in those churches that compelled Paul to write to them? We'll explore two issues: the influx of Gentiles into these churches, and the rise of false teachers. Let's look first at the way the Gentile Christians flocked into the Galatian churches.

Influx of Gentiles

One of the great things God did through Paul's first missionary journey was to bring many Gentiles to Christ. Much to Paul's surprise, most of the Jews in Galatia rejected the gospel. When Paul faced this widespread opposition, he came to realize that God wanted him to focus on reaching Gentiles. Listen to Paul's words to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, recorded in Acts 13:46-47:

We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:46-47).

This passage reveals a major shift in Paul's ministry. As a Jew, he naturally gave priority to Jewish evangelism. But their negative reactions to the gospel convinced Paul that God was calling him to reach the Gentiles. And this he did with much success. Listen to the way Luke summarized Paul's work in Iconium in Acts 14:1:

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed (Acts 14:1, emphasis added).

It wasn't just Jews who came to faith, but Gentiles too.

In a similar way, in Acts 14:27, Luke reported how Paul summarized his first missionary journey saying that,

God ... had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27).

Now, we might think that everyone would have rejoiced to see so many Gentiles in the Galatian churches. But the influx of Gentiles actually caused serious problems in Galatia. And these problems incited Jewish false teachers to rise in reaction.

False Teachers

Until Paul's first missionary journey, the Christian church had been predominantly Jewish. The early church began in Jerusalem and had held firmly to this

Jewish identity. Consequently, the influx of Gentiles led to all kinds of theological and practical troubles. Did these Gentiles have to adopt Jewish traditions? Did they have to keep the law of Moses as Old Testament believers were required to do? These kinds of questions gave rise to false teachers in Galatia. These Jewish teachers came up with their own ways of dealing with Gentiles in the church by insisting that they be circumcised.

During his missionary journey Paul had not circumcised Gentile believers, but in his absence, the false teachers had taught just the opposite. Now, Paul knew that God had ordained circumcision for Israel, and he was not opposed to circumcision per se. But in Galatia, circumcision for Gentiles had become a very serious matter which Paul could not ignore. It represented a serious departure from the heart of the Christian gospel.

We will touch on three ways in which Paul believed that insisting on circumcision for Gentile Christians reflected serious misunderstandings of the Christian faith. First, it denied the sufficiency of Christ's death and resurrection for salvation. Second, it demonstrated an improper reliance on the power of the flesh. And third, it resulted in division within the churches of Galatia. Let's look first at the way the false teachers had denied the sufficiency of Christ's death and resurrection for salvation.

From the book of Galatians we may surmise that the Galatian false teachers saw circumcision as a sacrifice of blood that enabled believers to live in a way that pleased God. In their view, Christians had to add circumcision to Christ's saving work. But from Paul's perspective, this belief stripped Christ's death of its true meaning and value. This is why Paul wrote these words in Galatians 5:2:

I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all (Galatians 5:2).

In addition to denying the sufficiency of Christ's saving work, the false teachers in Galatia challenged Paul's gospel by teaching that believers must rely on the flesh to complete their salvation. Paul expressly referred to this problem in Galatians 3:3 where he sarcastically asked these questions:

Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Galatians 3:3).

The Greek term rendered as "human effort" is *sarx*, often translated "flesh." Paul typically used the term "flesh" (or *sarx*) to refer to mere human power, and often with the connotation of sinful human ways. So, it is rightly translated here "human effort."

When Paul first ministered in Galatia, his preaching had been accompanied by dramatic displays of the Spirit's power. The Galatians had begun their Christian lives in the power of the Spirit. But now, by turning to circumcision, they had begun to depend on their own human abilities to live in ways that please God. Ironically, this reliance on human ability actually condemned them to impotence and failure.

In addition to denying the value of Christ's work and the importance of the Holy Spirit, Paul was also deeply troubled because the false teachers had created divisions in the church. As Paul put it in Galatians 6:15-16:

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).

In Christ the divisions between Jews and Gentiles had been eliminated.

Disunity in the churches of Galatia deeply troubled Paul. Quarreling and divisiveness among the people of God was absolutely contrary to what Christ had done and against the ideal toward which the church was to strive. But the false teachers followed the Old Testament teaching that circumcision was necessary for full inclusion among the people of God. For many in the church — especially Jewish Christians — it was natural to think that anyone who refused circumcision was at best second class. It is no wonder then that divisions developed between those Christians who were circumcised and those who were not.

So, we see that the false teachers had brought some very serious problems to the Galatian churches. And having heard what these false teachers were doing, Paul could not remain silent. The Galatians were his spiritual children; they were his loved ones. So, he wrote his epistle to rescue both Jewish and Gentile believers from the destructive views of these false teachers.

Now that we've seen some important aspects of the background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, we're ready to look more closely at the structure and content of his letter. What did Paul write to the churches of Galatia? How did he respond to their problems? We'll briefly explore the book of Galatians by summarizing each of its main sections.

CONTENT

The epistle to the Galatians divides into six main sections: first, a prescript in 1:1–5; second, an introduction to the problem in Galatia in 1:6–10; third, several historical accounts in 1:11–2:21; fourth, a series of proofs for the doctrine of justification by faith in 3:1–4:31; fifth, some practical exhortations in 5:1–6:10; and last, a postscript in 6:11–18.

PRESCRIPT / POSTSCRIPT

The prescript of Galatians is brief and fairly straightforward. It introduces the apostle Paul as the author and identifies the churches of Galatia as the recipients. The postscript is also brief, closing the letter with some final remarks and Paul's personal blessing for the churches. It also highlights some of Paul's more important thoughts in this letter.

INTRODUCTION TO PROBLEM

In the second section, 1:6-10, which we've called the "Introduction to the Problem," Paul immediately attacked the problem of false teaching in Galatia. He expressed astonishment, and warned his readers how dangerous it was to follow the false teachers. In no uncertain terms, Paul insisted that to reject his teaching was to accept a false gospel. Listen to the dire curse he laid on the false teachers in 1:8:

Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8).

To follow the teachings of the false teachers was to reject the true gospel of Christ — it was to reject salvation itself. This section of the letter makes it clear that the problems in Galatia were not insignificant. The Galatians' eternal destinies were at stake.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

The third section of the epistle, 1:11–2:21, is more elaborate. It consists of several historical accounts in which Paul proved his authority. Three different historical events come to the foreground in these chapters: Paul's call and training in 1:11-17; Paul's meeting with church leaders in Jerusalem in 2:1-10; and Paul's conflict with Peter in Syrian Antioch in 2:11-21.

Call and Training

The account of Paul's call and training explains how Paul had the authority to resist circumcising Gentiles. It begins with a description of how Paul had loved the traditions of Israel. Listen to his words in Galatians 1:13-14:

You have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism ... I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:13-14).

But Paul also explained how his attitude had changed. Despite his earlier zeal for Jewish traditions, when he was on his journey through Galatia, Paul had not required the Gentiles to be circumcised. How could he have done this when he had been so committed to the traditions of Israel? Listen to Paul's testimony in Galatians 1:15-18:

When God ... was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man ... I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:15-18).

Paul had spent three years in Arabia learning the gospel and Christian doctrines directly from Jesus. His refusal to require Gentile circumcision did not result from natural reasoning or personal preference. Jesus, the Lord himself, had taught Paul his new views. To disagree with Paul on this matter was to disagree with Christ himself.

Meeting with Leaders

The second historical account in this section of Galatians, found in 2:1-10, reports Paul's meeting with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Simply put, fourteen years after an earlier private meeting with Peter, Paul met with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. And in this meeting, they confirmed his approach to bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. Listen to Paul's record in Galatians 2:1-9:

I went up again to Jerusalem ... in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles... They saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles ... James, Peter and John ... gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship ... They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1-9).

Paul related this story to the Galatians so that they could see that his work among the Gentiles did not contradict the authoritative teaching of the church leaders in Jerusalem. In fact, the other apostles agreed that God had given Paul the specific role of spreading the gospel to the Gentile world. So, Paul had every right to approach the question of Gentile circumcision as he had.

Conflict with Peter

Paul's third historical account, found in 2:11-21, describes a conflict with Peter in Syrian Antioch. At an earlier time, Peter had freely associated with uncircumcised believers. At some later time, however, Peter began to fear for his reputation among some strict Jewish believers from Jerusalem. So, he separated himself from uncircumcised believers.

Regardless of what Peter believed in his heart, his actions conformed to the false belief that uncircumcised Gentile believers were inferior to Jewish believers. When Paul found out about this, he confronted Peter and reminded him of the gospel which both Peter and he believed. Galatians 2:15-16 report Paul's words to Peter on that occasion:

We who are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners" know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by

faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:15-16).

Paul wrote about his conflict with Peter to prove that even Peter had submitted to his authoritative correction in this matter. If Paul's authority had been sufficient to correct even the preeminent apostle Peter, it certainly was sufficient to correct the false teachers in Galatia.

In these three accounts of call and training, meeting with the Jerusalem authorities, and confronting Peter, Paul built a strong case against the false teachers in Galatia and defended his gospel.

THEOLOGICAL PROOFS

After giving these historical accounts, Paul turned to the fourth section of his epistle in 3:1–4:31. There he offered more direct theological arguments for his doctrine of justification by faith. This material divides into four parts, alternating between the experiences of the Galatians and the biblical record of Abraham's life. First, Paul appealed to the early experience of the Galatians. Second, he turned to the Old Testament account of Abraham's saving faith. Third, Paul appealed to the current experience of the Galatian believers. And fourth, he drew upon the story of Abraham's wives and sons.

Early Experience

Let's look briefly at 3:1-5, where Paul focused on the Galatians' earlier experience of the Christian faith. He wrote these words in 3:2-5:

I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ... After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ... Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:2-5).

In a series of rhetorical questions, Paul referred to his first missionary journey. As Acts chapters 13-14 tell us, the Galatians had received many incredible blessings from the Holy Spirit when Paul had first been among them. Both they and he knew that these blessings of the Spirit did not come because they were keeping the law of God. God had freely given these gifts simply because they had believed the gospel. From this experience, the Galatians should have known better than to think that God's blessings could later be obtained by obedience to the law.

Abraham's Faith

After touching on their early Christian experience, Paul turned to the example of Abraham's saving faith. He argued in 3:6–4:11 that God had blessed Abraham because of faith, not because of Abraham's obedience to God's law. Abraham had not earned the blessing of salvation through fleshly human efforts. Paul's argument in this section is rather complex, but we may summarize it in five steps.

First, Paul pointed out that Abraham was justified by having faith in God's promise that he would have a son. In 3:6-7 Paul referred to Genesis 15:6 in this way:

Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:6-7).

From Paul's point of view, Genesis 15:6 made it clear that Abraham was justified by his faith in God's word and not on the basis of his circumcision which took place years later. On this basis, Paul concluded that the true children of Abraham were those who followed his example of trusting in the promises of God for salvation. Salvation was a blessing which came by means of faith, and not by circumcision.

Second, because controversy had risen over the status of uncircumcised Gentiles, Paul went on to point out that God had told Abraham that the blessing of salvation would spread through him to the Gentiles. In Galatians 3:8-9 Paul referred to Genesis 12:3 in this way:

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:8-9).

Paul understood Genesis 12:3 to teach that a time was promised when Gentiles throughout the world would receive God's blessing. This blessing would come to all nations in the same manner as it came to Abraham, through faith.

Third, Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that the bloody cutting of the flesh in circumcision was a symbol of self-cursing, not a way to gain righteousness. Circumcision meant "may I be cut off from the land of the living if I do not exercise covenant faithfulness." Christ had come precisely because nobody else could live up to that standard. As Paul put it in Galatians 3:13:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13).

By hanging on a cross — a most shameful and cursed death in Jewish understanding — Christ took upon himself the awful curse of sin. The Galatians needed to understand that the blessings of covenant faithfulness were theirs totally by faith, because Christ had already taken the curse on himself for their sakes.

In the fourth place, Paul preempted an objection from the false teachers by arguing that the law of Moses did not reverse Abraham's example. As he put it in Galatians 3:17-19:

The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise...What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come (Galatians 3:17-19).

From Paul's point of view, the law hadn't been given to enable the people to gain God's blessings by works, like the false teachers of Galatia had claimed. The Mosaic law had been added to deal with the sinfulness of Israel, and to prepare them for Christ.

In the fifth place, Paul declared that God's blessings came only to those who belong to Abraham's special son, namely Christ. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:16, 29:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:16, 29).

As Paul read the record of Genesis, he noticed that in 22:18 the Hebrew word *zera* (translated here as "seed") was singular, not plural. Abraham's inheritance had not been offered to all of Abraham's children as individuals, but in the first place to Abraham's son who was the representative head of those who descended from him. And in the light of the revelation of Christ, Paul knew that Christ was the great descendant of Abraham who was the final representative head of God's people throughout time. Christ is the one great seed who inherits all promises given to Abraham, and individuals participate in this inheritance only by belonging to him.

In these ways, Paul argued that justification comes only to those who follow the example of Abraham and receive God's blessings through Abraham's son; salvation is by faith in the promises of God and not by works of the law.

Current Experience

After appealing to the initial salvation experience of the Galatians and to the biblical account of Abraham's faith, Paul addressed the Galatians' current experience in Galatians 4:12-20. Listen to what he wrote in 4:15-16:

What has happened to all your joy? ... Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? (Galatians 4:15-16).

Here Paul expressed deep concern for the Galatians' spiritual well-being; he wanted them to recognize their desperate spiritual condition. As the Galatians turned

from the gospel, they lost their joy, a fruit of the Holy Spirit that they should have been enjoying. This loss alone should have alerted the Galatians to the fact that there was something wrong with the teaching of Paul's opponents.

Abraham's Wives and Sons

The fourth way Paul argued his case against the false teachers was by focusing on the biblical record of Abraham's wives and sons in Galatians 4:21-31. Paul explained that in Genesis 15, God had promised Abraham an heir through his wife Sarah. But Sarah was barren and past childbearing age, so receiving an heir through her required Abraham to have faith in God's promise. By trusting God to fulfill his word, Sarah had a son, Isaac. Sarah's child Isaac was a child of promise, and he was accepted as Abraham's heir and the representative of all who believe.

But, as Genesis 16 tells us, before Isaac was born, Abraham had grown tired of waiting for God to give him the promised son. So, he turned to Sarah's slave Hagar to have a child. By doing this, Abraham sought to secure his legacy by human effort, by the effort of the flesh. Hagar bore the child Ishmael to Abraham, but Ishmael was a child of the flesh. God rejected him as Abraham's heir and he came to represent all who look to the flesh as the way of salvation. After drawing out this contrast between Abraham's wives and sons, Paul concluded this way in Galatians 4:31:

Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman (Galatians 4:31).

Faith in God's promise is the way of salvation for Christians just as Isaac was born to Sarah because of Abraham's faith. Just as in Abraham's day, believers in every age are justified, included, and empowered to live righteously by means of faith in God's promises, not by their own merit.

So we've seen that Paul offered four main arguments to explain that believers receive all of God's blessings by means of faith alone. He argued from the Galatians' early experience of salvation, from the faith of Abraham, from the Galatians' recent loss of joy, and from the record of Abraham's wives and sons.

PRACTICAL EXHORTATIONS

With the content of chapters 1-4 in mind, we are in a position to summarize the exhortations of 5:1-6:10. In these chapters, Paul addressed a number of practical problems that the false teachers had caused in Galatia.

Paul had much to say in these verses but we can summarize Paul's thoughts here under three main headings: responsible freedom in Christ, in 5:1-15; the power of the Holy Spirit, in 5:16-26; and God's judgment, in 6:1-10. Let's look first at Paul's emphasis on responsible freedom in Christ.

Freedom in Christ

In 5:1-15 Paul called on the Galatians to remain true to their freedom in Christ. His position is carefully balanced. In the first place, he stressed the need to maintain Christian freedom. Listen to his words in 5:1:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).

During his first missionary journey, Paul had brought Gentiles into the Christian faith free from burdens, and he wanted them to remain free because the burdens of legalism are so dangerous. As he wrote in Galatians 5:2-3:

If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law (Galatians 5:2-3).

The false teachers in Galatia had introduced a legalistic system of righteousness. They had taught Christians to rely on their obedience to the law rather than on Christ. But in so doing, they actually obligated these Gentile Christians to a standard that was impossible to keep, obedience to the whole law. Their choice was between freedom in Christ and bondage to the law. The one led to salvation, the other to judgment.

Even so, in the second place, Paul balanced his defense of Christian freedom with an affirmation of Christian moral responsibility. He warned the Galatians not to use their Christian freedom from Jewish traditions as a license for disregarding God's moral law. In 5:13 he wrote:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature (Galatians 5:13).

Christ had released the Galatian Christians from bondage to the law as the means to justification and power for righteous living, but he still demanded that they follow the commands of God. Paul did not want the Galatians to think that their freedom from circumcision included freedom to violate God's holy character, which was the very foundation of the law.

Power of Spirit

Having established this two-fold orientation toward the importance of freedom in Christ and righteous living, Paul addressed the importance of the power of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:16-26. How could the Galatians be empowered to resist sin if not by legalism and human effort?

In a word, Paul answered that every believer must rely on the Holy Spirit for leading and empowerment rather than on the flesh. Listen to the way he put it in 5:16 and 25:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature...Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25).

From Paul's point of view, the only way to live a holy life in Christ was to depend on and follow the Spirit of God.

Now, it is always important to remember that Paul never set the Holy Spirit over or against the Scriptures. For Paul, living by the Spirit could not be divorced from written revelation. The Spirit of God always led God's people to live according to the written Word of God, as it had already been revealed in the Old Testament and as it was progressively being revealed in Paul's letters and in other writings that would become the New Testament. But living by the Spirit was not merely to conform to the teaching of written texts. It also involved a conscious dependence on the power of the Spirit to fulfill what God had commanded. Christians have nothing to fear from God if they rely on the Spirit to produce the fruit of righteousness in their lives.

Divine Judgment

In the third place, Paul summed up these practical matters by speaking of God's judgment. Listen to his serious warning in 6:7-9:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9).

Paul was deeply concerned with the ultimate destiny of the Galatians. He knew that true believers in Christ can never lose their salvation. But he also knew that not everyone who professes faith really has saving faith. So, he warned the Galatian churches not to forget the coming judgment of God. He hoped that this warning would encourage them to rely on Christ and the Holy Spirit for salvation.

From this brief overview of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, we can see that Paul refuted the false teachers in Galatia in several ways. He engaged the Galatians with deeply personal appeals and urged them to believe the true gospel, and to live according to that gospel he had preached to them years before. In short, Paul exhorted the Galatians to reject the false teachers and to embrace again the gospel of justification by faith apart from works.

So far, we've explored the background of Paul's letter to the Galatian churches and the basic content of his epistle. Now we're in a position to look at our third topic: how the book of Galatians reflects Paul's central theological outlooks.

THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS

You'll recall from our first lesson in this series that we have to distinguish between the specific teachings in Paul's letters and his underlying theological system. Paul repeatedly corrected the false teachers in Galatia for calling Gentile Christians to submit to circumcision. And he spent a great deal of time discussing circumcision and justification by faith.

Paul's direct statements about circumcision and salvation were actually expressions of more basic theological convictions. His teaching in the book of Galatians was an application of his central eschatological views. You will recall how the apostle Paul taught that the great age to come had begun with Christ's death and resurrection, even though sin and death would not completely vanish until Christ returned in glory. And this means that Christians live in what we might call the "already and not yet," a time when the age of sin and death overlaps the age of eternal salvation.

But the fact that this age and the age to come exist simultaneously gave rise to some critical misunderstandings in Galatia. Paul believed that the Galatian specific controversies over circumcision, justification and the like were actually symptomatic of a more basic problem. The more fundamental error in Galatia was that the false teachers seriously underestimated the degree to which Christ had brought the age to come through his death and resurrection. They failed to realize just how much of the age to come was already present. As a result, we might call this false teaching "under-realized eschatology," meaning that their views diminished the significance of Christ's first coming.

Now, in one sense, Paul attacked the false teachers' "under-realized eschatology" in every portion of the book of Galatians. But we'll focus on six areas in which Paul clearly applied his central theological outlooks to this problem: first, his description of Christ; second, his focus on the gospel; third, the law of Moses; fourth, the doctrine of union with Christ; fifth, his emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the Christian life; and sixth, his final appeal to his doctrine of the new creation.

CHRIST

Paul's appeal to his doctrine of the latter days becomes evident in his description of Christ in the introduction of the book of Galatians. Listen to how Paul described Jesus in Galatians 1:3-4:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age (Galatians 1:3-4).

Notice that Paul did not simply wish blessings from the Father and Christ for the Galatians. Instead, he drew attention to the purpose for which the Father had sent Christ. As he put it here, Jesus was sent “to rescue us from the present evil age.”

The expression “the present evil age” corresponds to the standard Jewish terminology with which we are already familiar. “The present evil age” is synonymous with “this age,” the age of sin and judgment before the coming of Messiah. Paul described Christ in this way because he wanted to point out at the beginning of his letter that the Galatians had lost sight of the reason Christ had come to this earth, namely to deliver Christians into the age to come.

The false teachers in Galatia had caused many believers to lose sight of the great changes that Christ had brought to the world. This is especially evident in the fact that the false teachers insisted on their returning to the outmoded covenant sign of circumcision. The Christian faith taught that Jesus came to this earth to deliver believers from this age and its old ways. To deny this truth in theory or practice was to deny the essence of the Christian faith.

GOSPEL

A second way Paul revealed his concern over the Galatians' under-realized eschatology was by describing his disagreement with the false teachers as a matter of the “gospel.” Listen to the way Paul summed up the matter in Galatians 1:6-7:

I am astonished that you are ... turning to a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-7).

Now, we can be confident that the false teachers in Galatia had not stopped talking about Jesus. They still claimed to be Christians. So, why did Paul call their message a different gospel, or no gospel at all?

To catch the significance of this statement, we have to remember that the term “gospel,” or “good news” as it's sometimes translated, comes from the Greek word *euangelion*. This New Testament Greek terminology was based on the Old Testament Hebrew term *mebaser*, especially as it was used in Isaiah. Listen to the prophet Isaiah's words in Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7).

In this passage, Isaiah spoke of the time when the Old Testament exile of Israel would end. And he used the term “good news” to describe the announcement that the exile was over, that God had established his reign in human history, and that God had

begun judging his enemies and blessing his people. As Isaiah said here, the good news of salvation is “Your God reigns,” the reign of God. This reign of God after the exile is what the New Testament calls “the kingdom of God,” which is also another term for “the age to come.”

So, when Paul said that the false teachers had “no gospel at all,” he implied that they denied that Christ had brought the age to come, the age of salvation, the age of the kingdom of God. By teaching circumcision and implying justification by works of the law, the false teachers rejected the true significance of Christ’s first coming. They had no good news or gospel to offer anyone because they didn’t believe that Christ had brought the Kingdom of God, or the age to come, in any significant way. Here again, Paul understood the root of the problem in Galatia was that the false teachers had an under-realized eschatology. The Christian gospel is the announcement that the Christ has indeed brought the Kingdom of God to earth; he has introduced the age to come.

LAW

A third way Paul’s eschatology influenced his letter to the Galatians was in his assessment of the Mosaic law. Paul touched on the subject of the law several times in this letter, but in chapter 3 he dealt clearly with its purpose in relation to this age and the age to come.

Now, we’ve already seen that receiving God’s blessings by faith was not some new doctrine Paul had brought to Gentile evangelism. Faith had always been the way of salvation throughout the Scriptures. But Paul’s emphasis on faith raised a serious question: if God’s blessings for Jews and Gentiles have always come by means of faith alone, then what was the purpose of the law of Moses? Why had God given the Mosaic law to Israel? Paul answered these questions in 3:19:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come (Galatians 3:19).

Notice how Paul put it. The law was given “because of transgressions,” and “until the Seed ... had come.”

At first glance, it might look like Paul simply brushed aside the moral relevance of the law of Moses, consigning it to an age before the coming of Christ. Several passages in Galatians show that this was not so. In Galatians 5:14 Paul appealed to Leviticus 19:18 to explain why believers should pursue love:

The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

A similar appeal to the law appears in Galatians 5:22-23. As he put it there:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

But if Paul wasn't teaching Christians to throw away the law of Moses, then why did he write in Galatians 3:19 that the law was given "because of transgressions," and that it was to be effective "until the Seed ... had come"?

To answer this question, it helps to recall that the problem in Galatia was that the false teachers thought the law was even better than it really was; they thought obedience to the law was the way to receive salvation from God. But Paul taught that God always blessed his people through the means of faith. That's why in 3:19 he said that the law was "added because of transgressions." The law wasn't instituted to give God's people salvation or to empower them to live righteously; it was instituted to reveal their sin.

But the law had this important function in God's plan "until the Seed... had come," that is, until Christ had come. The Mosaic law was given to condemn men and women for their sins. But the law's authority to condemn was only temporary. Now that Christ has come, he has inaugurated a new age, and because believers are united to Christ, they are ushered into the age to come. And in the age to come, the law's authority to condemn has been abolished. True followers of Christ are free from the condemnation of the law.

UNION WITH CHRIST

A fourth way Paul's writing depended on his central outlook on eschatology was by focusing on believers' union with Christ. The false teachers in Galatia encouraged the Galatians to think of their salvation in individualistic terms. Their focus on circumcision and the stipulations of the Mosaic law had reduced salvation to an individual attempt to live righteously, and implicitly to earn justification, by obeying the law. In effect, men, women, and children were left to stand before God on the basis of their individual merit.

But Paul insisted that neither justification nor righteous living could be gained this way. Justification and righteous living had to come through union with Christ. In Galatians 3:26-29 Paul put it this way:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

The false teachers in Galatia actually taught that some believers in the church were better than others because everyone stood or fell before God on the basis of their own merit. But they were wrong. The truth is that we are "clothed ... with Christ," we are "in Christ Jesus." Because we are united to Christ in this way, God looks upon Christians as if they were Christ himself. And because Christ is totally righteous and holy, justified

and deserving of all Abraham's blessings, God sees us as righteous and holy and justified and deserving of blessing too.

Once again, Paul's perspective rose out of his eschatology. Paul taught that the transition from this age of judgment to the coming age of blessing takes place through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. By his own obedience to the law, Christ fulfilled the law's requirements for all believers. By his death in place of believers — enduring the curses of the law on their behalf — Christ had fulfilled the requirement of the law that sin be punished by death. By his resurrection on behalf of believers, Christ and those for whom he died were vindicated by the Father as worthy of glory. As a result, when believers are united to Christ by faith, God looks upon them as if they were Christ himself, and on that basis considers them to have died to the curse of the law with Christ and to have been raised with Christ into the new life of the age to come.

To follow the false teachers of Galatia was to reject this central role of Christ as the heir of Abraham's promise — it was to require every individual to pursue the blessing of righteous living by his own human effort. But Paul saw Christ as Abraham's seed through whom every aspect of salvation comes, making it clear that believers receive all God's blessings only as they are joined to Christ.

HOLY SPIRIT

A fifth way Paul's eschatology guided his writing of Galatians was in his discussion of the Holy Spirit's role in the Christian life. In fact, the role of the Holy Spirit was one of the main ideas Paul had in mind as he wrote this letter. This emphasis can be seen in Paul's first description of the false teaching in Galatia. Listen to what he wrote in Galatians 3:1-3:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?... Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Galatians 3:1-3)

Paul was amazed that the Galatians, who had begun their Christian lives by relying on the Holy Spirit, had somehow been tricked into relying on their own human effort.

One place in which Paul called great attention to the contrast between the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of fleshly human effort was Galatians 5:16-26. There, he developed a strong contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. Paul contrasted the acts of the sinful nature, or of fleshly human effort, with the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:19-21 he listed the works of the flesh as including: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and orgies. But in Galatians 5:22-23 he listed the fruit of the Holy Spirit as: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The false teachers wanted people to believe that by fleshly human effort they could submit to circumcision, and that they could be empowered to live righteously. But as Paul showed here, the only thing human effort could produce was sin. Joel 2:28 is one

prophecy which clearly expressed that during the age to come God would pour out his Spirit in ways that he had not done in the Old Testament.

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions (Joel 2:28).

The Holy Spirit had been present with believers even before Christ came, and he had empowered believers to remain faithful to God. But back then his greater filling and special gifts were reserved, with few exceptions, for a limited number of people, such as prophets, priests and kings. In this sense, the Holy Spirit's presence was less dramatic and overwhelming in the Old Testament. But Joel prophesied that in the age to come the Holy Spirit would be poured out on all classes and groups of believers. And as we learn in Acts 2, Joel's prophecy began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. At that time, God began pouring out his Spirit on all his people in a dramatic way, indicating that the hope of the age to come had become a reality.

But in Galatia, the false teachers had instructed the Galatians to rely on their own human efforts to live righteously, indicating that they denied the Spirit's abundant gifting and enabling in the New Testament era. They failed to realize the great blessing of the Holy Spirit that Christ had brought when he inaugurated the age to come. In response, Paul reminded the Galatians that those who belong to Christ already possess the Holy Spirit in the fullness of his power. When followers of Christ rely on the Spirit's power; he moves within them to produce the fruit of righteousness.

NEW CREATION

A final place in which we may see Paul's heavy dependence on his doctrine of the latter days is his appeal to the idea of the new creation. This doctrine appears in the postscript of his epistle. Listen to the way Paul put it in Galatians 6:5-16.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).

In many respects, these words summarize the entire point of view presented in the book of Galatians. In Paul's outlook, his opponents were making far too much out of circumcision, because with the coming of Christ, it does not matter at all if a person is circumcised or not. Instead, what matters is that every person become a part of "the new creation."

You will recall that one way Paul believed the *eschaton*, or end times, had come with the first coming of Christ was that Christ had begun the renewal of the entire universe into a new creation. This new order of things brought such enormous blessings to the people of God that it completely overshadowed the ways of the old creation. Rather than going back to the ways of life prior to the coming of Christ, living in the new creation is to be the preeminent concern of every believer. From the days of Paul until

Christ returns, the chief concern of every follower of Christ is to be life in the new creation. And as Paul put it, those who make this their choice are indeed “the Israel of God.”

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have seen how Paul responded to the problems that arose in the churches of Galatia. We have explored the background of the false teachers in Galatia, the content of Paul's letter to the Galatians, and finally we have seen how Paul depended on his central doctrine of eschatology to address the problems in Galatia.

As we reflect on Paul's response to the Galatians, we not only see how he guided them through their own very serious problems, but also how Paul speaks to us today. Time after time modern Christians live as the Galatians. We forget how much Christ's first coming has changed human history. Like the Galatians we turn back to the failures and frustrations of living as if Jesus has done very little. But the heart of Paul's theology speaks to us as it did to the Galatians. Christ has brought us out of this present evil age so that we may live in the blessings of the age to come. As we turn our hearts toward the ways of the new creation that has come in Christ, we will find that the gospel of Christ is good news indeed. Christ has brought salvation to the world, and we have been granted the privilege of living in that salvation, even today.

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