

PAUL'S LETTER

TO THE

GALATIANS

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The Bible Light Study Notes

INTRODUCTION:

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

The letter to the Galatians is Paul's declaration of independence from the Law on behalf of all believers that have put their trust in Jesus Christ for spiritual life and liberty. In this letter Paul strongly defended the doctrine of justification by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This theme of full salvation by faith in Jesus Christ would be expanded later in his letter to the Romans. Paul and Barnabas had started these churches in Galatia on his first missionary journey by preaching the Gospel of freedom in Christ. Although Paul wrote several letters to individual churches, this was the only letter that he wrote to an association of churches.

The Problem of the Galatian Churches

False teachers had propagated in these Galatian churches a false doctrine of salvation that added the works of the Law. This was beginning to shake the true faith of these believers. Paul responded with this decisive letter to root out this false teaching that had been sown among them. Martin Luther loved this letter to the Galatians as he loved his own wife and called it by his wife's name, Catherine, because he "was wedded to it." He faced a similar false doctrine of salvation by works in the Roman Catholic Church, so Paul's message to the Galatians became the theme of his mighty ministry during the Reformation.

Although they are not mentioned by name in this letter, it is likely that these false teachers were Jews who had spread their false doctrine of salvation among the believers in the Galatian churches. Paul had preached that both Jews and Gentiles were set free from the demands of the Law by faith in Jesus Christ. This message offended these Jews and they strongly opposed it. They did not accept justification by faith in Christ alone as a valid message, because they strictly followed of Law of Moses for salvation. They had been falsely taught that they had to do the works of the Law to be saved. Even the Jews that received Jesus as their Messiah believed that it was necessary to keep the Law to be accepted by God. Therefore, they believed that Gentiles also had to keep the Law to be accepted by God. They believed that God would accept no one through simple faith in Jesus Christ. No one could be saved without keeping the Law. It was all right to believe in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, but circumcision was needed to fulfill the Law of Moses so they could be saved. Circumcision was the first demand of the Law to be saved. Then other requirements from the Law would be asked of them so they could be perfected in their Christian experience. These false teachers are often referred to as Judaizers. They were a problem for Paul in most, if not all, of the churches that he started.

The Judaizers openly opposed Paul's "new way of salvation" by accusing him of being a false prophet with a false message. From Paul's defense of his apostolic calling, we can assume the charges that they made against him. **First**, they claimed that he was a false prophet because he did not require circumcision to be saved. Circumcision had been required of all Jews beginning with Abraham. God said that a person would be cut off from the nation of Israel if he were not circumcised. This was true for citizens of the nation of Israel which were under the Old Covenant, but God set aside the nation of Israel for the present time and is now dealing with believers in the churches, both Jews and Gentiles, under a New Covenant. **Second**, he was a false prophet because he had not been appointed by the Twelve Apostles to be an apostle. Therefore, his message was invalid. These attacks on Paul had begun to turn some Galatian believers against him and the message that he preached. If these believers rejected Paul's message, they would be giving up the liberty that they had in Jesus Christ and would be returning to the bondage of keeping laws for salvation. This false teaching had to be stopped.

To stop the false teaching of the Judaizers, Paul needed to accomplish two major tasks. **First**, he defended his calling and authority as a true apostle. In chapters 1-2, he reveals that God called him to be an apostle to declare His Son among the Gentiles. He pointed out that the leaders of the church at Jerusalem recognized his calling from God. Furthermore, he proves his authority as an apostle was real when he faced the Apostle Peter and soundly rebuked him for his hypocritical action at the church in Antioch.

Second, Paul defended his message of justification by faith in Jesus Christ without the deeds of the Law. In chapters 3, 4 and part of 5, he instructs his readers that the Law of Moses will bring them into the bondage of sin, but the Spirit of Christ will give them freedom from sin. The Law came 430 years after the promise given to Abraham was confirmed to Jacob (Gen 46:1-4). God's promise to Abraham was extended to all nations through his seed, which is Christ. Jews and Gentiles that put their faith in His promise would be blessed with Abraham. Paul showed that the Law of God was not given to bring a blessing, but rather it was given to bring a curse. The Law brings a curse on those who do not keep every part of it. The Law is good in that it enables a sinner to see his sinfulness and prepares him to receive by faith the blessing of God's promise. The Law cannot save a person from the penalty of his sins, nor can it perfect a believer in overcoming the power of sin in his life. The Law can only condemn sin. It is the promise of God through the finished work of Jesus Christ that can give life and liberty. It is faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ that brings God's blessing. This was the message that Paul preached to plant these churches in Galatia. This was the message that he defended in his letter to these Galatians.

In chapters 5-6, Paul shows how a believer is to use his life and liberty to walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. He is to serve others with love and so fulfill the Law of Christ (6:2). The charges against him and his message had to be answered. They threatened the very life of these Galatian churches as well as all other churches then and now.

The Author of the Galatian Letter

The Apostle Paul has been acknowledged as the author of the letter to the Galatians without any question. He refers to himself by name in his greeting (1:1) and later in his teaching (5:2). He even wrote a part or possibly the whole letter by his own hand (6:11).

The Recipients of the Galatian Letter

There were two groups of people that could be called the Galatians. The first group was the ethnic Galatians that had migrated from Gaul into the northern part of Asia Minor (Turkey). The second group was the political Galatians that came into existence about 25 B.C. when Rome enlarged Galatia by adding to it some lands south of it. These lands had other people groups in it, but they also became known as Galatians. There is a debate as to which of these two groups Paul sent his letter.

It is well known that Paul and Barnabas started churches in several cities in south Galatia on their first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). There is some evidence that Paul ministered in north Galatia on his second missionary trip (Acts 16:6), but there is no mention that he started any churches in that northern area. Older scholars claim this letter was addressed to the ethnic Galatians in the north, but most scholars today believe this letter was addressed to the churches that Paul and Barnabas established on their first missionary journey. The message and theology of the letter is not affected by knowing which churches received this letter, but it does help in determining when it was written and in harmonizing the events of this letter with the historical account of Luke in the book of Acts. This will be discussed in considering the date when Paul wrote this letter.

The Date of the Galatian Letter

The time and place of writing Galatians is in question, depending on the meaning of "Galatia." If "Galatia" means the churches of north Galatia, a late date for writing is necessary, because Paul could not have started these churches before his second missionary journey. Furthermore, a second visit is implied by the words, "at the first" (Gal. 4:13), and this second visit could not have occurred before his third missionary journey. Although Galatia originally was located in the north and a late date for writing Galatians would solve some problems, there is no concrete evidence that Paul had contact with these churches in north Galatia. If, however, "Galatia" means the churches of south Galatia, an early date is possible (as early as A.D. 48/49, the earliest of Paul's epistles). Paul and Barnabas started the churches of Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe on his first missionary journey and revisited them on that same journey (Acts 13, 14). Furthermore, Paul mentions only two visits to Jerusalem in this letter: it can be proved that two took place before the "council at Jerusalem" (Acts 15). One visit was made by Paul a few years after his conversion (Acts 9), and the other occurred when he took a gift from Antioch to relieve the Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering from a famine (Acts 11). This would seem to put the writing of Galatians between the "relief visit" and the "council meeting." Thus the letter would have been written from Antioch in Syria. There are other possibilities, but the early date seems to be the most plausible.

The date of this letter is aided by comparing the visits that Paul made to Jerusalem in Acts and in Galatians. Luke records five visits that Paul made to Jerusalem after his conversion (Acts 9:26-29; 11:27-30; 15:1-35; 18:21-23; 21:15ff). Paul refers to two of these visits in Galatians (1:18-19; 2:1-10). Some believe that Paul's second visit to Jerusalem mentioned in Galatians refers to the third visit recorded in Acts, but others believe that Paul's first two visits to Jerusalem mentioned in Galatians are the first two visits in Acts.

Those holding either position have set forth good reasons for their views, but the best reasons favor the second position. These people believe the letter was written after Paul's first missionary journey and before his third visit to Jerusalem when that church officially declared that Gentile converts were not required to submit to the circumcision rites of Jewish law. Taking this position would explain why Paul did not refer to this official document to refute the Judaizers in his letter to the Galatians. It did not exist! It also explains why Peter vacillated in his association with Gentiles at Antioch, but later took a strong stand for Gentiles in his witness at Jerusalem. He had learned an important lesson from Paul's rebuke, which strengthened his resolve to treat Gentile brethren like he would treat Jewish brethren. The date for writing this letter is around A.D. 49, making it the first inspired letter that Paul wrote.

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OUTLINES FOR THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Simple Outline of Galatians

- I. Defense (Battle) – 1-2
- II. Doctrine (Belief) – 3-4
- III. Deportment (Behavior) – 5-6

Detailed Outline of Galatians

- I. Gospel of Paul – 1:1-24
 - A. Right of Paul to Preach the Gospel of Grace – 1:1-5
 - B. Removal from Christ by the Galatians – 1:6-9
 - C. Revelation of the Gospel to Paul – 1:10-16a
 - D. Reliance of Paul on God's Call – 1:16b-24
- II. Authority of Paul (as an Apostle) – 2:1-21
 - A. Reception of Paul by the Apostles – 2:1-10
 - B. Rebuke of Peter by Paul – 2:11-21
- III. Justification by Faith – 3:1-4:31
 - A. Examination of the Galatians' Faith – 3:1-5
 - B. Exposition of God's Word – 3:6-14
 - 1. Faith of Abraham – 3:6-9
 - 2. Curse of the Law – 3:10-14
 - C. Explanation of God's Promise – 3:15-4:7
 - 1. Preeminence of the Promise – 3:15-18
 - 2. Purpose of the Law – 3:19-24
 - 3. Position of the Believer – 3:25-29
 - 4. Privilege of the Believer – 4:1-7
 - D. Expression of Paul's Concern – 4:8-20
 - 1. Alarm of Paul for the Galatians – 4:8-11
 - 2. Ambivalence of the Believers toward Paul – 4:12-16
 - 3. Affection of Paul for the Galatians – 4:17-20
 - E. Example from Abraham's Wives – 4:21-31
 - 1. Information – 4:21-23
 - 2. Interpretation – 4:24-27
 - 3. Application – 4:28-30
 - 4. Conclusion – 4:31
- IV. Behavior of a Believer – 5:1-6:18
 - A. Liberty in Christ – 5:1-15
 - B. Life in the Spirit – 5:16-26
 - C. Love for Others – 6:1-10
 - D. Loyalty to Christ – 6:11-18