

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

Galatians

This “**epistle of Christian liberty**” is the ninth book of the New Testament, between 2 Corinthians and Ephesians. Paul the apostle wrote to congregations in Galatia, a region in central Asia Minor (modern Turkey), around A.D. 50. It is the most turbulent and polemical of Paul’s letters.

Underscoring his authority as an apostle, Paul reports his calling and training from the Lord (1:12-17) and his relation to Peter and others in Jerusalem (1:18—2:14). He insists that the gospel was revealed directly to him (thus, he needs the other apostles less, 2:6); but he also expresses eager desire to work in harmony with the others, each according to his gift (2:7-10).

Paul drops a couple of hints that he suffered from poor eyesight (4:13-15; 6:11).

Major problem

Galatians addresses one specific problem faced by the churches in that region. It’s the Judaizers — adversarial preachers who followed up Paul’s work by spreading their own version of the gospel in the same places.

Paul had taught the churches he founded that Gentiles are redeemed and justified by God’s grace through faith and that there is no saving merit in the efforts of the flesh (human ritual) or in the works of the law. The Judaizers contradicted Paul’s emphasis on grace. They taught Gentile believers that to continue in salvation, they must be circumcised and obey the law like Jews.

The false gospel of the Judaizers prompts righteous indignation from the Apostle to the Gentiles, as well as some strong language: Those who pervert the gospel are “accursed” (1:6-9); the Galatians who’ve been duped are “foolish” (3:1-3); and may the Judaizers emasculate themselves (5:12)!

The problem of the Judaizers became so pervasive in the early church that a council of apostles and elders was called in Jerusalem to discuss it (see Acts 15).

After much debate, the council determined it was *not* necessary to teach Gentile converts to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:10, 11, 22-29). In robust and compelling terms, Galatians sets forth Paul’s support of this decision. Paul says . . .

Understand the covenants

- God promised the gospel to Abraham and his seed at the start (3:6-16).
- The law was added in the old covenant, till the Seed came (3:17-25).
- Then God sent Christ to fulfill the gospel promise through the new covenant (4:4-7).
- A vivid allegory contrasts the two covenants (4:21-31).

Understand law and grace

- Because it demands perfection and brings a curse, the law is futile as a means to right standing with God, either at the beginning or at the end of the Christian’s experience (3:10-25; 4:1ff, 21ff; 5:1ff).
- The believer is justified, or declared righteous before God, not by the deeds of the law but by faith in Christ, and is thus freed from slavery to the law (2:15-21; 3:1-9, 11, 24-26; 4:7-9; 5:1ff).

- The believer is united with Christ and others through the Spirit, which, better than the law, can produce the fruits of obedience, service, love, joy, peace, etc. (2:20; 3:2-5, 27-29; 4:6; 5:16-25).

If Galatians were Paul’s only letter, we might think he had no use for God’s law or good works. In other writings, however, Paul upholds law for several purposes (Rom. 7:7-12; Eph. 6:1-4; 1 Tim. 1:9ff) and stresses the need for good works (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8, 14) — but not here. Correcting a severe problem in Galatia, he employs extreme measures. Everything is in contrast:

- Spirit contrasted with flesh (3:3; 4:29; 5:16ff; 6:8)
- faith, with works (3:5)
- blessing, with cursing (3:13, 14)
- promise/grace, with law (3:17ff)
- sons, with slaves (4:1-7)
- Sarah, with Hagar; Isaac, with Ishmael; Zion, with Sinai (4:21ff)
- liberty, with bondage (5:1)

Still, Paul finds space to explain that the law is not against God’s promise of life (3:21), that the law serves the positive function of bringing people to Christ (3:24), and that believers should not tire of good deeds (6:9).

Also in Galatians

- the insignificance of our differences in Christ (3:28)
- the possibility of falling from God’s grace (5:1-4)
- the offense and glory of the cross (5:11; 6:14)
- the Christian’s responsibility to others (5:13-15, 26; 6:1-10)

Galatians in a sentence: With false teachers perverting the gospel of God’s grace, Paul attacks error with his personal experience and persuasion, his teaching about the law, and his appeals to the cross of Christ and the Holy Spirit in every struggle against the flesh.