

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 13

Galatians

I am making loaves of wheat bread. The recipe calls for white flour, wheat flour, yeast, salt, honey, and water. The recipe is from a fellow who won the international bread baking championship. He makes bread for a living. Me? I make bread for a hobby. I have never even entered a bread making competition. So, I am making his bread, and I am following his recipe. I want my bread to taste as close to his as possible. His bread is really that good!

Now, I have made bread before. One kind of bread I love to make is called "Gibassier." It also contains flour, yeast, and salt, but beyond those ingredients, the recipe is different. Gibassier uses eggs (I use Eggbeaters!) and milk. The bread is truly tasty, but it is very different from the loaves of wheat bread I am trying to make!

Might I be foolish enough to add some of the eggs and milk to the world famous wheat bread I am making? After all, the eggs and milk certainly "work" in the Gibassier! I would not be so foolish as to make those changes, and if I did make those changes, no one would expect the end product to turn out the same.

My bread point is a paltry illustration of a problem that happened in the Galatian area to the churches Paul had evangelized. The Galatians were taking the gospel Paul taught and adding to it. They were influenced by others to make significant changes and Paul would have none of it! Paul wrote the Galatians a letter that we have before us in this class.

Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of feasting on the Galatian letter for a long time. In the time context of our class, our goal is to give a thorough overview of the letter as we go through the life of Paul. In the second part of our series on Paul, we will address the strands of Paul's teaching on key subjects including those at issue in the Galatian letter.

LETTER BACKGROUND

Certain background questions we should ask in our study include when Paul likely wrote the letter and who were the "Galatians"? These are questions that might bore some, but they are necessary to help us put the letter into its original context. Once we have done so, we can then more fairly apply it to today.

As we read the letter, we try to understand why Paul was compelled to write it. We then try to follow through Paul's train of thought in the letter noting the points he emphasizes along the way.

When?

Unfortunately, first century letters did not contain the modern convention of a date on the letter. Therefore, we cannot pinpoint exactly when Paul wrote the Galatian letter. Scholars give a number of different dates ranging from shortly after Paul's first missionary journey to much later in Paul's ministry.

We think it most likely that Paul wrote the letter shortly after the first missionary journey and likely *before* the conference held in Jerusalem that we discussed in class last week (found in Acts 15). While there are many reasons for accepting this date, two core reasons are:

1. Paul is writing about a problem that was a hotbed of concern during that time period. The Galatian letter addresses some of the very same issues debated at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15. Paul is fresh off his missionary trip into the Galatian region and it seems sensible that he would write them to clarify the issues circulating in the churches.
2. Paul's letter to the Galatians does not make any mention of the Jerusalem conference and its resolution. The elders and apostles in Jerusalem wrote a letter to the Antioch church addressing related concerns to Paul's Galatian letter. If Paul were writing *after* the conference, one would expect Paul would have made some reference to it in his Galatian letter.¹

For those wishing to study the dating of the letter more fully, see the arguments set forth in a thorough commentary.²

¹ Some scholars argue that Paul does reference the Jerusalem conference in Galatians 2:1 [see, e.g., William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary – Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Baker Books 1995)]. The information as Paul relates it seems too diverse from Acts for me to accept that the two visits by Paul to Jerusalem were in fact one and the same.

² Some commentaries with good discussions of the issues involved in dating include F. F. Bruce, *The New International Greek New Testament Commentary – The Epistle to the Galatians* (Eerdmans 1982); Ronald Fung, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament – The Epistle to the Galatians* (Eerdmans 1988);

Who?

The debate of dating the letter also runs into a discussion of who exactly were the Galatians to whom Paul wrote.

The region of Galatia had a northern sector (called “North Galatia” by scholars debating this point) and a southern sector (not surprisingly called “South Galatia”). Paul evangelized the south Galatian area in his first missionary journey. There is no clear reference in the Bible for Paul having evangelized the north sector.³

We know from secular sources that the area Paul evangelized in the first missionary journey was considered at the time, Galatia.⁴ Over the next hundred years after Paul wrote, Galatia became the term for only the northern province. Early church fathers, therefore, thought of Galatia as the northern province and this thinking influenced scholars in the church up until Sir William Ramsay did serious archaeology in the Galatian region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Sir Ramsey was able to show that at the actual time that Paul wrote, the area that Luke describes as the first missionary journey was a part of Galatia.⁵ For Paul to write to those churches of his first trip, it was proper and even expected that he would term them “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). Once Ramsay made his discoveries, the dominoes began to fall into place in support of the theory that Paul wrote to Galatians in the very churches we have studied in Paul’s first missionary journey.

Ultimately, regardless of one’s opinions on the time of the letter or the proper geographical description of the recipients, the core message of Galatians remains the same. It is that message which we should focus on now.

³ There is debate among scholars whether Luke’s reference to Paul going through the “region of Phrygia and Galatia” in Acts 16:6 (and similarly in Acts 18:23) might refer to the northern sector. We find the arguments most compelling that Luke is addressing Paul revisiting those churches from the first missionary trip throughout Galatic Phrygia.

⁴ See the sources cited by Bruce at 3–18.

⁵ See W. M. Ramsey’s various works including *The Cities of St. Paul* (London 1907); *Historical Geography of Asia Minor* (London, 1890); *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London 1420); *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia* (Oxford 1895).

The Message

To properly understand the message, we need to consider the reason Paul wrote Galatians. Scholars use the word “occasion” to refer to the reason (or reasons) behind an epistle such as Galatians. We might consider our reading of the letter a bit like listening to one side of a telephone conversation. We cannot hear what the other person is saying, nor can we see the circumstances of the other person. But, we can gather a bit of information about the circumstances and conversation simply by listening to the one we can hear.

Similarly, we discern the “occasion” of Galatians by reading what Paul writes. One might fairly ask why the “occasion” is important? The answer lies in our need to properly understand what Paul wrote. Orthodoxy teaches that the Holy Spirit worked through Paul and his writing to give the church guidance through specific problems and issues of the time. As we put those writings into their occasion, we are putting them into their historical context. That is the important first step before figuring out what God would want those scriptures to say to us in our historical context. For this reason, we examine the occasion. As we do so, we can tell that the churches were faced with certain problems and we can reconstruct fairly well what had happened since Paul left the churches.

As we try to determine the occasion, we do well to consider several verses:

- “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6).
- “There are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:7).
- “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (Gal. 3:1).
- “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3).
- “Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (Gal. 4:9).
- “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?” (Gal. 4:21).
- “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).
- “Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you” (Gal. 5:2.).
- “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4).

- “You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (Gal. 5:7).

Although these verses give us only one side of the conversation, from them we get a good indication of why Paul wrote. Since Paul had evangelized the churches, some others had come in with a different teaching. This was a doctrine that Paul considered a distortion of the true gospel. Rather than reinforce faith in Christ, this teaching sought to enforce works of the flesh. Paul saw this as enslavement. It removed the purpose and role of Jesus the crucified Savior. It removed truth. It was as if someone were tampering with the perfect recipe, but so much more serious! This was not a simple loaf of bread. This was God’s eternal plan for the church!

With an initial understanding of why Paul wrote and what he wrote to fix, we can now focus on the flow of Paul’s letter. Again, as we do so, we are merely skimming along the surface of the letter. An in-depth study of Galatians would reveal many nuggets we miss by the necessity of our high altitude review of the material!

No doubt because Paul is going to spend a great deal of this letter challenging, and even condemning, the teaching of some who came into the churches after Paul and Barnabas left, Paul begins his letter by setting up his own credentials and authority. Paul is “an apostle...through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). Paul does not write on his own, but writes with the support of “all the brothers with” him (Gal. 1:2).

Paul will explain in 1:11-24 that his gospel he taught the Galatians was one that Paul received “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). It was “not man’s gospel” (Gal. 1:11). Paul did not receive it from the apostles in Jerusalem, in fact his trips there were very limited. That said, Paul does want the Galatians to know that Paul ultimately set the gospel he taught before the Apostles. The apostles accepted it and did not urge Paul or his brothers to change what they were teaching. “On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised...they gave the right hand of fellowship” (Gal. 2:7, 9).

Paul was so fervent in his zeal and so clear in his conviction about the gospel that Paul willing confronted Peter, telling the Galatians, “I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned...and the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him” (Gal. 2:11, 13).

With great conviction and with a showing of Godly authority, Paul set out to

defend the gospel to the Galatians and to attack head on the teachings and people in opposition. Paul was not going to let anyone distort the gospel! Early in the letter, Paul says that anyone who preaches a contrary gospel, even if it were an angel from heaven, should be “accursed.” Paul emphasizes his point by repeating it, “I say again: if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8-9).

Paul explained his gospel in very simple yet meaningful terms, “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). “Faith” to Paul does not mean a mere mental assent. Faith (πιστεύω or *pisteuo* in the Greek) means believing and trusting. It implies obedience, hope, and faithfulness.⁶ Paul is fervent on this point and repeats it over and over throughout the letter. Paul will say it in a myriad of ways. Consider:

- “By works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16).
- “Through the law I died to the law” (Gal. 2:19).
- “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (Gal. 2:21).
- “Did you receive the Spirit by works of law or by hearing with faith?” (Gal. 3:2)
- “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and who works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith” (Gal. 3:5).
- “It is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham...For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (Gal. 3:7, 10).
- “No one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Gal. 3:11).
- “You who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:4).

Do we see a pattern? Paul’s concern is so great that he goes over and over his point.

While Paul continues to repeat this core understanding of salvation, he also answers several questions that might be arising in the minds of the Galatians. For example, the Galatians might have wondered whether their refusal to follow Jewish ceremonial laws like circumcision makes Christ a minister or servant of sin (Gal. 2:15-18).⁷ In the words of the New International Version, “does that mean

⁶ See Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 6 at 208.

⁷ Some scholars see in this passage an argument that the false teachers had planted in the minds of the Galatians.

that Christ promotes sin?” Paul is confronting an argument that while the uncircumcised Gentile is a sinner, once that Gentile becomes a Christian, should the person then receive circumcision and begin to honor the law? The argument says if the Gentile does not start following the law, it leaves Jesus as a minister or promoter of sins and sinners? Paul explains that nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul shows that no one is ever “sin free” under the law. The solution to the law’s bondage is death. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ.” No, “it is no longer” Paul that lives, “but Christ who lives” in Paul. Paul’s earthly life is lived “by faith in the Son of God” (Gal. 2:20). Paul is explaining that Jesus is not the minister of sin, but the new life of the redeemed! If the law could be followed by anyone, Jew or Gentile, such that a person was no longer a “sinner” then “Christ died for no purpose” (Gal. 2:21).

Paul also uses several illustrations to make his point as he writes. On the issue of the law’s ability to add anything to one’s salvation, Paul goes to the Old Testament teaching on Abraham. Paul reminds the Galatians that the promise of blessing to Abraham was one that was given 430 years before the law was given on Sinai. Paul says that even with a human contract, one does not add or annul it once all have agreed to the terms. In this vein, Paul is asserting that the promise to Abraham could not have been altered 430 years later by a new addition of the law! (Gal. 3:15-19)

Paul’s illustration of Abraham is especially powerful when we realize that the legal burden being placed on the Galatians was likely placed by “good Jews” who saw it as appropriate for the children of Abraham.

After that illustration, Paul then addresses a logical question that might arise to the Galatians: If God did not give the law to effect eternal life, then why did he give it? Paul explains that the law met several of God’s purposes. First, the law was added “because of transgressions” (Gal. 3:19). The law stops some from sins that hurt and destroy society and the world around us. Further, the law showed sin for what it was, thereby also showing us Christ. Like a pedagogue⁸ (ESV “guardian”), the law led the lost to Christ.

But, the law lost its power as guardian once the Galatians came to Christ. “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 2:26-27).

⁸ See lesson on this word in lesson 3 available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

Paul then uses an allegory from the Old Testament to explain the difference in the children of Abraham by faith and those by law. The children of faith are like the offspring of Sarah, who bore children to Abraham out of the promise of God. The children who claim simply a genetic relation to Abraham who insist on adherence to the law are children of slavery like the offspring of Abraham through Hagar. (Gal. 4:21-31). In an ironic way, the Jew who insists that the Galatian Christians follow the law and be, in essence a “good Jew” is allegorically, a non-Jew child of Abraham through Hagar.

Paul is emphatic that Christians are free from the law. Then, Paul makes a turn on matters that are not ceremonial. Paul explains that as free people with the Spirit of God indwelling, we actually have the sense and the power to now walk holy in matters of ethics, morality, and attitude. We have the Spirit leading us to the fruit of “love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). These fruit are beyond the letters of legal action. Like all fruit, they grow from the inside out. They proceed from the indwelling Spirit of God.

This same Spirit leads us away from the dead works of the flesh: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (Gal. 5:19-21). These are deeds of the unsaved.

With this encouragement and correction, Paul brings his letter to a close urging the common bond of love to have the Galatians help each other through sin and burdens. Paul gives a personal touch to the letter writing in his own large letters (Gal. 6:11). Paul then closes with a final word that circumcision, just as other formal Jewish requirements of the law, truly count for nothing. Paul wants no boasting by any in what they do, but simply in the love of the sacrificed Messiah, Jesus.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. This brings us back to my bread. I would never add to the bread-master's recipe and expect to get the same product. Yet, since the very earliest days of the church, we have seen the constant and recurrent attempts by many to add something to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why is this a problem? Why do people repeatedly tamper with God's perfect recipe? Perhaps it has to do with our desire to be special, or be in control, or be "right." Whatever the reason, we must always guard against it! Jesus is our soul's salvation. Jesus. Not Jesus plus; but simply Jesus. "For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law" (Gal. 3:21).

It is one of the common threads among Christians – adding to Christ. Whether it is tithing, Sabbath keeping, man-made holiness rules, tradition, or special spiritual experiences, we must guard against any additions to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. In Christ then, we have a freedom from the bonds of sin and the law's requirements. But, this freedom is not one that sends or allows us to run rampant into sin! The great paradox is that we are freed from the law's bondage so that we can, by the Spirit's power and leading, grow into holiness in heart and action. This is Paul's exhortation, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25).
3. As we are walking in His grace, and as we see the Spirit's fruit growing in our lives, may we never boast in anything "except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!" (Gal. 6:14)