

# The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson 2

Paul and the Galatians

Manuscript



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# The Heart of Paul's Theology

## Lesson Two

### Paul and the Galatians

#### INTRODUCTION

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At one time or another, most parents play with their children by picking up a toy or two and behaving, at least a little bit, like children themselves. All of this is normal and to be expected. But it would be very strange for mature adults to fill their days by playing endlessly with children's toys. If we saw a friend doing this, we'd probably say something like, "You're an adult; stop acting like a child."

The apostle Paul faced something like this early in his ministry. He had proclaimed the good news of Christ and established churches among believing Jews and Gentiles in the region of Galatia. He'd taught them that Christ had inaugurated the last or latter days of history and had brought them into a mature relationship with God. But after Paul left them, false teachers tempted many in the churches of Galatia to turn back to the ways of Israel before Christ had come. So, he wrote his epistle to the Galatians to tell them, in no uncertain terms, "You are now spiritual adults in Christ; stop acting like children."

This is the second lesson in our series on *The Heart of Paul's Theology*, and we've entitled it, "Paul and the Galatians." In this lesson, we're going to see how the Galatian churches were tempted to return to the practices of Judaism. And we're also going to see how Paul reacted to these backward-looking Christians by reminding them that Christ had brought them into the blessings of God in the last days.

In our previous lesson, we saw that the heart of Paul's theology was his eschatology — his firm conviction that Jesus was Israel's Messiah and that Jesus had inaugurated the latter days, or last days of God's kingdom on earth. On the basis of Old Testament prophecy, every faithful Jew in Paul's day believed that when the Messiah came, he would radically change the world. And, following the teachings of Jesus, Paul taught that Christ had begun to do this when he inaugurated the last days in his first advent. But he also taught that there would be a period where God's kingdom would continue to spread throughout the world. And finally, Christ would complete the transformation of creation only at the consummation of the last days in his second advent.

It's easy to understand that many Christians were confused by this Christian teaching. In what ways had the last days already come? In what ways had they not yet come? As we're about to see, the Galatians were tempted to underestimate how much Christ had already accomplished.

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 summarize the structure and content of his epistle. And third, we'll examine how the content of this letter emerged from Paul's central theological outlooks — his outlooks on the latter days or eschatology. Let's look first at the background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

## BACKGROUND

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Paul wrote his letters as he traveled from place to place. And as a result, he didn't write primarily about abstract theology. Rather, he wrote his epistles to address specific issues that Christ's followers faced in different times and places. So, to understand what Paul wrote to the Galatians, we need to answer some basic questions about the historical situation in Galatia in Paul's day. When did Paul write his letter to the Galatian churches? What issues did he address in this epistle?

We'll look into the background of the book of Galatians in two ways. First, we'll review Paul's contact with the Galatians during his first missionary journey. And second, we'll mention some of the specific problems that motivated Paul to write to them. Let's start with the background of Paul's first missionary journey.

### FIRST JOURNEY

Acts 13, 14 summarize Paul's first missionary journey. It's clear that Paul and his companion Barnabas faced much opposition as they proclaimed the good news of Christ and established churches in the region of Galatia. Sadly, much of this opposition came from Paul's fellow Jews who refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. But opponents didn't trouble only Paul and Barnabas. After Paul and Barnabas left the region, Jewish teachers in the church pressured the new Galatian believers to follow certain Jewish traditions — traditions that Paul believed were out of accord with what Christ had accomplished.

Paul's first journey as an apostle of Christ began around A.D. 46 after the Holy Spirit 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 of Christ's kingdom 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. At that time, Pisidian Antioch 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 in Christ. But the church was not firmly established because Paul and Barnabas quickly left the city when unbelieving Jews plotted to murder them.

The next stop in Paul's first missionary journey 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. Soon after this, some unbelieving Jews arrived from Iconium, and were able to turn the disillusioned citizens of Lystra against

Paul and Barnabas. But God spared their lives, and they 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 great risk to their lives, Paul and Barnabas returned to each of these cities. In each city, they strengthened the fledgling churches. They also explained that the sufferings that Paul and Barnabas had experienced were the sorts of tribulations all Christians should expect to endure as they furthered 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's 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. The assembly in Jerusalem addressed some of the same issues as Paul's letter to the Galatians, especially whether Gentile Christians had to be circumcised. If the assembly had already taken place by the time Paul wrote Galatians, he certainly would have appealed to this assembly to support his views. But he did not. So, it seems likely that he wrote Galatians around A.D. 48, within a year or so of leaving Galatia, but before the Jerusalem council was held.

**In Acts 15, we find that Paul and Barnabas come back from the mission field, and they have to come to explain what was happening in the mission. In fact, people were excited that many of the Gentiles have come to Christ. However, there were those who were saying, "It is too easy. These Gentiles are becoming Christians ... and they need to be circumcised." But Paul and his team said, "No," and Paul stood the ground and explained and said, "We should not burden the Christians, the Gentiles" ... And therefore, the Jerusalem Council met and, under the leadership of James and Peter, they agreed that they don't need to burden the Gentiles with those ceremonial laws of circumcision or washing of the feet, but they need to keep away from, at least, their sexual immorality and things offered to the idols.**

— Prof. Mumo Kisau

Now that we've considered the background of the book of Galatians and Paul's first missionary journey, we should look at the specific problems in Galatia that concerned Paul. What were the conditions of the Galatian churches? What had happened in those churches that compelled Paul to write to them?

## PROBLEMS

We'll explore two crucial problems that affected the Galatian churches: the influx of Gentiles into these churches, and the rise of false teachers. Let's look first at the way

Gentile Christians flocked into the Galatian churches.

## Influx of Gentiles

Old Testament prophets often spoke of the future when the Messiah would spread the kingdom of God throughout the earth. These prophets made it clear that Jews and Gentiles who resisted the Messiah would be destroyed. But they also indicated that both Jews and Gentiles would repent and receive mercy from God. Much to Paul's surprise, most of the Jews in Galatia rejected his proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom in Christ. So, Paul focused his ministry on reaching Gentiles. And during his first missionary journey, he brought many Gentiles to Christ. Listen to Paul's words to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, recorded in Acts 13:46-47:

It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "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. He knew from the Old Testament that repentance in the age of the Messiah was to begin in Israel. But the negative reactions of many Jews 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] entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed (Acts 14:1).

It wasn't just Jews who came to faith in Christ. A "great number of both Jews *and Greeks*" — or Gentiles — believed in Jesus. In a similar way, in Acts 14:27, Luke reported how Paul summarized his first missionary journey saying that:

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

Now, having considered the problems associated with the influx of Gentiles in the early Galatian churches, we should look at the rise of false teachers in these churches.

## False Teachers

From our modern perspective we might think that everyone would have rejoiced to see Jesus extend God's reign over the earth by calling so many Gentiles into the

Galatian churches. But the influx of Gentiles actually caused serious problems for early Christians. And these problems incited Jewish false teachers to rise in response.

It's important to know that before and after the time of Christ, Jewish proselytizers required all male Gentiles who converted to Judaism to submit to baptism and to circumcision. Circumcision was a sign that Gentile converts were committed to observing many other Jewish traditions, like strict Sabbath-keeping, avoiding animal blood, and refusing food devoted to idols. So, it was only reasonable for Jewish Christians in the first century to expect Gentile Christians to be baptized and circumcised. But during his first missionary journey, Paul had only baptized Gentiles. He had not circumcised them.

Paul was not opposed to circumcision per se. He knew that Genesis 17 required circumcision for all male Israelites, and that Exodus 12 required Gentile slaves and sojourners who lived in the land of Israel to be circumcised before they could partake of Passover. But it's important to realize that the Jewish tradition of requiring all Gentile converts to be circumcised went far beyond these Old Testament teachings. And more than this, there's no explicit Old Testament teaching about whether or not Gentiles should be circumcised once the Messiah brought the last days and spread the kingdom of God to the Gentile nations.

Until Paul's first missionary journey, the Christian church had been predominantly Jewish. The early church had started in Jerusalem and had held firmly to its Jewish identity. Consequently, the influx of Gentiles led to all kinds of theological and practical problems. Should Gentile believers observe the many ways Jewish traditions had applied the law of Moses? False teachers in Galatia believed that they should. And for this reason, they insisted that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be justified or declared righteous before God. But Paul vigorously opposed this point of view.

We'll mention three of the main ways Paul believed that requiring circumcision for Gentile Christians reflected critical misunderstandings of the Christian faith. First, requiring circumcision meant that Christ's death and resurrection were insufficient for salvation.

*Insufficiency of Christ.* Paul insisted that justification, or right-standing before God, was obtained solely by faith in Christ. But from the book of Galatians, we may surmise that the Galatian false teachers saw circumcision as a sacrifice of blood that was necessary for believers to please God. For this reason, they taught that Christians had to add circumcision to Christ's saving work. But from Paul's perspective, this belief represented a rejection of the immeasurable value of faith in Christ's death and resurrection.

**Paul puts forth in the book of Galatians the idea that Christ's work is sufficient. That is the key element — Christ's work is sufficient. So, when you add other human works, whether it be baptism or circumcision or certain other forms of obedience, and bring that in as part of what is expected of us to be children of God and to commune with our Father in heaven, then you have distorted the message,**

**because the essential issue is, am I saved by what I do, or am I saved by what Christ has done? And so, Paul, understandably and rightly, suggests that if you miss it on this point, you've missed it completely.**

— Rev. Dan Hendley

This is why Paul wrote these words in Galatians 5:2:

I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you (Galatians 5:2).

***Reliance on Flesh.*** Paul not only accused the false teachers in Galatia of denying the sufficiency of Christ's saving work, he also disputed their teaching that believers must rely on the flesh to complete their salvation, rather than relying on the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul expressly referred to this problem in Galatians 3:3 where he sarcastically asked these questions:

Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:3).

The Greek term rendered as “flesh” is *sarx* (σάρξ). 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 may rightly be translated here, “sinful human effort.”

**So, Paul regularly makes the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. And the Greek word *sarx* is the word “flesh,” and in some contexts it literally just means this stuff, you know, the human body. But more normally it speaks about the fallen human nature and that we are fleshly in the sense that our natural instinct is directed away from serving God toward serving ourselves. And to be fleshly is to indulge ourselves in our own sinful desires and our own sinful nature. And when we become a believer, the Holy Spirit indwells us, and his job is to make us more like Jesus.**

— Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

As Luke's record in Acts 2 makes clear, the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the last days — predicted by Old Testament prophets — began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. So, 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 by turning to circumcision, they had turned from God's gift of the Spirit and had begun to depend on their own human abilities to please God. Tragically, their reliance on human ability actually condemned them to impotence and failure.

***Divisions in Church.*** In addition to denying the sufficiency of Christ's work and relying on the flesh instead of the Holy Spirit, the false teachers also deeply troubled Paul because they had created divisions in the church. Listen to what Paul wrote in Galatians 6:15-16:

Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).

All too often, modern Christians are so used to divisions in the Christian church that we simply accept them as inevitable. But Paul would have none of it. The false teachers in Galatia were creating divisions between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, and this was entirely unacceptable to the apostle. Paul insisted that what counts is "a new creation." Old Testament prophecies, like Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, spoke of the new heavens and new earth — a renewal of all of creation that the Messiah would bring. And the Christian good news, or gospel, was the announcement that Jesus had, in fact, inaugurated the new creation.

For this reason, Paul insisted that the only substantial division among people was whether they were a part of the new creation in Christ or not. And it's why Paul declared that there should be no divisions within the church. As he put it in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In Christ, the old divisions between Jews and Gentiles had been eliminated. So, the disunity between these two groups in the churches of Galatia deeply troubled Paul. Quarreling and divisiveness among God's people that rested on divisions prior to the new creation were absolutely contrary to what Christ had done and against the ideal toward which the church was to strive.

Now that we've introduced several crucial aspects of the background of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, we're ready to look more closely at how these issues appear in the structure and content of his letter. We'll briefly explore the content of Galatians by summarizing each of its main sections.

## STRUCTURE & CONTENT

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Paul's letter to the Galatians is short, but it's so dense that well-meaning Christians often become lost in the details. So, we're wise to gain an overview of how every part of this letter fits with every other part. From beginning to end, Paul designed the entire epistle to lead the Galatians into remaining faithful to the good news about the last days in Christ as they faced the challenges of false teachers.

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 theological 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.

Let's consider first the prescript and postscript of the letter.

### **PRESCRIPT (1:1-5) & POSTSCRIPT (6:11-18)**

The prescript of Galatians, in 1:1-5, is brief and fairly straightforward. It introduces the apostle Paul as the author and identifies the churches of Galatia as the recipients. The postscript, in 6:11-18, is also brief, closing the letter with some final remarks and Paul's personal blessing for the churches of Galatia. It also highlights some of Paul's more important thoughts in this letter.

### **INTRODUCTION TO PROBLEM (1:6-10)**

In the second section of the book, in 1:6-10, we see an introduction to the problem that the Galatians faced. Here, Paul directly attacked the problem of false teaching in Galatia. He expressed astonishment and warned the Galatians of how dangerous it was to follow the false teachers who were troubling them. In no uncertain terms, Paul insisted that following these false teachers was to accept a false gospel. Listen to the dire curse Paul pronounced against the false teachers in 1:8:

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

To follow the doctrines of the false teachers was no small matter. It 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.

**You know, one of the most surprising New Testament books is the book of Galatians. And I say it's surprising because this is Paul's first letter — at least I believe it's Paul's first letter — and think about how he starts. He starts without a greeting, and every Greek letter is supposed to have a greeting, “Hey, how are you doing.” He skips that and he goes right to the punch. “I am astonished at you Galatians that you are so quickly turning to another gospel — which is no gospel at all.” And then Paul goes on to say, “If anyone listens to a gospel other**

than the one we preached, even if it's an angel" — even if it's someone like Gabriel — "*anathema estō*," let there be an anathema, an excommunication, on such a person. What Paul is saying in his very first letter is that truth matters. And the reason he writes Galatians is because there are well-meaning people following up on his ministry who are saying, "Well, you know, if you really want to be right, if you want to be on the inside, you Gentiles, you need to be circumcised, and we can help you with that." And Paul says, "Stop! That's false teaching." And you say, isn't Paul overreacting? Not at all, because Paul sees the very gospel as being imperiled by their insistence of bringing about a fuller gospel through the rite of circumcision.

— Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.

## HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS (1:11–2:21)

The third section of the epistle of Galatians, in 1:11–2:21, is more elaborate. It consists of several historical accounts in which Paul proved his authority as an apostle. In this portion of his letter, Paul showed that his harsh and categorical condemnation of the false teachers in Galatia was based on the authority God had given him as an apostle.

Three historical accounts 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. These events were so crucial to Paul's attempt to persuade the Galatians that we should look at each of them, starting with Paul's call and training.

### Call and Training (1:11-17)

The account of Paul's call and training explains why Paul had the authority to condemn those who insisted that Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised. It begins with a description of how Paul had loved the traditions of Israel so much that, prior to his conversion, he had actively persecuted the church. Listen to his words in Galatians 1:13-14:

You have heard of my former life in Judaism ... I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:13-14).

No one who knew anything about Paul could deny that he had been deeply committed to the traditions of Israel before he became a follower of Christ. In fact, even as a Christian, he often submitted himself to many of these traditions for the sake of spreading the gospel. But despite his earlier zeal and continuing respect for Jewish

traditions, Paul had not required the Gentiles to be circumcised when he was on his journey through Galatia. How could he justify having done this when he had been so committed to the traditions of Israel in his day?

**I think the thing that we have to remember most of all was that Paul was first of all a Jew, and he was a Jew who had discovered that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. Paul was brought up in the tradition of the elders, he was brought up hearing Scripture from his childhood on up, and because he was trained as a Pharisee, he had an in-depth knowledge of those Scriptures. In fact, probably, Paul knew several books by heart. And so, all that wealth of what we call today the Old Testament Scriptures — of tradition, of the history of Israel; things that we see, for instance, in Romans 9 — Paul brings all that with him... Now the negative things as well are things, as well, that he realizes he has to shed when he comes to Christ. So, the tendency of self-justification, the superiority of the Jewish race as it was perceived in Paul's time, those are things that he brought as well as a Pharisee. And what happened on the road to Damascus is the living Christ appeared to him, and Paul realized suddenly that he was the promised Messiah. And so, when Paul begins preaching, what he is basically preaching is that Jesus of Nazareth is the one who has fulfilled all the Old Testament promises, and so he won't be preaching that Judaism is bad, but rather, that it has been fulfilled in Christ.**

— Dr. Donald Cobb

Listen to Paul's testimony in Galatians 1:15-18:

When [God] ... was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone ... I went away into Arabia, and returned again 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 his personal preference. Jesus, the Lord himself, had taught Paul his new views. For this reason, to disagree with Paul on this matter was to disagree with Christ himself.

### **Meeting with Leaders (2:1-10)**

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. Fourteen years after a private

meeting with Peter, Paul met with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and 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 ... because of a revelation and set before them ... the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles ... [T]hey saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised ... James and [Peter] and John ... gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, 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 church leaders in Jerusalem. 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.

**Paul affirms in Galatians, that his call, commission, apostleship, and the gospel that he received were from God directly, not from the Jews nor from the leaders of the Jews. In his letter to the Galatians, he speaks about how he received the right hand of blessing from the leaders of the church, like Peter and John, and they confirmed the authenticity of the gospel he received. Consequently, he launched his ministry from a Gentile church, sending the great message that the gospel is not bound to a certain people, nor to a Jewish church in itself, like the church in Jerusalem, but it is bound to the content of the Bible.**

— Dr. Atef Gendy, translation

### **Conflict with Peter (2:11-21)**

Paul's third historical account, found in 2:11-21, describes a conflict with Peter in Syrian Antioch. In this account, we learn that at an earlier time, Peter had been true to the gospel of Christ by freely associating with uncircumcised believers. At some later time, however, Peter feared for his reputation among some strict Jewish believers from Jerusalem. So, he separated himself from uncircumcised believers. Peter's actions conformed to the false belief that uncircumcised Gentile believers were inferior to Jewish believers. And when Paul found out about this, he confronted Peter and reminded him of the gospel which both he and Peter believed. Galatians 2:15-16 reports Paul's words to Peter on that occasion. Paul said:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus

Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of 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 regarding how people are justified, or made righteous in God's eyes. It was not by observing traditional Jewish teachings, but by faith in Christ. If Paul's authority had been sufficient to correct even the preeminent apostle Peter when he strayed from this essential truth, he certainly had the authority to correct the false teachers in Galatia.

These three accounts of Paul's call and training, his meeting with the Jerusalem leaders, and his conflict with Peter, had one theme in common: They all built a strong case for Paul's authority to oppose the false teachers in Galatia and to defend the true gospel of Christ.

After giving these historical accounts to prove his authority, Paul turned to the fourth section of his epistle in 3:1–4:31. Here he offered more direct theological proofs to demonstrate that justification or right standing before God was by faith alone apart from circumcision or any other human works.

### **THEOLOGICAL PROOFS (3:1–4:31)**

The material presenting Paul's theological proofs divides into four parts, alternating between the Galatians' experiences and the biblical record of Abraham's life. First, Paul appealed to the Galatians' early Christian experience. Second, he turned to the Old Testament account of Abraham's saving faith. Third, Paul appealed to the Galatian believers' current experience. And fourth, he drew upon the story of Abraham's wives and sons. Let's look first at Paul's focus on the Galatians' earlier experience of the Christian faith in 3:1-5.

#### **Early Experience (3:1-5)**

Listen to what Paul wrote in 3:2-5:

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ... Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ... Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (Galatians 3:2-5).

In a series of rhetorical questions, Paul referred to what had happened during his first missionary journey. As Acts 13, 14 tell us, the Galatians had received many incredible blessings from the Holy Spirit when Paul had first been among them. Both the

Galatians and Paul knew that these blessings of the Spirit did not come because they were keeping the traditions of Israel. They had not been circumcised when the Spirit came to them. God had freely given these gifts because they had believed in Christ. 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 (3:6–4:11)**

After presenting theological proofs that touched on the Galatians' early Christian experience, Paul turned to the example of Abraham's saving faith in 3:6–4:11. In these verses, Paul argued that God had blessed Abraham because of his faith, not because of Abraham's obedience to God's Law. Abraham had not earned the blessing of salvation through fleshly human efforts.

***Abraham's Justification.*** Paul's argument in this section is rather complex, but we may summarize it in five parts. In the first place, Paul pointed out that Abraham's justification in the eyes of God came through faith in God's promise. In 3:6-7 Paul referred to Genesis 15:6 in this way:

Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" ...  
Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:6-7).

To understand the significance of Genesis 15:6, we have to keep in mind what preceded this verse. Earlier, God had promised Abraham a great kingdom, but Abraham doubted God's promise because his wife Sarah was barren. In response, God confirmed his promise. He showed Abraham how he had filled the night sky with stars and promised that Abraham's heirs would be as innumerable as the stars of the heavens. Abraham was convinced and believed God's promise. And God counted him as righteous or justified.

Now, of course, Abraham remained a sinner, but God declared in the court of heaven that Abraham was righteous in his eyes. This took place long before Abraham was circumcised. For this reason, Paul concluded that what was true for Abraham himself, is true for all of Abraham's children. And those who follow Abraham's example are his true children and heirs of the great kingdom God promised.

***Promised Gentile Salvation.*** In the second place, Paul went on to point out how God had promised 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, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:8-9).

Genesis 12:3 anticipated that the gospel or good news of Christ would justify Gentiles who shared Abraham's faith. God had called Abraham to spread God's blessings to Gentiles throughout the world. And Paul concluded that the spread of the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles fulfilled this calling.

**In Genesis 12, God promises Abraham, not only that Abraham — who at that point, of course, was childless — that he would have a seed that could not be counted, but that through Abraham the nations would be blessed. And we see that working its way out through the Old Testament. Israel is called to be a people who are distinctive to the Lord and yet also a people who represent the Lord and his reign among the nations. They are called “a kingdom of priests” ... Of course, we know that Israel in so many ways failed, as we would have failed, to be that kingdom of priests, to be that avenue through which blessing would flow from God through Israel to all the nations. But Jesus is the ultimate seed of Abraham, and now, in Christ, the new covenant church is both the recipient of blessing through Jesus the seed of Abraham and the avenue of blessing among the nations.**

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

*Curse Taken by Christ.* In the third place, Paul explained that salvation comes through faith in Christ apart from good works because God's curse on sin was taken fully and finally by Christ himself.

Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that the bloody cutting of the flesh in circumcision was not a way to gain righteousness. As the sign of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, circumcision was a solemn oath that meant, “may I be cut off from the land of the living if I do not exercise covenant faithfulness.” Christ had come as the final atonement for sin. He received the curse due for our disobedience to God. 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).

Paul's statement here was based on Deuteronomy 21:23 which declares that one who hangs on a tree is cursed of God. 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 God were theirs, totally by faith in Christ, because he had taken the curse on himself for their sakes.

**At the heart of Paul's theology is the idea of the sufficiency of what Christ has done, and there is so much in us as fallen human beings that somehow wants to fight against that idea that our salvation, our**

redemption has been won for us apart from anything we've ever done and will do. But Galatians is a book in which Paul pushes this idea upon us, presses it into our consciousness to understand that Christ has done it all, that he has paid the final price. The Old Testament spoke of a curse. And Christ having borne that curse, we are now free from that. And so, Paul makes a big to-do in Galatians about freedom, and it's a freedom that we have not won by our efforts, we have not won by following human ceremonies and things that are given to us by the religious world. But we have won it, or we've been given that gift by the Lord Jesus Christ who himself has paid the price, who himself has borne the curse and, therefore, set us free to live in the freedom of the children of God.

— Rev. Dan Hendley

*Law of Moses.* In the fourth place, Paul explained God's purpose in giving the law of Moses, by making it clear that the law did not reverse Abraham's example of faith. The false teachers in Galatia urged that righteousness before God comes through obedience to God's law. But as we've seen, Paul insisted that justification, or righteousness, comes by faith alone. Why then did God give his Law through Moses? As Paul put it in Galatians 3:17-19:

The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void... Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made (Galatians 3:17-19).

God's covenant with Israel in Moses was introduced some 430 years after his covenant in Abraham. But Paul insisted that the law of Moses hadn't annulled the way of justification by faith established in Abraham's day. Rather, as Paul put it here, the law of Moses had been added to deal with Israel's transgressions and to prepare them for the day when Christ, Abraham's great offspring — or "seed" as it is often translated — would come. Paul said so much in this passage that we'll return to look at it more fully later in this lesson. But at this point, it's important to note that Paul boldly asserted that Moses' law "does not annul [Abraham's] covenant ... so as to make [God's] promise void." Whatever else may be said about the role of Moses' law in biblical history, Paul believed that God's law was consistent with the rest of Scripture. It was impossible for the law God revealed to Moses to be contrary to what God had revealed to Abraham. As Paul put it in Galatians 3:21, "Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not!"

The stories of Abraham in Genesis make it clear that God required good works or obedience to his commands in Abraham's day, much like he required the Israelites in Moses' day to obey his commands. But the false teachers in Galatia had lost sight of a crucial fact about obedience. In God's covenants with Abraham and Moses — as in the entire Bible — obedience to God's commands is not a way of gaining righteousness

before God. It's the way true believers express their gratitude for the free gift of justification that they receive through faith. The law wasn't added to annul justification by faith, but to lead to Christ. So, who then can become an heir of God's promise to Abraham?

***Seed of Abraham.*** In the fifth part of Paul's argument, he made it clear that God's blessing comes to everyone who belongs to Abraham's perfectly righteous son, his true seed and heir, namely Christ. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:16, 29:

The promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ... And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:16, 29).

As Paul read the record of Genesis, he noted that in 22:18, the Hebrew word *zera* (זָרַע) — translated here as "offspring" — was singular, not plural. God's blessing first came to Abraham, and then was passed on to future generations through God's chosen seed, his son, Isaac. For this reason, Abraham's inheritance did not come to all of Abraham's children individually, but to Isaac who was the representative head of those who followed. And in the light of the revelation of Christ in the last days, Paul knew that Christ was the final heir or seed of Abraham who was the representative head of God's people. Christ is the heir of all promises given to Abraham, and every Jew and Gentile who belongs to Christ will receive Abraham's inheritance of eternal salvation. In all of these ways, Paul demonstrated that justification comes only to those who follow Abraham's example by receiving God's blessings through faith in Christ. And he confirmed that salvation is by faith in the promises of God and not by works of the law.

## Current Experience (4:12-20)

After offering theological proofs related to the Galatians' early salvation experience and 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, NIV).

Here Paul expressed deep concern for the Galatians' spiritual well-being and how it revealed their desperate spiritual condition. As the Galatians turned from the good news that salvation is by faith alone in Christ, they lost their joy, a fruit of the Holy Spirit according to Galatians 5:22. This loss alone should have alerted the Galatians to the fact that there was something wrong with the teaching of Paul's opponents.

There are lots of ways to evaluate whether we're going in the right direction in our Christian lives. Paul highlighted one of these ways for the Galatians — their loss of

the joy of the Holy Spirit. Now, Paul didn't mean by this that the churches of Galatia should seek happiness and joy at any cost. Even Jesus was not joyous every moment. But he did want them to recognize that their once-joyous churches were being torn to pieces by division and strife. Some of them had even started to become Paul's enemies. This loss of unity in the church indicated that something was wrong. And Paul suggested that their loss of joy was because they'd begun to adopt a false gospel and quench the Spirit in their midst.

### **Abraham's Wives and Sons (4:21-31)**

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. Abraham had two sons: Isaac by his wife Sarah, and Ishmael by Sarah's slave Hagar. In Galatians 4:24, Paul commented that the differences between these two mothers and sons "may be interpreted allegorically." By this he meant that Abraham's historical interactions with these mothers and sons corresponded to two paths the Galatians could follow: the way of faith in God's promise and the way of the flesh. On the one hand, Abraham followed the path of faith with regard to Sarah and the birth of Isaac. On the other hand, Abraham followed the path of the flesh with regard to Hagar and Ishmael.

According to Genesis 15, God had made a covenant in which he 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 covenant promise to him. By trusting God to fulfill his word, Sarah had Isaac. Isaac was a child of promise, Abraham's heir and the conduit of God's blessing to all who would believe after him. In this sense, all who believe the true gospel of Christ are saved by believing in the promises of God in Christ. As Paul put it in 4:26, those who believe in Christ belong to the heavenly "Jerusalem above" where Christ now reigns. This is the new Jerusalem that Christ will bring down to the earth when he returns in glory.

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. Abraham wavered in his faith and sought to secure his legacy by human effort, by the effort of the flesh. Hagar bore him Ishmael, but Ishmael was a child of the flesh. So, God rejected him as Abraham's heir, and he came to represent all who look to the flesh as the way of salvation. In this sense, all who wrongly believed that Moses' law offered a way of justification through human merit were part of "the present Jerusalem" on earth. In Paul's day, Jerusalem was a city in the grip of open rebellion and hypocritical legalism — a city that was doomed to suffer God's judgment in A.D. 70. After drawing out this contrast between Abraham's wives and sons, Paul concluded this way in Galatians 4:31:

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

Faith in God's promise is the only way of justification before God and freedom from God's judgment. 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 as the false teachers had promoted.

So, we see that in the fourth major section of Galatians, Paul offered four main arguments, or theological proofs, to explain that believers are justified before God by means of faith alone. With the content of chapters 1–4 in mind, we're in a position to summarize the last major section of Paul's letter to the Galatians: his practical exhortations in 5:1–6:10. In these chapters, Paul addressed a number of problems that the false teachers had caused in Galatia.

### **PRACTICAL EXHORTATIONS (5:1–6:10)**

Paul had many practical exhortations in these verses but we can summarize his 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 divine judgment in 6:1-10. Let's look first at Paul's emphasis on responsible freedom in Christ.

#### **Freedom in Christ (5:1-15)**

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:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).

During his first missionary journey, Paul had brought Gentiles into the Christian faith, free from the shackles of Jewish legalism. And he wanted them to remain free in Christ. As he wrote in Galatians 5:2-3:

If you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law (Galatians 5:2-3).

The false teachers in Galatia had introduced a legalistic system of hypocritical, self-righteousness to the Christians in Galatia. They had taught the Galatian believers to rely on their obedience to the Law rather than on Christ. But by teaching the necessity of circumcision, they obligated these Christians to perfect obedience to the whole law, a standard that was impossible to fulfill. So, the Galatians had a crucial choice to make. They could choose the freedom of salvation by faith in Christ or bondage to sin because of their inability to keep the whole Law. The one led to salvation, the other to judgment.

Even so, 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:

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (Galatians 5:13).

Christ had released the Galatian Christians from bondage to the Law as the means to justification and power for righteous living. Yet, Paul did not want the Galatians to think that their freedom included freedom to violate God's holy character, which was the very foundation of the Law.

**If I find out suddenly, “Oh, I don’t have to follow the law to be saved. Oh, righteousness is not about the law,” then I say ... “I don’t have to do anything. I can do whatever I want. There’s no rules. This is great. I can serve myself.” But that misses that we have been set free for each other and for God, because it isn’t about us anymore, because we don’t have to “do” in order to be righteous. But because we are righteous we can have that vision of the future us, the restored us, the fully sanctified us in mind, and we can be working towards being what God has already made us, towards being what God has called us to, because we already are in him.**

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

## **Power of the Holy Spirit (5:16-26)**

Having established this balanced orientation toward 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 hypocritical legalism based on human effort? According to Paul, every believer must rely on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for empowerment rather than on the flesh. Listen to the way he put it in 5:16, 25:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh... If we live by the Spirit, let us also 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's always important to remember that Paul never set the Holy Spirit over or against the moral teachings of Scripture. For Paul, living by the Spirit could not be divorced from God's written revelation. The Spirit of God always leads God's people to live according to the written Word of God as it is revealed in the

Old and New Testaments. But living by the Spirit is not merely to conform to the teaching of written texts. It also involves a conscious dependence on the power of the Spirit to fulfill what God has commanded. By depending on the Spirit of God, we will not fulfill the desires of the flesh.

### **Divine Judgment (6:1-10)**

In addition to Paul's exhortations toward freedom in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul summed up his discussion of practical matters by speaking of divine judgment. Listen to his serious warning in 6:7-9:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, 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 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, he urged them to believe the true gospel, and he exhorted them to live according to that gospel — the same gospel he'd preached to them 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 structure and 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.

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## **THEOLOGICAL OUTLOOKS**

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It's easy to see how Paul addressed the false teachers' call for Gentiles to be circumcised, but let's face it, very few Christians today face questions about circumcision. So, what does the book of Galatians have to do with us today? To catch just how important the book of Galatians is for Christians in every age, we must see how it reflected the heart of Paul's theology. Nearly everything Paul wrote in Galatians was based on his belief that the false teachers in Galatia had failed to acknowledge a core dimension of the Christian faith — the fact that Jesus had inaugurated the last or latter

days, the age of eternal judgment and salvation.

You'll recall from our previous lesson in this series that it helps 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 the specific issues of circumcision and justification by faith. But Paul's direct statements about circumcision and righteousness before God were actually expressions of more basic theological convictions. His teaching in the book of Galatians was an *application* of his central eschatological views.

Like Jesus and all the New Testament authors, the apostle Paul taught that the great age to come had begun with Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. But he also taught that the trials of this age will not completely vanish from the world until the consummation when Christ returns in glory. And this meant that Christians live in what we might call the "already and not yet," a time when this age of sin and death overlaps the age of eternal salvation to come.

But the fact that this age and the age to come exist simultaneously gave rise to serious problems in Galatia. The Galatian's 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. When we see how this error was at the heart of the problems in the Galatian churches, we can see more clearly how the book of Galatians applies to Christians in every age. In one way or another, we are all tempted to underestimate how much Christ has brought the age to come into our lives.

Now, 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. Let's look first at Paul's description of Christ in the introduction of the book.

## CHRIST

In Galatians 1:3-4, Paul appealed to his doctrine of the latter or last days when he described Jesus in this way:

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

Notice that Paul didn't 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 deliver us from the present evil age." The expression "the present evil age" corresponds to the common 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. So, when Paul began his letter describing Christ as the one who gave himself to deliver Christians from the present evil age, he was pointing out that Jesus, the Christ or Messiah, had come to deliver Christians into the age to come. And in doing so, Christ had brought great changes to the world. The false teachers in Galatia had caused many believers to lose sight of these great changes. This was especially evident in their insistence on returning to the traditional covenant sign of circumcision. Many traditions in Israel had become hypocritical and legalistic, reflecting "this age" of sin. And those who now lived in "the age to come" were to reject these traditions. Paul taught that Jesus had come to deliver believers from this age and its old ways. To deny this truth in theory or practice was to deny the essence of who Jesus was.

## 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, NIV).

Now we can be confident that the false teachers in Galatia had not stopped talking about Jesus. They still claimed to be Christians who had good news. 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* (εὐαγγέλιον). This New Testament Greek terminology was based on the Old Testament Hebrew term *mebaser* (מְבַשֵּׂר), especially as it was used in Isaiah. Listen to the prophet Isaiah's words in Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isaiah 52:7).

In this passage, Isaiah spoke of the announcement of God's victory over evil when Israel's judgment of exile would come to an end. And he used the term "good news" to describe the announcement that God would establish his reign in human history by 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 gospel of 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 had denied that Christ had brought the age to come, the age of salvation, the age of the kingdom of God. By continuing to teach what had led so many in Israel to receive God’s judgment — namely that justification before God came by works of the law — the false teachers had rejected the true significance of the Christian good news. Here again, Paul revealed that the root of the problem in Galatia was that the false teachers had an under-realized eschatology. The ways of failing, sinful legalism introduced by the false teachers denied the radical changes when Christ brought the kingdom of God to earth.

## 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 saw earlier in this lesson how Paul insisted that Moses’ law did not annul the path of justification or righteousness by faith that God had clearly established in the days of Abraham. Righteousness by faith is the way of salvation throughout the Scriptures. But this truth raised a serious question. What then was the purpose of the law of Moses? Why had God given Israel the Mosaic law? Listen to what Paul said in 3:19:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made (Galatians 3:19).

Paul was so succinct in this passage that it often leads to confusion. So, we should unpack it a bit. In the first place, Paul said that the law “was added because of transgressions.” According to Romans 7:12, the law itself is “holy and righteous and good.” It revealed what was good and evil in the eyes of God. But Paul also realized that history had proven that the law actually increased sin. As he put it in Romans 5:20, “The law came in to increase the trespass” of Adam. How did this increase in sin happen?

Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself revealed that Moses’ law led to the increase of sin and God’s judgment in two basic ways. First, when many in Israel learned the way of obedience from Moses’ law, it incited them to open rebellion against God. They flagrantly pursued all kinds of forbidden immorality, idolatry, injustice and violence. But second, the law of God also increased transgression in Israel by giving opportunity for hypocritical legalism. Many in Israel appeared to please God by living in obedience to the law, but they reduced God’s law to a system of self-righteous deeds that only required outward and selective obedience. These hypocrites thought they were righteous in God’s eyes because they multiplied their sacrifices and prayers, they kept dietary restrictions, and they observed other regulations like Sabbath keeping and

circumcision. Yet, their hearts were hardened against God. They were circumcised in their flesh, but not in their hearts. So, they too were under sin's power and God's judgment because they only went through the *motions* of loyalty to God.

In addition to this, in Galatians 3:19, Paul also said that the law of Moses was given “until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.” Here Paul looked with hindsight at God's purpose for allowing the increase of transgression through the law of Moses in anticipation of Christ bringing the age to come. God's purpose was to exalt the grace extended to the world in Christ. Israel's open rebellion and hypocritical legalism had cast the chosen people into exile for centuries under God's judgment. But Israel's exile led to the greatest display of God's grace in history — the appearance of Christ in the last days. As Paul put it in Romans 5:20, “The law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” in Christ.

Now we should never think for a moment that, in saying this, Paul simply brushed aside the moral relevance of Moses' law for followers of Christ by consigning it to an age before Christ's coming. Rather, the moral teachings of the Old Testament are to be applied to the Christian life, but in the light of New Testament priorities for living in the last days in Christ. Consider just two passages where Paul affirmed the abiding authority of the moral teachings of Moses' law for followers of Christ. In Galatians 5:14 Paul appealed to Leviticus 19:18 to explain why believers should pursue love. He said:

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall 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, self-control; against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

**Paul's view of the law is complex. Reading quickly Paul's letters, we could conclude that Paul is against the law, and that's actually how he's been understood by a lot of people throughout the history of the church. In fact, very often we'll find ourselves saying that we're not under law, we're under grace, as if that's where the opposition is — between law and grace. But in order to understand what Paul is saying, we have to look closer. First of all, for Paul — and we see this in Romans 7 — “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” And he says that more than once. In Romans 2, he says that “the law [is] the embodiment of knowledge and truth.” In other words, the law gives us a picture of who God is and of what we should be. Think of the essence of the law, which is that you will “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your ... mind; and, [you will] love your neighbor as yourself.” ...**

**But where we run into problems is that the law is given to sinful people, and so that law tells us who we are to be, what we are to do. But as sinful people, we don't do that. And so, the law also tells us what we are not doing. And because of that, it becomes an instrument of condemnation; it establishes our guilt. Add to that the fact that, fundamentally, the law is only words on a page. It can tell us what to do; what not to do, but it doesn't have any inherent power to make us do something or to keep us from doing something... And that's why Paul's emphasis is so much on the Spirit. Because if the law can tell us what to do, only the Spirit can work out Christ's righteousness, Christ's obedience to the law, so that we actually become what the law is calling us to. And that's what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit.**

— Dr. Donald Cobb

## 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 other traditions they had developed out of the Mosaic Law had reduced salvation to every individual's attempt to live a righteous life and 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:

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to 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 "have put on 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 of Abraham's blessings, God sees us as righteous and holy and justified and deserving of God's 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 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 are 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 or her 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 of God's blessings only as they are joined to Christ.

## HOLY SPIRIT

A fifth way Paul's theological outlooks guided his writing of Galatians was in his discussion of the Holy Spirit's role in the Christian life. Although it's often overlooked, the role of the Holy Spirit was one of Paul's main topics as he wrote this letter. Listen to how Paul emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 3:1-3, where he first described the false teaching in Galatia:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ... Are you so foolish?  
Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?  
(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, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 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."

Paul was deeply concerned that the churches of Galatia were divided. He wanted the turmoil of division to be replaced with the unity that was appropriate for the church of Christ. How did he call for this unity to be established? Not by the flesh. Reliance on the flesh results in all kinds of trouble for the church. The path toward unity was reliance on the Holy Spirit. And, as we know, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the people of God everywhere was the wonderful gift Christ gave to the church when he ascended into

heaven.

The prophecy in Joel 2:28 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 it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall 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. 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 personal devotion and unity in the church.

## NEW CREATION

A final place in which we 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 what Paul wrote in Galatians 6:15-16:

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon 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 did not matter at all if a person was circumcised or not. Instead, what matters is that every person becomes a part of the "new creation."

You'll recall that one of the ways Paul believed the *eschaton* or "end times" had come with 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, 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

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In this lesson, we've seen how Paul responded to the problems that arose in the churches of Galatia. We've explored the background of the controversy over circumcision in Galatia, the structure and content of Paul's letter to the Galatians, and how Paul's responses to the problems in Galatia emerged from his central theological outlooks on eschatology.

As we reflect on the book of Galatians today, we not only see how Paul guided his original audience through their specific problems, but we also realize how this letter speaks to us today. Time after time, modern Christians are tempted to live like the Galatians did. We underestimate what Christ has accomplished, and we turn to our own efforts. We seek to be righteous in God's eyes by our good works, rather than relying on God's grace and the Holy Spirit. But if we'll embrace what has come in Christ, we'll find that the gospel of Christ is good news indeed. Christ has brought the blessings of the age to come to all who believe in him. And he has given us the outpouring of the Holy Spirit so that we may live day by day in the blessings of the new creation in Christ.

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## GLOSSARY

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**A.D. 70** – Year that Jerusalem and the second temple were destroyed by the Romans

**Abraham** – Old Testament patriarch, son of Terah, father of the nation of Israel with whom God made a covenant in Genesis 15 and 17 promising innumerable descendants and a special land

**Adam** – The first man; husband of Eve; man with whom God made the covenant of foundations in which humanity was to fill and subdue the earth

**already and not yet** – View of the end times known as "inaugurated eschatology" which asserts that the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in its fullness

**apostle** – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

**Arabia** – Large, arid, triangular peninsula in the southwest of Asia bordered by the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean; desert region where Paul spent three years after his conversion

**atonement** – A sacrifice made to remove the guilt of sin and reconcile the sinner with God

**Barnabas** – Friend of the apostle Paul and cousin of John Mark (author of the second gospel) who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey

**circumcision** – The Jewish tradition of excising the foreskin of the male penis instituted by God as a sign and seal for his covenant people in Genesis 17:10-14

**consummation** – Third and final stage of inaugurated eschatology when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

**covenant** – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

**Cyprus** – Island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea visited by Paul on his first missionary journey

**eschatology** – The study or doctrine of the last days

**eschaton** – The last stage of world history; the last or latter days

**euangelion** – Greek word (transliteration) for "gospel"; literally "good news"

**Galatia** – Roman province in Asia Minor where Paul planted a number of churches on his first missionary journey

**Gentile** – Non-Jewish person

**Hagar** – Sarah's handmaid who slept with Abraham and gave birth to Ishmael

**Isaac** – Son of Abraham and Sarah; heir of God's covenant promises

**Isaiah** – Prophet from Judah who ministered from approximately 740-701 B.C. during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah

**Ishmael** – Son of Abraham and Hagar

**Jerusalem** – City where David established his throne and Solomon built the temple during the united monarchy; capital of the southern kingdom of Judah that was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and later destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70; city where the early church began

**Jerusalem Council** – Meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 where the apostles and church leaders addressed concerns in the early church; in particular, whether or not Gentiles were required to follow the Mosaic law to be saved

**justification** – Initial declaration of righteousness when a believer is acquitted of the guilt of sin and is credited with the righteousness of Christ

**mebasar** – Hebrew word (transliteration) for a messenger who brings official (usually good) news

**Messiah** – Hebrew word meaning "anointed one"; the great King from David's royal line who would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come; translated "*Christos*" in Greek

**Mosaic law** – Also called the law of Moses; can refer to the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah or Pentateuch, or the statutes, ordinances, caselaw and judgments revealed by God to the ancient Israelites through Moses

**Moses** – Old Testament prophet and deliverer who led the Israelites out of Egypt; man with whom God made a national "covenant of law" and who administered the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant to the Israelites; also appeared with Elijah at Jesus' transfiguration

**Pentecost** – Jewish festival, often called the "Feast of Weeks," that celebrated the early harvest; celebrated by Christians as the day the Holy Spirit was poured out on the early church

**Peter** – One of Jesus' twelve apostles; also called Simon; a leader in the early Christian church; preached on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2; according to church historians, Mark relied on Peter's accounts of Christ's life to write his gospel

**Sabbath** – Day of rest commanded by God in the Old Testament; *Shabbat* in Hebrew

**salvation** – Deliverance from the tyranny of evil and from God's judgment against sin through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

**Sarah** – Abraham's wife, originally called Sarai, who gave birth to Isaac at an old age

**sarx** – Greek word (transliteration) meaning "flesh"; often used in the Bible to refer to sinful human nature

**synagogue** – Place where Jews assembled for worship and instruction

**Syrian Antioch** – Capital of the Roman province of Syria located in what is now modern-day Turkey; Paul's starting point for his missionary journeys; city where Jesus' followers were first called Christians

**theology** – Any matter that refers directly to God or that describes subjects in relation to God

**this age** – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the present age of sin, suffering and death

**under-realized eschatology** – View of the end times that diminished the significance of Christ's first coming and underestimated how much Christ had already brought the kingdom of God to earth

**zera** – Hebrew word (transliteration) for "seed"; similar to "offspring" or "descendant"