

Galatians Study Guide

Session One: Introduction/Background, 1:1-10, and 6:11-18

Welcome to our study of Paul's letters to the Galatians. Below are my notes and questions to help you in your study. As you can see, this week we are not covering all of chapter one but will discuss the background of the letter, Paul's introduction (1:1-10), and Paul's conclusion (6:11-18). As in any form of good writing, the introduction and conclusion will give many clues as to the major themes of the piece, so as you read them, be on the lookout for the big ideas Paul might be trying to convey in this letter to the Galatians.

As usual, I suggest that you watch the Bible Project Video overview of Galatians to help orient yourself to the message and context of this letter. If you want more information, N.T. Wright's introduction to Galatians is very helpful. And finally, if you are feeling ambitious, I recommend Dr. Tim Gombis' lecture introducing Galatians. Gombis is a Pauline scholar and his lecture is a wonderfully informative treasure trove of Galatians gold.

Blessings,

Ronnie

[Bible Project Galatians](#) (9 minutes)

[N.T. Wright Galatians](#) (17 minutes)

[Dr. Tim Gombis, Introduction to Galatians](#) (66 minutes)

Introduction

Galatians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a group of churches in the region of Galatia, a Roman province of Asia Minor in what today is central Turkey. See the map of Paul's first missionary journey below.



Based upon an original created by International Mapping.

Paul visited the churches of Southern Galatia on his first missionary trip around 47-48 A.D. On this trip he left Antioch and traveled through Cyprus and Southern Galatian before returning back to Antioch. Apparently, afterwards other missionaries from Jerusalem came through the same towns in which Paul had established churches. These missionaries sought to correct what they saw as Paul's deficient gospel message. What did they disagree about? It seems the disagreement was about whether one needed to become a Jew in order to be a servant of Yahweh and his Messiah, Jesus, and therefore one would still need to be circumcised, keep Sabbath, and abide by Kosher food laws in order to be a part of Yahweh's people. Paul's answer to this suggestion was a defiant NO!

A little background information might help you understand...

First, it might help to know that many of the Jews of the first century believed they lived in a present evil age, marked by death, sin and oppression. They looked for the coming New Age of God's anointed king (Messiah) where God would raise the dead, free Israel from the bondage of sin, rescue Israel once again from her oppressors, and establish His eternal rule upon the earth. Some of the more strict Jews, the Pharisees, believed they could hasten the arrival of this day, the arrival of the new age of God's reign, if only all Jews could somehow achieve holiness by living according to the Law (Torah) for even one day. Therefore, they did their best to make sure

the people lived by the Law--that they kept Kosher, kept the Sabbath, and circumcised all male converts.

We also need to understand that the first disciples and converts of Christianity, the Apostle Paul included, did not view Christianity as a religion separate from Judaism. This is very important for us to grasp: the first-century Christians saw themselves as Jews! For them, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the one promised by God to come and usher in the new age for which they longed. So the dispute between Paul and those that followed him into Galatia, whom we will call "Paul's opponents," was an inter-Jewish dispute. They were both, Paul and his opponents, trying to live as good Jews. Yet Paul believed that Jesus had ushered in the new age and therefore the old boundary markers of Judaism--Kosher food rules, Sabbath keeping, circumcision--were no longer necessary. A new age had dawned. Now, according to Paul, the only thing necessary to mark one off as a follower of Yahweh, part of his eternal family, was Jesus the Messiah. Yet, his opponents believed that the arrival of Jesus had not done away with the old boundary markers of Jewish faith. They believed that, to truly be a child of Yahweh, one must follow the Jewish Law as well. And they were worried that people not obeying the Torah might prevent the New Age of Yahweh from arriving.

You can imagine how difficult the message of Paul's opponents would be for the Gentiles of the Roman Empire. "What, we need to get circumcised in order to be truly a part of God's people," they might think. "No thanks." "What, we can no longer eat with our families nor buy food at the local market but must only buy more expensive food from designated Kosher food dealers and eat only in private?" Following the Jewish Law (Torah) would be quite an obstacle to faith for these Gentiles and, in Paul's version of the Gospel, was completely unnecessary because it trapped people in what he viewed as the Old Evil Age, an age where the Jewish customs were good and necessary. No, says Paul, we have been set free from the Old Way, the Old Age, and we now live in the age of the Spirit of God, the New Age of Jesus. This letter to the Galatians, then, is Paul's argument against his opponents that followed him into Galatia, telling his churches that they must live as Jews if they were to inherit the Kingdom of God. No, says Paul. The new age has dawned in Christ and now the only marker of God's people is faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

1:1-10 Greetings and Introduction

As you read through this introduction to the letter, look for ways that it is different from Paul's typical letter introductions.

How is this greeting and introduction different from the one in Philipians or Romans?

What is missing from this introduction?

What is the tone of Paul's introduction?

What had the Galatians done to shock Paul? (v.6)

In Galatians 1:1-10, Paul bypasses the usual politeness of his greetings and moves quickly to make three arguments:

1. First, he argues that his apostleship is of divine origin (1-2).
2. Second, he argues that salvation involves Christ's self-sacrificial rescue from the present evil age (3-5).
3. Third, he argues that the Galatians are abandoning their founder and the only true gospel (6-10).

Why might Paul have felt the need to argue for the divine origin of his apostleship?

Have you ever thought of the salvation we have in Christ as a rescue from this evil age? Does this sound like the "gospel" you have been taught? What do you think it means and what are its implications for Christian living?

Paul argues forcibly that the Galatians have abandoned the true gospel message. If someone asked you to explain the true gospel, what would you say? What is essential to the Christian faith?

6:11-18 Conclusion

As you read this section, notice again that the usual personal greetings and pleasantries are missing from this letter ending.

In verse 11, Paul points out the large letters with which he writes this section. It could have been that Paul used large letters because he has bad eyesight and he wants the Galatians to remember his trouble. It is more likely that he writes in large letters as a way to add emphasis and emotion to this section, similar to the way we might use italics or all CAPITALS. Paul wants them to see how passionately he believes what he is saying.

What in this section is Paul so passionate about?

According to vs 14-15, Paul's opponents boast in the flesh while Paul boasts only in the cross of Christ. He is dead to the world and his true life is in Christ.

Where is our true life? Do we live as if this world is crucified to us?

Verse 15 tells us there is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but new creation. This means that a new creation is our true reality, not the old ways of division. With the words “new creation,” Paul asks us to compare what has happened in Jesus to the creation stories of Genesis 1-2. Paul wants us to know that there has been a new start. It is this new start that determines existence now, not the old divisions of Jew and Gentile. As Peter Oakes says in his commentary on Galatians: “If the Galatians follow Paul’s opponents back into the world where these polarities are given decisive significance, that would mean that the Galatians do not understand Christ’s new creation” (Oakes, 190).

J. Louis Martyn wrote that 6:11-18 was the key to Galatians, for it shows that: “No longer having real existence is the cosmos of religion, and taking its place is God’s new creation, that is to say, Christ and the church (the Israel of God), in which the Spirit is bearing the fruit of love.”

What, according to Paul, is truly real? What has real existence?

If Christ truly has made a new creation, what does this mean for how we live? Are we able to live as if the only true existence is found in God, not what we see around us?

In verse 17, Paul talks about bearing the marks of Jesus in his body. What does Paul mean by this?

He could be referring to the practice of owners putting their mark on a slave, as we would today brand cattle. Paul is a slave of Christ and is owned wholly by Christ and therefore represents Christ’s interests on earth.

But what are these marks? Most likely they are the scars and physical marks he received through persecution. His body was likely damaged in many ways by the stonings, beatings, shipwrecks, and deprivation he experienced, causing it to be deformed and making Paul an object of ridicule to his opponents. But Paul turned his injuries around, saying they made him visually closer to Jesus than other people. As a living icon of Christ, Paul’s sufferings became a means by which Jesus’ life was revealed. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 also expresses this idea:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for

Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Could you imagine yourself having this attitude towards physical suffering?