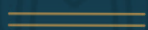


JEREMIAH
BIBLE STUDY SERIES



GALATIANS

THE PATH TO FREEDOM

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

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Prepared by Peachtree Publishing Services



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Produced with assistance of Peachtree Publishing Service (www.PeachtreePublishingServices.com). Project staff include Christopher D. Hudson, Randy Southern, and Peter Blankenship.

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ISBN 978-0-310-09166-0

First Printing November 2019 / Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction to the Letter to the Galatians</i>	v
LESSON 1 The One True Gospel (<i>Galatians 1:1–10</i>)	1
LESSON 2 Grace Under Fire (<i>Galatians 1:11–24</i>)	13
LESSON 3 The Freedom Fighter (<i>Galatians 2:1–10</i>)	23
LESSON 4 Confrontation Over the Gospel (<i>Galatians 2:11–21</i>)	35
LESSON 5 Bewitched (<i>Galatians 3:1–14</i>)	47
LESSON 6 The Law and the Promise (<i>Galatians 3:15–29</i>)	59
LESSON 7 Time to Grow Up (<i>Galatians 4:1–20</i>)	71
LESSON 8 A Tale of Two Sons (<i>Galatians 4:21–31</i>)	83
LESSON 9 The Law of Liberty (<i>Galatians 5:1–15</i>)	95
LESSON 10 Walk in the Spirit (<i>Galatians 5:16–26</i>)	107
LESSON 11 Bearing Each Other’s Burdens (<i>Galatians 6:1–10</i>)	117
LESSON 12 Grace Gets the Last Word (<i>Galatians 6:11–18</i>)	127
<i>Leader’s Guide</i>	137
<i>About Dr. David Jeremiah and Turning Point</i>	143
<i>Stay Connected to Dr. David Jeremiah</i>	145

INTRODUCTION TO

The Letter to the Galatians

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1). The issue of slavery versus freedom lies at the heart of the letter to the Galatians. In this case, *freedom* is represented by faith—faith in God’s grace and in Jesus’ sacrifice. *Slavery* is represented by the Law of Moses—the system of trying to live up to the regulations in the Old Testament covenant that God had given to Moses at Mount Sinai. The Galatian believers had been given freedom when they put their faith in Christ, but they had turned their backs on that freedom and were again embracing the law as a means of salvation. They were convinced they still needed to obey endless rules and rituals to make themselves acceptable to God. But the message of this letter is that God’s grace cannot be earned—for if it could, it would not be grace.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The writer of this letter identifies himself as the apostle Paul (see 1:1), and he offers convincing biographical details throughout the letter to support his authorship. The events he discusses align with accounts about his life given in the book of Acts and other epistles, and the theology aligns with Paul’s teachings in his other letters. Only the more mechanical aspects of authorship are debated today, such as why Paul writes toward the end of the letter, “See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand” (6:11). Most likely, this indicates the letter

was recorded by a scribe on Paul's behalf, with the apostle picking up the pen here and there to authenticate that the message is from him. Paul is believed to have composed the letter either in AD 48 (if the term *Galatians* refers to churches Paul founded during his first missionary journey) or in AD 52 (if the term refers to churches he founded in the region during his second journey).

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Paul's letter to the Galatians offers a snapshot into a battle for their souls. Paul had led the Galatians to Christ on one of his previous missionary journeys. He had introduced them to God's grace and salvation and rejoiced when they embraced the new faith. But when certain leaders of the church in Jerusalem (called the Judaizers) heard what was happening, they sent emissaries to Galatia to infiltrate the church and convince the members they needed to incorporate the Old Testament law into their faith. These emissaries persuaded the Galatians to believe that in addition to faith in Christ, they had to be circumcised and submit to the Law of Moses. When Paul learned what these emissaries were doing, he sent this letter to refute their claims and to remind the Galatians of the freedom they had experienced in Christ.

KEY THEMES

Several key themes are prominent in the letter to the Galatians. The first is the *nature of Paul's authority*. The Judaizers, in an effort to bolster their own claims, had challenged Paul's authority in bringing the "gospel of grace" to the Galatians and were undermining his legitimacy as an apostle. In response, Paul recounted the circumstances of his conversion—and how he had gone from persecuting Christians to being persecuted for his own Christian faith (see 1:6–10). He told them, in no uncertain terms, that his gospel message was the one true gospel—the same as that of Peter, John, and James, the other "pillars" of the Jerusalem church.

A second theme is that *justification comes through faith alone*. The Jewish leaders who had come from the Jerusalem church were challenging this key tenet of Christianity, convincing the Galatian believers that faith was only the *beginning* of salvation. These Judaizers claimed that in order to gain God's favor, the Galatian believers also had to submit to circumcision and keep the Law of Moses. But the apostle Paul insisted that the only way a person can be made right with God is by faith in Jesus Christ (see 2:15–16).

Paul spends so much of the letter countering their elevation of the law that it becomes a third theme in the book: *the law was designed to help people come to grips with their inability to follow it*. The teachers from Jerusalem had evidently raised the question that if salvation came through faith in Christ alone—as the apostle Paul was professing—the law ultimately served no purpose. Paul was clear in his rebuttal that the law had been given to display our sinfulness and drive us to Christ (see 3:19–25).

A fourth theme is *how Christians should live out the freedom God has given them*. Paul needed to address not only those individuals who were ascribing to the idea they could “earn” their salvation by following the law but also those who were succumbing to a form of hedonism by misunderstanding God's grace. These individuals were reasoning that because Jesus' sacrifice was all that was required for salvation, they were free to do anything they liked. Paul recast the issue for the Galatians and helped them see that true Christian freedom expresses itself in acts of loving service (see 5:7–15). God's grace should naturally motivate them to love Him, walk in the Spirit, and seek to do good works for their neighbors.

KEY APPLICATIONS

Galatians is a powerful and practical book. In this letter, Paul shows us that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is enough to make us right with God. He urges each of us to stand firm in the freedom Christ has given us. And he encourages us that living an abundant Christian life is possible as we walk in the Spirit.

Galatians 1:1–10

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.

SETTING THE STAGE

Even in the days of the early church, believers in Christ struggled to find agreement on what is the “gospel.” Is it simply that Jesus gave His own life on the cross so we might be set free from our sins and experience eternal life with Him? Or does the gospel require something more—such as our ability to follow a set of rules and regulations on how to live?

This is the debate Paul confronted as he composed his letter to the Galatians. After he had planted the church in Galatia on one of his missionary journeys, he learned that certain Jewish Christians from Jerusalem (known as the “Judaizers”) had arrived and were trying to convince the new believers their faith wasn’t complete unless it was accompanied by obedience to the rituals and requirements of the Old Testament. The Judaizers taught that in order to be saved, a follower of Jesus had to *live as a Jew*. This message posed a real threat to the new church. It seemed the gospel—the *good news that salvation is a gift*—wasn’t as good or as simple as the Galatian Christians had been led to believe.

In response to this, Paul preached that Jesus alone saves. He held that the additional requirements of the Judaizers, such as circumcision, were not needed for salvation. No one can justify himself or herself before God—it is only in Christ that anyone is justified. This is the incredible reality of the gospel. We cannot save ourselves by any effort whatsoever. Our only hope is grace and grace alone. And when we place our trust in Jesus, we are saved!

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Greeting (Galatians 1:1–5)

¹ Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead), ² and all the brethren who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

1. Paul was under attack by certain leaders in the Jerusalem church who were questioning his authority and the validity of the message he had preached. Given this, what is significant about the way Paul describes his apostleship (see verse 1)?

2. How did Paul define the *gospel* (see verses 4–5)? How does Paul's definition compare with your own?

Only One Gospel (Galatians 1:6–10)

⁶I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, ⁷which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

¹⁰For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

3. What was the source of Paul's *marveling* or *astonishment* as it related to the believers in Galatia (see verses 6–7)?

4. The word Paul used for *accursed* is the translation of the Greek word *anathema*, which means “to be set aside to God for destruction.” According to Paul, who are those who are accursed (see verses 8–9)? Why does Paul use such strong language?

GOING DEEPER

Paul omits his typical “thanksgiving” section—where he praises God for the faithfulness of the church—in his letter to the Galatians. This points to the urgency he felt in calling out the error of the Judaizers. This was not the first time God’s people had been forced to deal with false teachers. In the following passage, Moses—the giver of the Law—offered the following guidance to the Israelites on how to identify a false prophet.

Identifying a False Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15–22)

¹⁵ “The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, ¹⁶ according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’

¹⁷ “And the LORD said to me: ‘What they have spoken is good. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. ¹⁹ And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him. ²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ ²¹ And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’—²² when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

5. The Israelites were about to enter a land filled with pagan ideology. For this reason, the Lord needed to clarify how they could discern a true prophet from a false one. Why did God first specify the importance of

following the instruction of a prophet who was truly from Him?
What were the penalties for failing to do this (see verses 15–19)?

6. What guidelines did God provide for how to distinguish a false prophet from a true one (see verses 20–22)? How does this help explain why it was critical for Paul to show the believers in Galatia that he was a true “prophet” from God who had brought them the true gospel of Christ?

Paul was not the only apostle in the early church who had to deal with the problem of false teachers infiltrating the body of Christ. In the following passage, the disciple John—much like Moses before him—gives his

readers some advice on how to distinguish the true prophets of God from the false teachers who had crept into their congregations.

Testing the Spirits (1 John 4:1–6)

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

⁴ You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

⁵ They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. ⁶ We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

7. What does John mean when he tells the believers to “test the spirits” to see whether they are of God (see verse 1)? What is the purpose of doing this?

8. What are the traits of a true prophet? What are the traits of a false prophet (see verses 2–5)? How does being “of God” help us to distinguish between the two?

REVIEWING THE STORY

The apostle Paul begins his letter by calling out the believers in Galatia who had deserted the true gospel in favor of one that was based on works. The Judaizers were teaching that salvation is dependent on both the work of Christ *and* on a person’s ability to adhere to the rules and regulations of the Jewish law. But Paul makes it clear that he and these Judaizers are at odds. His message to the Christians of Galatia is that there is *one* God, *one* Savior, *one* gospel, and *one* way of salvation. Believers are not justified because they obey the law—they are justified solely on the basis of their faith in Jesus.

9. What two points did Paul emphasize in his greeting to the Galatians (see Galatians 1:3)?

10. What did Jesus accomplish on the cross by dying for our sins (see Galatians 1:4)?

11. How did Paul describe the work of the Judaizers from Jerusalem (see Galatians 1:7)?

12. Why was Paul so passionate about getting the meaning of the gospel right? Is the meaning of the gospel as important to you? Explain.

APPLYING THE MESSAGE

13. Why do think a gospel based on works—rather than faith in Christ alone—would be compelling to certain people? When are times in your life that you have been tempted to ascribe to such a gospel of law and works?

14. The word *gospel* means “good news.” According to this lesson, why is the true gospel *good news* for every person—sinner and saint alike? What are some ways you can remind yourself (and others) of the importance and significance of the gospel each day?

REFLECTING ON THE MEANING

For Paul, the nature and content of the message of the gospel of grace was of utmost importance. In the first two chapters of this letter, the word *gospel* is found ten times! After his usual greeting of grace and peace, Paul's opening words to the Galatians set forth three major truths about Christ's death that we must never forget.

First, the death of Christ was *voluntary*. Christ "gave Himself," for our sins. No one made Jesus go to the cross. He did it Himself—of His own free will. The first thing to remember about the gospel is the voluntary death of Christ on the cross.

Second, the death of Christ was *vicarious*. The word *vicarious* means to do something on behalf of another person—in other words, to do something in someone else's place. Paul says that Christ died for "our sins." He went to the cross where we deserved to go. He died in the place where we deserved to die. He paid the penalty for our sins in our place. He was our vicarious substitute on the cross.

Third, the death of Christ was *victorious*. Paul writes in Galatians 1:4 that Christ died that "He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father." The word *deliver* suggests that Christ has conducted a successful rescue operation and set us free from the one who held us captive. He rescued us from this present evil age.

Since Christ has done all of this—voluntarily giving Himself for us, taking our place in death, rescuing us out of this age—how presumptuous we must seem to Him when we try to add something human to that which He has already done! It was this very thing that so angered Paul. The believers in the Gentile churches were being taught that what Jesus did through his death on the cross wasn't enough. It may have been adequate for their initial salvation, but their continued salvation depended on their own performance of good works. Paul challenges this dangerous idea consistently throughout his letter.

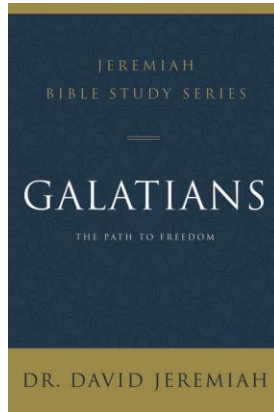
So what is the gospel? Simply this—Christ died, Christ was buried, and Christ rose again. His death was on our behalf as the Son of God.

LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

That is the pure gospel of the grace of God. It is not a matter of law *and* grace—it is a matter of law *or* grace. It is grace and grace alone!

JOURNALING YOUR RESPONSE

What are some ways you are tempted to base your relationship with God on your performance? How would your relationship with God be different if you based it solely on His grace?



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God's grace cannot be earned.

If you were a former slave who had been granted freedom, why would you voluntarily submit to slavery again? This question lies at the heart of Paul's letter to the Galatians, who had been deceived into believing they had to practice the laws of the Old Testament to receive salvation. Paul is adamant that God's grace cannot be earned, regardless of how many commandments we try to obey. Only our faith in Jesus provides the way to eternal life. "Man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ . . . for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified" (Galatians 2:16). This knowledge gives us freedom from the pressure of trying to be "good enough" for God.

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