

Galatians

The letter to the Galatians is known as Paul's "angry letter." This is because something terrible had happened in the Galatian churches. After a very short introduction, Paul immediately begins by saying, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (1:6). Then, Paul acts quickly and speaks powerfully to defend the true gospel, the Good News about Jesus and his Kingdom.

Writer: The Apostle Paul

Date of writing: Between 48-55 AD

Original Audience: The churches in Galatia. Most people in the churches in Galatia were not Jewish.

The Reason for the Letter: People in Galatia heard the Good News about Jesus and the arrival of God's Kingdom. They accepted that Good News and began their new lives in Christ. However, sometime later, people from the outside came into the churches teaching that non-Jewish followers of Christ needed to follow the Jewish religious laws. They also accused Paul of being a people-pleaser and not a true Apostle. Paul calls these people "agitators" (5:12) and ones who pervert the Good News about Christ (1:7). Therefore, Paul is writing to remind the Galatians of the truth of the Good News and encourage them to turn away from slavery to sin and the law and find freedom in Christ.

The Main Message of the Letter: Paul's teaching to the Galatians: By Jesus the Messiah's death, believers have been rescued from the evil age. God's new world or kingdom has come, and with it, a new community has been created. That new community is the community that God had always promised to create. Jesus broke the curses of the law on the cross, and now Jews and Gentiles can be made righteous by faith. They can receive adoption into the new family of Abraham. Now, they obey God's law by living by the Spirit. Therefore, Paul urges, do not submit to circumcision. It brings you into a new form of slavery. Instead, enjoy the freedom of the Messiah and the power of the Spirit.

The Outline of Paul's Teaching:

1. Greetings and reason for writing (1:1–10)
2. How Paul received the Gospel message (1:11–24)
3. Paul's meeting with Peter, James, and John in Jerusalem (2:1–10)
4. The conflict at Antioch (2:11–21)
5. Paul's defense of the gospel and warning to the Galatians (3:1–5:12)
6. Paul's teaching about living by the spirit (5:13–6:10)
7. Conclusion and letter closing (6:11–18)



Circumcision

Circumcision is a surgical procedure that removes the foreskin of a penis. It has been and still is practiced by many cultures for various reasons. In ancient Israel, male children were circumcised on the eighth day of their life (Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3). Both Jesus (Luke 1:59; 2:21) and Paul (Philippians 3:5) were circumcised in keeping with this sacred tradition, which still is practiced by Jewish people today.

In the Jewish religion, circumcision was “the sign of the covenant”: males were circumcised to show that they belonged to the chosen people of God, that they were heirs of the promises God gave to Abraham, and that they would keep the Law, given by God to Moses. Prophets sometimes spoke of circumcision in symbolic ways. For example, the prophets said people who were stubborn or didn’t obey God had uncircumcised ears or uncircumcised hearts (Jeremiah 6:10 and Leviticus 26:41).

Paul is not against Jews or Gentiles (non-Jewish people) following the religious tradition of circumcision. However, he is angry that people are teaching that following or not following any tradition will affect a person’s status with God. Paul says clearly that Salvation and a person’s relationship with God are only based on faith.

The Fruit of the Spirit

Paul clearly teaches that people are not made righteous by following the Jewish religious law or even by works. People are only made righteous by their faith. Some people may think that it doesn’t matter what followers of Jesus do. However, Paul says, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (5:13–14). Paul compares living by the flesh or living according to our human desires with living by the Spirit. Living by the flesh results in evil deeds, but living by the Spirit produces good fruit! The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things, there is no law (5:22–23).

The conflict between Peter and Paul

In Galatians 2:11-21, we read about a disagreement between Paul and Peter. When Peter came to the city of Antioch where Paul was, he ate together with the Gentiles. Probably this means he took his regular meals and the Lord’s Supper together with the non-Jewish Gentiles. In doing so, he showed that he believed both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus were free from Jewish law. However, when some Jewish men arrived “from James,” Peter stopped that practice because he was afraid. Paul confronted Peter and rebuked him. Unfortunately, Paul doesn’t tell us what happened after that or if he and Peter continued to be friends. Thankfully, in 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter recommends Paul’s letters and indicates that they had repaired their relationship.

Take time to read Galatians all the way through. Then, go back and study each section in detail, considering and discussing these questions:

1. What do we learn about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in these verses?
2. What do we learn about humanity in these verses?
3. What do I need to do to be obedient to God?
4. Is there a belief or action I need to change?
5. Who can I share these verses with?