

Freedom to Live

a journey through Galatians

Introduction

The book of Galatians was written by the apostle Paul to churches in the province of Galatia, or what we know as central Turkey. Paul had travelled to the region (see Acts 13-14) on early missionary journeys, sharing the gospel in the region. Most of the Galatian churches were comprised of Gentiles, who were not Jewish.

When was the Letter written?

That depends on who Paul was writing to, believe it or not! There are two possibilities - churches in north Galatia, or funnily enough, churches in south Galatia. If it was south Galatia, that dates it to 48-50CE, coinciding with Paul's first missionary journey, and making it one of the earliest (if not the earliest) of New Testament documents. Otherwise it would be a little later, say 58CE.

Why was the letter written?

The Epistle was written to counteract the influence of a few so-called 'Judaizers' who had come amongst the Galatians, and were endeavouring to persuade them that in order to be perfect Christians it was necessary to be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses. Their arguments were sufficiently specious to puzzle the Galatians, and their object was likely to gain the approval of unbelieving Jews. They said what Paul taught was good as far as it went; but that he'd not taught the full perfection of Christianity.

This attack on Paul wasn't surprising, as he was not one of the great Apostles who'd been taught by Christ himself, and received their commission from Him. Whatever Paul knew he learned from others, and he'd received his commission to preach after Christ's death and resurrection, mostly in Antioch.

Paul, hearing the news of this, became incredibly angry at the Jews, for he knew that this was not the message of the gospel of Jesus. Paul saw this as being a decimation of the gospel of grace by reversion to religious legalism. So he writes this passionate letter to the Galatians to restore their understanding of the gospel and what it means to be in right relationship with God.

Those who dared to engage in dialectic forensics with Paul soon found that he could chew you up and spit you out in no time. He could have you mutilated (5:12) and spiritually damned (1:8,9) before you knew what had hit you!

Effect of the Letter

When the letter arrived in the churches of Galatia it was probably explosive. Just think of the controversy it provoked, and the reaction of the itinerant false-teachers who were probably present when it arrived! We don't know the subsequent effect that this letter had on the Galatian churches, but the impact of the letter has been felt down the centuries. Martin Luther regarded this as his favourite book of the New Testament, and once wrote, *"I have betrothed myself to it. It is my wife!"* The epistle to the Galatians can be said to have inspired the Protestant Reformation, but in every age it should serve to inspire reformation and restoration that sets Christians free from religious legalism, behaviourism, moralism, traditionalism, formalism, fundamentalism, denominationalism. etc., in order that they might appreciate the freedom of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Such religious iconoclasm is what makes the letter to the Galatians not only arresting but also one of the most controversial of New Testament documents. It has led the theologian, H. D. Betz to describe it as *"one of the most important religious documents of mankind"*.

Handle with care!

Session 1 - Good News and Bad News

To Start

"There is always the danger that those who think alike should gravitate together into 'coteries' where they will henceforth encounter opposition only in the emasculated form of rumour that the outsiders say thus and thus. The absent are easily refuted, complacent dogmatism thrives, and differences of opinion are embittered by group hostility. Each group hears not the best, but the worst, that the other groups can say."

C.S. Lewis, *"God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics"*

How do you respond to dogmatic thinking, an *'I'm right you're wrong'* mentality?
How do you cope with those whose ideas differ from your view of things?

Read: Galatians 1: 1-10

It's an abrupt start. Paul normally takes some time to thank God for the saints in the church at Ephesus or Philippi or Colossae. Not here. In this, the earliest of the epistles, he's obviously wanting to get straight to the point. Something's up. Paul's heard some bad news about the Galatian Christians and wants to sort it out.

1. How would you describe the mood of this passage?

2. The word apostle means '*one who is sent*'. Paul stresses that he has been sent by God not men (v.1). Why do you think he feels he has to do this?
3. What do we learn about the message of the gospel in verses 3-5?
4. Is there any part of this outline of the gospel that is especially important to you?
5. In verses 6-7, Paul summarized the problem that caused him to write the letter. What do you think was happening in the Galatian churches?
6. What do you make of the stark implication of verse 6 that, if we desert the gospel, we desert God?
7. Verses 8-9 show us Paul at his most uncompromising. Why do you think he is so harsh on those who preach a different gospel? Does his stance encourage, challenge or annoy you?
8. Are there ways in which you think the gospel is being perverted today?

For reflection:

- *Where do I compromise in my faith?*
- *Where am I too dogmatic?*
- *How can I understand the Gospel more clearly?*

Session 2 - Accepting Others

To Start

“There are Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians. There are Presbyterians, Lutherans, Congregationalists. There are Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are Quakers. And that's only for starters. New denominations spring up. Old denominations split up and form new branches. The question is not Are you a Baptist? but, What kind of a Baptist? It is not, Are you a member of the Presbyterian church? but Which Presbyterian church? A town with a population of less than five hundred people may have churches of three or four denominations and none of them more than a quarter full on a good Sunday.

When Jesus took the bread and said “This is my body which is broken for you” (1 Corinthians 11:24), it's hard to believe that even in his wildest dreams he foresaw the ironic and ludicrous brokenness of the Church as his body. There's no reason why everyone should be Christian in the same way and every reason to leave room for difference, but if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and high hope that unites them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the Church would look more like the Kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess.”

Frederick Buechner

What types or groups of Christians do you instinctively avoid? Why?

Read Galatians 2: 11-21

Here Paul outlines his very public disagreement with Peter in Antioch. Essentially Paul believed that Peter was behaving hypocritically by separating himself from Gentile believers. It's interesting to note the timescale here. All this controversy was taking place at least 15 years after the resurrection. Slow learners these Christians!

1. What is wrong with Peter's actions and why Paul is upset about them. How exactly were Peter and the other Jews *'not acting in line with the truth of the gospel'*
2. How might their actions have forced Gentiles to follow Jewish customs (v.14)?
3. Why was Peter afraid of associating with Gentiles?
4. What nonessential customs do Christians sometimes force on each other? Are there any that worry you more than others?
5. To justify (vv.15-17) is a legal term meaning the person on trial is declared not guilty and deserves all the privileges of one who hasn't broken the law. How can this justification lead some to claim that 'Christ promotes sin' (v.17)?
6. How does Paul deal with this charge (vv.17-19)?
7. What do the expressions *'dying to the law'*, *'living for God'* and *'crucified with Christ'* mean to you?
8. How do you think God's acceptance of us ought to affect how we approach God and others?

For reflection:

Think about people or situations you choose to avoid. Look to the reasons why you do this. Seek to see ways of building on the truth of God's unconditional acceptance as a means of breaking down barriers between yourself and others.

Session 3 - Why God accepts us

To Start

"A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by Grace. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do."

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace is only yours if you reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."

Frederick Buechner

Why do you think Christians often have difficulty believing that God accepts them as they are?

Read Galatians 3: 1-14

Here Paul lays out the Galatian Christians' own experience of faith as a testament against their 'foolish' acceptance of Jewish legal practices. He points them to Abraham, the founder of the children of faith, and to Jesus, the man cursed that we might be truly and completely accepted by God.

1. Looking at verses 1-5 can you trace out the Galatians' spiritual journey?
2. What is it they've done that Paul thinks is so foolish?
3. Why do you think Paul uses the example of Abraham to make his point?
4. Why is it important for the Galatians to rely on the Spirit and not the law? What are the implications for the Galatian church?
5. In what ways do we sometimes try to earn God's favour?
6. The word redeemed means to deliver from some evil by paying a price. How does Paul understand Christ's redeeming act in this
7. Could you put verses 13-14 into modern parlance so that you would be better placed to explain it clearly to someone?
8. If you can, share what you consider to be a special gift that you have received in the recent past.

For reflection:

There are several key words in verses 1-14 that describe what Jesus has done for us. Identify some of these and reflect upon them over the next few days, thanking God for his love.

Session 4 - The Joys of Growing Up

To Start

"Parents rarely let go of their children, so children let go of them. They move on. They move away. The moments that used to define them - a mother's approval, a

father's nod - are covered by moments of their own accomplishments. It is not until much later, as the skin sags and the heart weakens, that children understand; their stories, and all their accomplishments, sit atop the stories of their mothers and fathers, stones upon stones, beneath the waters of their lives."

Mitch Albom, *"The Five People You Meet in Heaven"*

If you could be a child again for one week, what age would you be and why?

Read Galatians 4: 1-20

In this section Paul contrasts the 'heirs of God' theme outlined in chapter 3 with the childishness of the Galatians. He argues that to truly grow up there are certain things that we always have to leave behind.

1. In verses 1-2 Paul talks about practices in Roman society. How could a Roman child be no different from a slave?
2. How was life 'under the law' like spiritual childhood (vv.3-7)?
3. Do you agree with Paul's distinction between spiritual infancy and adulthood?
4. What do these verses (particularly v.19) reveal about Paul's feelings toward the Galatians?
5. In what ways do you feel you have matured, and in what ways do you see yourself as still a child?
6. The Aramaic word Abba (v.4) suggests an intimacy with God akin to a child with his or her father. Do you see yourself as a son or daughter of God in the sense Paul is describing? If not. How would you describe your relationship with God?

For reflection:

Take some time to think about what are some of the things you miss most about being a child.

Session 5 - Living by the Spirit

"Rules of living - Don't worry, eat three square meals a day, say your prayers, be courteous to your creditors, keep your digestion good, steer clear of biliousness, exercise, go slow and go easy. May be there are other things that your special case requires to make you happy, but my friend, these, I reckon, will give you a good life."

Abraham Lincoln

Would you say you are a slave to rules and regulations, or do you think of yourself as more of a free spirit with regard to the law.

Read Galatians 5: 13-26

Paul here is dealing with the obvious dilemma facing a Christian who is no longer under any obligation to the law - how far can a Christian express such freedom? Paul attempts to resolve this by appealing to the ultimate legal injunction '*Love you neighbour as yourself.*'

1. What does Paul say we should do with our freedom?
2. How would you summarize the different lifestyles Paul describes in this section?
3. In verse 15, Paul accuses the Galatians of '*biting and devouring one another*'. Do you see this happening among Christians today? If so, in what context?
4. Would Paul's exhortation (vv.13-14). help in such situations?
5. How does Paul define '*flesh*'? How does he define '*spirit*'? What does it mean to 'live by the Spirit' (v.16)?
6. How can Paul's warning in verse 21 be reconciled with his emphasis on justification by faith?
7. Why is fruit a good description of the Spirit's work in us (vv.22-23)?

For reflection:

Which fruit would you like to cultivate more in your life?

Or do you feel that you've had enough gardening?

Session 6 - The Law of Love

To Start

"Matthew the tax collector and Thomas the doubter. Peter the rock and Judas the traitor. Mary Magdalene and Lazarus's sister Martha. And the popcorn-eating old woman. And the fat man in the pick-up. They are all our family, and you and I are their family and each other's family, because that is what Jesus has called us as the Church to be. Our happiness is all mixed up with each other's happiness and our peace with each other's peace. Our own happiness, our own peace, can never be complete until we find some way of sharing it with people who the way things are now have no happiness and know no peace. Jesus calls us to show this truth forth. live this truth forth, be the light of the world, he says. Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be the salt of the earth. Bring out the true flavour of what it is to be alive truly. Be truly alive. be life-givers to others."

Frederick Buechner

Someone once said that the church is the only army that shoots its wounded.
How do you respond to that statement?

Read Galatians 6: 1-18

Paul summarizes his entire message in this last chapter. He focuses on the law of love and contrasts it with the mixed motives of those who would wish to force the Galatians to follow legal injunctions. Ultimately Paul's personal lens is fixed on one thing -the death and resurrection of Jesus.

1. What does 'caught in a sin' mean (v.1)?
2. Has the church lost its sensitivity to sin? Or do you think it has too much of an obsession with some sins compared with others?
3. What guidelines does Paul offer for dealing with this issue? Do you agree with them?
4. How does Paul say we should walk alongside our communities? What characteristics should mark our relationships?
5. What type of burdens do you think Paul has in mind in verse 2?
6. How would you help those you know to carry their particular burdens?
7. What do we discover about the motives of Paul's opponents (vv.12-13)?
8. It would appear that the approval of others was most important to Paul's enemies (v.12). Are there situations where you are tempted to hide the fact that you are a Christian 'in order to make a good impression outwardly'?
9. What one thing (if any!) has impressed you most about this letter to the Galatians?

For reflection:

Take some time to thank God for all that he has given you in life. Remember those things that we so often take for granted. Give thanks to God for all that is positive, and be honest about what you would like to change.

A Prayer

Lord, we offer all that we think and say and are to you.
We thank you for one another,
and we ask your blessing on our time together.
May your word be a guide to our feet and a light to our path.
And so let us go from here challenged, encouraged and strengthened
to follow you more nearly and love you more dearly day by day.

Amen