Paul’s letter to the Galatians

An introduction, studies, talk outlines, and questions for further thought.

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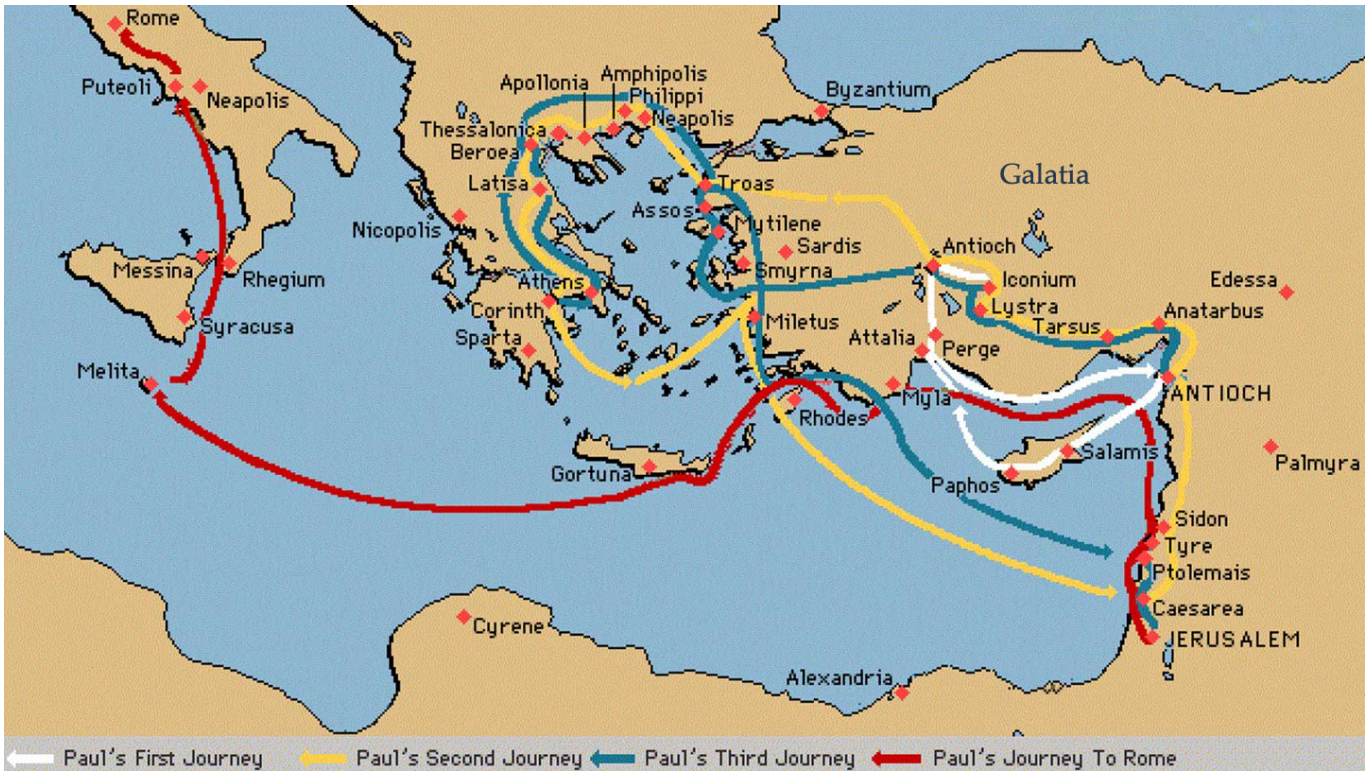
Why Galatians?

To many, Paul's letter to the Galatians can read like an obscure debate about the value of faith and good works in religion. But at the heart of the letter are questions that still deeply concern us, such as: Why do we believe anything at all? What rational basis is required to justify our views of the world or any faith commitment? How do I judge myself, and how do other people judge me? Which voices of right and wrong do I listen to and why?

In this booklet are introductory notes, study notes, and outlines of talks along with questions for further thought.

A map of Galatia

Scholars believe the letter to the Christians in Galatia is the apostle Paul's first letter. These churches were established during Paul's first missionary journey through what was then known as Asia Minor, now largely the nation of Türkiye. From the events he describes in the opening two chapters, it was probably written around 49 A.D. before the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-15), when many of the issues raised in Paul's letter were decided by the first council of the church.



Paul is writing because these two-year-old Christians are in danger of abandoning the gospel Paul had brought to them by adding to the gospel of Jesus, signs, and efforts from Hebrew law, to win the approval of God. He is as passionate about how wrong this is as Jesus was about legalism and hypocrisy in religion (e.g. Matthew 23) for similar reasons (see below).

A sketch of Galatians

Chapters 1 & 2 - Paul and his gospel

- Paul introduces himself as an apostle (sent one) of Jesus.
- Jesus gave himself to rescue us, and there is no other gospel. This gospel may not please people who want to justify their lives on their own terms.
- Paul provides an autobiography to show that he is a genuine apostle, tested and accepted as such by the other apostles. Paul is even able to rebuke Peter as an equal for Peter's failure to uphold by his actions the gospel of grace.
- The grace of the gospel means that all people are accepted by God because of their faith in Jesus Christ only. There is nothing else that is necessary.

Chapters 3 & 4 - Our lives are justified to God by trusting Christ

- In 3:1-29, Paul is applying the crucifixion of Jesus Christ who died to save us because we couldn't save ourselves.
- Abraham is the prime example of faith in God's ability to save us.
- The law of Moses came after the promises God made to Abraham and that law was based on those promises. The law was given to convict us of sin, to teach us and keep us until the object/fulfilment of the law should arrive. The law pointed forward to fulfilment in Christ who is the offspring or seed God had promised to Abraham who would bring the nations of the world back into the company of God.
- This means those who have faith in Christ, the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, are all equally children of God just as Abraham was.
- There are no distinctions on the basis of race, gender or custom. All are legal heirs.
- In 4:1-11 Paul gives us an example to explain what has just been said about law, faith and inheritance. In 4:12-20 we get more of Paul's autobiography, how Paul and his gospel were once accepted by the Galatians.
- In 4:21-31 Paul gives us a parable or allegory of Abraham's children. One claiming God's promises by our own effort (works of the law), the other trusts in God's gift (grace through faith).

Chapters 5 & 6 - Don't sell or misuse your freedom in Christ

- In 5:1-13 Paul makes clear that having our existence justified by grace and receiving that gift by trusting God's promise does not mean we can live as we please. He asks the Galatians to stand firm in gospel freedom. Godliness is faith expressing itself through love not conforming to the ceremonies of the law.
- In 5:13-26, the Galatians are taught to aim for freedom, not self-indulgence. This is what it means to live by the Spirit of God (in God's company now because of the fulfilled promise in Jesus) and not the law.
- There are ungodly consequences for religious legalism, which, ends as a hypocritical self-salvation project. But there are godly consequences of the gospel of grace.
- In 6:1-10, Paul describes how to deal with sin while living by grace. He says we need to restore those who are struggling with wrongs gently, beware of our own temptations, beware of pride— lest we fall — and to keep on doing good.
- In 6:11-18, Paul gives a sharp farewell and summarises themes and issues in his letter concerning misunderstanding the law of Moses, the promises given to Abraham, and the power of grace to change lives.
- "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit."

Paul and the law

Many thick books have been written about how the apostle Paul uses the law of the Old Testament. It can be a complex topic first because the law is complex, but second because Paul writes to the Galatians with a shorthand or poetic style that assumes we know more than we often do about the law of God.

The law is the Torah, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Any one who has read these books knows they not only contain laws but also nuanced stories, poetry, and histories. A summary of these books may include:

Genesis

- Creation is a good gift of a good creator who sets boundaries to define his creation. Humanity is made in God's image but rebels against God's boundaries as humanity becomes its own self-focused creator. The judgment for becoming false gods is that we are isolated from the true God who is the source of an ordered, good, and eternal life.
- Human rebellion climaxes in a catastrophic failure as the world degenerates into concentration camp conditions, and God's grief over the corruption of his gift of life leads to uncreation in the flood.
- After the flood, God limits the ability of human effort to coordinate to dominate the world by setting power against power in human history (Babel).
- It is into this world that the promise of God is given to Abraham to bring humanity back to himself through his seed. Abraham acts on this promise, and God declares this trust is what justifies or makes right Abraham's life with God.
- This promise begins its unlikely and frail fulfilment in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- The book ends with Jacob's descendants (now called Israel, meaning: 'he with whom God strives') in Egypt.

Exodus

- God saves his promise project (Israel) from slavery in Egypt. This was by grace alone, as God acted on his promise to Abraham.
- God then gives his people, through Moses, laws to teach what it looks like to live as the image of God in the presence of God in their daily lives. This was a necessary counterbalance to the laws and cultural habits they had been living under in Egypt.
- Provision is made in God's laws for failing those laws by making use of a sacrificial system and priesthood of mediators.
- However, in the worship of the golden calf, God's people break his laws in such a profound way that even the sacrificial system is inadequate to atone for them.
- Moses, the mediator, pleads for their impossible forgiveness, and God, without just cause, forgives and continues to be with them.

Leviticus

- This book is full of beautiful details about how reverence for the creator, creation, and humanity are to be lived out in a Bronze Age culture. A significant part of this are the details of the sacrificial, welfare, and health systems.

Numbers

- Numbers is the painful story of how God's promise project rebelled against him ten times. In the end, their judgement is to receive what they wanted, which is also part of what they feared. The generation who witnessed the great works of God are sustained and nurtured by God in the wilderness until they die from natural causes there. The plan is to leave their children to inherit the promised land.

Deuteronomy

- This book is a sermon Moses gave to the new generation before they crossed the Jordan River to claim the land of Canaan. It repeats and adapts to the new setting, many of the laws of God already given along with the reminder of the example of the generation before them who failed to trust God and obey him. They are warned that their happiness and success depend upon their own trust and obedience. This includes keeping the sacrificial laws to deal with their failures when they arise.

You can see what it is a mistake to think of the law of God as only a list of rules. It is really a story of potential and tragedy, of knowing what is good and right to do and be and still falling short of those ideals. It is a tale of the human condition that begins, is sustained by, and will end in grace. We all struggle to justify our own existence - even to ourselves and our own standards, let alone the expectations others have for us, let alone the good that God created us for.

This is why Paul points the Galatians to the prophet Hosea (Galatians 3:11) who lived waiting for the invasion and exile of Babylon. He lived waiting for the final collapse of the covenant of the law God had given through Moses. The question for Hosea is, after centuries of inability to keep and fulfil the promised blessing of the law - how will those who seek God live now? The answer is, they will live as those faithful to God had always lived, by entrusting themselves to his grace. 'The righteous will live by faith.'

Legalism

Paul is outraged that because 'certain people came…' (Galatians 2:12) there was pressure on the Galatian Christians to do aspects of the law of God and to require these practices of non-Jewish people who had come to trust in Jesus. The requirements seem to have included: separation of Hebrew from Gentile people (2:12), observing special days (the Hebrew religious calendar - 4:10) and male circumcision (5:2). There are at least four problems with this:

1. Jesus did not instruct his disciples to add the burden of the Hebrew law to the lives of his non-Hebrew followers.
2. The law of Moses had collapsed. The kingdom of Israel was gone. The Hebrew people themselves were unable to keep the law (see Acts 15:10-11).
3. The people troubling the Galatians only demanded that certain markers of the law be followed. They could not ask for the whole law to be kept because that was impossible. But, as Paul points out, if we start by keeping part of the law to justify yourself, where does our self-justification end?
4. Legalism is a simplistic response to our struggle to do what is good for us. Psalm 19 describes the law of God as 'perfect, reviving the soul… making wise the simple, more to be desired than gold, sweeter than honey.' It was never just a list of to-do's to make us acceptable, it is beauty, life and wisdom. Paul, in Romans 7, describes the law as holy, just and good - our problem is not with the law, it is with what the law reveals we are, too often unholy, unjust and wrong. A legalistic application of God's law does not include the grace that the law is based on, sustained by and points forward to. Legalism leads us to either the paralysis of despair about our efforts to grow as human beings or to the hypocrisy of denial, manipulation of the rules and arrogance.

The legalists in Galatia were asking for outward signs of Jewish observance from non-Hebrew believers. This was to add to their justification before God. To make them acceptable. This is a world away from suggesting helpful practises for prayer or disciplines in the Christian life. This is adding a legal requirement to the grace of the gospel. It is not only a foolish application of what the law of God and the history of his people had taught but because it is an act of self-justification, it is powerless to help us grow

and change our lives for the better (Galatians 4:8-11). It is a work of our rebellious and wilful flesh rather than a humble trust in God's promise to us in Jesus and the gift of his Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26).

To put that another way. Legalism is a form of self-worship, a declaration that we are independent of God at some level. It is the original rebellion of humanity from the start of the law, disguising itself as acts of hypocritical obedience.

Is Paul the second founder of Christianity?

Given the content of Paul's reaction to the legalism of his day, not a few people suggest that Paul established a revised version of Christianity different to the teaching of Jesus. There are two reasons to suggest that this is not the case.

First, Paul says, very clearly, that he is not allowed to invent another gospel (Galatians 1:6-10) and that he should be accursed (cut off from God) if he should do so. He tells us that the gospel he gave to the Galatians was from Jesus Christ (1:11, 12) and his teaching was cross-checked with the teaching of the first disciples of Jesus (2:1-10).

Second, though Paul is writing about justification by grace through faith alone, often by using the language of the Roman legal system, his teaching about law, legalism, freedom of conscience, justification, the power of the Spirit to change lives, and the slavery of the flesh that corrupts lives can be found in the gospel writings that record Jesus' teaching.

Here is one example. In the sermon on the mount in Matthew, Jesus says the law and the prophets will not pass away (because no word of God is ineffective) but are fulfilled by him (Matthew 5:17, see also Luke 4:16-21). He then says that his followers' righteousness must exceed that of the religious professionals represented in the scribes and Pharisees of his time. Then he goes on to unpack in detail how the legalism and legal manipulations of the scribes and Pharisees have perverted and buried the law of God. Legalism was ignoring the internal depths of the law as well as the grace and mercy needed to enter and be sustained in the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:3, 7:7-11). To put that another way, the legalists of Jesus' day had turned the gracious law of God into a self-salvation project. In contrast, the teaching of Jesus and many gospel stories show us to approach Jesus for his help by entrusting ourselves to him who is, he says, the fulfilment of what was promised to Abraham (John 8:54-59).

It is true that Paul, with the other writers of the New Testament letters, develop the implications of Jesus teaching, life, death and resurrection and apply them to a new situation (the church growing amongst the nations). But they are not planting something new, they are following their calling to allow the plant God established by his ancient promises to continue growing (John 16:4-15). In the case of Paul's letter to the Galatians, Jesus' famous outrage regarding the dangers of legalism and hypocrisy in religion (see Matthew 23 for an example) is mirrored by Paul's outrage as he writes to the Galatian Christians. Paul wants their lives to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus, not to be filled with the ineffective anxiety of self-justification or the rebellion of self-salvation.

"For freedom Christ has set you free, stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Galatians 1 *Why do we believe anything?*

Why do we believe anything?

The message of grace and peace

The danger is leaving grace

by adding to Christ

Is Paul and his message valid?

For further thought
1. What do you believe is important in life and why do you believe it?
2. How does our culture deal with differing convictions about what is ultimately true?
3. What reasons does Paul give for believing his message?
4. Why is the gospel of grace both liberating and offensive?

Study notes

Galatians 1:1–24

* What key ideas or passages come to mind as you think of Galatians?

Initial Greetings (1:1–5)
1. Paul typically begins his letters with words of praise and thanksgiving. Why might they not be present in this letter?

2. What is the contrast that Paul uses to identify himself in v.1, and what significance might that have for how we are to read this letter?

3. What do you understand by grace and peace (v.3)? How are these two words related to Paul's gospel of salvation?

4. Some see the crucifixion of Jesus as no more than the tragic end to a promising career. What do we learn about the death of Christ from 1:4–5?

Paul's Rebuke (1:6–10)
5. Paul attributes the problem to a group of troublemakers within the churches. What were they doing and why was it so damaging?

6. How does Paul react and why is his response so strong? Can you think of similar situations in today's church?

7. Paul insists here that there is only one gospel and that this gospel does not change. What is the gospel according to Paul?

Paul's Story (1:11–24)

8. In the face of those who present a 'different gospel' (v.6), Paul now turns to defend the validity of his own ministry. What does Paul claim about his message, and how does he support his claim?

9. What reasons do people give nowadays to question Paul's authority? How would you respond?

Galatians 2:1-21 *Does anything I do matter?*

Conflict and racism in the church!

Is Paul speaking the truth about God?

- Paul stands with Peter (1-10)
- Paul stands against Peter (11-21)

So, does anything I do matter?

For further thought

1. Here are some examples of alternative gospels today: 'it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are loving and good', 'there is a right and a wrong way to worship and live - the rules must be kept', 'The intensity and passion in our experience of God is what should define us as a church' Who is left behind by these alternative gospels?
2. List examples of gospel truth being ignored for the sake of institutional unity or gospel unity being broken for cultural or religious reasons.
3. How would you explain justification by faith alone to someone who had never been to church?

Galatians 3:1-14 *What voices do we listen to?*

To try to justify ourselves is:

- to deny Christ (1)
- to deny our experience (2-5)
- to deny Biblical teaching on faith (6-9)
- to deny Biblical teaching on law (10-12)
- to deny ourselves the blessing of God (13-14)

What voices do we listen to?

For further thought
1. Share with others what brought you to Christ?
2. What key experiences have strengthened your faith over the years? How have you endured or failed in times of trial?
3. Paul shows that his teaching is based on more than experience. What else is your trust in Christ based upon?
4. Abraham was not perfect but he responded to God with faith. In what areas of your life is God currently asking you to respond to him with faith?

Study notes

Galatians 3:1–14

Evidence from Experience (3:1–5)
1. What are the Galatians doing which leads Paul to call them 'foolish' (v.1)?

2. What does he remind the Galatians of in regard to their conversion, and what implication does that have for how they are to understand the role of the law of Moses?

3. What else is Paul arguing here?

Evidence from Abraham (3:6–9)
4. How did Abraham become righteous (vv. 6, 9)?

5. What did God outline to Abraham? How is this of significance to us today?

Evidence from Scripture (3:10–14)
6. Paul now expands on the two alternatives he discussed in 2:16. Why are those who 'rely on works of the law' (3:10) in trouble?

7. Galatians 3:10 quotes Deuteronomy 27:26. How does this provide evidence that a person cannot be righteous through the OT law? How then is it possible for anyone to escape the curse of 3:10 and 13 and enjoy the blessing of 3:14?

8. Why does this not happen automatically? What then do we have to do?

Galatians 3:15-29 *Why are we at war with ourselves?*

An example from life

- The promise first
- Then the law

Why the law?

The promise and the law

We are all sons

Our personal war

For further thought

1. Many of us have had the experience of being given a series of do's and don'ts to act on, and the experience of trust where we are given freedom to act within the bounds of our conscience. Which experience helps most in developing our own values? Can you relate this to Paul's argument here?
2. What difference would it make for you to practice the presence of Christ as if you were clothed in him? How is this different to obeying the laws and rules that you normally operate by?
3. How are the barriers that exist where we live broken down in our church? How can you help this?

Galatians 4:1-31 *Choosing to grow up*

You are no longer slaves (1-7)

So how is it you are turning back?

I plead with you

Until Christ is formed in you

Do not choose slavery but freedom

Study notes

Galatians 4:1–31

Brought by Christ into Sonship (4:1–7)
1. How does Paul characterise humanity's condition under the law? How does this work out in practice?

2. In what sense did God send his Son 'at the right time'? Why was he sent? In what ways was Jesus uniquely qualified to do the task set for him?

3. Those in Christ have a new status through faith in him. What further blessing does the sending of the Spirit bring?

The Temptation to Return (4:8–11)
4. What is the difference between knowing God and being known by God (vv.8-9)? Why are both important?

5. What was the basic mistake made by the Galatians? What practical steps can we take to avoid falling into the same trap?

Two Kinds of Teachers (4:12–20)
6. What does he mean in v.12?

7. The Galatians once received Paul as they would have received Christ Jesus himself (v.14). Why had their attitude changed and what can we learn from this?

8. What do we learn about Paul's attitude to, and goal for, the Galatians in vv.19-20? How was this different to that of the false teachers?

Two Kinds of Lives (4:21–31)

9. In Paul's analogy, what do Hagar and Sarah stand for? How is this relevant today?

10. 'Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise' (v.28). What two implications for the Christian community does Paul draw from this?

Galatians 5:1-26 *Why is freedom so complex?*

For freedom Christ freed us

so we wait for the righteousness for which we hope

and we obey the law in love, not fear

as Christ is formed in us

For further thought

Consider and discuss these four types of people:

1. Law-obeying, law relying – Under the law and sure, at least externally, they are keeping it. However, their inward uncertainty makes them less than gracious, sensitive to criticism, and insecure.
2. Law-disobeying, law relying – Have a religious conscience but carry a great deal of guilt. Tend to be more humble but suffer from low esteem and often fear church.
3. Law disobeying, not law-relying – Probably intellectually secular or vaguely spiritual. They insist that they live by their own moral standards. Can be happy and tolerant with a strong liberal strain of self-righteousness about what they see as unnecessary legalism.
4. Law-obeying, not law-relying – a mature Christian position. The law of God, their own, or others' standards cannot complete them, and they are free from the guilt and compulsion of these laws. They choose to obey God's law from love of God, others, and their own self-respect of who they are as heirs of God. They can afford to be more tolerant than 3, more sympathetic than 1, and more confident than 2 – but they still battle with the over-desires of the flesh and the Spirit of God within them.

Study notes

Galatians 5:1–26

Where This Teaching Will Lead (5:1–6)

1. What might be some ways in which we might fall from freedom back into slavery (v.1)?

2. Using this passage, how would you answer someone who said that Paul's emphasis on faith in Christ means that we are free to live as we please?

Where These Teachers Are Headed (5:7–12)

3. What marks of false teaching does Paul outline in this passage? Why is it so difficult to keep preaching the truth?
4. Paul's attitude to the false teachers (v.12) sounds harsh. Why might he have said this? How important is it today to address false teaching in the church?

How to Live in True Freedom (5:13–26)
5. How does v.13 relate back to v.1?

6. Maintaining Christian freedom involves us in constant conflict between the 'flesh' and the 'Spirit'. What does Paul mean by these two words?

7. What strikes you most about the list in vv.19-21? What part of the fruit of the Spirit do you find hardest (vv.22-23)?

8. What does it mean to crucify the flesh (v.24) and to walk by the Spirit (v.25)? What do these two phrases mean in practice?

Galatians 6:1-18 *Repair each other gently*

If we could just get it right

- the systems we serve

But we are caught in wrong (1-5)

- and need to be repaired gently

- and wisely

- we need to carry our own responsibilities

So don't get weary of doing good (6-10)

For there is only one thing worth boasting in (11-18)

Study notes

Galatians 6:1–18

The Way of the Spirit (6:1–5)
1. 5:26 seems to be a hinge verse, rounding off chapter 5 but also leading into chapter 6. How does 5:26 shed any light on Paul's warnings in 6:1-5? What leads Christians to treat each other wrongly?

2. How do you explain the connection between the instruction to 'carry each other's burdens' (v.2) and 'each one should carry their own load' (v.5)?

3. Verse 1 is an example of a burden being borne. What guidelines does Paul give? How can we apply these today?

Why We Should Live by the Spirit (6:6–10)
4. Paul's final few instructions are linked by the common theme that we reap what we sow. How is v.6 relevant for us?

5. What does it mean to 'sow to [please] their flesh'? In what ways can we 'sow to [please] the Spirit'?

6. In what areas do you find yourself growing 'weary in doing good' (v.9)? What does Paul say to encourage us?

Defined by the Cross (6:11–18)

7. What does Paul mean by ‘the world has been crucified to me and I to the world’ (v.14)?

8. Paul opposes those who concentrate on outward show at the expense of what really matters—‘a new creation’ (v.15). What point is he trying to make?

* Looking back over this letter, what major lessons stick in your mind?