



Part 1 – No Justification, No Peace

Galatians 1:1-8

With the possible exception of Romans, no other New Testament epistle has had such a profound impact on the history of the church as has Galatians. It has been called “The Magna Carta of the Christian Life.” Martin Luther called his commentary on Galatians his most important work. Indeed, so great was Luther’s affection for this little letter that he said he was “wedded” to it. He referred to Galatians as his Katie Von Bora.

What makes Galatians so important?

Obviously, it is part of God’s inspired word. Within its context Galatians soars so high because within it Paul defends the gospel with singular zeal. He makes clear what is at stake when the gospel is adulterated. Specifically, Galatians confronts the all too human tendency to reject the unmerited grace of God in Jesus Christ in favor of a religion of human merit. In Galatians, Paul answers the question, “What must I do to be saved?” “Given that all of us must one day die and stand before God, there can be no more important question, and none on behalf of which we ought to exert ourselves to be sure that we have answered it correctly.”¹

The Apostle Paul’s letters followed the typical structure of the day. The opening section includes: 1) Author introduction (“Paul”); 2) Recipients identified (“the churches of Galatia”); 3) Salutation (“grace and peace”). Interestingly, the opening greeting of the letter to the Galatian churches (vv. 1-5) is a bit longer than most of the greetings in Paul’s other letters. This is deliberate on Paul’s part because these opening elements foreshadow important themes in the letter.²

1. The Apostle

Vv. 1-2

- The word translated apostle means *messenger* or *sent one*. The New Testament apostles were chosen by Jesus and commissioned to proclaim his message. It was upon their witness that Jesus would build his church. The apostleship of Paul was frequently attacked by those who were either jealous of his influence or who were desirous to undermine the gospel he preached. The reason Paul defends his apostleship with such zeal is not out of pride or love of status. Rather, it is the gospel which is at stake. Those preaching another gospel know they must undermine Paul’s status as an apostle if they are to replace the gospel he preached with their own.

2. The Galatians

Vs. 2b

- Galatia was a region of the Roman Empire in what is now Turkey. Northern Galatia was populated by Celts (Gauls – “Gaulatia”). The churches Paul was writing to were most likely in the southern region. It was in this region among cities such as Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium that Paul traveled during his second missionary journey (Acts 13 & 14).

3. The Gospel

Vv. 3-5

- The heart of Paul’s life and ministry was the gospel.

¹ Terry Johnson, Galatians (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012) p. 11.

² Thomas Schreiner, Galatians ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) p. 71.

A) The Gospel's elements

Vs. 3a – “Grace to you and peace...”

- Grace is the unmerited favor of God toward sinners through the death and resurrection of Christ. Peace here is more than just a cessation of conflict. It is also the existence of a positive disposition toward another. Through his perfect obedience and sacrificial death Jesus has brought sinners into a right relationship with God. He has made peace between all those who belong to him. And he has granted us peace within our own hearts.

B) The Gospel's Source

Vs. 3b – “...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...”

- The salvation that the Father decreed from all eternity, the Son accomplished. It was for us and our salvation that the Father sent the Son to stand in our place. Only our Heavenly Father could devise a way to save sinners without compromising his own justice.

C) The Gospel's heart

Vs. 4 – “...who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father...”

- Here Paul sums up the very center of the gospel – Jesus “gave himself for our sins...” This is the doctrine of the atonement; that Jesus died in the place of sinners to take upon himself the justice they deserved.
- The gospel is not something we do. The gospel is not a lifestyle. The gospel is news. It is the announcement that Jesus died for sinners.

D) The Gospel's goal

Vs. 5 – “...to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

- It is unusual to find a doxology in the opening of an epistle. Here it is used to emphasize the great goal toward which the gospel points us. Since the justification of sinners is wholly a work of God, he receives all of the glory for it.

4. The Troublers

Vv. 6-7

[6] I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—[7] not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

- Those who were preaching another gospel to the churches in Galatia believed in Jesus. They believed in Jesus' death for sinners and his resurrection. They believed that salvation was by grace. They believed in the vital importance of faith in Jesus. But they also believed that justification depended on both faith and works of obedience. Some might be willing to overlook such an error given the other areas of agreement. But Paul understood that one little addition to be the difference between a false gospel and the true gospel. These troublemakers are often referred to as “Judaizers” because they insisted that observing the ceremonial law of the Mosaic Covenant was necessary to be made right with God.

5. The Verdict

Vs. 8 – “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”

- Paul reserves his harshest words for those who distort the gospel. And Galatians holds his harshest words. Remember that these words of condemnation are against those who proclaimed a divine and risen Jesus. But their error of adding works of the law to the calculus of justification is abhorrent. It makes the gospel bad news. It is the difference between a message that brings salvation and a message that brings condemnation. In his judgment upon those preaching justification by faith and works Paul is laboring for our joy. He is fighting for a message that brings peace and rescue. He is holding forth the Jesus who woos us with an easy yoke and a light burden.