

Background of the Book:

Many years before the NT was written there were people who lived in France known as Gauls. Several centuries before the time of Caesar, the Gauls had in part migrated to northern Asia Minor (the central regions of modern-day Turkey) and settled there. That is the reason that the area was called Galatia; Galatia means simply the place where the Gauls live. However, when the Romans became a world power, they reorganized that part of Asia Minor and made Galatia into a large Roman province that included the country of Galatia and other regions in the south as well. Therefore, in Paul's day, the term Galatia could refer to two different areas: it could be the larger Roman province, or it could be the country in the north where the Gauls had originally settled. As a result, scholars question which area Paul was referring to when he wrote the Book of Galatians. If he is referring to the Roman province that included the southern area, then he would be writing to the churches he had established on his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). Most scholars who speak English believe that Paul is writing to the churches in the southern area, having been influenced by the writings of the Scottish scholar, Sir William Ramsey. Scholars who do not speak English tend to believe Paul was writing to the churches in the north. If the south Galatian theory is correct, then the Book of Galatians was probably written between 48-49_{AD} and is the first epistle written by Paul (S. Lewis Johnson).

Paul is writing to churches that have been heavily influenced by Jews who are insisting that to be a true believer in Christ, one must also submit to certain demands of the Old Testament. They have distorted the gospel. Galatians tells us what the gospel is not. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul gives us a defense of his apostleship, in chapters 3 and 4 he defines justification by grace, and in the last two chapters he stresses the ethical implications of the doctrine.

1:1 Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),

1:2 and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

1:4 who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

1:5 to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

Verses 1-5 form the introduction to the letter, but in some ways it is different than most of the other letters written by Paul. After Paul identifies himself as an apostle, he immediately launches into a defense of his apostolic authority. This gives us a hint as to the nature of this letter. Paul often assigns the source of his apostleship to the will of God (see Ro. 1:1; I Cor. 1:1; II Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; II Tim. 1:1), but here he also stresses that his call had nothing to do with the influence or appointment by men. A similar comment is made in 1:11 and 12. We can conclude from Paul's defensiveness that false teachers who were teaching a different gospel had been trying to minimize his apostolic authority to discredit him and his message.

Paul is clear that his authority did not come from others (he was “not sent from men nor through the agency of man”). It came through Christ whom he met on the Damascus road (Gal. 1:12; I Cor. 9:1; cf. Acts 9:1-7) and God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. However, Paul is also clear that his teaching is not unique to him. In verse 2 he says that all the brothers with him stood behind his letter. Though Paul's authority does not come from them, the message which God has given him as an apostle unites him to his brothers; together they declare to the Galatians the true gospel.

The bottom line is that Paul is declaring to be sent by Christ as His emissary, so the words he speaks are the words of Christ, and the gospel he proclaims is true.

Mention of the resurrection (1:1) is tied to the common Jewish belief at that time that the establishment of God's kingdom would be marked by the resurrection of people from the dead (Moo, 69). Paul alludes to it here because his theological argument throughout the letter is based upon the thought that the resurrection of Christ has inaugurated a new age of salvation (Schreiner, 75). His resurrection changes everything, especially one's relationship to the law. The Jews who opposed Paul had turned time back and were submitting to the law once again.

Deliverance from the present evil age carries overtones of eschatological fulfillment. NT scholars generally recognize that in the NT the “present age” contrasts to “the age to come” (Matt. 12:23), and reflects the Jewish concept that history was sharply divided into two phases. They looked for a future time for God to usher in His salvation. Verse 4 explains the purpose of Christ's sacrifice. It is the cross that saves sinners from the evil age, not the law.

The present age is an evil age where Satan is allowed to exercise his power. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul says, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (cf. Luke 4:6). But those who believe the gospel have begun to be liberated from this age. Colossians 1:13 says, "God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son." Hebrews 6:5 says that "we have tasted the powers of the age to come." Jesus said, "The kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk. 11:20), and in John 17:15 Jesus prayed for us saying, "Father don't take them out of the world, but keep them from evil." 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." Now, in Galatians, Paul insists that although the present evil age continues, believers have been rescued from it with its evils and ultimate death, finding their true identity in Christ who has broken into history conquering this age and its rulers; believers belong to a completely different state of affairs. They belong to the age to come.

Unlike Paul's other letters, this one lacks an opening thanksgiving for the church. “He has neither the time nor the inclination to thank God for the Galatians when their very identity as Christians hangs in the balance. As Chrysostom puts it, the letter ‘breathes an indignant spirit’” (Moo, 65). He immediately gets to the heart of the issue in verses 6 and 7.

1:6 I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;

1:7 which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

The underlying truth of the passage is that there is only one gospel.

In verse 6 Paul says that he is amazed that the Galatians are starting to turn to a "different gospel" which he calls a distorted gospel in verse 7. The word "distort" often denotes a radical change, as of water into blood, or feasting into mourning, or daylight into darkness (Schreiner, 86). The manner in which the gospel was distorted comes out as we read the Book of Galatians. The false teachers demanded that one not only believe in Jesus as the messiah, but also required circumcision and submission to the OT law (5:2-6; 6:12-13 cf. 2:3-5), which was tantamount to putting themselves back under the Old Covenant. In Acts 15:1 it says, "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

In verse 6 there are two implied reasons as to why turning to a different gospel is so astonishing. First, turning to a different gospel is turning *from* God. Paul said, "You are deserting him who called you."

The Jews who were opposing Paul were no different than their ancestors. Back in the days of the Exodus, shortly after being delivered from bondage, while Moses was in the process of receiving the Ten Commandments, the people had begun turning from God. In Exodus 32:7-8 the Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. *They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them.*" When the Jews in Paul's day added to the gospel, they were not just turning from a doctrine or an idea, they had turned away from God, and that is astonishing.

A second reason why turning to a different gospel is so astonishing is because people that turn from the gospel are turning from grace. Had they been satisfied by what Christ had done on the cross, they would not have looked to add anything to it. The Judaizers had returned to the notion that their works were necessary to merit salvation. In Galatians 5:4 Paul says, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." Paul was stunned that anyone who had heard and believed in the gospel of grace could ever turn from it.

1:8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!

1:9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

The word for accursed is "anathema." It speaks of something devoted to God for final destruction and condemnation (Schreiner, 87). In 1 Corinthians 16:22 it also says "If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed." When a person is anathema, he is cut off from Christ (Romans 9:3) and doomed to

eternal punishment. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says that those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus “will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”

The rejection and distortion of the gospel leaves a person under God's curse, no matter who they are or where they have come from. In verses 8 and 9 Paul says, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” Paul repeats himself to demonstrate the seriousness of what he is saying (Moo, 81).

The truth of the message depends on its content, not the credentials of the messenger (Schreiner, 87). No matter what claims of divine authority are made, all who fail to preach the gospel that Paul had originally preached to the Galatians are cursed – including Paul and angels! In verse 9 he extends the threat to “any man” which is a thinly disguised way of speaking about his opponents.

“When a person rejects the gospel, the free, gracious gift of God's forgiveness and kingship, then he remains under the divine curse for his sin—a terrifying prospect because of its torment and unending length. . . For Paul the gospel of Christ is the point at which the awesome life of God touches the life of this foul world of sin. And when that offer of eternal grace to utterly unworthy creatures like us is rejected or perverted to satisfy our pride, somewhere someone must rage at the heinousness of the crime” (Piper).

1:10 For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

Finally, Paul tells us that a true servant of God seeks to please God alone. Paul wants to deny any accusation that he is preaching a form of the gospel that is meant to please men. “If I were still trying to please men” is a second class condition in Greek, indicating something contrary to fact; if Paul desired to please people more than God (which he didn't), then he would no longer be a bondservant of Christ.

Perhaps Paul's stress on the grace and freedom from the law was interpreted by some Jews as a gospel designed for people who didn't really want to submit to God. Or maybe they saw Paul as a hypocrite for he at times insisted that people be circumcised (Acts 16:1-3), and other times he didn't.

Two important points need to be made:

1) It was never Paul's aim to alienate people. In fact, he did all he could do to NOT offend people. In 1 Corinthians 10:31f. Paul says, “Do all to the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage but that of many, that they may be saved.” And in Romans 15:2 he says, “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to edify him; for Christ did not please himself. . .” Nevertheless, the one who faithfully presents the gospel will alienate people and it is during those times that we need to make a decision if we will speak in such a way as to try to please men or God.

2) We need to realize that Paul speaks differently about the same things under different circumstances. He had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), and told him to follow certain Jewish practices so that he would not cause offense. Paul was a Jew to the Jews. On the other hand, he would not allow Titus to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3), nor yield even to the slightest suggestions of those in Galatia who insisted that aspects of the law had to be followed to be a believer (Gal. 2:5). When the heart of the gospel was not in question, Paul was willing to do anything possible to avoid offense, but when the people tried to subvert salvation into a system of works instead of faith he did nothing that may be interpreted as agreement with false doctrine.

Piper summarizes the first 10 verses like this: “The underlying truth of this passage is that there is one, and only one, gospel. It is therefore astonishing to turn away from it—away from God who calls, and away from grace in Christ. It is not only astonishing, it is tragic, because the person who rejects the gospel is anathema, accursed and cut off from God. But on the other hand, if you embrace the one true gospel, not only are all your sins forgiven by God, but a thrilling unity and integrity and liberty come into your life because there is only one person to please, Jesus Christ, and he only wills what is best for you” (Piper).

By way of application, we see from verse 6 that even after we become believers we are prone to wander from God and God’s grace. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 that “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” One way to avoid being swayed by false teaching is to remain connected to a good church where the gospel is clearly proclaimed (Eph. 4:11-15).

Secondly, we see in this passage the exclusiveness of the gospel. Paul pronounced an eternal curse on people because they had distorted the gospel. It should be pointed out that these were people who believed in the OT, claimed allegiance to God, and even professed Jesus as Messiah! But Paul doesn’t see their gospel and his as mere differences of opinion; he saw those who proclaimed such a gospel as enemies of God and damned to eternal destruction. The gospel of grace must not be lost amidst all the clutter that Christians clamor for.

Thirdly, Paul warns of the danger of trying to please men instead of God. The implication is that the things of God are not the things men naturally desire. In the Book of John, Jesus tells us that the reason that many didn’t believe in Him was because they longed for the praise of people more than the glory of God (Jn. 5:42-43). If our desire is to please people, we must truncate or distort the gospel to do so, but when we do that we are no longer pleasing God. At times, we don’t please God because we are immobilized by the fears of what others think and say. The parents of the blind man whom Jesus had healed were intimidated by the religious leaders (Jn. 9:22). In John 12:42-43 it says, “Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.” The only thing that can conquer these fears is the deep-seated desire to please God above all else.

1:11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

1:12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

In verse 1 Paul defended his apostleship: "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father . . ." In verses 11-12 he defends the divine origin of the gospel: "I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ." The "for" of verse 11 thus introduces the evidence that the gospel is not merely human.

"Paul is arguing in verse 12 for the truth of his preaching. His gospel is not a human concoction. It is not his own private version of something he picked up secondhand from the Jerusalem apostles. It is not, as verse 11 says, 'according to man.' That probably means, first, that it didn't originate with man but with God. It didn't come out of Paul's head; it came out of God's heart" (Piper).

1:13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it;

1:14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

Verses 13-17 introduce further support to the claim that the gospel did not originate from Paul's own thinking, but had come to him by a revelation of Christ. The truth of the gospel that he is preaching is based on this fact.

Paul begins his argument in verses 13 and 14 by reminding his readers of what he was like before he believed. His own testimony demonstrates that there is no *human* reason for Paul to come to Christ.

Paul was one of the most fervent Pharisees of his day and was fiercely anti-Christian; his personal mission was to destroy the church (Acts 9:1) which was perceived as zeal for the truth and righteousness (Phil 3:6). Paul's persecution of the church matches what we see of the Jews, in general, in the Book of Acts (Acts. 7:58-8:3; 9:1-2, 13-14, 21; 22:3-4, 19-20; 26; 4-5, 9-15).

Furthermore, Paul was advancing in the traditions inherited from the fathers; that is, his life and beliefs followed the Torah (the OT law) and the traditions and teachings that developed around it. He was a rising star among the students of the great Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3) whom the Jews celebrated as "the glory of the law," the first designated Rabban "our master" and president of the Sanhedrin under Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius (ISBE).

1:15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased

1:16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood,

1:17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.

Verse 15 begins with “but when God” and introduces the contrast of Paul’s previous life with the change that took place when he met Christ. Paul’s own conversion story is mentioned in Acts 9:1 ff. and Acts 26.

First, Paul states that God had set him apart even before he was born (1:15) to reveal Christ to him. God called Paul through His grace both to salvation and to his ministry to the Gentiles.

Once Paul had met the risen Lord, he was not quick to consult with men about what had happened or what it all meant; he says, “I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood.” “Flesh and blood” is used in the Bible to emphasize the frailty of humanity, man with his limitations and weaknesses (see Matt. 16:17; Eph. 6:12); one might say, Paul did not get the gospel from “mere man.” Nor did he go to Jerusalem to be taught the gospel by the apostles; instead he went to Arabia, then back to Damascus.

All of this shows that Paul didn’t consult with other people about the content of the gospel, nor was his apostolic authority bestowed upon him by men. The gospel is the transcendent word of God – a word that speaks perfectly, without error to human beings. When we proclaim the gospel, we are proclaiming the word that comes from the Father. Thus, rejection of the gospel is rejection of God Himself.

In addition, Paul’s conversion is a testimony of the power of the gospel, for there was no human reason for him to give up his faith in Judaism. It is a demonstration of the power of God’s grace. From a human perspective, we would not expect Paul to be saved. But God not only saved him, He called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and write the majority of the NT. As Piper says, “Paul describes his pre-conversion life to show how utterly improbable it is that he could ever have been allured into the ranks of the apostles by any human effort. The apostles were his arch-enemies. Paul argues that there is only one adequate explanation of how he came to devote his life to the Christ he hated and how he came to preach a gospel that overturned his whole life of Pharisaic pride. . . He knew that he had seen the risen Christ and had been commissioned to preach; and the only way he could verify that experience for others is to point to its effects. They are remarkable, indeed” (Piper).

1:18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.

1:19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

1:20 (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)

Paul continues to develop the theme that his ministry was not motivated by a desire to please men (1:10), nor was he dependent upon the apostles for the knowledge he possessed about the gospel. He

just didn't spend enough time with the apostles for this to happen; in fact, after he was saved he didn't even see the apostles for three years. Then when he finally went to Jerusalem, he only spent 15 days with Peter (Cephas), and did not see the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. "A mere fifteen-day visit with Peter cannot possibly support the Judaizers' apparent contention that he was a secondhand disciple of the Jerusalem apostles" (Piper). Paul hadn't distorted the gospel that he had learned from others (as he was being accused of); he was an independent witness of it.

1:21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

1:22 I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ;

1:23 but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy."

1:24 And they were glorifying God because of me.

Furthermore, after his trip to Jerusalem he went to Syria and Cilicia. If Paul had been an understudy of the apostles in Jerusalem, these are precisely the churches where he would have worked. But though they knew of him, they didn't know him personally.

Paul's conversion was dramatic. "From persecutor, to preacher. From one ready to kill Christians, to one ready to be killed as a Christian. From one who heard in the Christian message a threat to everything he stood for, to one who now had a vision of the gospel that blew his Pharisaism to smithereens. What happened? How do we account for such an astonishing reversal? Or to be more precise, as Paul put the question, was the grasp of the gospel that revolutionized Paul's life a work of man or a work of God? Did Paul somehow in those days of persecution get attracted to the apostles in Jerusalem and then go off on his own and botch their message? Or did Jesus Christ, alive from the dead, meet Paul on the Damascus road, manifest to him the truth of the gospel, and call him into service as an apostle?" (Piper)

Paul remained a Jew ethnically, but no longer saw himself as a part of Judaism (v. 14); unlike his opponents, he believed that faith in Christ was by grace alone, apart from adherence to the Mosaic Law (Schreiner, 98). He once saw himself as a righteous servant of God, but after meeting Jesus considered himself unworthy to be called an apostle (I Cor. 15:9; Eph. 3:8) and designated himself as "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor" (1 Tim. 1:13), the foremost of sinners (I Tim. 1:15). We learn from Paul's experience that zeal and sincerity do not make one right. "We can be zealous for something and yet be zealously wrong" (Schreiner, 104).

Paul's *apostleship* is "not from men or through man" (1:1), nor is his *gospel* from men (1:12). Therefore, to oppose his message is to oppose God, abandon grace, and be accursed.