

## LESSON ONE

# *Only One Gospel*

### **FOCAL TEXT**

Galatians 1:1–10

### **BACKGROUND**

Galatians 1:1–10

### **MAIN IDEA**

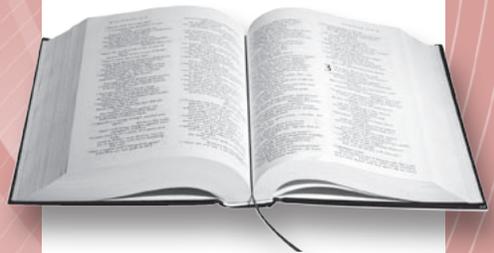
Only the gospel of the grace of God in Christ is worthy of our commitment.

### **QUESTION TO EXPLORE**

At what point does acceptance of differing viewpoints turn into a denial of the gospel of Christ?

### **TEACHING AIM**

To lead the class to identify current substitutes for the gospel of the grace of God in Christ and describe how to respond in light of Paul's strong statements



## **UNIT ONE**

# **Only By Faith in Christ Jesus**

## BIBLE COMMENTS

### Understanding the Context

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The area known as Galatia in New Testament times was in central Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey. The Roman province of Galatia stretched from the narrow province of Bithynia that bordered the Black Sea to the province of Pamphylia on the Mediterranean Sea. It was east of the Roman province of Asia where significant New Testament cities like Colossae and Ephesus were located. It was northwest of Tarsus, Paul's hometown. The southern portion of Galatia included the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia, all of which are mentioned in the New Testament. Paul and Barnabas traveled through this region on their first missionary journey. No direct evidence has been discovered to suggest that Paul ever traveled through the northern part of the province, although some believe he journeyed there on his second missionary trip.

Scholars generally believe that the Galatian peoples originated in central Europe. Some migrated into Britain and became known as Celts. Others migrated to France where they were known as Gauls. Still others eventually migrated to Asia Minor where the indigenous people labeled them Galatians.

Pauline scholars have long debated the dating and audience of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. Some scholars hold what is called the *North Galatian Theory*. They believe Paul wrote Galatians after the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and after his second missionary journey. According to this theory, the recipients of the letter were churches in locations such as Ancyra and Tavium that are not mentioned in the New Testament. Those who hold to an earlier writing of Galatians are proponents of the *South Galatian Theory*. They believe Paul wrote the letter after his first missionary journey and before the Jerusalem Council. Others hold to some sort of hybrid view that combines both approaches.

A segment of Christians known as Judaizers plagued the early churches. Judaizers insisted that Gentile converts must first become Jews, which meant that they must practice circumcision and other ritual practices of Judaism to become Christians. Paul frequently encountered

problems throughout Acts with these Jewish Christians. One of the main purposes of the Galatian letter was to deal with the questions raised by these Judaizers.

## Interpreting the Scriptures

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### Greeting (1:1–5)

**1:1–2.** Paul customarily began his letters by introducing himself. In some of them, he simply introduced himself and others who were with him. In many of his letters, he identified himself by giving his name and then adding that he was “an apostle by the will of God.” In Galatians and the Letter to the Romans, Paul found it necessary to qualify even further his apostleship. Here, Paul wrote that Jesus Christ and God the Father chose him for his mission. The highly descriptive introduction offers a clue that Paul intended to deal with difficult issues. He apparently wanted to clarify from the beginning that this message came not just from personal beliefs but from the authority God had given him. He added that this greeting also came from “all the brethren who are with me.” Had Paul identified his companions or co-workers, scholars might find it easier to pinpoint more exactly the date of the letter’s writing and more precisely who its recipients were. It is possible that Paul may have been identifying those who sympathized with the arguments he would present. In verse 2, Paul simply named the recipients as “the churches of Galatia.” This indicates that Paul intended the various churches in that region to circulate his letter.

**1:3–5.** As was typical in Paul’s letters, he opened with a greeting of “grace” and “peace.” Paul used this wording with only slight variation in every letter he wrote. In his letters to Timothy, he added an additional word, “mercy.” However, Paul did utilize something different in his greeting to the Galatians. Paul always used “grace” in association with Christ. The peace of which Paul wrote is the kind of peace to which he often referred. Most commentators agree that this “peace” parallels the *shalom* of a Hebrew greeting, while Paul applied “grace” as coming solely from Christ. Paul used “grace and peace” to give a blessing to his readers.

Paul's salutations were similar, but not identical. One difference found only in Galatians was Paul's elaboration on the sacrificial death of Jesus. Throughout the New Testament, we find that this self-giving of Jesus resulted in positive consequences. Paul wanted his readers to know that as Christians they were experiencing the Christlike life even while living in an evil age that was, and is, passing away. It is quite possible that Paul introduced this concept at the very beginning of his letter because he planned to hammer home throughout the letter the all-sufficient power of God's grace through Jesus Christ and his sacrifice. It may well be a foreshadowing of Paul's intent to criticize those who sought to add requirements on to God's grace in salvation. He concluded his greeting with a commitment to God's will and with a statement of praise to God.

### The Problem in Galatia (1:6–10)

**1:6–7.** Paul quickly and uncharacteristically jumped immediately to the purpose of his letter. Often, he began his letters with a prayer and some sort of recognition of his recipients' gifts or positive qualities. Even the First Epistle to the Corinthians, one of his most intense letters and critiques of the believers' faith, followed this pattern. In Galatians, however, Paul cut directly to the heart of the matter. The word Paul used that may be translated as "amazed" or *astonished* was a powerful word. Paul could not understand how the Galatians were "deserting" God's message in Christ and how it could happen "so quickly." It is uncertain, though, whether Paul meant that their "deserting" occurred soon after he had been there or soon after these false teachers appeared in Galatia. "Deserting" can also be translated as *departing* or *turning away from*. Paul used the present tense to describe an ongoing process or trend that he hoped to end. Stopping this growing trend in the Galatian churches describes Paul's basic intent for his letter.

Paul vehemently opposed the teaching of the Judaizers (see "Understanding the Context"). As the remainder of the letter will demonstrate, Paul believed their distortion not only caused disruption of the church's work but also muted the believers' experience of grace. Another translation of "distort" is *pervert*. Paul clearly believed these false teachers were confusing the Galatians. In Paul's mind, this false gospel prevented the believers from enjoying the grace that was theirs.

**1:8–9.** Paul posed a hypothetical case. He went so far as to say that were he or an “angel from heaven” to preach such distortions, it would warrant a curse from God. He used these extreme examples to stress how serious this offense was. Of course, neither he nor an angel would ever do this but, even so, they would be subject to the same judgment as these offenders. One scholar has written that the gospel “is so holy that anyone who independently modifies it brings down the curse of God on his head.”<sup>1</sup> Apparently from what Paul wrote in verse 9, he had already warned them about those who would preach a false gospel. This ignored warning may in part explain Paul’s strong reaction to their abandonment of the gospel of grace.

**1:10.** Here Paul began to make the transition to the next section. The Judaizers may have suggested that Paul had preached a watered-down version of the gospel during his visit so he might gain a wider following. They may have insisted they were correcting his error. In other passages, 1 Thessalonians 2:4 for example, Paul clearly stated that he sought not to please people but to please God, whereas the Judaizers may have claimed that Paul was seeking to please people. Paul wrote that he was a “bond-servant” or *slave* of Christ. In the passage that we will discuss in the next lesson, Paul proceeded to defend his apostleship.

### **Focusing on the Meaning**

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There are those who might accuse Paul of narrow-mindedness. Like Paul, the Judaizers believed that one was saved through Jesus Christ. They undoubtedly believed that Jesus was Savior. As long as they trusted Christ, then shouldn’t they have been welcomed as fellow followers? Was Paul too harsh on them and their teaching?

Paul clearly considered God’s grace so powerful and great that he believed any attempt to add requirements to it for salvation muted its significance. Paul may have feared that any sort of additional requirements to salvation would ultimately result in some sort of works righteousness. Paul taught that God’s grace alone was sufficient. Jesus had paid the price to purchase humanity’s redemption. Nothing should be added to that. To do so endangers the very truth of the gospel.

Paul was saying that salvation was God's gift, whereas the gospel proclaimed by the Judaizers was a different gospel entirely. As we shall see, they were insisting on additional requirements. They were making God's gift into a form of a purchase. God's grace is a complete and total gift. It cannot be earned, but it must be accepted. When we accept that gift and recognize the fullness of it, we honor our gracious, gift-giving Lord. When we share that gift with others, we become further participants in God's great grace. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:15, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

## TEACHING PLANS

### Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

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#### Connect with Life

1. Think of one or more heroic *rescue* scenarios (fire rescue, life guard, being tied to train tracks, etc.). Have willing participants act these rescue scenarios out. Consider taking the initiative and volunteering yourself. Have fun and ham it up a bit. This activity will serve not only as a good object lesson but also as a helpful ice breaker. After the fun is over, discuss what occurred during the rescue(s). Affirm that we as Christians have been rescued from death and eternal separation from God by the selfless action of God through Christ. This is the gospel.
2. Next, refer to the rescue scenarios, and say something to the effect that the facts behind a story are usually very important. Begin a discussion about the possible frustration and even anger that might occur after hearing someone get the facts of a very important story wrong (for example, identifying another person as the hero in one of the above rescue scenarios). Ask the class whether anyone has ever experienced the frustration of someone getting the facts of a story wrong. Inform the class that this analogy can begin to help

us identify with the frustration and even anger the Apostle Paul felt toward those who were giving a false testimony about the gospel.

### Guide Bible Study

3. Have volunteers read Galatians 1:1–10 in two or three translations represented in the class. Ask the class to listen for some of the key points made in the passage. Tape a large piece of paper to the wall and have a marker on hand. Lead the group to list the powerful words Paul used in Galatians 1:1–10 that seem to indicate his passion about the situation at the church in Galatia (for example, from the NIV, “astonished,” “deserting,” “confusion,” “pervert,” “condemned”). Ask, *Why do you think Paul was so disturbed by what is going on in this church?*
4. Explain Paul’s use of the word “different” using the information in the *Study Guide*.
5. Divide the class into two or more groups (no more than six people each). Have each group suggest at least three substitutes for the gospel of God in Christ that are held by many in our culture. Then have each group suggest three appropriate responses to these false teachings. Have the groups come together and share their findings. Next, refer to the *Study Guide* comments about being narrow-minded under the heading “Paul’s Concern (1:6–10).” Explore together possible responses to the view that Paul’s position about the gospel was too narrow-minded.
6. Have a debate between two groups. Have one side argue the following: *Since I am saved by grace, I can live however I want.* Have the other side argue: *Even though I am saved by grace, I must still follow God’s teachings.* Discuss the proper place of works in our relationship with God.

### Encourage Application

7. Lead the class to consider things they might put into a note to God thanking him especially for rescuing them from this “present evil age.” Invite suggestions after a few moments. Lead participants to

write a short note to God thanking him for his grace in Christ. Encourage the class to keep this note with them throughout the week to serve as a reminder of God’s selfless action on our behalf.

8. Close with prayer. Offer both thanksgiving and petition—thanksgiving for God’s wonderful mercy and grace, and specific petition for those who may be being led astray by another gospel that is really no gospel at all.

## Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

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### Connect with Life

1. Before class, write the two Greek words for *another* on a board at the front of the class (*allos* and *heteron*). Begin the class by summarizing the two paragraphs that begin the lesson in the *Study Guide*. Then refer to the two Greek words. Use the information about these words under “Paul’s Concern (1:6–10)” in the *Study Guide* to explain that while both of these words are translated the same way in English, they have different meanings. Use two different kinds of fruit for an object lesson as the writer does in the *Study Guide*. Explain to the class that a group of teachers known as the Judaizers had presented another gospel of a different kind to the church in Galatia.

### Guide Bible Study

2. Enlist someone to read Galatians 1:1–10 while the class listens for the problem with which Paul was dealing in these verses. After the reading, call attention to verses 1 and 2. Ask the class what difference they think it makes that Paul was “sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.” After allowing a short time of discussion, display a poster on the wall that says, “Wanted: Paul.” Underneath this heading, write, “Charges.” Then number 1–3 and write a charge beside each number (1. not an apostle, 2. no gospel at all, 3. loose living). Explain these charges against

Paul using the information under the section “Paul’s Calling” in the *Study Guide*.

3. Next, write the words “The Rescuer” on the left side of the board. Invite the class to share fitting characteristics of one who rescues others. List responses on the board. Then start another column and write the words “The Rescued.” Ask the class to share fitting characteristics of one who is rescued by someone else (needs help, unable to rescue himself or herself). After this exercise bring attention to Paul’s words in verses 3–4.
4. Share some thoughts about what God through Christ has rescued you from (the parts of this present evil age from which you have struggled to be free). Encourage others to share their experience of being rescued.
5. Point the class to the small article in the *Study Guide* titled “A Question,” and lead them to respond to the question. Say, *One might argue that this young ruler was guilty of trying to receive a righteousness through works.* Then ask, *What are some other substitutes for the gospel of grace that are floating around in our culture?* After this discussion, refer to and summarize the last two paragraphs under the section titled “Paul’s Concern” in the *Study Guide*, on narrow-mindedness and tolerance.

### Encourage Application

6. Lead the class to contemplate the beauty of the wonderful gospel of God. Have the class close their eyes as you read one of the accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion (perhaps Luke 23:33–46). Remind the class that we had nothing to do with God’s plan of the cross. God came to us, and in Christ we have indeed been rescued.
7. Close with a time of prayer, thanking God for his gospel.

### NOTES

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1. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953, 1981 reprint), 50–51.