

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

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### ***Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s Letter to the Galatians***

(SB\_Galatians\_Lsn1\_Background and Introduction)

#### **BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

Paul’s letter to the Galatians has had tremendous impact not only in Paul’s generation, but throughout the centuries of the history of the church. In fact, the truths contained in this one letter alone can be said to have altered the course of history in the Western world. Galatians has been called the “Magna Carta of Christian liberty” – liberty from the bondage of legalism and a works-based salvation. As such, the truths found in this letter became the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther called it his Catherine von Bora (his wife’s name) for he said that he was wedded to it. Luther simply rediscovered and forcefully proclaimed the truths that Paul had discovered so many centuries earlier. Paul’s thesis in Galatians – salvation is through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

#### *HISTORICAL CONTEXT*

Imagine the rapidly changing set of events and the progressive unfolding of doctrinal understanding that was taking place in the growing community of believers throughout the Roman Empire by the late A.D. 40’s. The first doctrinal crisis for the growing body of believers was building. During the first few years after our Lord’s resurrection, the gospel was preached by Jews to Jews almost exclusively. Jewish traditions continued to be observed virtually without question by both unbelieving and believing Jews, e.g. circumcision, meeting in the synagogue on the Sabbath, separation from things declared unclean by the Law, etc.

*Gentile Believers and Jewish Traditions* – Eventually, evangelistic efforts of the believing Jews began to draw Gentile converts into the fold. As Gentiles became believers, questions began to arise as to whether the Gentile believer should be required to observe the traditions of the Jews. We can imagine questions such as the following having been the basis for much debate:

- Was it necessary for a Gentile to observe the Mosaic Law in order to become a Christian?
- Specifically, should the Gentile be circumcised?
- Was it proper for Jews and Gentiles to eat together?
- Could they eat the same foods?
- Was the Jew contaminated by such fellowship with the Gentile?

In other words, did Gentile believers need to become Jews? If they didn’t, were they really saved and part of the elect? These questions revealed a significant undercurrent of thought that was still very pervasive in early Christianity and which had yet to be addressed – the Jews still considered themselves to be God’s elect people through whom God was working His salvific purposes among Jews and Gentiles alike. Even though Paul would deal with this issue later in depth in such passages as Romans 9-11, Paul had not yet received, or at least communicated, the dispensational truths that would address this long held paradigm. (See the accompanying MS PowerPoint slide labeled “First Century A.D. Timeline”).

*The Timing of the Letter to the Galatians and the Council in Jerusalem* – Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians at the end of his first missionary journey into Gentile dominated parts of the Roman Empire around A.D. 48 just a year or two before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The issues that Paul addresses in the book of Galatians would also be the subject of debate at the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 50. The Jerusalem Council would embrace and uphold the essence of Paul’s teaching in Galatians that Gentiles did not have to observe Jewish tradition and the Mosaic

Law in order to be saved. At the same time, it is also likely that the Jewish believing leadership of the Jerusalem Church, while being willing to tolerate Gentile non-observance of Jewish tradition, may have not been so flexible with regard to the believing Jewish community.

“The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 “Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word *of mouth*. 28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”<sup>1</sup> (Acts 15:23-29)

If the Jewish believing leadership in the Jerusalem church had completely divorced themselves from the observance of all things related to the Mosaic Law (as will eventually be promoted by the writer of the book of Hebrews) they would not have included such a request as “abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication.” One could argue that these requests were made of the Gentile believers so that the Gentiles not offend any Jews – especially unbelievers who might otherwise listen to the gospel and become believers. That may be true – at least in part. However, there appears to be more going on here.

It is clear that the Jewish believers did not yet comprehend the dispensational change that had by this point been effected – a dispensational change where Jew and Gentile were members of the same Body of Christ. For the first time in history, Jew and Gentile believers were seen as indistinguishable by God. Note the contrast in paradigms that existed at this point in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century that underlies the following two passages.

13 And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. 14 “Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 “And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,  
16 ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,  
AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,  
AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,  
AND I WILL RESTORE IT,  
17 IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,  
AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’  
18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF OLD.  
19 “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. (Acts 15:13-20)

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:28-29)

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The New American Standard Bible* (LaHabra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

*Different Paradigms* – The difference in paradigms that is highlighted by these two passages is phenomenal. Even after Paul had penned this revolutionary idea that Jews and Gentiles have no distinction as believers in Christ, James, one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church, was still manifesting a paradigm that was very Jew-centric. James' paradigm was based upon passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. Gentile salvation was always presented as secondary to the Jew. The Jew first, then the Gentile. Many passages, such as Amos 9:11-12 quoted by James in Acts 15:16-17, referenced Gentile salvation in association with the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom.

*The Jewish Perspective on the Salvation of Gentiles* – As we discussed in our study of this passage and other similar passages in Acts, the Jewish believers at this point in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century would have been interpreting the salvation of Gentiles through the lens of these Messianic passages. Consequently, they would have seen Gentile salvation as a necessary and wonderful phenomenon accompanying the last days of Israel in preparation for the establishment of the Messianic kingdom – a period during which Israel would be exalted among the believing Gentiles. Obviously, that is a Jewish-centric paradigm that is based upon the old order – Jew first, then Gentile. During the first three decades after Jesus' resurrection, Jewish believers had no reason, other than Paul's teaching, to understand anything differently. However, Paul spent most of his time on missionary journeys in Gentile dominated lands – not in Jerusalem. Therefore, when Paul returned to Jerusalem and met with the Jewish church leadership, he generally faced opposition from unbelieving Jews and perhaps even some believing Jews who were still observing Jewish traditions such as circumcision. Galatians provides us with tangible evidence that Paul was, by this point in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D., definitely introducing teaching and concepts that were unique to a new era and not associated with the Jewish-centric Age of Israel. The Judaizers did not accept the changes taught by Paul and wanted to retain a Jew-centric order.

*Who Were the Judaizers?* Paul taught a gospel of salvation that was free from any requirements of the Mosaic Law. The believers of Galatia embraced Paul's teaching (4:13-15). As was Paul's custom, he established churches and moved on to a different area perhaps returning to visit the area again on a subsequent journey.

After Paul departed from Galatia, he received word that the Galatians were on the verge of departing from the faith that Paul had taught and that they had embraced so willingly. Why? Jewish teachers had arrived in Galatia from Jerusalem and claimed to be sent from James, the Lord's brother. They were teaching that Paul was wrong in his doctrine. They taught that Gentiles must observe the Mosaic Law in order to be saved. Specifically, they must be circumcised to evidence that they were saved and set apart to God. Paul was incensed with righteous anger. He rightly perceived the threat to Truth. If the Judaizers' teaching gained a foothold and prevailed, the gospel of grace and freedom through Christ would be diluted and emptied of value (5:2-4). Christianity would become little more than a sect of Judaism.

*How Was Paul, the Messenger, Being Discredited?* Those who oppose a view have two options: 1) discredit the view or position of the other person; and 2) discredit the person. If both can be accomplished, the debate is over. The Judaizers tried to discredit Paul, the person, and thereby discredit his view or his position. How did they try to do this? Their strategy was three-pronged:

- Discredit his claim to be an Apostle – Paul had not lived with Jesus while Jesus was alive on the earth as had the other “real” Apostles. He was not one of the Twelve. They asserted that Paul was merely an evangelist who after having received some initial knowledge of Christianity turned to his own devices and mechanisms. In an effort to please the Gentiles, Paul taught an easy gospel that was at odds with the apostolic model (1:10).
  - Paul's Reply to This Charge – Paul's reply to this charge is principally found in chapters 1 & 2 of Galatians. His response is essentially three-fold: 1) his teaching was not from human authority, but came directly from God – he had

seen and spoke with the resurrected Lord; 2) his authority was acknowledged by the other Apostles each time they had been in contact with each other; and 3) he had stood firm when others of reputation had waived in Antioch, namely Peter and Barnabas.

- Discredit his gospel – closely related to the first charge, if Paul was not a true Apostle, then obviously, his gospel was false. They argued that God's law could not be set aside – it was eternal. After all, Jesus kept the Law. So did the disciples and followers of Jesus. Who was Paul to set the Law aside?
  - Paul's Reply to This Charge – Paul's reply to this charge is principally found in chapters 3 & 4 of Galatians. Paul uses the faith and life of Abraham to show that God credits righteousness to a person on the basis of faith, not deeds. The imputation of righteousness does not come from the Law or circumcision. Abraham was declared righteous years prior to his circumcision.
- The Effect of Paul's Gospel was to Promote License to Sin – By stressing the Law, Judaizers claimed that the Law promoted morality whereas Paul's teaching did not include a mechanism to control the sinful tendencies that were so prevalent and obvious within the Gentile world.
  - Paul's Reply to This Charge – Paul's reply to this charge is principally found in chapters 5 & 6 of Galatians. Paul taught that Christianity involved changes to the inner man wrought by the Holy Spirit rather than behavior modification imposed by external forces such as the Law. The Holy Spirit produces fruit that is characterized by such attributes as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (5:22-23). The person who has come to faith in Christ alone for salvation is free from the bondage of legalism and free to serve God as led by the Spirit.

*Who Were the Galatians?* There are different theories regarding the exact location of the churches of Galatia to whom Paul addressed his letter and there are very competent scholars who have advocated and attempted to defend the two prevalent theories – the Northern Galatia and Southern Galatia theories. The most important ramification of which theory one adopts is the effect upon the dating of the book. We will accept the South Galatian theory which is the most widely held view today and which results in a dating of the book at the end of Paul's first missionary journey around A.D. 48-49. (The North Galatian theory would have resulted in a dating of the letter at the end of Paul's second missionary journey – about A.D. 52).

The word Galatians has both an ethnic and a political meaning. The ethnic Galatians were Celts who migrated from central Europe to Asia Minor in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. (Another branch of the Celts migrated westward to modern-day France and became known as the Gauls). The eastern Gauls who eventually settled in the area of modern-day Turkey arrived there after invasions of Macedonia and Asia Minor. The eastern Gauls became known as "Gallo-Graecians" and the name was eventually shortened to "Galatians."

By Paul's day, the Roman province of Galatian was further south of the ethnic and political Galatia of two hundred years prior. The north Galatian region still existed and the Galatian dialect was spoken there in combination with the Greek language used for business and governmental matters. However, the south Galatian region contained the cities Luke mentions that are visited by Paul and his companions on the first missionary journey.

*Date of Writing?* This too is a much debated topic and there are good arguments for dates ranging from A.D. 48 to A.D. 52 provided one accepts the premise that Paul was writing to the believers in the southern Roman province of Galatia. One of the major points of discussion surrounding the dating of the letter is Paul's mention of his rebuke of Peter and Barnabas in 2:11ff. Did this occur prior to or after the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 (ca. A.D. 50). We'll address the dating of the letter in a bit more depth when we arrive at that passage.

## **BASIC OUTLINE**

- Paul Defends His Claim to be an Apostle (Chapters 1-2)
- Paul Defends His Gospel Against the Judaizers (Chapters 3-4)
- The Implications of this Gospel in Regards to Daily Living (Chapters 5-6)