

Paul the Apostle:  
the man,  
his background  
and his ministry to  
the Churches in Galatia

**Notes from 'Study, Share and Grow' Bible Studies  
from November 2022 to June 2023**

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# Paul – A Man Prepared

It is useful to know something about Paul himself as we start to look at what he said and wrote. If we were to remove all reference to Paul's life story and writings from the New Testament, it would be a very slim volume!

**Origins** His name was originally Saul, a Hebrew name apparently meaning 'desired' or 'asked', though I have always understood it to mean 'great'. Certainly his namesake, Saul the first king of Israel, was head and shoulders taller than his contemporaries, so maybe that is where the 'greatness' idea has come from (**1 Samuel chapters 9 & 10**). From **Acts 13:9** onwards Saul is called Paul (Greek *Paulos*), which means 'little'.

He was born in Tarsus in south-eastern Turkey, part of the Roman province of Cilicia, and had official Roman citizenship from birth (**Acts 21:39, 22:25-29**). However, he was brought up and educated in Jerusalem and was tutored by Gamaliel, a well-respected Jewish teacher in the sect of the Pharisees (**Acts 22:3, 5:34**). As Saul, he grew up in Jerusalem and was well-known to all there as a Pharisee, 'the strictest sect of our religion' (**Acts 26:5**). At least part of his family continued to live there, as his nephew was on hand in **Acts 23:12-22** to pick up news of a conspiracy to kill Paul and advise the Roman commander, so averting the assassination attempt. But there were probably still some family links with Tarsus, as he was sent on his way there after his early attempts to share the message about Jesus with Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem (**Acts 9:26-30**). There may have been mixed motives for this! It removed Saul from an earlier assassination plot, but also prevented him from stirring things up any more than he already had!

**Pharisee** Paul's background in strict Pharisaism is a fact that he sometimes refers to. For a Jewish audience, this gives him increased credibility as someone who upholds and seeks to enforce the minutest details of the Law as found in the 5 'books of Moses', Genesis to Deuteronomy (the 'Pentateuch'). See **Acts 22:3 & 26:5**. However, in **Acts 23:6**, he uses it to spark disagreement among those who are accusing him!

The Lord Jesus was scathing in his attacks on the Pharisees because of their blatant hypocrisy, and included their cronies the scribes, 'teachers of the Law', but he found no fault with the Law itself, nor even with the teaching which the scribes and Pharisees delivered. **Matthew 23:13-39** is a blistering attack on their hypocrisy, but he prefaces it by telling the crowds to do all that they instruct the people to do (**Matthew 23:1-12**). See also **Matthew 5:18 – & 24:35!**

For other examples of the Pharisees' legalistic Judaism, see **Luke 11:39-44, Matthew 9:11 & 14, Matthew 12:1-2**. There are many more! They loved the power and position that came with their religious fundamentalism, and used it to criticise, control and manipulate others. (**Matthew 23:4-7, 13-15**)

We could easily take a much longer look at the Pharisees, but the main point here is to realise and remember that Saul / Paul was brought up on this diet of strict legalistic adherence to the Jewish Law, and perhaps with a sense of moral superiority which sprang from this assiduous religious observance. It was in his family and in his own personality. What a change was coming!

**Persecutor** Hardly surprising, then, that this young Pharisee would become such a vigorous opponent of the newly-emerging followers of 'the Way' (**Acts 9:2, 19:9 & 23, 22:4, 24:14 & 22**) as taught by that upstart 'prophet' Jesus, who came from Nazareth in Galilee of all places! (**Isaiah 9:1, Matthew 4:15, John 1:46, 7:41 & 52**). 'Galilee of the Gentiles' was despised by many Jews, maybe because it was so closely linked with non-Jewish nations nearby.

Saul would have known all about the confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. Stephen's accusations to the high priest and the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) would have hit him hard, especially the charge of hypocrisy. From Paul's own comments in **Acts 23:1** and **24:16**, we know that he had always had a sensitive conscience. Maybe Stephen's linking of prophecy about the Messiah with the historic persecuting and killing of the prophets who brought those prophecies

also touched a raw nerve and made Saul angry. (**Acts 7:51-53**). We know that he was 'furiously enraged' at all the Christian believers and that this fuelled his persecution (**Acts 26:11**).

Whatever the motivation, it was from the time of Stephen's death that Saul 'began ravaging the church' (**Acts 8:3**) and started imprisoning anyone he could lay his hands on. Little did he realise that he was contributing to the spread of the gospel by forcing many disciples out of Jerusalem. They went into the surrounding areas of Judea, even to Samaria (another place despised by the Jews) and had evidently reached Damascus and had become numerous enough there for this young zealot to want to stamp them out – which led to his journey there in **Acts 9**.

**The Damascus Road** It's worth reading Luke's account in **Acts 9** alongside Paul's own later accounts when he is explaining his history to the mob in Jerusalem in **Acts 22** and to Festus and Agrippa in **Acts 26**. Saul is not merely converted, he is also given his commission as an apostle to the Gentiles. Some key points:–

- 1) The risen and ascended Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting him. His attacks on the church were effectively attacks on the Lord Jesus himself.
- 2) He was told to proceed to Damascus, where he would receive further instructions.
- 3) In the meanwhile, the Lord Jesus outlines Saul's future:
  - a) As a servant with delegated authority. The word translated here as 'minister' or 'servant' is more often translated as 'officer', as in **John 7:32**, when the chief priests sent 'officers' to arrest Jesus. The officers had no authority of their own, but acted with the authority of those who had sent them. Paul was to be the same, acting under authority delegated from the Lord Jesus.
  - b) As a witness. To pass on what he had already seen and what would be shown to him later. Witnesses do not describe a theory; they describe events which they have been part of.
  - c) To go to the Gentiles, to open their eyes to turn from darkness to the light of God, and from Satan's control to God himself, so that they should receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance with God's chosen people. In the process, the Lord would need to rescue Paul from both his own Jewish people and from the Gentiles. We see plenty of evidence of this in Luke's accounts of Paul's journeys.

That last commission was completely contrary to the way that Saul's life had been until that moment. He had been raised to know that the Jews were God's own specially chosen people, the only ones who were truly included in the divine plan. In a very real way, the whole history of the Jews was bound up with the fact that they – and only they – were worshippers of the one true God.

God's own name, I AM, had been revealed to their ancestors. They were the only ones who truly worshipped and served the One Who Is. Now Saul was being commissioned to open up that inheritance to the Gentiles, the heathen nations whom the Jews hated and despised. Nothing could have been much further from the instincts of this zealous Pharisee!

**A Humble Helper** A very dazed Saul makes his way into Damascus. No longer the strident persecutor intent on wreaking havoc among the followers of the Way, but now a humbled and temporarily blinded man who needs leading by the hand, so shattered by his experience that he neither eats nor drinks for 3 days.

Meanwhile, the Lord tells Ananias (a Jewish believer in Damascus) to go to where Saul is staying and lay hands on him so that he will get his sight back and also lets Saul know that Ananias is coming. From what Ananias knows of Saul, he would expect to be immediately arrested and imprisoned, but he follows the Lord's instructions.

Ananias confirms part of what the Lord has already told Saul, that he will be a witness for him to all people of what he has seen and heard. Saul's sight is restored, he is baptised and is filled with the Holy Spirit, and has a meal. Having fulfilled his vital role, Ananias slips back into obscurity, but he probably also plays his part in reassuring the other believers in Damascus that Saul's conversion is genuine, as Saul stays with them and starts to proclaim in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah (Christ).

**Effective Witness** It seems likely that it was shortly after this that Saul spent some time in Arabia before returning to Damascus, and the implication of what he writes in **Galatians 1:15-17** is that it was during that time away that the Lord revealed to him the message that he was to proclaim. He insisted that his message was not just something he had picked up from others, but it had been given to him direct from God. He became so effective in proving Jesus to be the Messiah that the Jews in Damascus hatched a plot to kill him, but he escaped and made his way back to Jerusalem, now at least three years since he left there on his original mission of destruction. **Acts 9:19-25**.

**Welcomed** Whatever news may have filtered back from Damascus over those years, the believers in Jerusalem wanted nothing to do with their former persecutor. It took a Jew from Cyprus to actually trust Saul's testimony, physically take hold of him and bring him to the apostles to confirm Saul's effectiveness in Damascus. Joseph was such a positive disciple that, from the earliest days, they had nicknamed him 'Son of Encouragement' – 'Barnabas' (**Acts 4:36-37**). He and Paul would soon form a very effective partnership. **Acts 9:26,27**.

Once again, Saul speaks out 'boldly in the name of the Lord' and, once more, some of the Jews try to get him killed. For his own safety (and maybe even for their own peace!), the church arrange for him to go to Tarsus, his old home city. **Acts 9:28-31**.

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**The beginnings of a ministry** Some while later, word reached Jerusalem of exciting developments further north. Some of the Jewish believers who had needed to leave Jerusalem after Stephen was killed had travelled on through Phoenicia, crossed over to Cyprus and reached as far as Antioch – 450 miles away, more than twice as far away as Damascus. Most of them had only spoken to Jews about the news of Jesus the Messiah but, in Antioch, some of them (originally from north Africa and Cyprus) had started sharing the gospel with Greeks and 'a large number who believed turned to the Lord' (**Acts 11:19-21**).

Someone from Jerusalem should go and help them, but who? Who better than good old Barnabas, himself from Cyprus, ready to get alongside to help (the real meaning of 'encouragement' in Greek). 'A good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.' What he saw delighted him, and he did what he was known for – he encouraged them! The church in Antioch grew (**Acts 11:22-24**).

But Barnabas knew who he needed to work alongside him and soon set off to Tarsus to look for Saul – another 300 mile round trip.

For a solid year, Barnabas and Saul devoted themselves to teaching that young church – 'considerable numbers' of them. We have no record of what they taught them, but that is where Saul / Paul started his ministry, so probably much of what we can read in his letters will have been developed then. Those believers talked so much about their Lord, the promised Messiah, the Christ ('Anointed One') that they got nicknamed 'Christians' for the first time. The promise of the returning Messiah was the promise of the coming Kingdom of God. (See '[Revolution on Earth](http://www.justonecandle.uk)' from [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk) for a simple study on the Kingdom of God.)

Thanks to the encouragement from Barnabas, Saul had now become an effective builder in the church in Antioch, and now it was not just he and Barnabas who were teaching and sharing the word of the Lord. **Acts 13:1** names five 'prophets and teachers' in the church, and they seem like a cosmopolitan team! Barnabas (from Cyprus); Simeon called Niger, meaning 'black', and so possibly from somewhere in Africa, but Simeon is a Hebrew name; Lucius (a Roman name) from Cyrene in present-day Libya; Manaen who had been the childhood companion of Herod the tetrarch, who had executed John the Baptist (**Matthew 14:1-12**); and Saul who, in his former life as a Pharisee, would not have associated with most of them!

Barnabas and Saul had seen a thriving church start from nothing. Now it was all about to change. The Lord had evidently given them a real ministry in church building there in Antioch. Now he was going to move them on . . .

# Paul in Galatia

Before we start studying the letter that Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, we need to do some 'homework' in order to better understand what he wrote and why he wrote it . . .

Galatia was one of several provinces of the Roman Empire in what is now Turkey. Bithynia was along the Black Sea coast in the north; Cappadocia was to the east; Lycia and Pamphylia were small provinces on the south coast, and Paul's home province, Cilicia, extended further east along the coast and round towards Antioch in Syria. Galatia was an irregular shape, running from the Black Sea southwards to the borders of Pamphylia, Lycia and Cilicia, and Asia was the more or less square block of territory to the west. New Testament references to 'Asia' always mean this Roman province, not the vast continent that we call Asia today. Each of these provinces had districts, some of whose names we shall encounter as we follow Paul's travels. You will find all these names – and a few more – in the maps in the the back of most Bibles.

In **Acts 13:1-3**, we find Barnabas and Paul (still called Saul) in the church in Antioch in Syria, along with three other 'prophets and teachers', Simeon, Lucius and Manaen. Barnabas had travelled from Jerusalem more than a year earlier to help this infant church and had quickly got Saul to join him there. For a whole year those two had taught the church there, the numbers had grown and word had spread in the city about these 'Christians' (**Acts 11:19-26**).

These five weren't having a 'leaders meeting' (though they were obviously leaders!), they were 'ministering to the Lord and fasting', and the Holy Spirit took the opportunity to give them some rather unexpected instructions! The two men who had been mainly responsible for seeing this church established, were to be 'set apart' to carry on this same work in other places. It seems that they were sent on their way without hesitation, with the full endorsement of the church.

They sailed to Cyprus and started to proclaim their message in the Jewish synagogues, gradually working their way through the island from Salamis to Paphos. The local Roman ruler there had evidently heard about them, as he summoned them to come and tell him the message, too. Though they had started with Jews, once again Paul and Barnabas were sharing the good news with Gentiles, as they had back in Antioch. And Sergius Paulus became a believer! (**Acts 13:4-12**)

Sailing on from Paphos, they arrived in Perga on the southern coast of Pamphylia, but didn't stop there for long. It seems that they were intent on reaching Galatia, and specifically another city called Antioch in the district of Pisidia. Once again, they start their preaching in the Jewish synagogue, but within a week almost all the city want to hear what they have to say (**Acts 13:13-44**).

What was the content of their message? Paul starts with the basis of the people of Israel: the fact that God had **chosen** them, multiplied them and then had led them out of Egypt and eventually into the Promised Land. He highlights that God had **chosen** David as their king and then moves straight on to Jesus as a descendant of King David and as the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham (**Genesis 17:4-6, 22:17-18**). "God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus".

He then underlines the fact that Jesus is the promised Messiah by quoting from **Psalms 2 & Isaiah 55** (both recognised prophecies of the coming Messiah) and adding a quotation from **Psalms 16** to show that King David was not writing about himself but about Jesus being raised from death. The fact that Jesus **was** raised and was seen by his disciples for 'many days' confirms that he is the fulfilment of these prophecies.

"Therefore", Paul says, "let it be known to you, brothers, that through him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you", and he then makes the astonishing statement that each person who trusts in Jesus is freed and justified (= made innocent, not guilty), something that simply could not happen under the old Jewish Law (**Acts 13:38,39**). Jews who were struggling to keep the Law of Moses (as Saul himself had done previously), who were failing and so were feeling condemned, were suddenly offered this amazing message! Not only had the promised Messiah come, but he had died and been raised from the dead, AND they could have all their failures forgiven!

No wonder there was an enthusiastic response, not only from the ethnic Jews but also from those Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. They were all there in the synagogue, but of course the word spread through the city and nearly everybody was there the next Saturday to hear what these newcomers had to say.

**(Acts 13:40-52)** Surely Paul will have realised that his message was being well received, even as he was speaking, but he still added a word of warning to anyone who might despise or try to rubbish what he was saying. Just as well! A week later, when the Jews saw that everyone and anyone was interested in what they thought was their own private arrangement with God, they turned against Paul and Barnabas and their message. Result: Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles (i.e. non-Jews), many of them believed and 'the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region'.

The Lord had told Saul right back on the Damascus road, and again later, that he would send him to the Gentiles (**Acts 26:17, 22:17-21**) and had reassured Ananias that he was a chosen vessel, to bear his name 'before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel' (**Acts 9:15**). Most times in Paul's future work, he would start with the Jews but very soon find himself proclaiming the good news to Gentiles.

As the Lord Jesus had already warned him (**Acts 26:16-17**), Paul went on facing violent opposition from both Gentiles and Jews there in Pisidian Antioch. The Jewish leaders stirred up the prominent men and women of the city and Paul and Barnabas were forced out of their district. See that 'they shook off the dust of their feet against them' before they went on to Iconium. This was serious (see **Matthew 10:14, Mark 6:11, Luke 9:5, 10:11**). The kingdom of God had been proclaimed but had been rejected! But 'the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.' (**Acts 13:44-52**) Was that Paul and Barnabas, or the new believers in Antioch, or all of them? !

In Iconium, a very similar train of events! (**Acts 14:1-7**) They speak in the synagogue, many believe (both Jews and Greeks), the unconvinced Jews stir up the Gentiles and embitter them towards them. But I like the next bit in **v.3** ! Therefore, because of the opposition, they spent a long time there – and saw the Lord backing up their words with miracles! And then, once more, a plot to attack and stone them, but the result is that they get away and spread the gospel to two more cities and the surrounding region.

In Lystra, their reception was even more dramatic. As a result of a healing miracle, Paul and Barnabas are regarded as incarnations of the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes (Jupiter and Mercury in the Roman system) and they only just manage to prevent the crowds offering sacrifices to them. Then, with the arrival of Jews from Antioch and Iconium (who had followed Paul and Barnabas), the crowd switches completely and stones Paul, thinking they have killed him. He survives, re-enters the city (!) and then travels on the next day to Derbe. (**Acts 14:8-20**)

Amazingly, it seems that the persecution did not follow them to Derbe, but they proclaimed the message there and 'made many disciples'. (**v.21**)

Perhaps even more amazingly, Paul and Barnabas then retrace their route and revisit Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, not hurrying away to avoid more trouble, but taking the time to encourage the believers and to fast and pray before appointing elders in each church. Those new Christians will have seen with their own eyes the truth of the warning that they were given: 'There will be trouble on our way to entering the kingdom of God.' (**v. 21-23**)

So, Paul and Barnabas leave the province of Galatia and return via Perga (where they **do** preach the gospel this time!) and then head back home to Antioch in Syria, where they report back to the church there. (**Acts 14:24-28**)

*If we try to summarise how that first 'missionary journey' went, what are the headlines? Here are a few: Enthusiastic response – violent opposition – people's opinions easily changed – religious Jews cause trouble – many new believers – churches established with leaders – any more ?*

That first journey was in about AD 47-49. Not long after they got back to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas were faced with a new challenge, and again it came from Judaism – but this time from *within* the company of believers! **Acts 15:1-35** gives us the whole story . . .

The big question was ‘If you are a Christian, do you have to follow the Jewish Law?’ Some Christians from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch and started insisting on the Jewish rite of circumcision for all believers. Needless to say, with all their experience right there in Antioch and on their Galatian journey, both Paul and Barnabas disagreed very strongly with this and the church there decided to send them to the believers in Jerusalem to get the issue sorted out once and for all.

I like the way that, although they were on their way to Jerusalem for this important meeting, Paul and Barnabas took the opportunity to meet with believers on the way and shared with them the amazing news of many Gentiles coming to faith in the Lord Jesus – news which was received with ‘great joy to all the brethren’ (**v.3**).

They continued in the same vein when they arrived in Jerusalem and reported not ‘all that they had done’ but ‘all that God had done with them’ (**v.4**). I like that, too.

But the reason for their visit was soon brought into sharp focus! Some of Paul’s ex-colleagues, Pharisees who had become believers, raised the same question of Jewish circumcision and a big debate resulted! (**v.5-7**) Peter, who had received quite a bit of criticism himself when he first went to Cornelius (**Acts 10:1-11:18**), settled it now in much the same way as he had done before. If God gave these Gentile believers the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, how can we stand in their way? Paul and Barnabas backed that up by ‘relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles’.

James had to agree ‘how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles’ (**v.14**). That was an enormous step for Jews to take, to agree that the promises to Abraham had been opened up to non-Jews, but he backed it up with a quotation from **Amos 9:11-12** and concluded that they should not ‘trouble’ those new believers by making them stick to all the Jewish Law. Everyone seems to have agreed and they drafted a letter that Paul and Barnabas could take to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia to reassure them, and even sent along two men from Jerusalem, Judas and Silas, to travel there with Paul and Barnabas. The result was tremendous joy and encouragement in Antioch (and presumably in the other churches as well).

Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch and it seems Silas did, too, ‘teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many others’.

After about a year, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they should revisit the churches in Galatia. Sadly, they disagreed sharply about whether John Mark should go with them or not, and parted company. Paul had evidently developed a good relationship with Silas, and they were ‘committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord’ and set off together, initially through Syria and Cilicia and then on to Galatia. (**Acts 15:36-41**)

(Silas (aka Silvanus) would stay working with Paul for years to come – just check out how many of the letters that we think of as having been written by Paul actually say that they are from Paul, Silas and Timothy! This was the beginning of a long-term apostolic partnership.)

We don’t get much detail about what Paul and Silas actually said and did as they made this journey through the same places that Paul and Barnabas had visited about 3 or 4 years earlier, but 3 things stand out:

1) Paul added Timothy to his travelling group. A young man, with both Jewish and Greek background (useful!), and highly regarded by the believers in the locality, Timothy would become like a son to Paul (**1 Corinthians 4:17**) and became a reliable member of the apostolic team.

Paul refers to Timothy as his ‘true son in faith’ and also as his ‘brother’. (**Romans 16:21, 1 Corinthians 16:10, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Philippians 2:19, Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 3:2,**



**1 Timothy 1:2, 1:18, 2 Timothy 1: 2, Philemon 1:1)** Paul may have led Timothy to the Lord in the first place and then he selected and trained him to the point where he was an equal partner in the gospel. He encouraged Timothy to follow the same plan (**2 Timothy 2:2**).

2) Paul and Silas passed on the letter from Jerusalem, about there being no need for believers to follow all the Jewish practices, laws and traditions. This will have received the same joyful reception as it had done in Antioch. They were laying some useful foundations, although these would be challenged again later! (**Acts 16:4**)

3) The churches were being strengthened in faith and the numbers were increasing – daily! (**v.5**)

. . . and then Paul and Silas – and Timothy – moved on to other places, taking the gospel to Europe for the first time . . .

It was probably about 3 years later, not long after he had returned from an extended stay in Corinth, that Paul set out again, to travel ‘through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples’ (**Acts 18:23**). It may have been soon after this visit, or perhaps some while later, that Paul felt the need to write the letter that we now know as the book of Galatians. In spite of all the input which the believers had received from Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy over seven or eight years, there were some things that needed to be sorted out, as we shall discover when we start on the letter itself . . .

# Paul's Letter to the Galatian Churches

Perhaps the first point to note is that this is the only one of Paul's letters which is addressed to a number of churches in a region.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, all Paul's letters (the ones we have, anyway) were addressed either to individual churches or to individual people.

General opinion is that Paul probably either wrote this letter from Ephesus in about AD 54, or possibly from Corinth in about AD 57 or 58. If he wrote from Ephesus, it will have been very soon after his last recorded visit to Galatia (**Acts 18**). If he wrote from Corinth, then several years will have elapsed since he last saw them face to face.

Paul addresses issues which affected all the churches in the Roman province of Galatia – one issue in particular. At first sight, what he writes may seem to be specific to that time and situation, but there is very valuable teaching here which affects us all.

There was a problem in the Galatian churches, and Paul had either just seen something of it as he travelled through, or else had recently received reports – or perhaps both! Either way, after a brief initial greeting, he launches straight in to tackle it.

The message which he had brought to them when he had visited them (3 times for certain) was being twisted and contradicted by others who had come later, so Paul takes most of the first two chapters to underline the validity of his message – and himself as the messenger.

## Greeting and Introduction (**Galatians 1:1-5**)

Even in his initial greeting, Paul takes the opportunity to underline his credentials as an apostle (= a 'sent one'), making it clear that, even though on each occasion he had been sent out from the church in Syrian Antioch, the real sender was God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Right from his first encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul knew that he was being sent to non-Jews.

". . . and all the brethren who are with me". It is easy to forget that Paul usually travelled with a group of companions, often those sharing with him in apostolic ministry. We don't know how many may have been in the group when he was in Ephesus, though he sent Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia (**Acts 19:22**). By the time he was in Corinth, there were at least eight others with him, including Luke and Gaius who came from Derbe, one of the churches in Galatia. (See **Acts 20:3-5**) Plus, of course, he was staying with local believers, so they may have also joined in the greeting to the Galatian churches.

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . ." A traditional Jewish greeting when entering someone's house was (and still is) 'Peace be to this house' (**1 Samuel 25:6**) and Jesus repeated it in **Luke 10:5**. Paul includes grace – a central theme of his message – and uses 'grace and peace' as his greeting in *all* his letters. Naturally, he also always refers to 'God our/the Father and our/the Lord/Saviour Jesus Christ' – the source of both grace and peace!

Here were two big steps for this ex-Pharisee:

1) Grace. The Greek word is *charis* (from which we get words like charity and charisma), and its basic meaning is a free and undeserved gift. It is used in some places in the New Testament to mean a favour or concession from someone else apart from God, so it is not a special 'religious' word. But grace from God was totally opposite to the Pharisees' way of thinking. As far as they were concerned, true religion was a matter of obeying (and enforcing!) every little detail demanded by the Law of Moses, **plus** observing all the many traditions that had been built over the centuries.

But Saul/Paul's understanding had been completely overturned: He had been confronted by the grace of the God who **gave** rather than demanded. (See **Galatians 1:15**) His own life had been (and was still being) transformed, and he wanted the same for all he came in contact with. His first recorded message in Galatia (in Pisidian Antioch) traces God's promises to the Jewish nation, the fulfilment of these promises in Jesus as the Messiah, and culminates in the expression of his

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<sup>1</sup> (though he did ask the church in Colossae to read a letter which he wrote to the church in Laodicea, and to share 'their' letter with the Laodiceans – **Colossians 4:16**)

**grace** in forgiveness and being set free from guilt through the Lord Jesus, in contrast to the Law of Moses which simply could not offer such deliverance. (**Acts 13:16-41**)

2) ‘God the Father’ (**v.1**). We may be so accustomed to this phrase that we don’t realise what a change this was for a Jew, especially perhaps for a strict Pharisee. There are only a very few references to God as Father in the Old Testament, and there is no indication that anyone ever prayed to him as ‘Father’ – until Jesus started doing just that **and** taught his followers to do the same! <sup>1</sup> Paul then takes it on from there and says ‘God **our** Father’ (**v.3**). He has more to write about this in **chapter 4**, so we will look at it a little later.

Paul finishes his greeting with a summary of the purpose of God in sending Jesus: a) He gave himself for our sins and failures – so that: b) he would rescue us from this present evil age, c) in line with the Father’s will and d) for his glory, literally ‘into the ages of the ages’.

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Then, straight away without any other introduction, Paul launches into the reason for this letter, and it’s not a comfortable message!

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This was no time for half measures. The whole of Paul and Barnabas’s successful ministry to Gentiles, plus the letter from Jerusalem, had been based on the fact that believers had a direct relationship with God through faith in the Lord Jesus and NOT based on circumcision or any other aspect of the Jewish Law. So Paul confronted Peter face to face and in front of all the believers there in Antioch. This directly affected them all, whether they came from Jewish or Gentile backgrounds.

Some scholars think that the direct words of Paul to Peter end at **verse 14**, but in my opinion the quotation continues to the end of the chapter. Either way, we have some really precious truth here, coming out of genuine heart-felt agony of soul <sup>1</sup> . . .

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2) The **only** way to be justified (= counted righteous) before God is through faith in Jesus the Messiah. Justification comes out of faith in Christ; it doesn’t come out of ‘works of law’. No-one stands righteous before God on their own. **Psalms 143:2** confirms this!

3) **2:17** : On this journey to find justification in Christ, says Paul, we Jews have found that we are also sinners (just like the Gentiles after all! – **v.15**). This is underlined by the fact that he is now building afresh what he once destroyed (**v.18**).

4) **2:19 & 20** : The heart of Paul’s liberty – he is dead to law and so to the whole Jewish Law, so that he can live in direct relationship to God. He expresses his ‘exchanged life’ succinctly in **v.20**. For more in-depth explanation of this vital truth, see **Romans 6:1 - 7:13**, <sup>2</sup> which helps us understand what he means by **v.19**. Paul (especially as an ex-Pharisee) had a real battle with the demands of the Jewish Law but came out liberated! He sums it up in **Romans 7:6**. Also see Paul’s (surprising) statement in **1 Corinthians 15:56** !

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# The Message and the Messenger (Galatians 1 & 2)

Perhaps the first point to note is that this is the only one of Paul's letters which is addressed to a number of churches in a region.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, all Paul's letters (the ones we have, anyway) were addressed either to individual churches or to individual people.

General opinion is that Paul probably either wrote this letter from Ephesus in about AD 54, or possibly from Corinth in about AD 57 or 58. If he wrote from Ephesus, it will have been very soon after his last recorded visit to Galatia (**Acts 18**). If he wrote from Corinth, then several years will have elapsed since he last saw them face to face.

Paul addresses issues which affected all the churches in the Roman province of Galatia – one issue in particular. At first sight, what he writes may seem to be specific to that time and situation, but there is very valuable teaching here which affects us all.

There was a problem in the Galatian churches, and Paul had either just seen something of it as he travelled through, or else had recently received reports – or perhaps both! Either way, after a brief initial greeting, he launches straight in to tackle it.

The message which he had brought to them when he had visited them (3 times for certain) was being twisted and contradicted by others who had come later, so Paul takes most of the first two chapters to underline the validity of his message – and himself as the messenger.

## Greeting and Introduction (**Galatians 1:1-5**)

Even in his initial greeting, Paul takes the opportunity to underline his credentials as an apostle (= a 'sent one'), making it clear that, even though on each occasion he had been sent out from the church in Syrian Antioch, the real sender was God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Right from his first encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul knew that he was being sent to non-Jews.

“. . . and all the brethren who are with me". It is easy to forget that Paul usually travelled with a group of companions, often those sharing with him in apostolic ministry. We don't know how many may have been in the group when he was in Ephesus, though he sent Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia (**Acts 19:22**). By the time he was in Corinth, there were at least eight others with him, including Luke and Gaius who came from Derbe, one of the churches in Galatia. (See **Acts 20:3-5**) Plus, of course, he was staying with local believers, so they may have also joined in the greeting to the Galatian churches.

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . ." A traditional Jewish greeting when entering someone's house was (and still is) 'Peace be to this house' (**1 Samuel 25:6**) and Jesus repeated it in **Luke 10:5**. Paul includes grace – a central theme of his message – and uses 'grace and peace' as his greeting in *all* his letters. Naturally, he also always refers to 'God our/the Father and our/the Lord/Saviour Jesus Christ' – the source of both grace and peace!

Here were two big steps for this ex-Pharisee:

1) Grace. The Greek word is *charis* (from which we get words like charity and charisma), and its basic meaning is a free and undeserved gift. It is used in some places in the New Testament to mean a favour or concession from someone else apart from God, so it is not a special 'religious' word. But grace from God was totally opposite to the Pharisees' way of thinking. As far as they were concerned, true religion was a matter of obeying (and enforcing!) every little detail demanded by the Law of Moses, **plus** observing all the many traditions that had been built over the centuries.

But Saul/Paul's understanding had been completely overturned: He had been confronted by the grace of the God who **gave** rather than demanded. (See **Galatians 1:15**) His own life had been (and was still being) transformed, and he wanted the same for all he came in contact with. His first recorded message in Galatia (in Pisidian Antioch) traces God's promises to the Jewish nation,

<sup>1</sup> (though he did ask the church in Colossae to read a letter which he wrote to the church in Laodicea, and to share 'their' letter with the Laodiceans – **Colossians 4:16**)

the fulfilment of these promises in Jesus as the Messiah, and culminates in the expression of his **grace** in forgiveness and being set free from guilt through the Lord Jesus, in contrast to the Law of Moses which simply could not offer such deliverance. (**Acts 13:16-41**)

2) 'God the Father' (**v.1**). We may be so accustomed to this phrase that we don't realise what a change this was for a Jew, especially perhaps for a strict Pharisee. There are only a very few references to God as Father in the Old Testament, and there is no indication that anyone ever prayed to him as 'Father' – until Jesus started doing just that **and** taught his followers to do the same! <sup>1</sup> Paul then takes it on from there and says 'God **our** Father' (**v.3**). He has more to write about this in **chapter 4**, so we will look at it a little later.

Paul finishes his greeting with a summary of the purpose of God in sending Jesus: a) He gave himself for our sins and failures – so that: b) he would rescue us from this present evil age, c) in line with the Father's will and d) for his glory, literally 'into the ages of the ages'.

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# Following Rules Doesn't Work (Galatians 3)

As we go on reading this letter, it's good to remember that Paul is writing to believers in the first churches that he and Barnabas saw established on their first apostolic journey. These are some of his first spiritual 'children' and he is really concerned that they are going off the rails.

Paul himself had been a strict Pharisee, a real stickler for every aspect of the Jewish Law but, as he wrote at the end of **ch. 2** and as we have seen in **Romans 7**, he had come through a deep personal battle with the demands of the Law. He **knew** from his own experience that following rules didn't work, and really longed to see his Galatian brothers and sisters living in the same release and liberty.

## **You Started by Faith, Not Law (3:1-5)**

He knew that he and Barnabas had brought them the true message of freedom, something that the Jewish Law simply could not offer (**Acts 13:38,39**), so where had this twisted religious teaching come from? He and Barnabas had concentrated on Jesus the Messiah, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the **grace** that they could experience as a result of trusting in him. Not a word about religious observance! (**Galatians 3:1 & Acts 13:26-43**). "You're just not thinking straight!" says Paul. (**3:1**)

"So", he asks, "just answer one question for me: You received the Holy Spirit, didn't you? How did that happen? Was it because you followed the Jewish Law, or because you put your trust in the message you had heard?" (Literally, 'out of the hearing of faith'). (**3:2**)

"Are you really that stupid? Having started out with the Spirit of God, what makes you think you will reach your goal by natural human effort?" (**3:3**)

"And how about all your experiences and suffering – was that for nothing after all?" (**3:4**)

"The Holy Spirit is at work amongst you and you are seeing miracles – is that because you are following rules, or because you hear what God is saying and believe it? (Again, literally, 'out of the hearing of faith'). (**3:5**)

## **Look at the Example of Abraham (3:6-9)**

Abraham is known as the father of the Jewish nation, so Jews have always prided themselves as being 'sons and daughters of Abraham'.

Back in **Genesis 15:1-6**, The LORD made promises to him (a childless man aged 80+ !) that he would be the father of great numbers and that they would possess the Promised Land. "*Then he believed in the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.*" (**3:6**) Paul quotes this and uses it to prove that the **real** 'sons of Abraham' are those who trust God, underlining the additional promises that the LORD made, that "all the families of the earth" (**Genesis 12:3**) and "all the nations of the earth" (**Genesis 22:18**) will be blessed in Abraham (**3:7**).

Even right back then, in Abraham's time, the future promise had been that 'God would justify the Gentiles by faith' (**3:8**). Wow!

That clinches it, says Paul, "those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer". (**3:9**) The words 'faith', 'believed' and 'believer' all come from the same root, meaning **trust**. <sup>1</sup>

## **The Law Brings a Curse – But We Have Been Released From It! (3:10-14)**

On the other hand, the Law demands perfection and "*cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them.*" (**3:10** and **Deuteronomy 27:26, Psalm 119:21, Jeremiah 11:3**)

Paul contrasts a well-established principle from the Jewish Law in **Leviticus 18:5 (3:12)** with a less well-known verse from **Habakkuk 2:4 (3:11)**. As a Pharisee, he would have been very well aware that '*he who practises them shall live by them*' but may have been surprised to also discover

<sup>1</sup> Paul describes Abraham's own faith in more detail in **Romans 4**.



that *'the righteous will live by his faith'*. He certainly quotes this verse again in **Romans 1:17**, and so does the writer in **Hebrews 10:38**. "*The Law*", he writes, "*is not of (literally, 'out of') faith*" – in other words, faith is not where law comes from!

**BUT** – and it is a big 'but' – we have been released from the curse of the law because the Lord Jesus paid the price for us by **becoming a curse** for us! (**3:13**) This word translated 'redeemed' literally means 'bought out of the market place', like a slave who is bought and then released. Paul uses it again in **Galatians 4:5**.

And the purpose of this? So that, in Christ, the blessing given to Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles, so that 'we' (both Jews and Gentiles) *'would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.'* (**3:14**). I do like Paul's inclusive 'we' !

### **God's Promises to Abraham Are Like a Will or a Legal Document (3:15-18)**

The promises that the LORD made to Abraham were made 430 years before the Law was given via Moses (**Exodus 20** onwards). Even a person's will or another legal document can't be changed once it has been ratified, and God's promises are the same. (**3:15**) The LORD promised an inheritance to Abraham and his offspring long before the Law was given, and the Law doesn't change those promises!

Jews all knew (and were proud of the fact) that they were descended from Isaac, the offspring according to God's promise, and not from Ishmael who was the result of Abraham's own attempts to have an heir.

Interestingly, though we can easily take 'offspring' to mean **many** people, the word is actually singular in the Greek version of the Old Testament and Paul uses that to show that the promises to Abraham actually pointed forward to the **one** offspring who was to come, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. (I have not yet been able to find out whether the word is singular or plural in the original Hebrew.)

If you look back to the promises in **Genesis 22:15-18** and read them with that understanding, they take on fresh meaning. <sup>1</sup>

### **So What Is (or Was) the Purpose of the Law? (3:19-23)**

If the Jewish Law only brings a curse, what is (or was) the point of it? Good question!

Paul says that it was 'added because of transgressions' (**3:19**). 'Added' to the promise made to Abraham 430 years earlier, to make people more aware of when they had crossed the line of disobedience. Sin/failure had been there all the time; having a set of rules flagged it up more obviously. And again, says Paul, the Law was only in force until the Offspring would come 'to whom the promise had been made'.

There was nothing wrong with the Law, but it could not give life (**3:21**). That could only come through the Offspring. Until he came, everyone was confined, **under** sin and **away from** the faith which would be revealed later.

### **Freedom as Sons of God (3:23-29)**

The contrast of two 'buts'! In **3:23**, Paul writes "*But before faith came . . .*" and then in **3:25**, "*But now that faith has come . . .*" The difference could hardly be greater!

He uses the picture of the young son of a wealthy man, who would be under the direction and control of a trusted slave. This 'tutor' would be the boy's constant companion, making sure that he went to school and did all his work properly, and would instruct him in all the things that the father wanted him to do, in some detail. The slave would even sit at the back of the class to keep an eye on him in school lessons!

Needless to say, these slaves were **not** popular with their young charges, but the father would eventually set a day – when the boy had been trained and had matured to young adulthood – on which he would officially recognise his son as his heir and as the young master in the household, and make him a partner in the family business. The young man would be released from subjection

<sup>1</sup> See also the earlier occasions where the LORD promised to bless Abram/Abraham, in **Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-18, 15:1-6, 18-21, 17:1-22**

to the 'tutor' slave, would come into a fresh relationship with his father and into his inheritance as his father's son, with full adult status in society.

The Law, says Paul, is like that slave for us: "*a tutor to lead us to Christ (literally, 'into Christ'), so that we may be justified by faith*" (**3:24**) and we are no longer under it, but have come into full sonship 'through faith in Christ Jesus' (**3:25,26**).

I can almost hear Paul saying "Don't you realise? You are all sons and heirs!" Because, he says, when you were baptised, you 'clothed yourself with Christ'.<sup>1</sup> Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – it's all irrelevant because 'you are all one in Christ Jesus' (**3:27,28**).

And, to cap it all, as those who belong to the Messiah, you are all genuinely Abraham's offspring, 'heirs according to promise' ! (**3:29**)

He develops this picture a little more in the next chapter . . .

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<sup>1</sup> See also **Colossians 3:1-17**, especially **9&10**. Paul asks a very similar 'Don't you know?' in **Romans 6:3**

# The Freedom of Sonship (Galatians 4)

Paul continues with the picture he started in **chapter 3**, of the young man who has stepped into his inheritance and has been released from subjection to a slave . . .

Have you ever been on the flat roof of a house in a busy town or city? From just a few feet up, you get such a lovely bird's-eye view of what is going on around you. I like to think that, as Paul was preparing this letter to the churches in Galatia, he will have been up on the roof one morning (great place for a prayer time – see **Acts 10:9**) and could see the 'school run' taking place in the streets below. All those rich men's sons being taken to school by their slave 'tutors', probably each 'chafing at the bit', wishing that he could get rid of this wretched slave but knowing that he was stuck with him until the day when his father would bring him into full sonship . . .

. . . and the Holy Spirit prompts Paul that this simple picture will help to make the point to those folk in Galatia, will help them to see that they really **have** escaped from the clutches of the Jewish Law, in fact from any – and all – legalism!

**You have come into your inheritance. (Galatians 4:1-7)** "Think of that boy", says Paul, "he may be the son and heir and the eventual young master of the household, but right now he is no better than a slave – he's even under a slave! His father's senior household servants and managers can tell him what to do – until that wonderful future day (set by his father) when the tables will be turned and he will be **their** boss!"

"We were the same! Like children, we were held under the elementary rules of the world." I do like the way that Paul includes himself, as a strict follower of the Jewish Law, along with all those Galatian believers who were from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds – they had ALL been under the same basic world-system principles: rules and regulations, expectations and demands that kept them all in bondage! We in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century were exactly the same.

**BUT**, when the right time had come (like the coming-of-age day chosen by the boy's father), God 'sent forth' <sup>1</sup> his Son, who was born into the same world law-system, so that he could 'buy out' <sup>2</sup> all of us who were trapped by it and we could receive that 'coming-of-age' for ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

And the result? God has 'sent forth' (same word) the Spirit of his Son into our hearts and by the Spirit we call out both 'Abba' ('Daddy' – a child's name for their father) and 'Father' (the mature son addressing his father), as Jesus did in Gethsemane (**Mark 14:36**).

"Right", says Paul, "that's settled, then! You're not a slave, you're a son. And as you are a son, then you are also an heir – all through what God has done for you."

By the way, please don't get the impression that all this talk of sons and sonship is only for men! At the end of the previous chapter, Paul made that abundantly clear: "*you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (**3:26,28**). The freedom of sonship is for ALL who have 'faith in Christ Jesus'.

**So why go back into slavery? (4:8-11)** "That's where you used to be, slaves to things that are not gods of any sort, when you didn't know God. (Yes, that applied to those from Jewish backgrounds, too! Look at the prophecy in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**, shown in **Hebrews 8:8-13** as having now been fulfilled!) But now that you have come to know God (though it's much more that he knows you!), why do you want to turn round and go back into slavery to those basic world-system principles?" They were observing special days and seasons, just like they used to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Sent out on a mission'. Used in these verses (and other places) and by the Lord Jesus in **Luke 24:49**.

<sup>2</sup> 'Redeem', the same word that Paul used back in **Galatians 3:11**, means 'buy out of the market place', like a slave who is bought in the slave market and then given their freedom.

<sup>3</sup> 'Adoption' is completely the wrong word, but we don't really have an English word for this turning point in a young man's life in those days. The Greek word literally means 'placing as a son'.

do under the Jewish system or any of the pagan rituals. “Have I wasted all that work that I did with you?” asks Paul.

**Two Types of Messenger. (4:12-20)** We gain a brief glimpse of the way that Paul worked with these folk and elsewhere. He became closely involved! It seems that he was suffering from some physical illness or disability (literally, ‘weakness of the body’) when he first went to Galatia and that they were more than happy to help him in any way that they could. He may have had something wrong with his eyes (4:15). People sometimes say that one of the quickest ways to make friends is to ask someone to help you, and this may have happened here. Anyway, they had given a warm reception to Paul **and** his message, as if he had been an angel – or even Jesus himself!

So what had happened to that blessing and happiness that they had experienced and expressed? Now that Paul is forced to confront them with the truth, have they begun to consider him their enemy? Why is he asking this? Because the believers there have been listening to some other voices: ‘They’ in 4:17. And what have those other voices been saying?

He doesn’t say exactly, but it is clear from 4:17 what their tactics have been. They have tried to shut out Gentile believers (and probably some from Jewish backgrounds) by saying exactly what had been said in Antioch in **Acts 15:1**: “*Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved*”. By shutting the door in their faces, these ‘Judaisers’ planned to get the Gentile believers to try to push that door open and become Jewish proselytes – and so make Christianity merely a branch of Judaism, still bound by the Jewish Law and traditions.

“Yes, it’s good to be wanted”, says Paul, “and not just when I am with you! But for good reasons, not bad ones.” (4:18)

When he calls them ‘my children’ in 4:19, he uses the word that means ‘a born one’. ‘My born ones’ – he sees himself as being their spiritual parent. But he feels like he is going through the pains of childbirth **again**, “until Christ is **formed** in you” – in other words, until they become more like true children who are maturing and becoming like their parents. Through all his letters, we find Paul is always urging his readers to move forwards, to progress and mature in our walk with God, so that we become incrementally changed to be more like the Lord Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

We can really feel his anguish and concern in 4:20. He would much rather be there and be able to talk with them directly; maybe then he could change his tone and see them liberated and moving forward. Meanwhile, he doesn’t know what to think! The word he uses means ‘not knowing which way to turn’.

Hopefully, the Galatian believers will have seen more of the genuine love and concern that Paul has for them, along with his message of freedom, and will have begun to see the emptiness of the other people’s attempts to get them stuck under rules and regulations . . .

**Abraham’s Offspring – Children of Promise. (4:21-31)** Paul brings another picture, this time from Jewish history and the Old Covenant. Again, he takes them back to Abraham, whom all Jews (including these ‘Judaisers’) venerated as the father of their nation.

Back in **Galatians 3**, he had emphasised Abraham’s **faith** as contrasted to **the Jewish Law**. Now he compares Abraham’s two sons – and their mothers!

First, he challenges them: “If you really want to be back under the Jewish Law, you should at least listen to it!” (The Jews referred to all the 5 books of Moses as ‘The Law’, even though the actual Law does not make an appearance until **Exodus 20**.) Then Paul goes on to bring them an allegory from the life of Abraham and the very beginning of the Jewish nation. Jews were (and still are) proud of being descendants of Isaac, ‘the son according to promise’ whose mother was Sarah – a free woman – and not from the line of Ishmael, whose mother was a slave.

So what Paul goes on to say next would have been surprising and probably shocking to Jewish believers. He equates the Judaism of his time with Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, “bearing children into slavery” (4:24) and says that ‘the present Jerusalem’ corresponds to the old covenant from

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<sup>1</sup> For example, **2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 4:11-16, Colossians 1:28** – and many more!

Mount Sinai, “in slavery with her children”. The reference to Sinai being in Arabia (**4:25**) underlines the link to Ishmael, whose descendants “dwelt from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as you go towards Assyria” (**Genesis 25:18**), an area that lies in present-day Saudi Arabia.

These are very strong statements which write off Judaism as being alien to God’s promises and purposes – totally opposite to the understanding that Paul would have had before, as Saul the ‘Pharisee of the Pharisees’ ! He has come a long way since those days, but the revelation that he has received gives him the clarity and authority to say this.

He no longer considers Jerusalem as his ‘mother’, as he used to do when he himself was bound by strict adherence to the Law. Now he looks to ‘the Jerusalem above’ <sup>1</sup> and compares it/her to Sarah, the **free** woman who was the mother of the son of promise. And he includes all believers (Jewish or Gentile) to be just like Isaac, ‘children of promise’ (**4:26-28**).

In **4:27**, Paul quotes from **Isaiah 54**, a chapter full of promises to the people of God, which follows on, of course, from the well-known Messianic prophecy of **Isaiah 53**. Like the people to whom Isaiah originally spoke this prophecy, the believers in the Galatian churches may have felt that they were a vulnerable minority, especially when compared to the large, thriving and apparently fruitful Jewish nation. Paul uses the encouragement of Isaiah’s words to reassure them that they are right in the centre of God’s plans and purposes. Check out more of the promises in **Isaiah 54** for yourself!

Just as Ishmael (aged 14+) mocked his infant half-brother Isaac (**Genesis 21:9**), so, says Paul, those who are the present-day equivalent of the one ‘who was born according to the flesh’ are persecuting those who are born ‘according to the Spirit’. Hence the hard time that the ‘Judaisers’ are giving to the Galatian believers (**4:29**).

Paul really doesn’t mince his words here! In equating Judaism with Hagar and Ishmael and identifying those with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the true children of promise like Isaac, he goes on to quote **Genesis 21:10 & 12**, which says that the son of the slave should be ejected and not share in the inheritance with the son of promise (**4:30**).

The Judaisers had tried to shut out the Gentile believers in order to try to get them to embrace Judaism. Now Paul is saying that it is they who are shut out and will miss out on the inheritance of the children of promise! **We believers**, says Paul, **are now the true heirs of Abraham** and the promises which God made to him, “not children of a bondwoman but of the free woman.” (**4:31**) The tables are completely turned!

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<sup>1</sup> See **Hebrews 12:22, 11:16, 13:14, Revelation 3:12, 21:2 & 10**

## Freedom in Practice (Galatians 5)

In the previous chapters, Paul has explained his own history and revelation from the Lord, shared how the leaders in the Jerusalem church had endorsed how he and Barnabas had taken the gospel to the Gentiles, recounted how he had needed to challenge Peter's inconsistency and made it abundantly clear that Jews and Gentiles are in exactly the same position before they believe in Jesus – bound by rules and expectations – and are on the same footing once they have believed – “justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of law, since by works of law no flesh will be justified” (**Galatians 2:16**).

He has illustrated how it was the **faith** of Abraham (father of the Jewish nation) that put him in right relationship with God, and that the effect of trying to obey laws is to put ourselves under a curse. How that curse is lifted through Jesus' death on the cross and how, as a direct result, “in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we all (Jewish and Gentile believers) would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (**3:14**).

He has painted the graphic picture of the young heir who is made to obey a family slave until the day chosen by his father for his coming of age, when he is placed as the son and heir in his father's household, and has shown the Galatian believers (and us!) that we have been put in exactly the same position in God's household. We are no longer under the slavish direction of ‘do this, do that’ in order to try to please our Father; he has brought us to the freedom of sonship and “sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ ” (**4:6**)

He has gone back to Abraham again and made the comparison of Judaism of that time with Hagar and her son Ishmael, the son of Abraham who did not inherit the promises. This would have been shocking in the extreme to Jewish readers/listeners, just as it would have been to Paul himself as a strict Pharisee just a few years earlier. They all prided themselves on being the descendants of Isaac, the ‘son of promise’. No, says Paul, the “present Jerusalem” (i.e. Judaism at the time) “is in slavery with her children” (**4:26**) and those who trust in Jesus the Messiah are the true “children of promise” (**4:28**).

We can imagine the impact that this would have had on any believers in the Galatian churches who might have begun to be persuaded that they needed to fall in line with established Judaism if they wanted to follow the Lord Jesus. Those from Jewish backgrounds might be horrified at the way that Paul seemed to be writing off their exclusive heritage as the people of God. The Gentile believers now found that they **didn't** need to embrace Jewish practices (such as circumcision) after all, but had already been made heirs of God's promises to Abraham. But I can almost hear the howls of protest from the Jewish contingent that ‘it's not fair!’ and there may have been some tension building between the two groups. Hardly surprising then, that Paul emphasises that every one of them who has been baptised into Christ has clothed themselves with Christ and “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.” (**3:27,28**)

But has Paul's painstaking teaching and persuasion had the needed effect? Is it working out in practice in their lives? Writing his letter from Ephesus or Corinth, of course, Paul can't see how they are responding to what he has already written, so he starts applying the ‘theory’ to practical aspects of their lives, into **chapter 5 . . .**

### Putting it into practice (5:1-6)

**5:1** seems to sum up all that he has written so far. The whole purpose of being released from sin, failure and bondage is so that we can experience freedom in practice. “Christ set us free” is the aorist tense, which always means that something has been finished and done ‘once for all’. Some translations (and a well-known song) say ‘Christ **has** set us free’, which of course is true, but the aorist “Christ **set** us free” says clearly that Jesus set us free **at a point in time past**. It is finalised! So, as that's the case, says Paul, “keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” Do we know what a yoke is? According to the dictionary, it is “a wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plough or cart that they are to pull.” An animal under a yoke is bound to hard work and effort – a good picture!

**5:2-6** First practical example: circumcision. This was Abraham's side of the covenant which the LORD made with him in **Genesis 17**, changing his name from Abram to Abraham and confirming the blessings which he had already promised in **Genesis 12** (plus some more). So, for every Jewish male, this was a vital part of continuing that covenant with God and so was absolutely essential for him. But here is Paul saying that, if you become circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you! What does he mean? Simply that, through Jesus, you already have access to the promises which the LORD made to Abraham. (**5:2**)

What is worse is that, by getting circumcised, a Gentile believer would be putting himself under the **whole** Jewish law, obliged to keep every little detail! As an ex-Pharisee, Paul knows only too well what that meant! (**5:3**)

**5:4** has an interesting word in it, which different Bible translations have struggled to express fully. They say that those who want to be justified by obeying the law have been 'severed', 'alienated', 'cut off', 'deprived of all profit', 'estranged' or 'separated' from Christ. The picture is clear enough, but the Greek word itself is even more graphic! *Katargeo* means to 'put out of action' or 'make inoperative'. Circumcision may not be a 'live' issue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but by any attempt to achieve justification by our own efforts, we are putting Christ out of action in our lives and have fallen away from the grace of God. A serious warning! <sup>1</sup>

**5:5** So, says Paul, by faith in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit (instead of relying on our own efforts), we are waiting for 'the hope of righteousness'. See **Romans 8:23** and **1 Corinthians 1:7**.

If you were a Gentile believer and became circumcised, you would be effectively saying that you thought the promises were NOT yours through Jesus, so you would 'make sure' by getting circumcised – completely pointless! And, of course, if you were already a Jew with access to the promises through your lineage from Abraham, you were now a **direct** heir to those promises through faith in Jesus. Circumcision was (and is) now irrelevant! Not our own efforts but faith being effective through selfless love. (**5:6**)

### **Who got in your way? (5:7-12)**

Once again, Paul expresses his concern that the Galatian believers are being diverted from the truth. Not just away from 'doctrinal truth' but away from the actual reality of what is theirs in Christ. Just a little false teaching can affect the whole church! He is confident that the believers will get it right in the end, but he refers again to those who are causing the problem – who are they? Judgement is coming their way, so he can leave that with the Lord, but he is really angry with them – see **5:12** !!

Whoever they are, Paul says, being easily persuaded like this does NOT come from the Lord! (**5:8**) Do we find ourselves being easily diverted towards self-effort instead of standing on the basis of what God has done for us in Christ?

As we saw in **Chapter 4**, Paul certainly does not proclaim Judaism any more – what he wrote in **4:21-31** would offend all practising Jews – and so he definitely does not advocate circumcision, which he used to do. As a result, most of the trouble he now gets is from Jews! (**5:11**) <sup>2</sup>

Paul refers to the cross of Christ as a stumbling block. He goes into a little more detail in **1 Corinthians 1:21-25**, contrasting Greeks and other Gentiles searching for wisdom and philosophy and Jews looking for supernatural signs. The message of the crucified Messiah makes no sense to those looking for a philosophical belief system and is downright offensive to Jews (and perhaps to other 'religious' or 'spiritual' people) who are looking for demonstrations of God's power.<sup>3</sup>

### **A life of freedom (5:13-15)**

Yes, we are called to freedom, but that is no excuse for just pleasing ourselves! Real freedom

<sup>1</sup> If you want to explore this word a little more, see 'Out Of Action' from [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, a few years earlier, Paul had thought it was a good idea for Timothy to be circumcised 'because of the Jews' (**Acts 16:1-3**). Now, at least 3 years later, he has evidently become much clearer about it!

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word translated 'stumbling block' is *skandalon*, from which we get our word scandal.

results in love which expresses itself through serving others, and this **fulfils** the whole Jewish Law (see **Matthew 22:36-40**). But if we use our ‘freedom’ to damage each other, we need to beware, because that damage could consume us all.

### **Natural and supernatural (5:16-26)**

“Walk by the Spirit”, says Paul, “and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” What does he mean by ‘flesh’? The natural, sinful and selfish drive which is characteristically human! We see it all around us all the time. He doesn’t say ‘you **should** not carry out the desire of the flesh’. This is a different way of living which relies totally on the new life of the Holy Spirit living inside us, flowing out and showing himself in our transformed lives, not on our efforts to live good lives. In **Romans 8:2**, Paul calls it “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”. Not an external law, telling us what to do or not do, but the life of the Holy Spirit working within us. <sup>1</sup>

There’s a battle going on! Natural humanity pulls one way, the Holy Spirit the other way. So much of a struggle that we can’t work out what to do! **BUT** there is a solution, says Paul: “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.” (**5:17-18**)

It’s easy to see what the actions of natural human nature are, and he lists some of them in **5:19-21**, with a repeated warning that people who live like that are not heirs of the kingdom of God. These are deeds that people **do**, not things that happen to them. Choice is involved. Earlier in this letter, Paul has written at some length about being heirs of the promises made to Abraham. Lives that look like this, he says, have no place in that inheritance.

But then he has a list of opposite characteristics in **5:22-23**, and he calls them “the fruit of the Spirit”. Not ‘fruits’ but one single fruit, the demonstration of the life of Christ visible in the life of the believer. The result, not of great effort to achieve, but of the ability of God the Holy Spirit to make us progressively more like his Son. This is what Paul meant about Christ being ‘formed’ in the believers there (**4:19**). <sup>2</sup> And then, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, he adds “. . . and there’s no law against any of these!”

So, what’s the solution to the problem of the natural human nature? More effort required to try NOT to do these wrong things? **NO**, says Paul, the solution has already been provided; your old life is already dead. If you are Christ’s person, you already crucified that old life with all its ‘passions and desires’ (**5:24**) (Another aorist tense : ‘finished and done’). By being joined to Jesus, your old life was crucified with him (**Romans 6:6**). He already touched on this vital truth at the end of **chapter 2**, and writes much more about it in **Romans 6:1-7:13**. We need to know it and count on it!

If we have life by the Holy Spirit (and we do!), let us also walk (literally ‘walk in line’) by the Spirit (**5:25**).

No boasting about ourselves, no winding each other up or envying each other (**5:26**) !

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<sup>1</sup> See also ‘Two Trees’, ‘DIY Religion?’ and ‘What Does God Want Me To Do?’ From [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)

<sup>2</sup> “Christian progress is not a question of attaining to some abstract standard, or of pressing through to some far-off goal . . . You advance spiritually by finding out what you really are, not by trying to become what you hope to be. That goal you will never reach, however earnestly you strive.” Watchman Nee, *What Shall This Man Do?*, Chapter 10.



## How It Works Out (Galatians 6)

Paul has worked through the problem that had been besetting the Galatian churches and, if they have followed his clear directions, they should now be able to see their way out of their 'religious' approach to faith in Christ.

Not allowing themselves to be dragged back into following man-made rules and regulations, not even trying to please God by attempting to keep the Jewish Law. For the Jews among them, not basing their trust on the fact of their natural lineage from Abraham and, for Jews and Gentiles alike, realising that they have all been made sons and heirs to God's promises through the fact that their lives have been joined to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Learning to live from the inside, not from the outside, from the 'law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus'<sup>1</sup> and not from any set of external expectations, whether imposed by someone else, by themselves, or even by God himself!

Just a passing thought: It is interesting, and perhaps a little disturbing, to realise that this problem had affected (and **infected**) a number of churches, not just one. As we have already seen, the idea that new Christian believers needed to embrace the Jewish religion had been put around among the Galatian believers in very much the same way as had been done in Syrian Antioch in **Acts 15**. That particular problem had been addressed, and the Galatian churches had even been told the result, but **still** the false teaching went around and took root. If it had not done so, Paul would have had no reason to write this letter!

This speaks volumes about our natural human tendency to try to work things out by our own efforts, both in the case of those who were propagating the false teaching and for those who were apparently all too ready to embrace it. The fact was that, originally, they had all been given the truth of the good news of God's **grace** through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But now the false teachers tried to drag Christians into Judaism and, it seems, there were many who were all too ready to be 'bewitched' into self-effort. However long we may have been believers, it is all too easy for us to begin to think that in some way we can earn some standing with God by our own efforts and achievements. The message of this letter remains very relevant today.

Now into **chapter 6**, Paul begins to sum up and move into some practical advice, drawing on what he has already written.

**Galatians 6:1-5** A practical problem! Someone has gone off the 'straight and narrow'! The word literally means to 'fall to the side'. That could be deliberate or accidental but, either way, we all have a responsibility to 'restore' (literally, to 'thoroughly complete') that person 'in a spirit of gentleness', to bring them back to a fully working relationship with the Lord, **and** to be wary of going the same way ourselves. All too easy to be critical and condemning, but Paul reminds us of our own weaknesses by prescribing 'gentleness' and our need to be careful for ourselves.

*"Bear one another's burdens"* (**6:2**) again speaks of coming alongside to help, sharing the load when a brother or sister has problems, not just when they have gone off the rails. Loving each other in the same way that we love ourselves (**5:14**) – and he writes about **fulfilling** the 'law of Christ', not striving to obey it!

**6:3-5** may seem a little disconnected, but they follow on from restoring someone who has slipped and from helping to carry each other's burdens. 'Don't kid yourself', says Paul. 'Do you think you are really someone special? In that case, are you fulfilling the law of Christ and loving your fellow-believers by correcting gently and helping with their problems? Check yourself out! You can't boast about what someone else has done as if you had done it yourself.'

**Galatians 6:6-10 Giving and Getting!** I am pretty sure that **v.6** is mainly an encouragement for those in the churches who are being taught to share practical resources with those who are doing the teaching, in other words to contribute to their day-to-day needs, but I also think it relates to sharing good things that come up in the course of the teaching process. In today's language,

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<sup>1</sup> **Romans 8:2**

positive feedback! Certainly I get really blessed by the things that people have found for themselves and share back into the study group.

One of the results of this sort of feedback and sharing is that we **all** get blessed! As Paul writes in **v.7-8**, what we 'sow' comes back to us. He applies it again to practical support in **2 Corinthians 9:6**, but here he is also talking about our own lives. If we concentrate and invest in our selfish benefit, what we get back is (literally) decay and rot. By contrast, by focusing on the work of the Holy Spirit, the 'harvest' is one of ongoing spiritual life. Not just life after death, but NOW!

It's easy to get disheartened when trying to help others, isn't it? 'Don't give up!', says Paul, 'The harvest will come, so go on taking the opportunity to help everyone – and especially your brothers and sisters in Christ!' (**6:9-10**)

**Galatians 6:11-16** Paul probably dictated most of the letter this far, but he ends in his own handwriting. (Is his handwriting so large because of a sight problem? (Look back at **Galatians 4:13-15**)) But he doesn't just wind down his letter; he uses the last few sentences to re-emphasise the main messages of what he has written:–

**6:12-13** See the motivation of those who are trying to persuade you to embrace Judaism by being circumcised. They are trying to avoid persecution from fellow-Jews, AND they don't even keep the Jewish Law themselves; they just want to be able to boast that they have drawn you into Judaism.

**6:14-16** 'No boasting for me!' says Paul, "*except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which (or 'through whom') the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" 'My old life is over, the world system has no more claim on me and I have no more claim on the world system. Circumcised or not circumcised? It's irrelevant! The only thing that makes any difference is whether you are a new creation (or 'creature') in Christ.' (**2 Corinthians 5:17**)

'Did you want rules to follow? Then follow that one! The result will be peace and mercy on you, as on all God's chosen people!'

**6:17** Paul's physical body bears the scars of persecution (see **2 Corinthians 11:21-30**). These clearly set him apart as belonging to Jesus, branded or tattooed like cattle!

**6:18** And he finishes as he began this letter, with the desire that all his readers will experience the reality of the grace of the Lord Jesus with their spirit.

Dave Taylor May 2023