

# GALATIANS

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## BACKGROUND

As Paul planted churches among the Gentiles of Galatia, other teachers came along and tried to convince the new believers that, to be truly saved, they had to keep the law. These "Judaizers" sought to discredit not only Paul's message but also his very claim to be an apostle. In Galatians, Paul vindicated both his apostleship ([Galatians 1-2](#)) and his message ([Galatians 3-6](#)), showing convincingly that salvation is by God's grace through faith, apart from works of the law.

## AUTHOR

Paul ([Galatians 1:1](#); [Galatians 5:2](#); see [Romans: Author](#)).

## DATE, LOCATION, AND RECIPIENTS

Different opinions about the date of this letter are influenced by differing interpretations of the letter's recipients. The letter is addressed to "the churches of Galatia" ([Galatians 1:2](#)). In Paul's day, Galatia referred to two different areas:

- Geographically, it referred to a northerly region Paul visited on his second missionary journey ([Acts 16:6](#); [Acts 18:23](#)).
- Politically, it referred to a Roman province that, in addition to geographical Galatia, took in more southerly regions including Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, which Paul visited on his first journey ([Acts 13:14-14:24](#)) and revisited on his second ([Acts 16:1-6](#)) and third journeys ([Acts 18:23](#)).

If [Galatians 2:1](#) refers to the Jerusalem Council ([Acts 15](#)), then Paul may have written this letter to the churches of southern Galatia just after that event, with the issue of law and grace fresh on his mind. That would give Galatians a date of about A.D. 49, making it the earliest of Paul's letters.

» **See also:** [Illustration: Epistles of Paul, The](#)

## PURPOSE

- To vindicate Paul's apostleship and message, both of which the Judaizers had questioned
- To show that God's righteousness (justification) can be received by faith alone apart from the law
- To discuss the meaning of Christian liberty and show that it does not mean freedom to sin

## UNIQUE FEATURES

- Galatians is the most severe of Paul's letters, offering no words of commendation.
- The doctrine of justification by faith is stated more emphatically in Galatians than in any other of Paul's letters—more so even than in Romans.
- Galatians gives an unusual amount of history for a letter. [Galatians 1:18](#) and [Galatians 2:1](#) give crucial clues to the chronology of Paul's life.
- Galatians is a letter of striking contrasts:
  - flesh and works vs. the Spirit and his fruit
  - the world vs. the Cross
  - circumcision vs. the new creation
  - faith vs. law
- Paul usually used an amanuensis (secretary) in writing his letters, but he wrote at least part and perhaps all of Galatians by his own hand ([Galatians 6:11](#)).

## COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

### *Romans:*

- Galatians has been called a shorthand version of Romans, which Paul wrote nearly 10 years later; Galatians discusses controversially what Romans discusses systematically.

### *2 Corinthians:*

- Paul's defense of his apostleship ([Galatians 1-2](#)) is somewhat parallel to the entire book of 2 Corinthians.

### *Hebrews:*

- Both Hebrews and Galatians talk about the New Covenant's superiority to the Old.

## OUTLINE

### I. PAUL'S DEFENSE ([Galatians 1-2](#))

1. Salutation and prologue ([Galatians 1:1-10](#))

2. Proposition ([Galatians 1:11-12](#))

C. Proofs ([Galatians 1:13-2:21](#))

### II. FAITH AND LAW ([Galatians 3-4](#))

A. The principle of faith vs. law ([Galatians 3:1-4:7](#))

B. A plea for faith vs. law ([Galatians 4:8-20](#))

C. A picture of faith vs. law ([Galatians 4:21-31](#))

### III. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY ([Galatians 5-6](#))

- A. Liberty, not law ([Galatians 5:1-12](#))
- B. Liberty, not license ([Galatians 5:13-26](#))
- C. Liberty in service ([Galatians 6:1-10](#))
- D. Concluding remarks ([Galatians 6:11-18](#))

#### TIMELINE

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| A.D. 35:    | Paul's conversion                        |
| A.D. 47:    | Paul in Galatia on 1st journey           |
| A.D. 49:    | Jerusalem Council, Paul writes Galatians |
| A.D. 51:    | Paul in Galatia on 2nd journey           |
| A.D. 53:    | Paul in Galatia on 3rd journey           |
| A.D. 60:    | Paul imprisoned in Rome                  |
| c. A.D. 67: | Paul martyred                            |

**[Galatians 1:1-5](#)** *Greetings of grace from a true apostle.* Stressing the validity of his apostleship, Paul greeted the Galatian believers in the name of the God of grace. The twin emphases of these opening verses—Paul's authority and God's grace—signal Paul's two main concerns in this letter.

**[Galatians 1:6-10](#)** *"Not even if an angel tells you!"* Paul was amazed that many of the Galatians, having received salvation by grace, had so quickly been persuaded by the Judaizers' "different" gospel of salvation by works ([Galatians 1:6-7](#)). Paul urged them to reject this false gospel, even if an angel should proclaim it.

The Judaizers' message was a "different" gospel ([Galatians 1:6](#)), which in Greek is *heteros* (root for "heterodoxy") meaning "another of a different kind." There is only one true gospel—the gospel of God's grace.

"Curse" ([Galatians 1:9](#)) is *anathema* in Greek (see [Romans 9:3](#); [1 Cor. 12:3](#)).

**[Galatians 1:11-12](#)** *"Let me tell you how I got it."* The gospel Paul preached was not of human origin, as the Judaizers were claiming; he had received it directly from Christ himself. Christ's direct revelation to Paul began on the road to Damascus (see [Acts 9](#)). Paul later made at least two references to information imparted directly to him by the Lord (see [1 Cor. 11:23](#); [1 Cor. 15:3-4](#)).

**[Galatians 1:13-24](#)** *His eventful early years.* Having claimed divine authority for his message ([Galatians 1:11-12](#)), Paul set out to prove that claim ([Galatians 1:13-2:21](#)). He began by telling of his youthful zeal for Judaism and persecution of Christians—a story he often told for its dramatic portrayal of God's grace ([Galatians 1:13-14](#); see [Acts 22:1-16](#); [Acts 26:1-20](#); [1 Tim. 1:12-16](#)).

He then reviewed his experiences following conversion. He had spent time in Arabia and Damascus ([Galatians 1:15-17](#)), after which he briefly visited Jerusalem ([Galatians 1:18](#)) before leaving

again for Gentile areas ([Galatians 1:19-24](#)). Throughout this travelogue, Paul emphasized how little contact he had had with other apostles, thus supporting his claim of direct revelation ([Galatians 1:12](#)).

Paul's first official visit to Jerusalem as a Christian occurred three years after his conversion ([Galatians 1:18](#); see [Acts 9:26-28](#)). If the 14 years prior to the next Jerusalem visit here reported ([Galatians 2:1](#)) includes the three years of [Galatians 1:18](#), it would coincide with the date of the Jerusalem Council (see [Date, Location, and Recipients](#)). If [Galatians 2:1](#) does in fact refer to the Jerusalem Council, Paul's trip to Jerusalem with famine relief (see [Acts 11:27-30](#)) is omitted here.

Paul had been called to his mission before his birth ([Galatians 1:15-16](#)). The Bible records at least two other instances of divine calls to the unborn (see [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#); [Luke 1:15-17](#)).

**[Galatians 2:1-5](#)** *Circumcision? Not for Titus.* While Paul was in Jerusalem, some legalistic believers had demanded that his Gentile companion Titus be circumcised, but Paul, taking a firm stand for the sufficiency of the gospel, had refused to bow to their pressure.

**[Galatians 2:6-10](#)** *Blessings on his Gentile mission.* When the church leaders and apostles in Jerusalem realized how God had blessed Paul's outreach to Gentiles, they commended his work, requesting only that he ask Gentile believers to help the famine-stricken Jewish Christians (see exposition on [Acts 20:1-6](#)).

**[Galatians 2:11-21](#)** *The tentmaker rebukes the fisherman.* On one occasion, both Peter and Barnabas had hypocritically refused fellowship with Gentile believers, for which Paul strongly rebuked them ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)). Nothing must be allowed to dilute the truth of salvation by grace alone ([Galatians 2:15-21](#)). Peter's hypocrisy was especially surprising, considering his pioneering role in Gentile evangelism (see [Acts 10](#)).

**[Galatians 3:1-9](#)** *Foolish pagans or Abraham's children?* Paul rebuked the Gentile Galatians for ignoring their salvation and freedom in Christ while trying to obey the Jewish law ([Galatians 3:1-5](#)). The Judaizers may have promised to make them children of Abraham, but they could be true sons of Abraham only if they, like he, were saved by faith alone ([Galatians 3:6-9](#); see exposition on [Genesis 15:1-11](#) and on [Romans 4:1-12](#)).

**[Galatians 3:10-14](#)** *The law curses; the Cross cleanses.* No one can be justified by the law, for the breaking of just one law brings God's curse ([Galatians 3:10, 12](#); see [James 2:10](#)). On the other hand, anyone who so desires can be justified by faith in Christ, who through his death on the cross accepted the law's curse on our behalf ([Galatians 3:11, 13-14](#)). The law is like a chain, which is entirely broken when just one link is severed. On "the just shall live by faith" ([Galatians 3:11](#), KJV), see [Habakkuk: Comparison with Other Bible Books](#).

**[Galatians 3:15-18](#)** *A covenant confirmed centuries before the commandments.* God's promise to Abraham, fulfilled in Christ, preceded the Mosaic law by hundreds of years. Since salvation through faith was therefore offered long before the law, salvation would continue to be given to all who believed.

The 430 years Paul spoke of ([Galatians 3:17](#)) was the duration of Israel's enslavement in Egypt (see [Genesis 15:13](#); [Exodus 12:40](#); [Acts 7:6](#)). God's original promise to Abraham (see [Genesis 12:3](#)) actually preceded Sinai by some 640 years.

**Galatians 3:19-25** *The law was our teacher.* If salvation comes through faith, one might ask, why did God give the law? He gave it as a "teacher" to guide sinful people until the Savior came ([Galatians 3:24](#)). But with Christ's coming, the tutor's role ended ([Galatians 3:25](#)). [3:19](#) is one of several references to the involvement of angels in giving the law (see [Deut. 33:2](#), NASB; [Psalm 68:17](#); [Acts 7:53](#); [Hebrews 2:2](#)).

**Galatians 3:26-4:7** *God's grown-up children.* Believers in Christ are no longer children in need of a tutor, but full-grown sons and daughters of God. For all practical purposes, children have no more freedom than slaves ([Galatians 4:1](#)). But there are significant advantages to being an adult son or daughter:

- Servants have a master, while sons and daughters have a father.
- Servants obey out of law and fear, while sons and daughters obey out of liberty and love.
- Servants have no inheritance, while sons and daughters can expect to inherit all things.

While Jesus was God's "only son" ([John 3:16](#)), Christians become God's children by adoption ([Galatians 4:5](#)). As adopted children, we can affectionately call God "Abba, Father" ([Galatians 4:6](#); compare [Romans 8:15](#)). Our adoption is secure, for God "chose" us for it (see [Ephes. 1:4-5](#)).

Paul's teachings elsewhere on the role of women in the church (see exposition on [§1 Corinthians 14:26-40](#) and on [§1 Tim. 2:8-15](#)) should be interpreted in light of his view of the equality of men and women in Christ ([Galatians 3:28](#)), a revolutionary concept in Paul's day. Christ transcends not only gender differences but racial and social differences as well. On "the right time" ([Galatians 4:4](#)), see exposition on [§Ephes. 1:7-12](#).

**Galatians 4:8-11** *"Don't abandon sonship for servanthood!"* Having been freed from the spiritual slavery of paganism, the Galatians had become enslaved to the observance of Jewish feasts and traditions. This, said Paul, was sheer insanity. He feared that his ministry of grace among them had been in vain.

**Galatians 4:12-20** *From dearest friend to worst enemy?* Paul begged the Galatians to remember the happy fellowship they once enjoyed with Paul, when their love saw him through a time of physical affliction ([Galatians 4:12-15](#); see exposition on [§2 Corinthians 12:7-10](#)). Did they now hate him for telling them the truth ([Galatians 4:16](#))? Their real enemies, said Paul, were the legalistic false teachers ([Galatians 4:17-18](#)). Speaking as their spiritual mother, Paul described his letter as an effort to give them rebirth into God's grace ([Galatians 4:19-20](#)).

**Galatians 4:21-31** *Hagar and Sarah, law and grace.* Paul presented Hagar and Sarah, with their sons Ishmael and Isaac, as types of the contrast between the bondage of legalism and the liberty of grace. Hagar, like those who depend on the law, was a slave; and her son, who was naturally born, was also a slave. Sarah, like those who depend on grace, was free; and her son, whose birth was miraculous, was Abraham's heir ([Galatians 4:21-27](#); see [Genesis 16:1-18:15](#); [Genesis 21:1-21](#)).

Christians, like Isaac, are the true heirs of God's promise to Abraham ([Galatians 4:28, 31](#)). Just as Sarah asked Abraham to "get rid of that servant," Christians should have no desire to be in bondage to the law ([Galatians 4:30](#); see [Genesis 21:10](#)). Just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, the Judaizers were persecuting Paul ([Galatians 4:29](#); see [Genesis 21:8-9](#)).

**Galatians 5:1-12** *Dependence on law means denial of grace.* Paul again pleaded with the Galatians not to forsake the way of grace for the way of law. If a person submits to circumcision, he is obligated to keep all the other laws as well. God's grace, by contrast, demands only our faith ([Galatians 5:1-6](#)). Like leaven, false teachings such as legalism can spread quickly through a church ([Galatians 5:7-9](#)). Paul had strong words for anyone who would spread such false teaching ([Galatians 5:10-12](#)).

While the phrase "fallen away from God's grace" is often used to describe someone who has adopted a sinful lifestyle, Paul used it to describe those who had regressed into legalism ([Galatians 5:4](#)).

**Galatians 5:13-15** *The bottom line: Love.* While the Galatians needed to be warned against legalism, they also needed to be warned against an opposite danger: lawlessness. Freedom in Christ should not become a license to sin (compare exposition on [§Romans 6:15-23](#)). Rather, it should motivate brotherly love and a willingness to serve. The whole law is summed up in the command to love (see exposition on [§Matthew 22:34-40](#)).

**Galatians 5:16-21** *The wicked works of the flesh.* Lawlessness can best be avoided by living "according to your new life in the Holy Spirit" (traditionally translated "walking in the Spirit"). As Paul would later show in his letter to Rome, lawlessness cannot be avoided simply by trying to follow the law, for the flesh is at war with the Spirit, leaving us helpless ([Galatians 5:17](#)), and the law tends to arouse our sinful desires (see exposition on [§Romans 7:1-25](#)). Paul listed several specific "desires of [the] sinful nature" or "works of the flesh."

**Galatians 5:22-26** *The wonderful works of the Spirit.* Paul then listed various manifestations of the "fruit" of the Holy Spirit that one can practice with no fear of transgressing any law. Believers in Christ have "crucified" the desires of the sinful nature ([Galatians 5:24](#); see [Galatians 2:20](#); [Romans 6:6](#)) and should seek to live in the reality of that fact ([Galatians 5:25](#); see [Romans 8:4-5](#)).

**Galatians 6:1-6** *Bear each other's burdens.* An appreciation of freedom in Christ should motivate the believer to a life of service (compare [Galatians 5:6, 13](#)). We should bear each other's burdens, especially the burden of past sin, which should be dealt with in a spirit of compassion and humility. Meanwhile, we should take responsibility for our own actions ([Galatians 6:4-5](#)). Those who are taught God's Word should help their teachers financially ([Galatians 6:6](#)).

**Galatians 6:7-10** *What you sow is what you reap, only more.* If we sow to the flesh, we will reap death. If we sow to the Spirit, we will reap life. We should always be diligent in sowing to the Spirit, that is, in doing good works and practicing the fruit of the Spirit.

**Galatians 6:11-18** *Not circumcision but a new creation.* Paul had written this letter in his own hand, using "large letters" perhaps because of an eye problem (see exposition on [§Galatians 4:12-20](#) and on [§2 Cor. 12:7-10](#)). The Judaizers, said Paul, were motivated by pride and unwillingness to suffer for Christ. Paul, however, would continue proclaiming the gospel that brought Jews and Gentiles together as "new and different people," no matter how he might have to suffer because of that sometimes unpopular message.

Paul ended his letter as he had begun it, proclaiming the genuineness of his apostleship (compare [Galatians 6:17](#) and [Galatians 1:1](#)).

