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Galatians

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Galatians

A. Overview and Summary.

1. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to churches located in the region of Galatia, which is modern-day Turkey. This is the only epistle written to more than one church in a city. Most scholars put the date of its writing about 50 AD. This is due to his mention of his going up to the Jerusalem Council (2:1), which is believed to have occurred in 49 AD, so it is believed this epistle must have been written shortly afterward. The region of Galatia was populated by Gentiles descended from a migration of Celtic people from Gaul or modern-day France in the third century BC. Paul had previously established churches in Galatia: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe during his missionary journeys as recorded in the book of Acts.
2. It is the only one of Paul's epistles not including a commendation to the churches because of his great concern they had drifted into heresy. The foundation of the Christian faith is justification by faith: by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The Galatians were Gentiles, but they had been influenced by Jews who claimed they must adopt the Jewish practices of the Law in order to be saved (see 1:7; 4:17,21; 5:2-12; 6:12-13). The basis of man-made religion is always justification by works, or what man is capable of. The true gospel is centered on what God has done through His Son Jesus Christ.

B. Chapter One.

1. Paul opens the book by expressing his authority as an Apostle: "not from men or by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead" (1:1). After greeting them with grace from God the Father and Jesus Christ he gets right into the purpose of his writing which is to confront false teaching: "I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from Him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to change the good news about the Messiah. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him! As we have said before, I now say again: If anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him! (1:6-9).

2. Paul continues by stating he did not receive the gospel from man but by revelation from Jesus Christ. He relates how, after his conversion, he went to Arabia and then back to Damascus, and only after three years, did he go up to Jerusalem, where he stayed with Peter for 15 days and did not see any of the other Apostles except James, the half-brother of Jesus (1:17-19). The chapter concludes with: 'I remained personally unknown to the Judean churches in Christ; they simply kept hearing: 'He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith he once tried to destroy.'" And they glorified God because of me'" (1:22-24).

C. Chapter Two.

1. Paul continues with his defense of the gospel he preaches: "Then after 14 years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. I went up according to a revelation and presented to them the gospel I preach among the Gentiles—but privately to those recognized as leaders—so that I might not be running, or have run the race, in vain" (2:1-2). "This issue arose because of false brothers smuggled in, who came in secretly to spy on the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, in order to enslave us. But we did not give up and submit to these people for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would be preserved for you" (2:4-5).
2. Paul relates how he did not receive anything from the other Apostles except an agreement that they would minister to the circumcised (the Jews) while he was to go to the Gentiles (2:6-9). He makes mention of how he opposed Peter to his face when he came to Antioch and ate at first with the Gentiles but when men came from James in Jerusalem, he withdrew so as not to offend them. Paul confronts Peter with: "If you, who are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentiles to live like Jews?" (2:14b).
3. He continues with a strong word about the true gospel: "We who are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners" know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. And we have believed in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified" (2:15-16).
4. He concludes the chapter with: "For through the law I have died to the law, so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God,

for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (2:19-21).

D. Chapter Three.

1. Paul opens with very harsh words: “You foolish Galatians! Who has hypnotized you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified? I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now going to be made complete by the flesh? (3:1-3). He reminds them how Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness (3:6). He continues with the blessing to Abraham that through him all the nations would be blessed (3:8).
2. He sharply reminds them all those who rely upon the law are cursed as no one is justified by the law but by faith (3:11) and that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us by hanging on a tree (crucified) (3:13). He continues: “Before this faith came, we were confined under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith was revealed. The law, then, was our guardian until Christ, so that we could be justified by faith. But since that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:23-26). This “guardian” Paul refers to, is an analogy of the practice of wealthy people who would have a trusted servant or slave escort their children to school thereby keeping them safe. He is saying the Law’s purpose was to show us what righteousness means until Christ could fulfill that function by giving us righteousness through His death and resurrection.

E. Chapter Four.

1. After telling the Galatians in the previous chapter that they are heirs of the promise (3:29), he instructs them if the heir is a child, they are no different from a slave although they own everything until the time appointed by their father. In the same way, he continues, we were in slavery until the time appointed when “God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (4:b-7). The phrase “Abba” is a term of endearment which the gospel gives us such a right to call our heavenly Father.

2. He then expresses his concern they have gone back to practices which have no value such as special days, seasons, months and years and his time with them was wasted (4:10-11). He expresses his frustration: “My children, I am again suffering labor pains for you until Christ is formed in you. I would like to be with you right now and change my tone of voice, because I don’t know what to do about you” (4:19-20).
3. He then goes into an analogy of Abraham’s two sons. One born of the flesh from a slave and one born by promise of a free woman. These two women represent two covenants; the slave (Hagar) bearing children into slavery. The other (Sarah), bearing children into the freedom of promise. He closes the chapter with: “Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman” (4:31).

F. Chapter Five.

1. He opens with a strong admonition: “Christ has liberated us to be free. Stand firm then and don’t submit again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1). He then disparages the practice of circumcision which was a sign of obedience to the Law and the only thing that matters is faith working through love (5:2-6).
2. He continues: “For you were called to be free, brothers; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the entire law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another” (5:13-15).
3. He continues with a comparison of walking by the Spirit or by the flesh: “I say then, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (5:16-18).
4. He warns them of the fruits of the flesh: Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I tell you about these things in advance—as I told you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (5:19-21).

In line with Paul’s warning, it’s important to understand that these sinful practices can cause a believer to forfeit their spiritual inheritance—eternal

rewards and fellowship with God in His Kingdom. While this does not necessarily imply the loss of salvation itself, it highlights the serious consequences of willfully living according to the flesh. As seen in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul also warns that those who persist in such behavior without repentance are at risk of being excluded from God's kingdom. However, salvation is secure for those who continue in faith, but it requires a continual walk of repentance, holiness, and obedience to Christ. The Bible makes it clear that salvation is not a one-time event but a journey of faith, one that demands perseverance in love and righteousness. Salvation is available through faith but requires active perseverance. As 1 Corinthians 3:15 reminds us, one's works will be tested by fire, and while a believer may experience the loss of rewards for unfaithfulness, they will still be saved, though as though through fire. Therefore, this passage should not be interpreted as indicating that those who struggle or fall into sin were never truly saved. Instead, it is a call to live in accordance with the Spirit, to actively pursue holiness, and to repent when we fall short. Our walk with Christ involves continual growth and transformation by the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to live in victory over the works of the flesh.

5. He closes the chapter with words demonstrating the fruits of the Spirit: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control. Against such things, there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, we must also follow the Spirit. We must not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another (5:22-26).

G. Chapter Six.

1. He opens the final chapter with: "Brothers, if someone is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual should restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so you also won't be tempted" (6:1). He continues about caring for one another: The one who is taught the message must share all his good things with the teacher. Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows he will also reap, because the one who sows to his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So, we must not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, we must work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith" (6:6-10).

2. He concludes with reference about writing in large letters which some have interpreted to mean that he still had some suffering in his eyesight which may have been the thorn in the flesh he refers to in 2nd Corinthians 12:7. He continues: “But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me through the cross, and I to the world” (6:14). He closes the epistle with: “Brothers, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen” (6:18).

H. Discussion Questions, Application and Passing it On.

1. Many Christians inadvertently live in a sort of a law to themselves such as certain practices they have. But freedom in Christ means we are set free from such things. Not to walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. How are you walking?
2. There are many gospels out there, such as Mormonism, the beliefs of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhism, etc. They all depend upon self-work for justification or attainment of something. Do you believe the true gospel? Are you able to convey that to others? Do you truly believe Paul’s words that those who present such false gospels are truly cursed?
3. What are your thoughts about Paul’s warning of the various sins that can prevent us from inheriting the kingdom of God? Do you view that as a genuine possibility if you do not take action to renounce the sin in your life?

This New Testament survey was provided by Joshua Nations (JoshuaNations.org)