

Galatians

**The Good News of God's Grace
A Study of Galatians**

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Course Introduction

Welcome to this study of the book of Galatians. Many call Galatians “The Charter of Christian Liberty.” In it Paul proclaims the wonderful truth that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are set free **forever** from eternal condemnation because of sin, and they are set free **daily** from slavery to the law through the grace that is in Christ Jesus. No more bondage! No more debt! No more slavery!

As forcefully as any of Paul’s letters, Galatians sets forth his great central theme: *justification by faith apart from works of the law*. This truth is of foundational importance to our personal lives on earth and our eternal future. In this letter Paul gives a spirited defense of his apostleship and the gospel he preaches, a gospel that promises liberty to those held captive to the curse of the law and its yoke of slavery.

Believers of all ages and in all locations have struggled with legalism—the idea that they must please God by their performance instead of enjoying the reality of their liberty in Christ. Yet believers also share a deep heart’s desire to experience the freedom found only in Christ. You may find that you struggle with legalism. Almost all believers do. Surveys indicate that 82% of all believers agree that “trying hard to obey God’s commands” sums up the Christian life.¹

Legalism can take at least two different forms. One is the wrong use of truth that focuses on the outward performance rather than the inner attitude of faith. For example, going to church to worship with the gathered body of Christ is a clear teaching of Scripture. Some churches, however, become legalistic when they imply that people who miss church once in a while are not “good” Christians.

The other form is to create humanly devised lists of behaviors that are declared to be sinful, when Scripture says nothing about them, such as watching television or playing sports on Sunday. These things are often imposed on church members as things they must avoid if they want to be seen as spiritual Christians.

For example, Pavel, an elder in his local church, likes to play a little soccer Sunday afternoons with some of his neighbors. But most of his fellow-elders feel it is sinful to play sports on the Lord’s Day. Therefore they are threatening to have him removed from the elder board.

In either case it is the attempt to achieve righteousness and gain God's favor through religious duty and the keeping of rules that is legalism. Paul in Galatians attacks that view of the Christian life.

During this course you will find answers to your own questions about legalism, and you will be equipped to help others understand God's grace and the freedom from the requirements of the law that Christ offers.

Contributions to Developing Character

A proper understanding of the gospel, especially the concepts of grace and faith apart from works, is the starting point of character development, or maturity in Christ. These concepts apply to every aspect of the Christian life. Galatians 5-6, which deal with walking in the Spirit and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit in your life, will contribute most obviously to your developing character. Each lesson in this course includes questions that encourage you to examine your life, to make godly choices, and to reflect on how you can allow the life of the Spirit to be seen in you. Lesson 9 speaks most directly about the development of godly character as an outworking of grace and faith in your life.

Contributions to Achieving Competences

The competences relating to the course on Galatians are discipling, evangelizing, preaching, and teaching. Following is a brief discussion of each that explains how they relate to the course and how the course will contribute to their development in your life.

In any discipling relationship, dealing with misunderstandings and misconceptions is important. Paul's parental (pastoral) concern for the Galatians is strongly evident in his letter. The entire letter can be viewed as a glimpse into how a master discipler compassionately yet firmly dealt with a crisis among his charges. You will be guided in how to help a new believer who is having difficulty applying the truths of the gospel.

To be competent in evangelizing, you must have a clear understanding of the gospel. The book of Galatians is ideally suited for instruction in salvation by grace through faith apart from works of the law. This course will focus heavily on developing your clear understanding of the gospel and in giving you opportunities to present it.

Much of the teaching of Galatians is at the very core of Christian proclamation and is therefore highly relevant to the competence of preaching. Therefore, the course will also focus on guiding you in exegesis (careful interpretation of Scripture) and organization of material with a view toward clear and powerful proclamation of the

Word. Though you may not actually have the opportunity to preach during the course, you will develop and present a sermon outline of a selected text.

Since the teaching competence focuses more on instruction than proclamation (though both deal with effective communication), the Galatians course has as a major emphasis the development of clear, interesting, and well-organized lessons. You will be reminded constantly that you are not only in the position of a learner (none of us ever stops being one) but that you are also in the position of a communicator. Ample opportunities will be given throughout the course to practice the skills needed to communicate effectively.

Inductive Bible Study

Inductive Bible study is an approach to interpreting Scripture that looks at the particulars in the text to draw from them generalizations, or conclusions, about the meaning of the text. For example, if you want to understand the meaning of a paragraph, you must first study each word, then each sentence, then the relationships of the sentences to each other. From that study you should be able to draw a conclusion about the meaning of the paragraph.

In a deductive approach you would bring an interpretation to the text and seek to make the parts fit that interpretation. Therefore, the inductive approach will help you be more objective as you approach any portion of Scripture to understand it.

You will be exposed to this method more through demonstration than through explicit teaching, as portions of Galatians are discussed. Nevertheless, many of the Assignments will include questions or instructions that are part of the inductive method.

Course Outline

- Lesson 1 Observing the Background of Galatians
- Lesson 2 Grasping the Overall Content of Galatians
- Lesson 3 Hearing Paul's Defense
- Lesson 4 Living by Faith
- Lesson 5 Understanding the Law
- Lesson 6 Knowing Our Identity in Christ
- Lesson 7 Walking Free
- Lesson 8 Walking by the Spirit
- Lesson 9 Relating to the Body

Course Objectives

When you have completed this course, you will be able to:

1. Experience joy in your freedom in Christ as taught in Galatians.
2. Teach elements of inductive Bible study so that the truths of Galatians can be discovered and applied to life.
3. Experience joy in discovering truths and applications to life from the Word of God.
4. Communicate the concepts of law, grace, and faith as taught in Galatians.
5. Encourage brothers and sisters in Christ to overcome legalism by their application of the truths of walking in the Spirit as taught in Galatians.
6. Guide others to the truths about personal evangelism in Galatians and to an effective application of them in sharing the gospel.
7. Encourage believers to experience the delight of sharing the gospel with unbelievers.
8. Describe ways in which you have seen growth in your Christian character through application of the truths learned in this course.
9. Perform the course tasks, which will help to prepare you to achieve the competences of preaching, teaching, discipling, and evangelism.

Course Tasks

During this course you will study material that will allow you to achieve the following major tasks. These will help you demonstrate that you have an essential grasp of the objectives of the course.

1. Using the principles of inductive Bible study you learned in this course, prepare and make a presentation² on a passage from Galatians. Prior to making the presentation, you will submit for approval to the course facilitator the written results of your inductive study (observations, interpretations, and applications) and an outline or lesson plan.
2. Lead a discussion³ in a real-life situation (e.g., personal conversation with a family member or friend, counseling session with a church member, teaching a lesson to a small group, preaching a sermon). In this discussion you will interrelate truths and applications about law, grace, faith, and walking in the Spirit taught in Galatians.
3. Prepare and make a presentation or lead a discussion, explaining how the truths of Galatians may be applied in personal evangelism.

***Galatians* in Relation to the Total Curriculum**

Galatians is one of the foundational courses of the Entrust curriculum in that it discusses the essential concepts of grace, faith, law, and life in the Spirit. The truths of *Galatians* will influence and apply to every course because these essential concepts are found throughout Scripture. More importantly, they are essential concepts of the Christian life.

Materials Required

There is no textbook for this course other than the Bible. The only materials required are:

1. This course workbook.
2. A notebook in which to record answers and other notes and observations.
3. A Bible.

Any other basic Bible study tools you have access to, such as an atlas, a Bible dictionary, or a concordance, will be useful but are not required.

Course Design

Each lesson will have several standard components:

1. A Lesson Outline will provide an overview of the content of the lesson.
2. Lesson Objectives will clearly set forth what you will be expected to achieve as a result of each particular lesson.
3. The text of the lesson itself.
4. Assignments will be interspersed throughout the lesson. These Assignments require immediate and thorough attention. The answers should be written in your notebook and can be checked later.
5. “Personal Reflection” and “Adoration” features will appear from time to time, which are intended for your enrichment and personal application. Normally, a written answer is not required, though you may find it helpful to note down your response. Occasionally, however, you will be directed to write out the answer.

This course is not an exhaustive verse-by-verse study of *Galatians*. Rather, the focus is on thematic content and Paul’s flow of thought, with an emphasis on the concepts of grace, faith, justification apart from works, and life in the Spirit.

Icons



Assignment: a question or study that focuses on course content. Written responses are required and are to be recorded in the student's notebook



Personal Reflection: an instruction to reflect on scriptural truths or character traits or both as they relate to one's walk with God. The focus is on personal application. A written response may be requested.



Adoration: an instruction to worship the Lord with reference to course content. The focus is on God. No written response is required.

ENDNOTES

¹ Joseph C. Wasmond, *Freedom in Christ Ministries Newsletter*, November 28, 2005.

² Wherever “present,” “make a presentation,” or “give a presentation” occurs, it represents any kind of intentional presentation of an organized body of information to at least one person. The kind of presentation will depend on the experience of the student.

³ Wherever “lead” or “lead a discussion” occurs, it focuses on interaction with at least one person on a particular topic that is already known to the group. It may or may not include the giving of a presentation by the student, such as an introductory lesson or message, as the basis for further discussion.

Observing the Background of Galatians

To appreciate the full significance of any letter, it is important to know something about its author, those to whom it is addressed, and the reason it was originally written. This lesson will take a brief look at the life of Paul: what he was like before he came to Christ, his conversion and call to the ministry, and his missionary journeys. You will also learn about the Galatians and the problem they were having with the Judaizers.

How important is it to know something about the author and occasion of a letter? Consider the following story:

Each year the United States government issues visas through a lottery system. All people have to do is sign up, and if their name is selected, they receive a visa allowing them to emigrate to the United States. Recently, some applicants have received an official-sounding letter or an e-mail. The letter begins, “Congratulations on your success in the America DV-2004-2005 VISA LOTTERY GREENCARD.” The letter then asks for official-sounding information, like (a) a current address, (b) a recent passport photo, and (c) family information. But then the letter asks them to send \$749.67 as a “clearance/acceptance” fee, with detailed information about how to send the money. However, the letter is fraudulent. Many who desperately want to emigrate to the United States have sent the money, only to find later that they have been duped.



1. How could the people who received this fraudulent letter have avoided losing all that money?
2. Have you ever received a letter from a stranger that made strong statements and gave advice? How does that compare to getting a similar letter from a close friend whom you love and trust? Which one would you be more inclined to heed?

Being cheated out of \$749.67 is a painful experience. Yet much more important is to avoid being duped when life and death are at stake. Understanding the gospel correctly is a matter of life and death. One's eternal destiny depends on it. No wonder the Apostle Paul is so quick to defend his ministry and message, dispensing with his usual introductory pleasantries in this short but powerful letter to the Galatians. False accomplished. They attacked the very foundation of what it means to be saved. They claimed that Paul was not a true apostle. Their message diluted the gospel of grace with legalistic requirements, thereby destroying the gospel altogether.



Before going any further, answer the following background questions:

1. How important do you think it is to know something of the circumstances of a letter (such as author, recipients, occasion, and purpose) in order to understand it? Why do you think so?
2. Briefly state what you already know about Paul, his letter to the Galatians, and the Judaizers.

The Galatians knew Paul. He had visited them and had taught them the gospel, the good news. Paul argued that, since the Galatians knew him, they could trust his message. What about you? How well do you know the Apostle Paul? Can you trust his message? Can this letter, written almost two thousand years ago, really be relevant to your life?

Galatians contains, in vigorous language, not only a defense of Paul's apostleship but a declaration of the central New Testament truth that **salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ**. The truths of this letter are of such importance that the rediscovery of them by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century helped fuel the Protestant Reformation.

Answering background questions is crucial in the undertaking of an in-depth study of any book in Scripture, especially New Testament letters. This lesson will focus on these questions and lay a foundation for grasping the great truths they teach.

Lesson Outline

- Authorship
- Recipients and Date
 - Recipients
 - Date
- Occasion and Purpose
 - Occasion
 - Purpose
- A Brief Life of Paul
 - Paul's Preconversion Life
 - Paul's Conversion and Call
 - Paul's Ministry Years
- Conclusion

Lesson Objectives

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to:

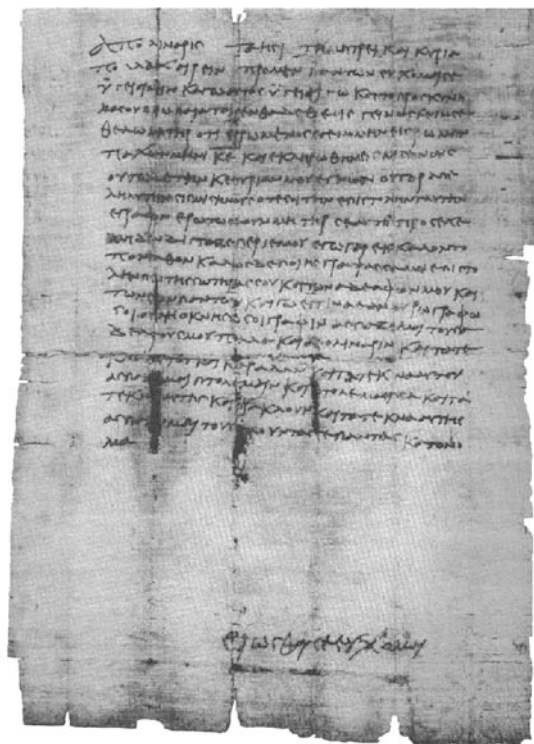
1. Explain the significance of who the recipients are and when Paul wrote.
2. Describe Paul's opponents, based on internal evidence in Galatians.
3. Explain the occasion and Paul's purpose for writing Galatians.
4. Write a brief biography of Paul.



The introductory information, including the course introduction, has given you an idea of what this lesson will be about. Write down how this knowledge might affect your understanding of the message of Galatians.

Authorship

Letters in the ancient world began with the identification of the author, followed by greeting the recipient. A writer often added further descriptions of himself or the recipient. For example, an ancient letter (shown on the next page) written from a son to his mother begins, “Apollinarios to his mother, Taesion, many greetings.”¹



Please open your Bible to Galatians and read 1:1-2. Spend a few minutes observing the text.

1. Does anything stand out to you in any special or perhaps surprising way?
2. Why do you think Paul does not begin his letter by greeting the recipients in the same way most people do today?.

Observe that the first word of Galatians is “Paul.” This is one thing that is true of all thirteen of Paul’s letters, perhaps the only thing they have in common. Though the Pauline authorship of several letters is disputed by some scholars, there is no dispute with Galatians. It is so characteristically Pauline in its tone and message that virtually no serious opposition to Paul’s authorship has been raised.

Paul then identifies himself as “an apostle.” Why would Paul immediately call himself an apostle? Why not just say, “Paul”? Or “Paul, the least of all the apostles”? Maybe “Paul, your good friend in Christ”? Does he always begin his letters with “Paul, an apostle”? Do you think this greeting is unique or that it is the way he always starts his letters? How would you know?

The chart in Assignment 5 will help you understand how Paul’s greeting to the Galatians is the same as and different from the greetings in his other letters.



Read over the chart below and notice where Paul's descriptions of himself and his recipients are the same and where they are different. Then fill in the answers for Galatians.

Greetings in Paul's Letters		
	How does Paul describe himself?	How does Paul describe the recipients?
Gal		
Rom	Bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle	Beloved of God, called as saints
1 Cor	Called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God	Church of God at Corinth, sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling
2 Cor	Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God	Church of God at Corinth
Eph	Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God	Saints who are at Ephesus and faithful in Christ Jesus
Phil	Bond-servant of Christ Jesus	Saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons
Col	Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God	Saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae
1 Thess	(no description)	Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ
2 Thess	(no description)	Church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ
1 Tim	Apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope	Timothy, my true child in the faith
2 Tim	Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus	Timothy, my beloved son
Titus	Bond-servant of God and apostle of Jesus Christ	Titus, my true child in a common faith
Phlm	Prisoner of Christ Jesus	Philemon, beloved brother and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house



1. Why do you think Paul describes himself in Galatians as an apostle, instead of as a bond-servant or a prisoner or in some other way?
2. When Paul calls himself an apostle, he usually describes himself as an apostle by the will of God. Why do you think he wrote such a different description to the Galatians?
3. Explain how Paul's description of the recipients of his other letters differs from that of Galatians.

Recipients and Date

The recipients and date of a particular Bible book can often be studied independently, but in the case of Galatians they are related.



How might knowing the recipients and date of Galatians affect your understanding of its message?

Recipients

It is difficult to know with certainty the exact destination of this letter. While the destination is not crucial to the interpretation of most elements of the letter, it is worth the time to take a closer look. With careful analysis you can come to a responsible, workable conclusion.

Note also that in Galatians 3:1 Paul refers to his readers as “Galatians.” Paul intended his letter to be circulated among several churches: gatherings of Christians in different towns and cities. The question is, where exactly did these Galatians live?

Debate arises from the fact that the term “Galatia” was used in two different senses. In one sense, “Galatia” referred to a **geographical** area in the highlands of north-central Anatolia (modern Turkey), deriving its name from the immigrant Gauls (Celts), who first settled the area in the third century B.C.

“Galatia” was also used in a **political** sense, referring to the Roman province established by the emperor Augustus in 25 B.C. This was a much larger area that stretched almost from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. If Paul is using the term in this second sense, the recipients would include the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, which Paul visited on his first (as well as his second and third) missionary journey.



These two possibilities are usually called the North Galatian theory and the South Galatian theory. As you read these theories, prepare to explain which view has more to commend it.

Geographical reference: the North Galatian theory. The North Galatian theory has the following favorable evidence:

1. The most natural use of the term “Galatia” at this time would have referred to the geographical district in the northern part of the province. The Roman province of Galatia was a relatively new creation. Perhaps the people in the southern district would not have appreciated being called “Galatians.”
2. Luke most often uses a geographical name for a region rather than a political or provincial one. For example, in Acts 14:6 he refers to Lystra and Derbe as cities of Lycaonia, not Galatia.
3. Acts 16:6 and 18:23 state that during his second and third missionary journeys Paul traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia.
4. Most of the early church fathers supported this theory.

Political reference: the South Galatian theory. The South Galatian theory has the following favorable evidence:

1. Acts contains no specific mention of a city in the northern provincial area. Acts 16:6 and 18:23 do not offer any proof that Paul went to the north. If he had established churches there, it seems likely that we would have some

reference to them. On the other hand, mention is made of the southern Galatian cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in all three missionary journeys.

2. Galatians 4:13 states that Paul first preached to the Galatians because of an illness. It seems highly unlikely that a sick man would have journeyed to the northern area over rugged mountainous terrain.
3. Though Luke often uses geographical terms, Paul was more likely to use political ones (e.g., 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Cor 8:1; Gal 1:22; 1 Thess 4:10).
4. It is legitimate to refer to this southern area as “Galatia.”
5. It appears that Barnabas was well known to these churches, since he is mentioned three times in chapter 2 of Galatians (vv. 1,9,13). Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, only accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey. Those who hold to the North Galatian theory admit that Paul could only have gone there on his second or third journeys, or both.
6. Judaizers (see below under “Occasion”), against whom Paul is arguing in this letter, were very active in the southern Galatian region.

Date

The date of the writing of Galatians cannot be determined with precision. Those who hold the North Galatian theory usually date Galatians anywhere from a.d. 52-57, with a few proponents advocating an even later date. Proponents of the South Galatian theory usually hold to a.d. 48 or 49 as the date, but some hold to dates from 50-57.² A deciding factor between the two South Galatian dates is whether Acts 15:1-29 (the Jerusalem Council) and Galatians 2:1-10 refer to the same event or different events. With either view Galatians is one of Paul’s earliest letters.



Read Acts 15. Then respond to the following instructions:

1. Describe in one paragraph what the implications are for the impact of Paul’s message in Galatians, first, if he wrote it before the Jerusalem Council and, second, if he wrote it after the council.
2. After considering these implications, does it change your decision about the recipients and date? If so, explain why.
3. How does the belief in either of the dates change the meaning and impact of Paul’s message?

Occasion and Purpose

Determining the occasion and purpose of a letter are foundational to understanding it. The occasion establishes the circumstances when an author writes and the context for understanding what the author writes. The purpose speaks of the reasons why an author writes. Bible students must recognize the difference.

Since a writer rarely states his purpose explicitly,³ the reader must deduce the purpose from the content of the letter, in light of the occasion. In addition, there may be more than one purpose. Students must think carefully before making decisions about the purpose or purposes of a letter.

For example, Paul stresses Christian freedom in Galatians because the Galatians were in danger of coming under legal bondage, whereas in 1 Corinthians Paul stresses obedience because many in the church were not living in a holy way. You will learn that Galatians is a stern letter of rebuke to the Galatians, whereas Ephesians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philippians are full of praise and encouragement. For different occasions there are different purposes.⁴



Think of a time when you wrote a letter to, or had a serious, intentional discussion with, someone.

1. What was the occasion?
2. What was the purpose?
3. How does recognizing the occasion and purpose of your letter or discussion help you see the importance of identifying Paul's occasion and purpose in Galatians?

Occasion

The core issue of the occasion for this letter is found in Galatians 1:6-10. In verse 7 Paul expresses great distress over those “who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.” Thus, from the beginning you understand the occasion for Paul's letter. In fact, he was so upset that he dispensed with his usual habit of giving thanks for his readers.

The people who were disturbing the Galatians came to be known as Judaizers. These Judaizers were apparently following behind Paul and Barnabas, disturbing the churches they had labored so hard to establish. Paul had received reports of these disturbances.

The Judaizers were probably Jewish Christians⁵ who were teaching that obedience to the law, especially circumcision, was required for a Christian to be right with God. They were teaching impressionable, non-Jewish (Gentile) believers that

they must be circumcised and live according to Jewish traditions. The letter to the Galatians condemns the teaching of the Judaizers and eloquently sets forth the purity of the gospel of grace.

The noun “Judaizer” does not appear in the New Testament, and the verb “to live like a Jew” appears only once. Appropriately, the verb is in Galatians 2:14, where Paul is rebuking Peter for his hypocrisy when he refrained from eating with Gentiles after certain Jewish leaders had arrived. Paul says, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews (i.e., “Judaize”)?” That even Barnabas and the Apostle Peter himself were influenced by the Judaizers shows what tremendous power and influence the Judaizers had.

To learn more about the Judaizers, you need to look no further than the text of Galatians itself, though many other references and allusions to them occur in the New Testament. In fact, the circumcision party (Acts 11:2; Gal 2:12) was the reason the first church-wide council was convened in Jerusalem (see Acts 15:1-2). Paul mentions these opponents in every chapter of Galatians.



1. In what areas of your life does peer pressure sometimes cause you to behave in a manner that reflects your Christian or religious culture yet is not reflective of actual biblical teaching for Christian living?
2. What changes do you need to make so unbelievers see a Christlike life versus human rules for Christian living?



1. For each of the following verses record what Paul says about the Judaizers. Sometimes there will be more than one thing to observe in each verse. For example, Galatians 1:7 says the Judaizers both are “disturbing you” and “want to distort the gospel of Christ.”
 - a. 1:7-9
 - b. 2:4-12
 - c. 3:1
 - d. 4:17
 - e. 5:1-12
 - f. 6:12-13

Using these observations, write a paragraph that explains who the Judaizers were and what “gospel” they preached.

It is hard to imagine a more forceful condemnation. Remember that Paul is talking about his own countrymen, who have now become enemies of the cross of Christ. Not only does he say they are accursed (see Gal 1:8), but he calls them false brethren (Gal 2:4) and insinuates that they are cowards (see Gal 6:12).



How would this kind of language be received today? To help you think through a response to this question, try to create a scenario from your culture in which people like Judaizers have caused a major disturbance in a church or region. If possible, try to describe a true event. Otherwise, seek to make it as true-to-life as possible. Then answer the question.

You have seen what Paul said about the Judaizers. But what were they saying about him?



Please identify five accusations (or possible accusations) the Judaizers were making about Paul:

1. What was Paul being accused of in 1:10?
2. In 1:11-12 Paul defends himself against further charges. What are they?
3. What accusation does Paul imply in 1:16-17?
4. What charge is Paul answering in 2:9?
5. According to 5:11, Paul was accused of advocating the very thing the Judaizers were doing. What is it?

Though some of these charges were leveled at Paul personally, essentially what the Judaizers were attacking was his office. If they could discredit Paul's apostleship, they would be able to make great inroads among his converts. By undermining his authority, their influence would be very strong.

Apparently, this undermining had already begun to happen in Galatia. As the apostle to the Gentiles, such discrediting was something Paul often had to face in his ministry. Paul did not take these accusations passively. On the contrary, he went on the offensive, delivering a scathing attack against his accusers. But he did this not so that he himself would be vindicated. He did it for the sake of the gospel. Paul was passionate about the gospel.



1. Following the model of the Apostle Paul, in what situations would it be appropriate to defend yourself and your reputation?
2. In what situations would it not be appropriate?

Most early Christians were Jews. All the apostles were Jews. Indeed, Jesus Christ was the Jewish Messiah. For many early Christians, Christianity was not a new religion that replaced Judaism but the final, perfected form of Judaism. As persecution came and the Christian Jews were scattered, many Gentiles also embraced the new faith through the preaching of people like Paul.

But for many Jews, letting go of the Mosaic law and the Jewish way of life was a very difficult thing, and they expected the non-Jewish Christians not only to believe in Christ but to adopt Jewish customs as well. God even provided a special object lesson to Peter (Acts 10) to show him that the gospel was for all people, not just Jews. If it was difficult to realize that the gospel was not limited only to Jews, imagine how much harder it was for some Hebrew believers to consider giving up their Jewish customs and ceremonial and judicial laws.

The Jews, who had been entrusted with the law, now found themselves confronting the One who had come to fulfill the law (Mt 5:17)—the Messiah and Savior Jesus Christ. God had spoken through the prophets in many different ways for many years, but now He spoke His final word in His Son (Heb 1:1-2). The fulfillment of the law in and by Christ in the new covenant, however, was not understood by all, which led to some false teaching. Clarifying the Christian's relationship to the law and the content of the gospel were two of Paul's most important tasks.



If you were teaching Galatians, how would you explain to your students the occasion that led Paul to write this letter?

Purpose

The occasion for the letter has now been clearly established. How distressing it must have been for Paul to hear about the work of the Judaizers and to learn that the Galatians were allowing themselves to be led astray so soon after he had labored among them.

With that occasion in mind he sat down to write. You can probably imagine several purposes Paul might have considered for writing to the Galatians. In Lesson 2

you will determine the purpose of Galatians for yourself. The following Assignment will help you anticipate that exercise.



Based on what you have learned about the situation, if you were Paul, what would you try to accomplish by writing to the believers in Galatia? To guide you in answering this question, complete the following statement: “I will write a letter to the Galatians in order to _____.”



This short letter, written to confused first-century Christians, has charted the course for God’s people for almost two thousand years. It leads us not only to a proper understanding of salvation by faith and our freedom in Christ but also to the solid ground of daily living by the power of the Holy Spirit. Take a few moments to praise God for using Paul’s response to the Galatian problem to enlighten us today.

A Brief Life of Paul

The more you know and understand about the life of Paul, the better you can understand and properly interpret his letters. The New Testament contains a great deal of biographical material on Paul, especially in Acts and several of his letters. Who was this man who so passionately loved the Lord Jesus and so passionately loved the church? What was his background? How was he led into Christian ministry? What enabled him to endure such suffering and hardship?

We will look now briefly at three stages of Paul’s life: (1) his preconversion life, (2) his conversion and call, and (3) his ministry years.

Paul’s Preconversion Life

The Bible does not give us a complete account of Paul’s life before his conversion to the Lord Christ, yet several passages reveal aspects of those years.



1. Examine the following passages and observe what each says about Paul's life before he came to know Christ:
 - a. Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 22:2-5, 25-28
 - b. Galatians 1:13-14
 - c. Philippians 3:5-6
 - d. 1 Timothy 1:13
2. Briefly state your overall impression of Paul before he came to Christ.



How could Paul's prior opposition to the gospel contribute to his development as the primary New Testament theologian?



1. Have you ever heard anyone say something like "God could never accept me. I'm too big a sinner"?
2. As you consider Paul's fierce opposition to the gospel, how does the fact of his conversion to Christ encourage you?

Paul's Conversion and Call

Paul's conversion experience is told three times in Acts: in 9:1-19 (a narration of the event itself); in 22:2-21 (his testimony before the crowd in Jerusalem); and in 26:2-29 (his testimony before Festus and King Herod Agrippa II). The stories are similar, but each account reveals new details. Observe that his conversion and call to ministry happened simultaneously.



Read Acts 9:1-22, 22:2-21, and 26:2-29, passages that recount Paul's conversion, and do the following:

1. List the key points in his testimony. Be sure you include the work to which God called him.
2. From this list of key points summarize in one paragraph Paul's conversion.

Clearly, Paul loved to tell about how he was saved. Doubtless, he shared his testimony many times over the course of his life. By the time he spoke before Herod Agrippa II in Acts 26, he was probably in his early 50s and entering the final period of his life. But he never tired of telling people, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Tim 1:15).

Sharing with others how one is saved can be an exhilarating experience, but it can also be difficult. The following true story shows how one can learn to tell that story effectively:

When John was in high school, he had a passion to tell others about Christ. An evangelist challenged him to share his faith in Christ with his friends. John tried to follow the advice of the evangelist, but at times it seemed as if the people with whom he spoke did not understand what John wanted to tell them. In college he attended the meetings of a Christian organization working on campus. They taught him how to share his own personal testimony. Soon he saw some of his friends begin to trust Christ. In turn, one of those friends used his own personal testimony to lead some of his friends to Christ.



Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ said, “I have asked two questions of Christians of all ages around the world for half a century. The answers are always the same, no matter whom I ask. What is the most important experience of your life? ‘Knowing Christ as my Savior.’ What is the most important thing you can do for another person? ‘Help him or her to know Christ.’”⁶

In light of those questions and answers, when was the last time you shared your testimony with someone who is not a Christian? If it has been a long time, (1) write the names or initials of several people with whom you would like to share your testimony and (2) ask the Lord to provide opportunities to share your testimony with them and to give you courage and wisdom as you share.



Take a moment to thank the Lord again that no one is beyond the reach of salvation, including you. Thank Him that He used someone in your life to bring you to Christ, and thank Him for the wonderful salvation that you have in Him.

Paul's Ministry Years

The first few years following Paul's conversion are described in Galatians 1:17-18, where he says he went immediately to Arabia,⁷ returned to Damascus, and then after three years went to Jerusalem.

No one can know with certainty exactly what happened during those first three years, but clearly Paul reexamined his Jewish theology during this time as a result of the revelation of Christ to him (see Gal 1:11-12). Though Paul had grown up in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), his first visit there as a Christian is recorded in Acts 9:26-30 and Galatians 1:18-19, when he went to meet Peter and be introduced to the Jerusalem church. In all, Paul made five trips to Jerusalem:

1. After his three years in Arabia and Damascus (Acts 9:26-30; Gal 1:18-19).
2. To take the relief gift during the famine (Acts 11:27-30; Gal 2:1-10?).
3. To participate in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-29; Gal 2:1-10?).
4. At the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:22).
5. At the end of the third missionary journey, though urged by colleagues not to go. This resulted in his imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 21:15-23:35).



1. Why do you think Paul returned to Jerusalem so often, especially when most scholars believe his ministry headquarters was in Antioch?
2. In light of your understanding of the reasons for Paul's frequent trips to Jerusalem, what impact might this have had on the message of Galatians?

The book of Acts, from chapter 13 to the end, narrates the three missionary journeys of Paul, as well as his imprisonment in Caesarea, his trip to Rome, and his imprisonment there. All three of his missionary journeys originated in Antioch, which could rightfully be called Paul's headquarters. Barnabas first brought Paul to Antioch, where they ministered together for an entire year. It is here that believers were first given the name "Christians" (Acts 11:25-26).

An in-depth analysis of Paul's three missionary journeys is not our purpose here, but some key features of each missionary journey can be identified, as you complete Assignment 19.



Spend some time tracing the routes of Paul’s journeys. Scan the biblical passages dealing with each journey (Acts 13:2-14:28; 15:40-18:23; 18:23-21:17). How do these missionary journeys help you better understand Paul and his ministry and the letter he wrote to the Galatians?

New Testament Time Line

<i>Birth of Jesus</i>	<i>Cross Resurrection Ascension Pentecost</i>	<i>Early church history in Acts Paul’s conversion</i>	<i>Jerusalem destroyed</i>	<i>Writing of Rev</i>
0 (4 BC)	AD 30	AD 34	AD 70	-100

Paul’s Ministry Time Line

<i>Conversion</i>	<i>Early Ministry</i>	<i>1st Missionary Journey</i>	<i>2nd Missionary Journey</i>	<i>3rd Missionary Journey</i>	<i>4th Missionary Journey Prison-Death</i>
AD 34	37	46-48	50-52	53-57	60-62 - 62-67 - 67-68
<i>Letters written</i>		<i>Gal?</i>	<i>1-2 Thess Gal?</i>	<i>1-2 Cor Rom</i>	<i>Eph Co Phlm Phil</i> <i>1-2 Tim Titus</i>



Paul's sufferings (see 2 Cor 11:21b-29) prove his steadfast determination to spread the gospel no matter what the consequences are to him. Note the many different kinds of suffering he experienced. What do these sufferings tell you about Paul and why Paul responded to the challenge of the Judaizers in Galatia as he did? Pause and reflect on how Paul can be an example to you of persevering for the sake of the gospel.

Paul viewed his converts intimately and tenderly, like a concerned parent or close family member. He was concerned about serving those he loved. Throughout his letters he referred to himself variously as a "father" (1 Cor 4:15), a "nursing mother" (1 Thess 2:7), a "fellow soldier" (Phlm 2), and even as a woman in labor (Gal 4:19). He labored tirelessly to teach and nurture the flock of God. Even though he was an apostle, he truly had a "pastor's heart." He sets an example for us that is well worth imitating (see 1 Cor 4:16 and 11:1).



Write a biography of Paul of no more than three paragraphs. Be sure to include all the main stages of his life that were discussed in the lesson. Explain how Paul's life experiences can help you understand this letter to the Galatians.

Conclusion

During this lesson you have examined the background for the study of Galatians. Paul wrote to the Galatians sometime between A.D. 48 and A.D. 55 in response to news that Judaizers were influencing the Galatians to return to a legalistic view of salvation and of the Christian life. He wrote Galatians to establish his authority as the one called by Christ to present to them the true gospel of justification by faith alone, apart from works, and to exhort them to return to a grace way of living in freedom from the law.

The survey of Paul's life showed that he had experienced the issues with which he deals in Galatians. He had been the staunchest of Jewish leaders and an expert in the law. Through his dramatic conversion to Christ he came to understand salvation by grace through faith alone, apart from works, and how salvation by grace surpassed the legalism of the Old Testament.

ENDNOTES

¹ The quote and the graphic are taken from John L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 161-62. Fortress declares: “Photograph reproduced with the permission of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, The University of Michigan Library.”

² See D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 293-94.

³ As does John in John 20:31.

⁴ See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles, Guides to New Testament Exegesis*, ed. Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 42-43.

⁵ It is commonly believed among scholars that these Judaizers were Jewish Christians, yet some say they were Jews who claimed to be Christians, and others believe they were Gentile Christians. The main point is that these people were advocating circumcision and other traditional Jewish practices as a necessary part of salvation and the Christian life.

⁶ *Ten Basic Steps toward Christian Maturity, Lesson 7: The Christian and Witnessing* [online version] (Orlando, FL: New Life, 2003); available from <http://www.basicsteps.org/english/witnessing/step711.htm>.

⁷ Most scholars today agree that this refers to the Nabataean kingdom to the east and south of Palestine, whose northern border ends at Damascus. See W. W. Wessel, “Arabia,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), 66.