

Notes on Galatians

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Chapter one

Paul knew that only a message which gave glory to God (vv. 5, 24) would be a true gospel. He had grown up in Judaism, knew it from the inside and sought to protect the Galatians from a heresy that had been influenced by it. Paul's gospel had come to him, as to us all, because God chose to give it to him and because Christ gave himself for his sins. It is by such a gospel that we are saved from this evil world and can live in grace and peace that comes constantly from God. All this is to God's glory.

What had come to the Galatians now was a deception, like the serpent's deception in Eden, based around receiving human approval rather than God's.

See the author's book *Commitment Theology—is it true and can it deliver?* listed on this web site.

Christ, not Jerusalem, was the authority for the true gospel. Christ revealed himself and the gospel to Paul, or in Paul. It changed the fabric of his being and he began to proclaim it immediately to Gentiles. The need to check his gospel with Jerusalem did not occur to him. When he did go to Jerusalem, it was for fellowship with the apostle Peter and the Jerusalem church leader James. No other purpose is mentioned. All the churches in Judea gave glory to God for what he had done in Paul.

Everyone needs a revelation of Christ. We need the apostles because through their testimony, Christ reveals himself in us. In this way, we know God, know his grace, know we are delivered from this evil world and are full of praise to God. Nothing must stand in the way of our standing in this powerful word of Christ.

Prayer

Thanks be to you, Father, for the grace you have revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ. I bless you for peace with yourself based on your own purpose and grace. Nothing could have awakened me to this other than Christ himself. Now, through him, and under his authority, I know I stand in your presence and do not crave the approval of people. Thankyou for delivering me from this present evil age. May my life from this day be an evident sign of your grace and truth, for your glory. Amen.

Chapter two

During future years, Paul must have been preaching the gospel. Titus was a witness that people who did not fit within Judaism were among the people of God wholly because of Christ and his gospel preached by Paul. God showed Paul that it was important for this work to be acknowledged by the Jerusalem church, not because he had any doubts about it but because he wanted it to be seen that the whole church was one people of God. In fact, some 'false believers', more concerned to preserve Judaism's central role than to give glory to Christ, tried to get Titus circumcised, but Paul resisted. Two apostles and Jerusalem elder James were entirely satisfied that Paul was equally an apostle with the others, and that his ministry was especially to Gentiles. We who are Gentiles are assured that we are fully a part of the people of God and that the church of God is one, with Christ and the apostles, united, as its foundation.

This point was threatened by Peter reverting to segregation laws for eating when certain people from Jerusalem visited Antioch. The whole Jewish community in Antioch was swayed by this. Paul could see that such hypocrisy threatened the one foundation of the church, which was, that God reckons as righteous those who trust in Christ. If Jerusalem's concerns and Peter's action had not been challenged, the world would get the message that everyone had to keep Jewish customs and undertake to keep the whole law in order to be a Christian. He said, in effect: 'we Jews know that we have never been justified by keeping the law. How can you lay that burden on others? If I insist on my self justifying culture after discovering Christ, I am denying the way of true justification and am proven to be a sinner. I won't do this! The law brought us to the end of trusting it for justification. I, and you too, have been judged in Christ. It is the Christ risen and living in us who enables us to live before God. My whole life, including eating with Gentiles, is a matter of trusting in Jesus Christ who loved and died for me. Not to do this is to treat God's grace as though it were nothing and to say that Christ did not need to die!'

Prayer

Lord, I desire to live unto you and to do so by the living and reigning of your Son Jesus Christ. Forgive me if through weakness of character and desire for the favour of people, I have conveyed the message that anything else is more important than being justified through faith in your Son. I thank you that your gospel, and so, your church, have remained until this day. Grant that the truth of your grace will be maintained in all places. May those whose consciences are in bondage be released through your true word, for the sake of Christ your Son. Amen.

Chapter three

Paul writes about a blessing, or a curse, from God. God had clearly blessed the Galatians with the gospel message. They knew Christ had been crucified for their sins. They had received the Holy Spirit and God had worked miracles among them. They had not made any commitments to Jewish law for all this to happen but were now making such a commitment as though such a thing was vital. They were in danger of losing the whole dynamic of what had happened to them. Israel's forefather, Abraham, had taught them that God's blessing came through believing God's promise. The law taught Israel that they had to keep every command or would be under God's curse, and they had not kept every command of God! The law (apart

from the promise in which it was given) did not require faith, only works. But Christ had now borne the awful curse so that the blessing of God promised to Abraham could come to them. He told the Galatians, 'You should never add to faith what you have needed to leave behind!'

Everything that had happened in Israel's history had led to the coming of Christ. The son promised to Abraham was not, ultimately, Isaac but Jesus Christ. He would inherit everything promised to Abraham. This promise was made directly to Abraham and his coming Son, not like the law which was handed on by a mediator, Moses. The law would act as a 'prison' or a harsh tutor, in that it would keep everyone aware of their sinfulness. It would serve (not supersede) the promise that God had made to Abraham, making us aware that only Christ could receive the promise of blessing and so bestow it on us. We have clothed ourselves with Christ now by being baptized into this name, and, with him, we are the 'son' who receives the promised blessing.

Prayer

Father, you have ordained that I should live in your blessing and not under your curse. Let me always remember Christ, your Son, who, on his cross, has borne the curse I deserved. Let me rejoice today that I am in your Son and live in your blessing. Grant too, Father, that those who have been bewitched by the lure of a self justifying culture, even a religious one, shall be set free, and glory in your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Chapter four

Paul links together his Jewish history and experience of the Gentiles to whom he wrote. Israel was God's son but still, like a child, under law and so like a slave. (Jewish children of rich parents may have been under the tutelage of a household slave until they became adult.) He called the law given by God an elemental spirit or basic principle. Of itself (the false teachers were taking it as something in itself) it was no more able to save people than any idolatrous ritual which enslaved its followers. Israel, and Paul in particular, had been redeemed from this through Jesus Christ. Now, the Galatians, who had not known God, knew him. They knew him as Father, were known by God as sons and daughters and would receive an inheritance as full members of the family. Why now, should they want to go back to trusting what they could do themselves, as a ritual, built up in this world? Paul could not go back to Judaism. The Galatians could not possibly want to exchange their newfound sonship for what Israel and Paul had found to be no better than idolatry!

How could Paul speak to these people who were bewitched by false teachers? He appealed to them to follow him out of the securing constraints of a culture that had its roots in this world. He appealed to them to remember the blessing they felt when he was with them, and when they were fresh in the love of Christ crucified for them and when they spoke readily to God as their Father. How he would love to be with them now as he had been with them then!

Perhaps they would listen if he explained Abraham's story. God promised that Abraham's wife would have a child. Because this was impossible, Abraham had a child by his wife's slave. But God did the impossible and a child was born to Sarah. These two mothers represent the two covenants, law and grace. In particular, Sarah represents the covenant in which, through faith in Christ, a person is justified. When

conflict arose between the two growing children, the child of the slave had to leave. God had given his church a parable in their forefather's history. The covenant which relies on what a human being can do, the law, must not stand in the way of the blessing promised to Abraham. The promised son, Jesus Christ, must inherit what was promised and share it with all who trust in him. The city of Jerusalem had become the 'son' which must be thrown out because she did not receive justification by faith.

Prayer

Father, you have proclaimed your Name to us through your Son Jesus Christ. Through him and by his Spirit, I now call you Father. I bless you for this freedom from vain traditions and from idols and thank you that you have prepared an inheritance for all your children. When I am tempted to revert to what is visible and possible and familiar, and when my heart grows cold to the grace I have received in your Son, grant that I may be warned and turn again to walk in freedom. Save all who have been bewitched. May they read and understand the story you have written and in which your people live, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter five

'Don't be a slave', says Paul. 'If you seek comfort for your conscience and advancement in your religion by what Jerusalem proposes, you won't need Christ, or grace, or the cross by which Christ redeemed us. You won't have to wait for any hope of righteousness because you will have made your own arrangements to appear righteous already' Here is the central matter. Do we have faith in what we can do, and so gain glory for ourselves, or faith in a Christ who has redeemed us by bearing our curse? If it is the latter, we will have to endure persecution from those who have stumbled over the offence of the cross. Paul was absolutely clear. 'The only faith which counts is faith in this Christ, and this faith functions by love, from beginning to end. Christ would never lay the burden on you that Jerusalem is laying on you.'

How may this freedom be expressed? Surely, by the love which faith knows, a love which serves and fulfils the law; there is no freedom in acting like animals. Surely, also, by the fruits which the Spirit produces, the Spirit who brought this new life to us.

We are still sufficiently subject to the weaknesses of our flesh to be warned not to give it any opportunity for expression (v. 13). From another point of view, in Christ, we have crucified it (v. 24). The trouble with the false teachers was that they were trying to gain perfection by the flesh, that is, by outward regulation (3:3). Like Abraham, they tried to do the Spirit's work by human effort and conflict arose between the two systems (4:23, 29). One led to bondage and the other to freedom. They could not live together. The false teachers were walking by the flesh while promoting the law, and their walking by the flesh stirred up all manner of evil, in themselves and in their hearers. While trying to prevent evil, they were actually assisting it, and while trying to secure people for the kingdom of God they were driving them away from it.

Paul says that in Christ, we have crucified the flesh. We must always be mindful of what Christ did on the cross and never move away from trust in what God did there. Christ became a curse for us so that the Spirit could be poured out on us (3:13-14).

By walking in the way of the Spirit who assures us of our sonship (4:6), we will not do the deeds of the flesh, we will not be under the law either to justify or to condemn us, and we will produce a harvest of godly and humane living. So then, what complaint could the false teachers have with such a life, since they were so eager to promote the law?

Prayer

Father, the desire for glory is very powerful. Sometimes, I have become enslaved to something which I hoped will justify me. Forgive me for this sin and this ignorance. I bless you for the love of your Son and the power of his cross by which I have been freed from condemnation and the need to make my own righteousness. I thank you that in knowing this love, I believe in you, and, that in believing in you, I love. Thankyou also for your Spirit by whom every good is worked in me. Help me to heed his leading and to walk in his way. Amen.

Chapter six

No one should think that it is easy to walk by the Spirit. Any of us could be overtaken in a fault (that is, not a haughty sin which intends to break covenant with God, but an unintended sin). But if there is someone who is walking in the Spirit, who considers that they too could be tempted, and who knows that of themselves they are nothing, they will know how to help a person bear their load. Christ has borne our burden and also helps us now with mercy, and grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). His law may mean the law he fulfilled and the law he now assures us we will fulfil in us by his Spirit, but it certainly means the loving of mercy (Matt. 23:23) which can restore someone to faith and good works. We are greatly tempted to think of ourselves in relation to another, perhaps that we have not fallen like another, but this means nothing. Each one must assess himself or herself as they are in relation to God and bear their own load.

Vv. 2 and 5 use different words for burden: v. 2 refers to its heaviness; v. 5 to its being borne.

Walking in the Spirit is shown to be wonderfully practical, as those who are taught care for those who teach and as every believer does good to everyone. The fruit of the Spirit breaks no law, and actually fulfils it, and, in this way, the whole need of humanity is encompassed.

Paul knew there were decisions the Galatians would have to make about false teachers and so he concludes his letter by making his own position clear. 'Your false teachers don't want to be linked with a crucified Christ. Their message cannot have brought peace because they have to enlist you to their cause to make themselves feel better. The one thing to boast of in this world is Christ giving himself up for us on his cross. Knowing this means that what the world thinks of you or can provide doesn't matter any more. Being committed to anything other than the new creation God is making through the gospel may be a self serving diversion. Peace and mercy be on all who heed what I have said, because such people are the true Israel on whom God's blessing rests. Let there be no more argument about this because the marks of being a truthful servant of the crucified Lord are in my flesh.'

Prayer

Father, I want to be strong in the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Grant that I may receive the help that others can give and encourage others to trust wholly in you. Thankyou for your servant Paul who has called us to freedom in such clear fashion. Help me to recognise the error which leads only to glory for myself and security in this world and grant that I, together with all your people, may live in the blessing you have ordained through your Son, in whose name I pray. Amen.

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