

Galatians: Occasion, Setting, Addressees, and Purpose

Let us begin with prayer together.

*Our heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for this day that You have given us. Many of us are tired and yet we rejoice that we have the opportunity to come under Your Word, to live in Your presence, and to have Your Spirit who will guide us into all truth. Lord, we pray that You will refresh us in mind and spirit this evening, that we will be refocused on You and re-motivated for witness. May we be deepened, not only in our understanding, but in our commitment to You. We thank You for this class. We thank You for the opportunity that You give us to reflect upon and to apply Your Word. We pray that You would bless this time that we have together to Your glory and honor. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

The title of this course is, *The Life and Letters of Paul*, and you may have wondered why we spent so much time in Acts. Acts is important and foundational because it shows the expansion of the Gospel across many barriers and borders. As we move into studying the epistles, we will see how the apostle Paul was used to carry the Gospel into various settings through the letters he wrote to his churches in those places. In Acts we have seen how Paul received the Gospel of great, unmerited forgiveness and regeneration in his life. Now he goes out and presents the Gospel to various groups, people, and cultures, in various situations. The issues that come up, in the presentation and living out of that Gospel in the churches he plants, are what he addresses in the epistles. At first glance, the epistles seem random, personal, and highly contextualized. In Corinth Paul experiences one thing and responds to it, and in Galatia there is a different issue and a different response. But actually, as the Gospel is presented to various cultures and settings, it brings up questions, problems, and situations that in the end reflect the human condition: the human condition without the Gospel, as it meets with the Gospel, and then as it responds to the Gospel. Thus we can say that, in God's wisdom, He led Paul to write particular, situation-specific letters to various churches, but the real problems he addresses are human-condition problems that will continue. The diversity of what he addresses would continue throughout the ages and will also be found today. In order to see that there are basic truths that continue from these letters, we need to have the understanding of what those situations represent and how they relate to our times today. While these letters were written to particular churches in particular situations, they are the Word of God to us. They are God speaking to our lives as we come under the Gospel. There is one unifying theme throughout in what Paul is doing as the apostle to the Gentiles—the apostle who writes from God—and that theme is this: bring everything under the authority and preeminence of Christ. Relate life, thought, and ethics to Christ. Whatever problem the churches come up with, Paul relates that problem to the Gospel; be it in thought, question, or conduct, he always uses a Christ-centered approach to dealing with those problems. That is the unifying theme of the epistles as Paul begins to minister.

Perhaps we can use the image of the Gospel as a plow that Paul uses to turn the soil of the churches he ministers to. As he begins to present the Gospel to these people, there are various stones, bushes, and other obstructions that are turned up. There is one major obstruction that Paul turned up as he ministered to the Galatians and as they responded to the Gospel. As we study Galatians, we will always have the question in the back of our mind, “What is the issue here and how does that issue relate to us today?” Before we go to our study, be aware that, throughout the history of the Church, revivals have begun when Galatians has been substantially studied, because those studying the book have returned to the Gospel. The most outstanding example of this is the Reformation. A substantial impact of Galatians can be seen and traced in Luther's teaching. He gave lengthy lectures on Galatians and that was part of the influence, which led him to say, “The church has lost a basic truth: salvation by grace alone. The Church has somehow allowed, propagated, endorsed, and encouraged human endeavor to gain the favor of God

and it has thereby compromised or sold out the Gospel truth. It has fallen back into exactly what Paul warned the Galatians not to fall back into: a man-generated purity that would somehow gain the favor of God.” Luther’s cry of, “Salvation by grace alone,” was like a fire that spread throughout Europe. There were many other times like that before and after the Reformation.

As we turn to Galatians, we turn to one of the nerve centers of the Gospel. It is not by accident, I believe, that the first apostolic letter, written to a group of churches where Paul had just recently plowed with the Gospel, is the letter to the Galatians. The first things I would like to address are the occasion, the setting, and the addresses of this letter. A lot could be said about this, but I will just develop that to a certain degree in this lecture. Paul’s ministry to Galatia marks the beginning of his missionary career.

It is important that Paul was a Hellenistic Jew in terms of his early upbringing. He grew up in the city of Tarsus, which, culturally, was a well-developed city. He would have had a good bit of exposure to Greek thought and philosophy. Scholars debate at what point in Paul/Saul’s life he moved to Jerusalem. It is perhaps good to say that he was younger rather than older, perhaps even only twelve or thirteen years old when he was sent by his father to Jerusalem. He was educated under Gamaliel, as Acts reports. Gamaliel was of the school of Hillel, which was (if you would want to use the word) a more liberal school. He was a little less rigid in applying the precepts of the Torah (the Old Testament) to particular rabbinic teaching. After this time of training under Gamaliel, there came the time of persecuting the church. Paul was at the center of the Palestinian Judaic, Pharisaic party, and felt that it was his duty and commission to persecute the church. I have made a few comments in our study of Acts concerning that and the entire disposition of Paul/Saul at that time. Paul felt that the Christians were worshipping Jesus, which he saw as blasphemy. The only way he saw to deal with that blasphemy was to persecute them and force them to blaspheme Jesus so that they might be brought back into the fold of Judaism, or perhaps, if necessary, kill them as those who are enemies of God. If you had interviewed Paul at that very point before his conversion, I do not believe that he would have said that he had some doubts about his own life or that he thought he had sins of incompleteness in his life. I think he would have told you that he felt closer to God than ever because he was not only teaching well, but he was also putting deeds to his words. He was fighting on the side of God for His name, for His glory, and for His honor against these horrible Christians who were blaspheming the name of YHWH.

At this, the highest point of Paul’s zeal for God, Jesus appears to him before Damascus. When the resurrected Jesus appears to him He does not say, “You know Saul, you are doing pretty well; you are willing to sacrifice much. There is just a little left—would you please believe in me a little bit.” Rather, as Paul encounters the living, risen Lord, he sees that the sum total of his life is false. Everything he understood and did was opposed to the purposes of God. This was a radically shattering experience for Saul. The sum total of his great deeds on behalf of God—his great pharisaic school, his wonderful zeal to do the Word of God and live by it—ended up being utterly opposed to the purposes of God. He had to recognize that this appointed Jesus was actually part of the purpose of the very God that He was intending to defend. It was not that there was just a slight deficit in Saul; he turned out to be the enemy, the opponent, of God.

This encounter with Jesus is the source and root of much of Pauline theology, which I believe is nothing else than the Gospel applied to Paul. As Paul says over and over in his letters, there is no human merit before God. If somebody would be able to stand the test of qualifying for God on the basis of self effort, Saul was it. And yet he did not turn out to be slightly deficient, only needing a little more effort to get him over the final barrier to godliness. Rather, the sum total of all his purposes turned out to be against the purposes of God. Thus the turning point of Paul’s life is the source of his clear teaching that man can

be justified and pleasing before God only by what Christ did and not by what man can do, no matter how good his efforts may look to the human eye.

Paul says in Philippians, “With regard to the law, I was faultless, blameless.” From human perspective, he had a lot to boast about, as he said. He could boast about his heritage, his education, and his knowledge. He could boast that he lived by that education and knowledge. He was not a hypocrite who said one thing and did another. He was even zealous for the living God. But with all of that of which he could boast according to the human perspective, he was an enemy of God. His was not a slight deficiency; it was utter opposition to the purposes of God, which Paul had to reckon with at his conversion (Acts 9, 22 and 26). Paul’s conversion, then, was a time of initial rethinking. There may have been other times of special revelation to Paul, but really the Gospel has already been set in his heart—not by man’s strength or skill, but by God’s provision only and exclusively does man have a chance to stand justified and favorable before God. I hope that you know that truth fairly well. Perhaps you will see as we look at Galatians how this tendency sneaks into our lives 20, 50, 100, and even 200 times a day; we so often want to add our own righteousness to that of Christ’s. “Let me do something that looks good to me and to others so that I will be able to boast about something.” We are saved by grace. We will see that Paul has to deal with that.

Paul is very familiar with the Old Testament and has reflected on the purpose of the Mosaic Law and on the purpose of the promise to Abraham. Some of what we have in Galatians is the fruit of that reflection, but his basic understanding of the Gospel has already been set since his conversion on the road to Damascus. I believe that the basic truth about the Gospel was set in Paul’s heart as he encountered the living Christ before the gates of Damascus. At that point everything had to be reconsidered. “What can I boast in? I consider all things a loss for the sake of gaining Christ.” Fundamental changes happened in Paul following his conversion, as we read in Philippians. He sojourned for a while in Tarsus, probably from 37 to 45 AD. It is from Tarsus that Barnabas the encourager calls this Paul and has him minister with him in Pisidian Antioch, the second missionary base.

And from Antioch, then, Barnabas and Paul are sent out for a first missionary journey in what is now Turkey: the area in the south of the larger Roman province of Galatia. If you look at a Roman description of Turkey, you would say, Paul ministered with Barnabas in south Galatia. In the southern area, there was an ethnic Galatia in the north that also included the Roman province of Galatia, but the cities mentioned in Acts are those of what we would call the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, including Lystra, Derbe, and Perga. Note from Acts that Paul primarily visited synagogues. So what we are dealing with in Galatians is particularly connected to that because the debate, the aestheticism, the contracts that Paul establishes in Galatia, are dealing with life connected and associated with Jewish synagogues. Then he returns to Syrian Antioch and pretty soon we can surmise from Galatians there are reports from the churches that he has established through this first ministry journey, that there are serious troubles—conflict and debate—in those churches and the letter to the Galatians written at about the end of 48 AD, or the beginning of 49 AD, addresses those questions.

For those of you who look at chronological connections, we are dating Galatians before the Jerusalem Council. I would say Paul wrote Galatians and then some time later was commissioned from the Antioch church to go down to Jerusalem and join the council. The major debate of the council, which we have already looked at together, was whether it was necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be saved. The letter to the Galatians already anticipates a culmination of this problem that comes up later in the Jerusalem Council. I date Galatians before the Jerusalem Council, as the first letter of Paul addressed to the south Galatians, because that is the only group of new converts that Paul can address at this early stage. If you dated Galatians later on, which you could, Paul would have been writing to churches in

north Galatia, if Paul indeed ministered in the northern region in the second missionary journey. But my understanding here is that it is more possible, according to all the pieces of evidence given, that Paul wrote this letter early and only to the south Galatians. In the ethnic north Galatia there was very little evidence of a Jewish population. However, in the south Galatia area, where Paul actually visited, there was a significant Jewish population. If Galatians was written later, there would be the question of why Paul spends so much time addressing the Jewish problem with the Gospel with regards to the law if there were not many Jewish Christians in the north of Galatia.

In summary, I date Galatians early, written prior to the apostolic council, and I understand the letter to be addressed to the south Galatians, particularly Jewish Christians. That is important as we now move on to the question of the addressees. The occasion for the letter is clear. There are new converts in the Galatian churches, particularly connected to the synagogue—there were many Jewish Christians. These converts embrace the Gospel and then something happens. That something, I believe, is best summarized by saying that there were Judaizers inside and outside of the newly-founded Christian churches. I understand Judaizers to be those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but who do not believe that salvation is by grace alone. The Judaizers, responding to the Gospel presented by Paul, say that Jesus is the Messiah; they believe that God's Word is fulfilled in Jesus. But they do not believe in the Gospel of grace. It is a strange hybrid and an inconsistent teaching. They were trying to hold on to seeking righteousness on their own terms, but adding faith in Jesus as the Messiah whom God had sent to them. There is an insignificant understanding of the death of Christ on their behalf. These Judaizers appear to go from synagogue to synagogue retracing the steps of Paul and telling these new Christians that they were misled by Paul. They were telling the new believers that Paul denied the significance of the law and that he was speaking against Moses. If you speak against Moses, you are in serious trouble. In this way they were shaking these young Christians who had been taught by Paul that the sacrifice of Christ was the only way they could come into a reconciled relationship with God. They were saying, "Wait a minute, don't believe what he says. He is leading you astray. You must keep the law. You must continue in these ways and just confess that Jesus is the Messiah." A report of these Judaizers comes back to Paul in Antioch. You can imagine, based on his own conversion, what he has received from God himself, how shaken he is on behalf of these new Christians who had just found freedom in Christ and were being re-captivated, returned to the law of Moses. I believe that is the occasion and the setting of this letter.

The addressees of this letter are young, searching Christians who are vacillating between these two teachings. Paul writes to encourage them to return to the Gospel that he preached to them. Note the beginning of Galatians where Paul states, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." I believe that when he says that, he is referring back to Damascus where he had to learn that his great achievements accounted for absolutely nothing—that they were actually opposed to the purposes of God. That Gospel, which he was presenting, he had received from God as His will and revelation to him. Paul was only passing that on. Paul says to the Galatians in 1:6, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." We could shake our heads and say, "It is amazing how superficial the Galatians were; they could not keep a hold on the Gospel." Yet the history of the church is full of the situations which deserve this questioning: "Why did you turn so quickly, foolish people." Therefore, we do well to reflect on the call of Paul as it is developed in his letter to the Galatians.

The purpose of this letter is to call the young Christians away from the Judaizers and back to the Gospel of grace. As you see, the Judaizers had quite a strong effect on the young Christians because they were actually arguing with the Word of God, and it looked as if Paul was arguing against the Word of God

and the Mosaic Law. Thus it was a major undertaking for Paul to communicate to these Galatian Christians what was really at stake. Are the Judaizers the only group that is in view here? They may be closely connected to Pharisaic Judaism. Pharisaic Judaism was the main-line movement among the Jews at the time of Jesus and Paul, and they did not believe in a . Pharisaic Judaism was a major movement, which went beyond Old Testament Scripture, and said that man must keep the law in order to be saved. You see, the argument in Galatians can be understood to say that the law was never intended to be kept in order to be saved. That is an Old Testament question. But we can say for sure that, within Pharisaic Judaism, there was a clear teaching that in order to have favor before God, you must keep the Law of Moses. This teaching influenced the Judaizers who believed in the Messiah, but who were still very strongly connected to this teaching that you must keep the law in order to be saved. What I am opening up for you here is the question of whether the law in the context of the Old Testament was ever intended to be kept in order to be saved. That is something we will come back to as we look at Galatians. But we can say that the representatives of Pharisaic Judaism did teach that you must keep the law in order to be acceptable before God.

Pharisaic Judaism had a very strong influence on the Judaizers, and a much lesser influence on Peter and even Barnabas. Peter certainly confesses Jesus as Messiah. He also knows that salvation is by grace alone, but he vacillates a little bit. We read in Galatians two how he wavered on the question of whether he should sit with unclean Gentiles when Jews from Jerusalem, perhaps Judaizers, are there. Thus there is a change in his conduct of living out his belief in salvation by grace alone. Before the Judaizers come he is sitting there at the table with Gentiles with his chin up and his shoulders broad. But when the Judaizers come around and despise him for defiling himself by sitting with Gentiles, he changes his conduct. So it is not a deeply theological problem with Peter, but it is a problem of conduct; of living out the Gospel in action. Peter, Barnabas, the Galatian Christians, and the Judaizers are slowly moving over into full Gospel living. Pharisaic Jews do not believe in the Messiah yet. Judaizers profess some confession of Jesus, but basically teach, "By law you must be saved." Peter and Barnabas, and particularly Peter, are a little fuzzy on conduct.

Paul is the one who is thinking and acting, through the Gospel of grace, in the light. Some would argue that Paul is completely free from any obligation to pursue the law of God; this is an issue we will deal with in the next lecture. Paul definitely teaches that man must be saved by grace alone. The question is, is there any function, any significance, of the law still, or is there none at all? Some believe there is none at all. I think you should be careful that you do not become a lawless person or a legalistic person. Antinomianism and legalism are both great problems and we will deal with those in the next lecture. At this point, we are just setting the stage for that discussion. Do you understand the spectrum here? Pharisaic Jews—probably many of the people Paul encounters when he goes to the synagogues—have the mentality that you must keep the law and only then will you be acceptable before God. The Judaizers believe you must keep the law and also believe in the Messiah, and then you will be acceptable to God. Others, including Peter at one stage in his life, believe that it is really tough to live out the Gospel sometimes, so they do what is easier for awhile. Paul proclaimed that we are saved by grace alone. He wanted Jews and Gentile to have table fellowship. He wanted them to live the Gospel out together and display the liberty that Christ has given us. By sitting at the table together, Jews and Gentiles, we are acknowledging that we all need mercy as sinners.

I have tried to summarize the occasion, setting, addressees, and the purpose of Paul's letter to the Galatians. He wanted them to watch out for the Judaizers. One of the main passages that we will look at immediately follows a criticism of Peter, but it is more serious. Paul is actually arguing against the Judaizers and not mainly against Peter. That is just one side issue. The false gospel of the Judaizers is the main problem that Paul confronts when he writes to the Galatians.

It has been asked, “Is there any credibility to the idea that the Judaizers actually wanted to use the Gospel for the purpose of national Judaism?” They were more concerned about the keeping of the law than about the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus as Messiah was in some ways incorporated in the basic system that they still kept. So that is possible, but it is hard to say. I believe that this is a group of people who are kind of between the synagogue and the Christian church: perhaps part of the Christian church, perhaps within the synagogue still. They have not clearly identified where they belong. Is there any information on the Judaizers outside the Scriptures? There are Jewish Christian groups that are traceable at the end of the first and beginning of the second century that seem to fit that description. These groups were losing life and influence in the second century. The Gospel to the Hebrews may be one evidence of that group. They were a strongly legalistic, but still somewhat Christian, group. Thus there is some trace of that phenomenon within Palestine in particular, but not so much outside of Palestine. I am talking here particularly about Asia Minor. But it is quite clear that the Judaizers had Jerusalem as their center and they moved out following Paul. In that sense, at least they were spurred on by Pharisaic Judaism and still kept that connection with the establishment.

In the next lecture we will study the issue of how Paul deals with the problem of the Judaizers and what he puts against their position—what he presents to help these young, searching Christians come loose from their grip and actually embrace the Gospel of grace. Please remember: as we go into that next lecture, keeping the law—especially as it is presented by Pharisaic Judaism—is man's effort to gain divine approval. I have looked far and wide to find any indication as to how Pharisaic Judaism describes sin, and I was astonished. In any area I looked—the Qumran, the Essenes in general, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, even Rabbinic Judaism in the first and second century—what I found was a casuistic understanding of sin; if you do something wrong, try to make it right. If you do something wrong, you may need to go through the ritual of some atonement or some forgiveness by sacrificing and then you will be all right again. There is very little, if any, reflection that there is something seriously wrong with the human condition, or that there is such a thing as original sin. That is very revealing. The understanding in Pharisaic Judaism, and also among the Judaizers, is that man is basically a neutral being. (I'm exaggerating a little.) You can choose the road of truth or the road of falsehood. You can choose the road of sinning or the road of pursuing godliness. You always have these options, and if you choose the wrong way, do something to get it right. Thus the method of dealing with sin is, if you take a wrong step, then take a right one. Then you are neutral again. If you take two right steps, you can afford one wrong step; it is an understanding of sin that is very close to Islam. If you study Islam, it is an incredible system of things to do and not to do. It also has a system that prescribes balancing your wrong deeds with good deeds. That is why you do not know whether you will get to heaven—because you may throw off the balance the last day of your life. So it is good to have a little credit in the bank of good deeds so that you are always on the winning side. But Pharisaic Judaism is very much that casuistic understanding of sin. It sees sin as being only the sinful deeds that we do, rather than our inherent and hopeless nature as sinners. Thus you see already how the Gospel needs to be brought to that situation and how these young Christians who are torn between these two teachings have to be guided into what the true Gospel is all about.

I had the opportunity in Austria to reflect on the severity of the human condition. It is a difficult part of preaching the Gospel. Some people just do not want to hear it. It is a very hard message to say, “Man is not just a little flawed, making some wrong decisions. Rather, man is actually seriously flawed and he is not capable of saving himself.” At one point I was teaching a group, which was a mixture of American and international people, and all of them understood English pretty well. I had them recite John 3:16 and they said it: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life.” I said to them, “I had not noticed before that the phrase, “will

not perish,” assumes that without Christ you are on the road to perishing. That is already a given of John 3:16. Faith in Jesus gets you out of that train that is bound for destruction. It is not that you are on neutral ground. You are saying, “I choose to believe in Jesus rather than to not believe in Jesus.” The problem is that you are already a denier of God. That is the train you are sitting in; that is the disposition you have. You can fight against it. You can say, “That’s unfair.” You can say, “God didn’t give me an option.” Yes, there is much challenge in it, but the truth of the Gospel is that you are on the road to destruction unless God saves you by giving you the gift of faith so that you can believe in the salvation of Christ. Then you “shall not perish, but have eternal life.” The Pharisaic Jews and the Judaizers do not see this. I believe that it is only as you know Christ that you come to understand the severe condition of man. That is part of Paul’s teaching in Galatians: you must understand the severity of the state of the human condition. Otherwise, you will believe that you can make at least some contribution to salvation and gaining a life before God. That thought will raise itself inside of you as sure as I stand here. I do it, and why should you get away with that? I think it is the human condition to say, “I will win my own way out of this.”

What did the Judaizers concretely believe concerning Jesus? It is hard to say because we only know this group from what Paul says about them to the Galatians. He tells the Galatians to watch out and to not believe them, to come away from their teaching and not return to it. We have to put together the puzzle of what Paul says. His goal is always very clear, but whom he is arguing against is not always sharply described. I think he has a purpose in that too—in leading to the answer and not describing the questions in all detail. It may be that their belief in Jesus was just intellectual. I would say that is true. There is not a reflection of the total work of Jesus in their teaching. Their belief was probably something like, “Jesus is the awaited Messiah who has some purpose of God.” They definitely did not believe that He died on behalf of the Judaizers. They had not come to that point.

It has also been asked, “Did the Judaizers respond so strongly against Paul because they already noticed in the early Christians a tendency toward licentiousness?” That is possible. I do not think that we can make a strong case for that. But we know from other letters of Paul that some Christians said, “I’m saved by grace through faith alone; now I’m going to have a good time with my liberty. Let me sin more so that grace may abound!” This is, of course, a complete misunderstanding of the Gospel. So that sort of attitude might have been evident in the Galatian Christians. If so, that would have given some fuel to the Judaizers who say, “See, the fruit of Paul’s teaching is that people please themselves.” That is why I believe we need to look carefully at what Paul teaches the Galatians. That may be at the horizon of the whole situation—this libertarian, antinomian attitude leading to lawlessness.

Once again, who are the recipients of the letter to the Galatians? They are young Christians who have received the Gospel in Paul’s and Barnabas’ first missionary journey. These are young churches that are influenced by the Judaizers. The addressees are young Christians who are giving one ear to Paul and the other ear to the Judaizers. They are confused. In fact, some of them are saying, “I think we need to listen to the Judaizers. I don’t think Paul gave us the Gospel.” I would say that most of them are converted Jews, but it is not likely that all of them are Jews. If what we have said about the possibility of libertarian tendencies is possible, there may be some Gentile influence there as well. But the main focus of Galatians is to speak to converted Jews—Jewish Christians.

The critical note of Paul against Peter and Barnabas is not directly responded to. There is a friendly response from Peter in 2 Peter where he says, “Listen to the letters of Paul, they are Scripture and people have twisted them, as they do with other Scripture.” Peter praises Paul’s teaching there. But we do not have a direct response. I think we should assume, from Acts and from the further development of Peter and Barnabas, that they saw that Paul was right—that there was a deficiency in their conduct.