# PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

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# LIVE FREE.

Are you spinning along in a prison-like pinwheel of do's and don'ts, all the while feeling like you never can quite measure up to the expectations of other Christians? Do you believe God's love for you is dependent on your behavior? It's time to discover true freedom and joy in God's grace.

# LIVING IN LIBERTY AS PEOPLE OF GRACE

### **CENTRAL PURPOSE**

Called the "Magna Charta of Christian Liberty," this pivotal letter to the assemblies of Christ-followers in the region of Galatia was, in part, a strong corrective to call them back to the one true gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. Pseudo-righteous Christians from a Jewish background were enforcing legalistic measures as a means of gaining and maintaining a right standing with God, e.g. circumcision (5:2-3), celebration of Jewish feasts (4:9-10), as well as cultural sensibilities of Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

While there was nothing wrong with people continuing their Jewish way of life, to force extra-biblical rules and preferences upon others as the way to follow God is entirely contradictory to the good news of Christ. Therefore, Paul – inspired by the Holy Spirit – wrote so that the believers across Galatia would return to the one true gospel of grace as the way to live in a love-relationship with God (4:1-7) and with one another (5:13-6:10).

# **AUTHOR and DATE**

The content, style, and peculiar earmarks of authenticity lead nearly all scholars to agree Paul wrote this important message to the churches of Galatia.<sup>2</sup> His defense of his apostleship (1:1, 11-24), his first-hand retelling of a debate between the apostles (2:1-21), personal comments about his penmanship (6:11), and a mention of his scars from persecution (6:17), guide us to confidently conclude Paul was the author.

Our best estimate for the time in which Paul wrote this letter is A.D. 48. Two factors point toward this time stamp: (1) The letter was likely written immediately prior to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15; about A.D. 49-50), which addressed the relationship between New Testament believers and the Law of Moses. If this gathering had already taken place, Paul certainly would have mentioned the council's resolution to further strengthen his argument. (2) This epistle was certainly written after Paul's first missionary journey (A.D. 47-48), which brought him through several cities in south Galatia (see *Setting*). Much to Paul's surprise, soon after evangelizing many people in the region, they began "quickly deserting"
(1:6) the gospel of grace in Christ for religious enslavement to the Law, thus the need for a swift and direct rebuke.

# HISTORICAL SETTING

Paul directly addresses the "churches in Galatia" (1:2) in his greeting, but where exactly were these churches? While some have theorized that this letter was addressed to believers in the larger northern region of Galatia (originally settled by the Gauls who migrated from western Europe), it is far more likely that this letter was originally sent to Christians in the southern portion of the province. During Paul's first missionary journey he ministered in four key cities in south Galatia: Antioch (Pisdian), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13:14-14:23). Paul continued planting churches in southern Galatia during his second . . . (cont. pg. 2)

# WARNING: SUBTLE DISTORTION

The central sin-issue in Galatia was not licentiousness but legalism. Outwardly religious, wise-looking behavior was promoted as the way of gaining and maintaining one's relationship with God. But the deception was subtle. Deconstruction of the gospel starts with a subtle distortion of the gospel. Legalism always disguises itself as a pious-sounding people-pleaser. Yet it slowly but steadily replaces joy with defeat, humility with arrogance, freedom with slavery, and motivation with exhaustion.

#### **HISTORICAL SETTING cont.**

...missionary journey, whereas there is no indication of direct missionary activity in northern Galatia.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a significant population of Jews (and presumably Jewish-Christian converts) lived in the southern region, and all the major thoroughfares of Paul's birthplace city, Tarsus, passed through south Galatia.4

When Paul mentioned to the Galatians that he bore on his "body the brand-marks of Jesus" (6:17b), he undoubtedly recalled his near death experience of stoning at the hands of hostile Jewish leaders who harassed him all the way from Antioch and Iconium to Lystra (Acts 14). No tolerance would be allowed for the "Judiazers," who were attempting to persuade new believers to adhere to portions of the Mosaic Law as a means to maintain righteousness before God.

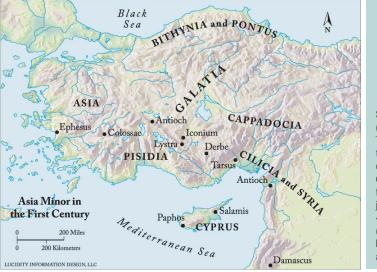
# **Q: WHAT IS LEGALISM?**

A: In relating to others, legalism is to enforce extra-biblical rules, personal preferences, cultural assumptions, or individual convictions upon another person as the way for them to attain a better or closer standing with God. In relating to God, legalism is to believe certain standards of behavior or religious duty will earn God's love and divine favor. In short, John Piper writes, "moral behavior that is not from faith is legalism."

For Israel: True Israelite faith was not designed to be legalistic. God intended that they follow the Law of Moses as an act of faith in God's promised Messiah and out of love for their Creator-Redeemer. However, they misinterpreted and misapplied the Law as a long set of regulations to follow in order to incrementally earn and keep God's favor.

For Galatia: These new believers who had so joyfully received the freeing message of grace in Christ were quickly succumbing to persuasive, wise-sounding lies, namely, that they must follow certain elements of the Law of Moses to maintain a good standing with God.

For Today: No standard of conduct or adjustment of behavior - no matter how noble - can merit us one inch of God's favor. God's kindness is offered to us through the Perfect One who fulfilled the righteous and holy demands of God to rescue us from our sin and bring us into God's family (Gal. 4:1-7). Only the gospel can restore our relationship with God and only Christ can maintain our right-relationship to God.



See Map: Paul (originally of Tarsus) traveled to the four central cities in southern Galatia during his first missionary journey (A.D. 47-48): Antioch (Pisdian), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

# **GRACE vs. LAW**

"One of the most serious problems facing the church in Paul's day was the problem of legalism. In every day it is the same. Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes his power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, sober, dull, and listless profession. The truth is betraved. and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy kill-joy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing."

#### - Dr. S. Lewis Johnson

# **HOW ABOUT YOU?**

The full and free grace of God does not lead the forgiven to license in sin but to liberty in love for God. But do you still find yourself on the performance treadmill? There are two ways that religious rat-race could end:

1. Arrogance through performance success with sin cleverly disguised and hidden deep within. You generally think you're holier than most everyone else yet remain full of pride and lust for power and control. You're headed for a blow-out...

2. Defeat through the inability to perform and measure up to the outward demands of religion. You feel like a failure and believe God will never be pleased with you. You're ready to give up...

Where are you?

Only the gospel of God holds the power to halt your sinful, fleshly temptations and bring about genuine, love-saturated holiness.

Stanley Toussaint reminds us: "the method of justification always determines the method of sanctification – by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone."

# **NOTES FOR TODAY:**


#### Selected Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> Carson, D.A., and Douglas J. Moo. An Introduction to the New Testament. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005: 465-467

<sup>2</sup> Keener, Craig S., The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 517.

<sup>3</sup>Campbell, Donald K. "Galatians" in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: an Exposition of the Scriptures. New Testament ed. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983: 588.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, John. "Galatians" in The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), xi.