

Galatians-by Tommy Lee

Chapter 1

Everywhere Paul went in his ministry among the Gentiles, it seems that he was stalked by "Judaizers"—Jews who professed to be Christians, but who insisted that if the Gentiles wanted to become Christians too, they couldn't just repent and believe. They had to be "Judaized" first; they basically had to become Jews first, observing things like circumcision, food laws, feast days, etc. The Galatian Christians had fallen for this "Christ plus" theology: Christ alone doesn't save you; you have to do this other stuff too. That's what this letter is going to be all about. Note the gospel-charged v.4. It is the self-sacrifice of Christ (not our works!) that delivers us from our sins. Hence, God gets ALL the glory (v.5). By the time you get to v.6, the seasoned reader of Paul's letters is expecting a paragraph of thanksgiving. Instead, we get a paragraph that contains the strongest rebuke found anywhere in the writings of Paul (v.8). This "accursed" business would have shocked his readers; so, naturally, he says it twice (v.9). This isn't just an intellectual disagreement. This is the gospel. Eternity is at stake.

Chapter 2

The Judaizers had apparently been trying to prove that Paul was a false teacher, preaching a false gospel, by raising **two** episodes in Paul's ministry that would seem to have put him at odds with the "pillars" of the church: **(1)** the conference he had with James & Cephas (Peter) & John in Jerusalem, and **(2)** the conflict he had with Cephas (Peter) in Antioch. So, in vs.1-10, Paul describes the Jerusalem conference. And in vs.11-21, he describes the conflict with Peter. In both cases, the gospel was fully vindicated and affirmed, as Paul profoundly summarizes: *"a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."*

Chapter 3

In vs.1-5, Paul is speaking very emotionally to the Galatians, with a flurry of personal questions; he is "astonished" (1.6) that they are abandoning the freedom of the gospel (a life of "hearing with faith," v.2 & v.5) for the hopeless bondage of "the works of the law" (v.2 & v.5). "Foolish" he calls them. Twice! "Bewitched." To the true gospel, throughout this letter, Paul attributes words like "faith, Spirit, inheritance/heir, promise, freedom, son, righteousness, life." To the "different gospel" (that is not a gospel, 1.6 & 7), he attributes words like "works of the law, flesh, slavery, sin, corruption, trouble, weak, vain, worthless." These are two very different systems; make sure you can distinguish the genuine from the counterfeit. One is based on faith in Christ and his righteousness. The other is based on faith in you and your righteousness. In vs.6ff, he proves that faith in the promise of Christ was *always* the way of salvation by going *all the way back to Abraham*. How was Abraham saved? By faith. In Christ. Paul fills this chapter with quotes from Genesis, Habakkuk, Leviticus, & Deuteronomy.

Chapter 4

The last chapter brought up the question, *how does one become a child of Abraham?* And Paul answered: not by performance of the law, but by faith in the promise of Christ. God counted sinful Abraham as righteous because Abraham believed; *"know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham"* (3.7). Paul continued that thought and applied it further in 3.26-29, speaking at some length about who can believe, and so become "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise... sons of God, through faith." And now, in chapter 4, Paul brings this "argument" in the letter to a compelling

climax. In 4.1-7, it is Jesus who redeems us and makes us sons / heirs. In 4.8-20, Paul reminds them of what their life was like before they knew God (or rather, came to be known by God); how can they turn back to that again? Paul longs for Christ to be more "*formed*" in them. Finally, in 4.21-31, Paul uses the Hagar & Sarah story from Genesis to make the point a different way. Christians are not children born of the working of the flesh (like Ishmael); we are children born of the promise (like Isaac).

Chapter 5

It's a common feature of Paul's letters: after teaching us the gospel (which is our faith, our doctrine), in all of its beauty and glory and freedom—freely given to us, purchased by Christ at great sacrifice—he then strongly calls us to *live our lives as the free children of God*. He calls us to stand firm in this faith and work the implications of it out in all the various corners of our lives, through love. That's how the law of God is fulfilled: when those who are justified by the blood of Christ truly and self-sacrificially love their neighbors as themselves (v.6; vs.13-15). Note that it's a ginormous error to think of the Bible's theology of *salvation-by-faith-in-Christ-and-not-by-works-of-the-law* as something that leads to spiritually passive, morally lazy, self-absorbed lives. Yes, in theology, we call that a "ginormous error." Rather, the gospel is a call to energetic action. Faith is "*working*" through love (v.6). Faith in Christ is what makes real, genuine "*work*" possible in God's world. We must grow into a more mature understanding of that before we can approach the commands of vs.13-26 rightly. This is true freedom.

Chapter 6

Having taught us, as Christians, how to rightly approach the law—*not as a means of gaining salvation, but as a revelation of God's will for our lives, set free by the gospel*—in chapter 5, Paul now (in 6.1) tells us how to help fellow believers who stumble and gets themselves caught up in sin. It's going to happen. And it's even going to happen to us. When it does, there is no place for harshness. Then, in vs.2-10, Paul moves through several topics, describing how a church is to live together in Christ-honoring community. Note, in v.9, Paul doesn't assume that a church's life together is going to be roses and celebrations, all the time. There will be discouragements along the way. But do not grow weary and do not give up; God will vindicate and reward his people. The end of the letter beautifully weaves together several things: the battle with the false gospel is mentioned in a few more ways (some quite clever, in a "play on words" sort of way), but Paul puts the word "*brothers*" in the emphatic position at the end of v.18. He is confident that they will again boast in the cross of Christ, not in themselves.

-Reflecting on Galatians-

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in Galatians. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish Galatians before we move forward?

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." Psalm 19.14