

FREEDOM IN CHRIST

Introduction to Galatians

This Week's Prayer Requests:

Memory Verse: 2:16 - "Knowing that a man is not justified by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

Author and Date

The letter written to the churches of Galatia has been historically referred to in very grand and yet nevertheless accurate terms. It has been variously called "the Magna Carta of the Christian church," "the battle cry of the Reformation," "the Charter of Spiritual Freedom," and "the Declaration of Christian Independence." And certainly the letter rises easily to the expectations to which those title's give rise, not only because of it's magnificent message, but also because of it's historical importance, which no one can doubt.

What comes to your mind when you think of the book of Galatians? What importance, if any, has this book had for you in your Christian walk? Why?

Galatians captivated the Protestant Reformers. In particular it was the favorite biblical book of Martin Luther, who lectured on this letter during the pivotal year of 1519 and again in 1523. He said of the book, "The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle. To it I am as it were in wedlock. It is my Katherine." In 1535, he published a commentary on this letter, which filled the equivalent of 1500 contemporary pages, and that in the very compressed grammar of Latin. And the importance of this Commentary on Galatians for the history of Protestantism is very great indeed. It presents like no other of Luther's writings the central thought of Reformation, the justification of the sinner by faith in Christ alone and on the basis of Christ's merits alone.

Who wrote Galatians?

Who is the author of this critical letter? Galatians itself identifies Paul as it's author both by name (1:1; 5:2) and by obvious biographical references (e.g. 2:1-10). The vocabulary, style and grammatical content are also distinctly Pauline. Further, this is also the universal testimony of other ancient authors. Thus the evidence both within and without the letter overwhelmingly attest to Paul's authorship.

When did he write the letter? The churches of Galatia were principally founded during Paul's first missionary journey with Barnabas described in Acts 13-14. This took place circa A.D. 46-48. The letter also had to be written after the Jerusalem Council, which is described in Acts 15 and referenced in chapter 2 of Galatians. However, it couldn't have

When was Galatians written?

been written too long after this, since it is also clear that the decision of the Jerusalem Council had not yet been widely circulated and reported among the churches. Most historians agree that the Jerusalem Council took place in 49 A.D. and since the letter was also apparently written prior to Paul's second missionary journey which began that same year, we can date it firmly as having been written in 49 A.D. This also means that Galatians was the first of Paul's thirteen letters inspired by the Spirit and preserved for us in the New Testament canon

Occasion

What is the emotional force of the book of Galatians?

I'd like to convey the force of this book if I may with a simple illustration. Back in Raleigh, NC where I used to live, there is a mall that was built while I was attending seminary. And in this mall, one of the side halls contained a very nice play space for children. It was called the Creek Side and had all kinds of pretend animals resting on blue carpet. There were turtles, fish, lily pads, a giant beaver with a log tunnel you could crawl through, crocodiles, so that a child could jump from one animal to the next without touching the floor, or sit on them and pretend to ride. There was a boat you can climb in and sit about 6 to 8 children inside, and there were two islands they could climb up with slides on one side. At one end of the Creek side there was a stage for performers to put on shows for the children. All in all it was a great set-up and we frequently took our two boys, who were just toddlers at the time, to play.

The only problem with the Creek Side was that it was very crowded. I mean there were a lot of kids there running around, even at times you wouldn't expect there to be a crowd. There were also a lot of parents sitting around the sides, or milling about, or following their kids. Moreover, there was a great deal of traffic to and from the stores, and there were adults who would come just to sit and watch the children playing.

Now I used to go there and watch Noah and Drew playing and think to myself, "What would I do if one of these strangers tried to wander off with one of my children, thinking that the parent wasn't paying very close attention," and a lot of parents weren't. I also used to watch the other adults to note who was attached to a child already and who just happened to be there looking, and to see if there was any suspicious behavior. Then, over time I developed a plan of action for how I would respond if someone tried to take either of my boys. Now you can probably guess that my plan of action consisted of generally loud,

violent and enraged behavior with the use of physical force designed to be just short of inflicting mortal wounds.

But put yourself in that position for a moment in your mind. Imagine that you're sitting at the Creek Side in a crowded mall, while your child or grandchild is playing. How would you feel if you looked away for a few moments, and then looked back and suddenly saw someone grabbing this small child or a grandchild of your own and trying to steal away with him or her? I think that you might suddenly feel sick, angry, aggressive, frightened, and ready to do desperate battle to save your child's life. Now when you've got that feeling in your mind, then Beloved, you have got the feelings of Paul as he wrote this letter to the churches of Galatia.

Who were the men threatening the work Paul had done in the Galatian churches, and why were they called by this name?

You see Paul and Barnabas had gone on their first missionary journey to the cities of Asia Minor, cities like Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, and as they were traveling through they shared the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and they founded churches in each of these cities. These were brand new churches filled with young baby Christians, Jews and Gentiles, worshipping the Lord together. Paul and Barnabas spent time with them, nurturing them, teaching them the things of God, feeding them, caring for them and guiding them in their first steps just as you would a little child. Then after they had gone through the area, they came back to the churches as they were returning to Antioch and encouraged and strengthened them in the faith.

But what happened next? As soon as Paul gets back, he hears this report that a group of teachers called Judaizers, had gone behind him into the churches of Galatia and had taught them, "You know believing in Jesus Christ is fine, but it's not enough, if you truly want to be saved. If you truly want to be right with God, the men have to be circumcised and all in the church need to start following Jewish customs and dietary restrictions described in the Old Testament. Oh ... and by the way, Paul, he's not a true Apostle, he doesn't really even have the right to speak authoritatively from God. We are the true apostles and the true representatives of Christ and what He taught on earth, not him."

Spiritually these Judaizers were trying to kidnap these babes in Christ and steal them away from the true faith and, as they were snatching them up and walking away, they were looking back and saying, "You know that man over there, Paul, he isn't really your father. I'm your real father. I'm the one who really loves you, and you need to come with me and live with me from now on."

What is Paul trying to accomplish as he writes the letter to the Galatians?

So Paul hears what is going on. He looks up and sees this wicked crime, and immediately he responds by writing this letter to the Galatian churches. In it he has to do two things. First he has to establish his authority as an Apostle, his right to speak authoritatively on behalf of God; and second, he has to defend the true Gospel of salvation by faith in Christ plus nothing and rescue the churches from the false teaching that is threatening to steal them away and destroy any true Gospel witness or influence they might have in their lives and in their cities.

This letter then, Beloved, has a living vigorous emotional force. You cannot read it without thinking that something utterly critical is at stake. You cannot read it and think, “Well this is an interesting piece of sober religious reflection,” not if your paying attention. This is not a detached theological treatise but a deeply personal and pained letter written from the grieving heart of a man for his spiritual children. It is written with a kind of compassionate rage and has been described as “a flashing sword wielded by a burning heart.”

What two fundamental truths does Paul exalt in this letter?

The great Scottish minister P.T. Forsythe once said, “The secret of the Lord is with those who have been broken by His cross and healed by His Spirit.” The letter from Paul to the Galatians exalts two fundamental truths: The cross of Christ is the only way a person can get right with God, and the Spirit of Christ is the only way a person can obey God and live for Him. Anything that diminishes the beauty and all sufficiency of what happened on the cross of Christ is an anathema, and anything that puts our willing or our running where the Holy Spirit belongs is witchery. Those are the words Paul uses. He is truly angry as he writes this letter because someone has “bewitched” the Galatians to put themselves where the Spirit belonged and the works of the law where faith in Christ and His work on the cross belonged.

In the book of Acts Paul warns the Ephesian elders about the Judaizers, false brothers, who arose from within the church quote “speaking perverse things” and trying “to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).

Theme

We are ready, then to state the central theme of this great work. It is simply this: Freedom in Christ. In fact, the central thematic verse and the climax of Paul’s letter comes to us at the beginning of chapter 5, where he says:

What do you think of when hear the phrase, “freedom in Christ”?

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”

Indeed, this idea of freedom verses bondage is the recurring refrain of the letter (e.g. 2:4; 4:3, 9, 24-25; 5:1), but when we say “Freedom in Christ,” we do not mean just any kind of “freedom.”

There is much confusion today with regard to the idea of Christian Liberty, just as there was back in the days of the Apostles (e.g. Jude 4). The reason being that many want to take this idea of “freedom” which the Scripture proclaims and turn it into “license.” “Freedom” as Paul uses it, however, does not mean license. It does not mean the unbridled freedom of being able to do whatever I choose, whenever I choose, without any reference to God, His word or His people. It is not the 1969 Woodstock ideal so prevalent in our nation.

But neither, Beloved, is this idea of “freedom” some kind of doublespeak. It is not something contained in little lists and diagrams or rigorous religious duties and sacraments. That was the notion of the Judiazers and that was the very thing that Paul was battling against. What then is “Freedom in Christ”? If it is not license and it is not a list, what is this “glorious liberty of the children of God”?

Keep reading.

Outline

A useful outline of the book, which gives a clear idea of the flow of the thought from start to finish is this:

- I. Introduction: Greetings to the Galatians and a Stern Warning to Those Who Were Perverting the Gospel by Preaching Legalism (1:1-10).
- II. The Apostle’s Argument from Experience (1:11-2:21).
 - A. Direct revelation of the gospel from Jesus to Paul (1:11-12).
 - B. Impossibility of Paul learning the gospel from his Jewish background (1:13-14).
 - C. Impossibility of Paul obtaining the gospel from other apostolic sources (1:15-24).
 - D. Acceptance of Paul’s gospel by the other apostles in Jerusalem (2:1-10).
 - E. Ability of Paul to rebuke Peter successfully when Peter compromised (2:11-26).

F. Paul's experience of spiritual life through Christ, not legalism (2:17-21).

III. The Apostle's Theological Argument (3:1-5:1).

A. The completeness of faith (3:1-5).

B. The example of Abraham's faith (3:6-9).

C. The inability to experience justification by obeying the law (3:1-14).

D. The priority of the promise to Abraham over the covenant of the law (3:15-18).

E. The Purpose of the law (3:19-29).

F. The availability of sonship through faith alone (4:1-7).

G. The emptiness of legalism (4:8-11).

H. Paul's personal appeal to the Galatians (4:12-20).

I. The Illustration of Hagar and Sarah as an example of freedom (4:21-51).

IV. The Apostle's Practical Argument (5:2-6:10).

A. Contrasting effects of legalism and faith (5:2-6).

B. Proof of persecution (5:7-12).

C. Genuine freedom (5:13-18).

D. Works of the flesh (5:19-21).

E. Fruit of the Spirit (5:22-26).

F. Proper treatment of offenders (6:1-5).

G. Appeals for generosity, obedience, and persistence (6:6-10).

V. Conclusion: Contrast Between the Pride of the Judaizers and the Humility of Paul (6:11-18).¹

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1. Adapted from Lea, Thomas D., *The New Testament, Its Background And Message*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, pp. 378-79.