

Galatians and the 'Gospel'

Key Verse:

"...if I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."

Galatians 1:10b

Extra: Is everyone who believes that Jesus lived, a Christian? Think carefully about this.

Level 5 lesson 1

Read: Galatians 1:1-24 and Ephesians 2:1 - 3:6

At the beginning of a New Year, we begin a new series of studies in the Book of Galatians. This was a letter written by the Apostle Paul to people in Galatia. They had become Christians through his faithful preaching of the gospel there some years earlier. Sadly, Paul had received reports that since leaving them, they had been influenced by false teachers who had confused them and robbed them of their assurance and joy in the Lord. The issues and principles Paul deals with in this letter are still extremely important for each of us to understand today!

Many people in our society are confused about what makes someone a Christian. They have their own ideas and opinions about how to live and what is required to please God. A common misconception among many is that it all depends on us (what we do or don't do) as to whether we will ever get to spend eternity with God in Heaven. Many are simply hopeful that they will be 'good enough' to be allowed into Heaven when they stand before God, and that their 'good actions' will somehow outweigh the 'bad.' Others of course, try to put thoughts of death and eternity right out of their minds!

Maybe you are not yet a Christian or perhaps you are a relatively new Christian. On the other hand, you may have been a Christian for some time. Well, whatever the case may be, the Apostle Paul reminds both the Galatians and us, of some foundational truths of the Christian 'gospel.' He sets out what it is and what it is NOT. These are facts which each person should be totally clear about in their own mind.

THE GOSPEL: GREAT NEWS! I'm sure many of you have heard that the word 'gospel' means 'good news.' However, I want to suggest to you that a more accurate description of the word as it is used in Scripture is 'GREAT news!' The 'gospel of Jesus Christ' is news so good it brings great joy to the people who understand and act on it. So what exactly is this 'gospel' and why is it such great news?

Well, simply, it provides the answer to man's greatest problem and fills his greatest need! The Scriptures reveal in Genesis that God created mankind perfect and able to enjoy fellowship and companionship with Him.

Sadly, it also records the terrible tragedy of man's fall into sin and disobedience, and the ensuing consequences of death and separation from God's Holy presence. Since then, all humanity has struggled beneath the crushing burden of sin and its death penalty. Every civilisation has lived beneath the ugly spectre of death, and has grappled with the horrors of human suffering and man's sinful 'inhumanity to man.' The gospel spoken about in the Bible, tells the news that Jesus was sent from God to live on earth and die in our place as a sacrifice for our sins, saving us from the punishment of death that our sins deserved. Jesus rose from the dead, and in so doing, defeated Satan, sin, and death. And having ascended once more to Heaven before the eyes of the disciples, He now occupies the highest position in Heaven. (Ephesians 1:19-21) By believing in Him and His blood shed on our behalf, we can receive full forgiveness for our sins and spend eternity in Heaven with Him. Now THAT'S good news!

A MYSTERY REVEALED: This news upset the Jews though, because for centuries they considered themselves the 'children of God.' Since God's covenant with Abraham way back in Genesis, God had set them apart as His special people, with very specific rules and regulations designed to mark them out as different from all other races. He was 'their' God, the "God of Israel." Any foreigner who wanted to become a Jewish 'proselyte' had to repent of their sin and desire to worship God, and they had to agree to adopt the rules and regulations of the Jews. In a very real sense, God had been the 'God of the Jews' up till now.

So to now be told that things were different 'in Christ,' naturally caused a lot of the Jews problems. As we have seen in past lessons, many resisted the teaching of the Apostles, failing to understand the wonderful new 'freedom' now available through faith in Jesus Christ, and seeing it only as a threat to their national religion, Judaism. This is not hard to understand, as even Paul conceded that this 'gospel of Jesus Christ' was a "mystery" - something "which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the Gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:5-6).

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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| 1. What was the effect of false teaching on the Galatians? | |
| 2. Why is the Gospel of Jesus Christ 'great news'? | |
| 3. What is the Gospel? | |
| 4. Why were many of the Jews upset about the 'Gospel'? | |
| 5. Why did Paul refer to this Gospel as a 'mystery'? | |

My Name is Age

Truth versus Fiction

Key Verse:
“A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ...”

Galatians 2:16a

Level 5 Lesson 2

Extra: Why is the 'false gospel' such a serious matter?

Read Galatians 2:1-21

This 'mystery' revealed the beginning of a new group called 'the Church' (Ephesians 3:10). Comprising both Jews and Gentiles (a name referring to all non-Jewish people) it was no longer Jewish versus Gentile, but the 'Christian Church'. Paul clearly speaks of these three separate groups in 1 Corinthians 10:32. All true believers in Christ become part of this new 'body' through the baptism of the Holy Spirit at conversion (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). However, the 'Judaisers' continued to resist the new 'gospel.' The Judaisers were those who held rigidly to the Old Testament pattern of sacrifices and traditions; which were initially given by Moses, but later added to in great number by succeeding generations of religious leaders.

They claimed that it was not enough to simply believe in Jesus and acknowledge that the shedding of His life's blood on Calvary's Cross had made full payment for their sin. Surely, to be acceptable to God, people had also to obey the hundreds of little rules that the Jews had been obeying for years. One of their most important rules was the rite of circumcision, and they told the Galatian Christians they must be circumcised in order to be acceptable to God.

WHICH GOSPEL TO BELIEVE?

Naturally, many of the young Galatian believers had become quite confused. When Paul had preached the gospel, they had believed what he said and followed Jesus whole-heartedly. Now they didn't know what to do! (Galatians 1:7) Should they get circumcised to 'make sure' that they were acceptable to God, or should they refuse? It was no easy decision. The Judaisers tended to be the important men in Jewish society and being rejected by them often meant being ostracised from society and experiencing fierce opposition from other people - even some they had previously thought were their friends.

Hearing of this situation, Paul wrote to the Galatians to sort it out. He began his letter by warning them of the seriousness of this matter, both for those who taught a wrong gospel and those who accepted it.

Those who taught error would be eternally condemned; those who accepted it would not be able to function effectively for God (Galatians 1:9-10). It was therefore of utmost importance that the Galatians understand the true Gospel and reject this false 'gospel'.

THE TRUE GOSPEL: GOD-GIVEN

So Paul began to give evidence for the truth of the gospel that he preached. Firstly, it was not just 'his' idea or anybody else's. It had not been 'made up' or simply 'imagined' by someone sitting deep in thought one day! He heard it directly from the lips of Jesus Christ Himself. Paul spelt out clearly how since his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, he had not consulted any of the other apostles, but had spent three years sharing the gospel in other areas.

Then he spent fifteen days with the Apostle Peter in Jerusalem but again, had not even seen any of the other apostles, apart from James, the Lord's half-brother. Although "unknown personally to the churches of Judea that are in Christ," they all heard a similar report concerning him. It was that the true gospel had changed Paul's life so dramatically that people he once persecuted now praised God because of him! Paul was living evidence of the truth of the gospel of grace that had been given to him by Christ.

THE TRUE GOSPEL: ACCEPTED BY THE APOSTLES

If further proof was required as to the truth of Paul's Gospel, he pointed to another important incident, which happened fourteen years later when Paul travelled to Jerusalem. Remember the Jewish law which said all Jewish boys had to be circumcised and which the Judaisers said was necessary for salvation? Well, although all of the disciples were Jews (and we can assume that they were all circumcised), it appears that circumcision or non-circumcision was not even an issue with them. Paul was also a circumcised Jew, but his helper Titus was not.

God revealed to Paul that we are justified not by what we do, but by who we believe in (Galatians 2:16). So Paul refused to give in to the opinion of others that Titus should be circumcised, and the other Apostles there (James, John and Peter) all agreed! Upon hearing Paul preach, they gave him and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship," acknowledging that "God was at work in his ministry to the Gentiles." They saw and heard for themselves that Paul was preaching the same God-given gospel that they were, and agreed he should carry on! They did not insist on Titus being circumcised, but simply asked Paul to encourage the Gentile believers to look after the poor, just as the Jewish believers were doing.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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| 1. What was revealed in the 'mystery' of the Gospel? | |
| 2. Who are the real members of 'the Church'? | |
| 3. How did the Judaisers' teaching differ from the Gospel Paul preached? | |
| 4. What was the effect of this Gospel on Paul's life? | |
| 5. How did the disciples react to Paul's explanation of his preaching? (v7-9) | |

Peter Rebuked

Key Verse:
“...the righteous will live by faith.”

Galatians 3:11b

Extra: Do Christians still need to do ‘works’ for God?

Level 5 Lesson 3

Read Galatians 3:1-14

As we considered in the first lesson, for centuries until the time of Christ, God had decreed through Moses and the other prophets that the Jews, the “Children of Israel” were to be a special race of people. God gave them special laws and regulations covering all aspects of life, all designed to set them apart from pagan nations, as His special people. As such, they were not to marry foreigners, etc. In fact, Jews were strictly forbidden to even eat with Gentiles!

However, as Christians we are now all “One in Christ Jesus.” No Christian has a better standing with God than any other; there are no ‘classes’ amongst Christians. Paul explained in Galatians 3:28, that through faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on our behalf, Christians are now treated equally as “sons of God.” Our sins can now be forgiven because of what CHRIST did - not because of a sacrifice we may have offered, or anything we may have done. That old system of ‘Law’ with animal sacrifices for sin has been totally superseded by Christ’s sacrifice of Himself, once and for all! We no longer have to follow these rules to be accepted by God.

Peter knew this, so he began eating with Gentile friends. However, when some important Jewish visitors came to stay, Peter wanted his visitors to approve of him and suddenly began to eat separately from the Gentiles again. Unfortunately, because Peter was such a great leader, many people followed his example. Paul soon rebuked Peter, reminding him of the true gospel: it’s not what we do that makes us acceptable to God; rather it’s faith in Jesus Christ and what HE has done! If we still have to do things to be saved, then there was no point in Jesus coming and dying for us. He would have died for nothing!

Four great truths:

1. Man’s great need is acceptance with God.
2. We gain acceptance not by keeping the Law, but through faith in Christ.
3. Trust in self is an insult to God.
4. Trust in Jesus Christ leads to a whole new life.

FOOLISHNESS OF THE GALATIANS: Sadly, the Galatian Christians began to fall into a trap, which is easy for all of us to fall into. We think we have to somehow ‘earn’ our ‘Free’ salvation! Of course, this is quite silly thinking, and we can almost hear the loving, deep concern in Paul’s voice as he asks, “O foolish Galatians! Who has tricked you?” They had already experienced ‘justification by faith’ and they had been made acceptable to God through faith in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. They had received the Holy Spirit as testament to their new life in Christ and God had even worked miracles among them. Their faith had stood firm even under persecution.

In spite of all this, the Galatians began to wonder if they needed to earn God’s acceptance through keeping His Law! So the Apostle asks them some important questions: did they think God had done all that by His Spirit and yet now required them to continue on in their own strength? (v3) Did God give them His Spirit because of their keeping the Law or because of their faith? (v5) Paul goes on to prove his point by reminding believers of some glaring differences between faith in Christ and the keeping of the Law.

THE BLESSINGS OF FAITH: He begins by pointing them back to Abraham, their revered forefather. Of course, Abraham was born about 2000 years before Christ came to earth, and well before God gave Moses the Law. Therefore, since Abraham was born before the Law was given, and before the coming of the Saviour, how could he possibly have been acceptable to God?

Paul explains: Abraham believed what God told him about his future, so God accepted Abraham (v6). Abraham was justified by faith alone, and not by keeping the Law. A major stumbling block for the Judaisers argument! All of us who have the same sort of faith that Abraham had, i.e. a faith seen in action, will receive the same blessing of acceptance.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why did Peter begin eating with Gentiles?

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2. Why did Paul confront Peter?

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3. What did the Galatians receive to prove that God had accepted them?

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4. What was a major stumbling block to the argument of the Judaisers?

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5. How can our sins be forgiven?

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The Curse of the Law Removed

Key Verse:
“The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

Galatians 3:24

Extra: What was the value of the Law?

Level 5 Lesson 4

Read Galatians 3:15-25

Have a good look at the Ten Commandments (the Law) God gave to Moses (see Exodus 20). I'm sure you'll agree that there is NO WAY anyone could ever keep ALL of them. All of us would admit that while we may not have broken all of them, we have all broken at least one or more of them. We don't need a Bible to know that there is not one perfect person in the whole world (although it does mention it in Romans 3:23)! Now consider that in addition to those Ten Commandments, the rest of the Jewish Law contained over 700 other rules for living. Seven hundred! God said that if anyone was perfect enough to obey all these laws, and obey them with right motives in their heart, they would be accepted by Him.

The 'flip-side' of course, as God clearly stated in Deuteronomy 27:26, is that if anyone did not obey all of the rules all of the time, they would be cursed: they would be separated from God forever! Clearly no-one can be made righteous and acceptable to God by keeping the Law (Romans 3:20). In fact, the Law only brings us under a curse.

Paul reminds the Galatians of this curse so that he can tell them how the curse was overcome. Jesus Christ, the only perfect man who will ever live, who kept the Law completely, by choice took that curse when He died on Calvary's cross. When we believe that Jesus did this for us, God accepts us: we are "justified by faith." Our friendship with God can only be through faith, not through works. We have been freed from the curse of the Law in order that we may enjoy the blessings of faith; this is the blessed good news of the Gospel!

FIRST, THE PROMISE: Paul then took his readers back to the very beginning, pointing out how Adam and Eve (the first people God created) enjoyed a wonderful, loving relationship with Him. God would walk in the garden He created for them, seeking them (Genesis 3:8-9). There was no sickness or death. When Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God's commandment not to eat of the "Tree of the knowledge of good and evil," the result was pain, death, and worst of all, banishment from God's presence (Genesis 3:16-23).

A few thousand years later, God spoke to one of their descendants, Abraham. God promised that the friendship between God and man would again be available, and the person who would make that possible would be one of his descendants, called his 'seed' (Genesis 12:3 & 7). This is the promise spoken about in Galatians 3.

THEN, THE LAW: Over 400 years later, and before God's promise came to pass, God met with Moses (called the mediator in v19) and gave him all the rules for the way Jewish people were to live, i.e. the Law. Those who followed the Law would be blessed, those who didn't would be cursed (Deuteronomy 11:27-28). Jesus' disciples, being Jewish, would have followed the Law until His resurrection.

THE GALATIANS' PROBLEM! The Galatians' problem was answering the question: "If the promise has been fulfilled through Christ, do we still obey the Law?" Paul explains that the promise came first, and nothing can set it aside or add to it (v15 & 17), especially a promise that has been given by God (v20). That being the case, then why did God give the Law? Is it the promise or the keeping of the Law, which makes us acceptable to God?

This is a vitally important question for each of us and it affects every single one of us! Knowing that no matter how hard you try, or how many rules you keep, you'll never be perfect. This is what Paul describes as being "held prisoner by the Law" (v23). Everybody is either held prisoner by the law or delivered from it. You see, the Law could bring blessing to the people, but it still couldn't take away their sins to make them acceptable to God. In fact, the main purpose of the law is to remind people of how far short of "perfect" we really are. Paul described the law as "being put in charge" (Galatians 3:24) to show us our desperate need of a Saviour and "to lead us to Christ."

In Christ, the promise has been fulfilled, and the Law is no longer necessary; its purpose has been achieved. The promise of acceptance through faith in Jesus Christ alone has come. Are you still a prisoner or have you been set free? By faith you can receive Christ as Saviour and Lord today and rejoice in the promise of acceptance with God!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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| 1. What was the purpose of the Law? (See Key Verse) | |
| 2. Why does the Law bring us under a curse, and hold us as 'prisoners'? | |
| 3. How did Jesus take the curse away from us? | |
| 4. Does righteousness (being acceptable to God) come from the Law? If not, from what? | |
| 5. How can we receive the 'Promise' today? | |

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