



## Summary of Galatians

### Introduction

Paul wrote to the churches located in the Roman province of Galatia about a year or so after his first visit to them, during which time he had established the churches, founded on the true Gospel of Christ.

However, some Jews had since arrived and started to teach that believers had to become Jews before they could become Christians and that justification could come only through observance of the law.

Paul rebukes them and argues from the perspective of his own dramatic change from a Jew to an apostle of Jesus, the fulfilment of Scripture and the work of the Spirit among them when they first came to believe.

Among the points that Paul makes to them is:

- The Christian life has its source in the believer having died with Christ to sin, and thereby having renounced the flesh.
- The Spirit is the source of power and guidance in the Christian life, and the work of the Spirit produces love and faith.
- The Christian life consists not in pleasing people but in pleasing Christ our master and being willing to suffer persecution for the sake of his Cross.

The key factors for the Galatians to accept is that there is only one true Gospel as revealed by God's grace through his Son, who died a substitutionary death on the Cross but was raised to life by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Those who embrace this Gospel will also receive the gift of new life in Christ.

### Chapter One

Paul grabs his readers' attention in the introduction of his letter by filling the typical formal greetings with two strong emphases: his God-given authority and his Christ-centred message. Once these points are grasped, the reader has the gist of the whole letter.

Paul writes his briefest opening to any letter because he is clearly concerned with the deteriorating situation in the Galatian churches. The absence of a thanksgiving at this point indicates how extremely serious the problem in the Galatian churches was from Paul's perspective. This is something he immediately starts to address by stating, in no uncertain terms, that the Judaizers were proclaiming a false Gospel.

A great deal of Paul's concern is to make clear that his call, his commission as a true apostle, his conversation, his every action is from God and not from any human being, group, or worldly concern. He is God's servant alone. He knew the danger of mixing the two - trying to please both God and man always leads to destruction.

## Chapter Two

Paul demonstrated in the previous chapter that he was independent of the apostles in Jerusalem and that the Gospel he had brought to the Galatians was genuine. His continuing autobiography shows it is ludicrous for the Galatians to discard Paul's Gospel as if it were a second hand, abbreviated version that needed to be supplemented with additional instructions from the Jerusalem apostles.

Paul shows that he did not spend enough time with the original apostles in Jerusalem to get his Gospel second-hand from them. Since Paul's Gospel was given by a revelation from God, the Galatian believers should have maintained unswerving loyalty to it. However, what he did achieve during his time with the other apostles was to gain recognition for his work and their approval of what he was doing with the Gentiles.

Paul recounts a painful confrontation between himself and Peter over an issue in Antioch that Paul found to be unacceptable behaviour in terms of the Gospel. To understand the nature of the conflict and the issues involved, it can be observed how the drama developed in four stages:

1. Peter's practice of eating with the Gentile Christians.
2. Peter's separation from Gentile Christians after the arrival of the delegation from James because of his fear of the circumcision group.
3. The separation of the other Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians because of Peter's influence.
4. Paul's rebuke of Peter.

Paul focuses the argument of who is God's true Israel, his chosen people. Is it the Gentiles? Is it only Jews and proselytes? Paul's statement at the end of this chapter reveals the answer: <<*it is Christ who lives in me*>> (v.20). That is, those who are in Christ, so that which is true of him is also true of them.

Whatever else the reader may take from Paul's writings, the unity and spiritual integrity of the church was always uppermost in his mind, as well as the fundamental issue of who a person truly is in Christ!

### Chapter Three

The theme of justification by faith in Christ alone continues as Paul argues the case of the Gospel he proclaimed to the Galatians when compared to the requirements of the law that the false teachers are insisting upon.

Paul shows that the promise of a single family of God's people was given to Abraham long before the law was in place and that circumcision was a sign that God's covenant was sure, not a requirement to be a member of it.

The law was given to provide guidance for the people of God, showing them just how far from righteousness they really were, during the intervening time between the promise being given to Abraham and the fulfilment of the promise that came through Jesus. Now that the promise is fulfilled, there is no longer any need for the law.

### Chapter Four

The contrast presented in the previous chapter between imprisonment under the law and new relationships in Christ is now clarified by an illustration drawn from a household where sons found themselves in a similar situation to that of the household slaves until they received the full rights of sonship at the age of maturity. First, the slave-like condition of the sons while they were still minors is described and applied to the human condition. Second, the sending of God's Son to liberate slaves and to make them sons is announced. Third, the full rights of sons are disclosed.

It seems that Paul's opponents were claiming that he was not telling the whole story to the Galatians when it came to the law. Paul counters this with the story of Abraham's first two sons. His wife Sarah was barren so she gave her slave woman Hagar to Abraham so that she could bear a child on Sarah's behalf. Since being childless in that culture was a source of shame, Hagar taunted Sarah when she bore Abraham a son. This was a son according to the flesh.

Later, when Sarah did have a son Isaac according to God's promise she had Hagar and Ishmael dismissed from their presence and inheritance. Ishmael went on to be the father of the Arabian nations according to a different promise of God. Therefore, Abraham had two families: one born into slavery according to the flesh; the other born in freedom due to the promise.

Paul's opponents it seems were claiming there were now two families. Both were sons of the Gospel but one was from Isaac (the Jewish Christians), and the other from Ishmael (the Gentile Christians). Paul stands this argument on its head showing that those who followed the law were the ones in slavery, as argued in the previous chapter, while those who accepted the Gospel by faith were the ones who were truly free in Christ.

### Chapter Five

This letter has been building up to the amazing statement that opens this Chapter: 'For freedom Christ has set us free'. This declaration of freedom is both a statement of an accomplished fact and a goal to pursue. Freedom is available to all because of the accomplishment of Christ.

Paul reinforces the message of freedom with two warnings. The first is against a temptation to be yoked to the law that would only lead them back into slavery. The second to a misguided notion that their freedom allows them to do whatever they choose, rather than living their lives through the Holy Spirit. To misuse this freedom leads the believer into the same slavery found under the law that Paul had already warned of.

Paul concludes the chapter with a graphic contrast between the works of the flesh and its destructive tendencies, and the fruit of the Spirit that can be seen in those who are truly in Christ.

## Chapter Six

The Gospel teaches unity in Christ, yet somehow the Galatian churches had become disunited, in part because of the doctrine of the false teachers and in part because it appeared that some may have seen themselves as somehow spiritually superior. Paul calls for a united teamwork approach to church, with those who are doing well offering encouragement and support to those who are encountering problems with their own Christian walk.

Paul does not point to any individuals who may be the root cause of the problems but he does say, in a nutshell, if you want to follow the law, follow the law of Christ, a law of self-giving to others in genuine love for them.

Paul writes a classic phrase that has become a modern parable: 'you reap what you sow', although this was not a new concept: <<*As I have seen, those who plough iniquity and sow trouble reap the same*>> (Job 4:8), and: <<*Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. You have ploughed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies*>> (Hosea 10:12-13a). Paul's call is to sow what is spiritual and not what is of the flesh. He also issues a call to persevere in order to reap the rewards of the Kingdom of God.

Paul concludes the letter by stating there can only be one Christian boast. It is not in the flesh, or of human achievement but in the Cross of Christ. And those who boast should be prepared to face the persecution that comes with professing the Cross, willing to bear the scars of such ill treatment with pride in their Saviour. The letter ends with a brief benediction for the Lord's grace on those whom Paul still viewed as his family in Christ Jesus.