

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lessons 28 & 29

Galatians – Parts One & Two

I. BACKGROUND

At this point in time, we are inserting into our study of Acts an examination of Paul's epistle to the Galatians where some reasonable scholars believe Paul wrote the epistle.

What is an "Epistle?"

The word "epistle" comes from a Greek word *ἐπιστολή* (*epistole*), which means a "message" or a "letter." It also conveys the idea of a "commission," "command," or something with authority. In English, an epistle has come to refer to the letters written early in the church, especially those included in the New Testament. In church liturgy, "epistle" refers to the reading from the apostolic letters as a part of the communion service.

How then is Galatians an Epistle?

First and foremost, Galatians is a letter Paul wrote to the churches in "Galatia." As such, it is an "epistle." First century letters were certainly not as common as letters are today; still, letters were written with regularity. We have innumerable copies of letters from both before and after the time of Paul. The letters were written with a certain style and format, just as letters written today.

A secular letter written at the time of Paul would generally have an introductory section, which would list:

1. The name of the writer,
2. The name of the recipient(s), and
3. A greeting (typically the word "Health!")

After the introductory section, a typical first century letter would have a middle portion, which was the main message. The first century letter would typically conclude with a paragraph bidding farewell and frequently conveying additional messages from friends.

Paul generally follows these conventions in his letters, but with certain changes. In Paul's introductions, he identified himself and the recipients as was normative. Instead of the typical "Health!" greeting however, Paul would use a Christian greeting. For example, in Galatians, Paul greets with "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:3).

As to the middle portion, Paul would typically divide his main message into two discernable sections. The first would typically relate doctrinal writings. The second section would be much more practical, applying the doctrinal concepts to the everyday aspects of life.

In his conclusion, Paul modified the typical sign-off (which was "farewell") with a prayer or benediction. So instead of ending Galatians with "farewell," Paul ends with "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen" (Gal. 6:18).

How were these letters written? How were they Sent?

Paul and others typically dictated their letters to an "amanuensis," a fancy word for a secretary that takes dictation! For example, in Paul's epistle to the Romans, the amanuensis writes his own name and personal message ("I. Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord." Rom. 16:22).

Paul would often add his own handwritten addition at the conclusion of his letters, probably out of affection as well as to indicate authenticity. For example, Paul wrote in Colossians 4:18, "I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand." In Galatians, Paul adds near the end of the letter the personal note, "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!" (Gal. 6:11)

In the first century, there was a system of shorthand in Greek that would allow Paul (or any other author) the ability to dictate at normal thinking/talking speed while the material was taken down. The amanuensis would then transform the dictation into a fully written letter for proofing/editing by the author. It would be the final letter where Paul could insert his personal note.

The first century world had no formal postal system for delivery of normal mail.¹ Special messengers or trustworthy travelers conveyed the letters. These letters would then be read to the churches and copied before being passed around to the other churches. So, we can imagine the Galatian letter being received by one of the Galatian churches, being read for the first time in an assembly, and then being copied for further study and reference before being sent on to the other churches in Galatia. One can't help but wonder what it would have been like to hear for the first time the words being read!

When Did Paul Write Galatians?

Unfortunately, first century letters did not contain the modern convention of a date. Therefore, we are unable to point with exactness on when Paul authored the Galatian letter. Scholars give a number of different dates. They range from the time period where we are inserting this letter in our Acts study to later dates with Paul writing after his second or even into his third missionary journeys.

The factors that go into the dating hinge on whether Paul was writing to "South Galatia" (which would include those churches established in the first missionary journey we've followed in Acts) or "North Galatia" (which was "ethnic Galatia," where Acts never details any visit or mission work by Paul.) A second factor is whether the Galatian letter is before or after the Jerusalem Conference detailed in Acts 15.

Because my personal opinion is that the letters were written to the churches Paul evangelized in South Galatia, as Luke detailed in Acts, at a time *preceding* the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15, I insert our study of the epistle here. It is important to note that insertion of the epistle at a later point in the timeline does not change the core message of the epistle. For that reason, we will not go into greater detail here on when the epistle was written. Those who wish to delve into this further are invited to read commentaries that set forward the various views with reasoning and discussion. One of which I recommend is the New International Commentary on the New Testament, written by Ronald Fung and edited by F. F. Bruce. Bruce's commentary on Acts (in the same series) also contains a good thorough discussion.

¹ Caesar Augustus set up an official postal service (*cursus publicus*) for official dispatches, but indications are that it was rarely, if ever, used for nonofficials.

Why are the New Testament Epistles arranged in the order we have them?

We do not know a certain answer to this question. The New Testament itself is arranged by:

1. Gospels (most likely in order of authorship as supposed by church fathers),
2. History (Acts),
3. Paul's letters to churches,
4. Paul's letters to individuals,
5. General letters (not addressed to any specific audience), and
6. Prophecy (Revelation)

Paul's letters to the churches are ordered, many suppose, based upon the significance of the particular churches themselves as perceived by the church fathers who put the New Testament together. Hence, Romans is first, followed by Corinthians, Galatians, etc. Others note that the books seem to be in size order! Romans is the longest, followed by 1 and 2 Corinthians, etc.

What Keys Aid Proper Understanding of Epistles?

Studying epistles presents certain fun challenges distinct from other parts of scripture. Most letters were written as necessitated by certain events or actions. We are not in a position to have a first hand account of the events that prompt the letters themselves. We can glean what the events were by reading the letters themselves. This is much like understanding what is going on by listening to one side of a phone conversation!

It is important as we study the letters, however, that we remember they are letters! They were written for certain reasons, and those reasons are important as we try to understand the letters. Scholars use the term "occasion" to reference why the letters were written. The "occasion" for Paul writing Galatians, then, refers to what circumstances and events caused Paul to write these words to those churches. We need to try and understand these reasons to put the letter itself into context. We are then in a position to fairly apply it to the circumstances that life has for us in our day and age.

What is the “Occasion” for Galatians?

We can tell from the letter itself that Paul had received some disturbing news about these churches. There were certain people who had come into the churches and incorrectly taught that Paul failed to teach that the Gentiles needed to follow certain aspects of Judaism as a part of their Christian faith. In essence, the teaching as to circumcisions and other Judaic laws was such that the Gentiles were to first convert to Judaism and then convert or affirm themselves as Christians. The net effect of this teaching was that works and faith, as opposed to salvation by faith alone, saved man. This was apostasy and heresy to Paul, and he writes this letter correcting it in very blunt terms.

II. GALATIANS

The Letter contains several natural divisions:

1. Necessary History for Understanding the Issues and Paul’s Teaching (Chapters 1 and 2)
2. Correct Doctrine to Counter the Heresy Being Taught (Chapters 3 and 4)
3. Proper Application of Paul’s Teaching in Real Life (Chapters 5 and 6)

As previously noted, there are also standard introductory and conclusion elements in chapters 1 and 6 respectively.

A. Introduction and Necessary History (Chapters 1 and 2)

Paul begins his epistle with the identification of himself as author and the Galatians as recipients. Paul does not merely say his name, however. Paul writes of himself as “Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead” (Gala. 1:1). From this powerful affirmation of Paul and his message, we already glean a bit of the “occasion” of the letter. We see from the outset that the message of Paul is not one of men. Paul is not to be seen as any man’s messenger. Paul’s message is that Paul himself is sent from God and the Lord Jesus. We will see Paul make a contrast between this message and source and the contrary message that is leading the Galatians astray.

Paul notes with astonishment that the Galatians are “so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all” (1:6). The Galatians are deserting Paul, but even more so the Lord himself, when they leave the grace of Christ and turn to a different gospel (if one could call it a gospel!).

We need to pause and understand several of Paul’s terms that he will use here and throughout most of his writings. These terms are crucial to a fair understanding of Paul’s message.

First, we need to examine the word “grace.” The Greek word Paul uses that is translated “grace” is *χάρις* (*charis*). In its simplest form, the word means “a favor done” or “a kindness.” As Paul uses the word, it carries a very pointed meaning. Paul uses the word as a singular noun in reference to the salvation event not to mean a character of graciousness on the part of God, but rather a specific favor done by God, a kindness done by God, that results in the ultimate salvation of man. We will see this over and over in Galatians and other Pauline writings.

The specific salvation favor God did for man is the atoning sacrifice of Christ. When Paul thus speaks of the grace of God, Paul is speaking of the historical event of Jesus Christ crucified for man yet resurrected into a new life that is ours by faith. This historical crucifixion/resurrection is the “grace” of which Paul so often speaks.

For example, we will read later in Galatians 2:21 Paul saying, “I do not set aside the *grace* of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.” Paul is using the word “grace” interchangeably with the death of Christ. Paul is saying that if we could be righteous by what *we* did, then Christ died needlessly – which is the same as setting aside the *grace* (death) of Christ.

In this sense we need to read the Galatians 1:6 passage that started this discussion. Paul’s astonishment was that the Galatians were “so quickly deserting the one who called you *by the grace of Christ.*” The readers were deserting a messenger, and in fact a message, of the atoning death of Jesus Christ. What these folks were turning to was “a different gospel” which “is really no gospel at all” (1:6). This brings us to the second term which merits a closer examination: “gospel.”

The Greek for gospel is εὐαγγέλιον (*euangeilon*) which is a composite of *eu* meaning “good” and *angelion*² meaning “news” or “message.” This is another term that Paul uses with a special clear meaning. For Paul, there might have been a number of items that could serve as good news. There was only one item, however, that head and shoulders beyond all others, was *the* good news. That news item was that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was resurrected into eternal life. In Pauline terms, the “good news” or the “gospel” was the “grace of God” or death of Christ for our sins.

Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15 when he writes, “I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you...Christ died for our sins ...he was buried...he was raised” (1 Cor. 15:1-4). That was Paul’s good news or gospel.

Now, looking at Galatians 1:6, we read Paul astonished that the Galatians are “so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ [Christ’s atoning death] and are turning to a different gospel [something other than the death of Christ for forgiveness of sins] which is really no gospel at all.” Indeed, there is no other good news or gospel. The idea of salvation by anything other than Christ alone is not good news. It strips the good news of its very power and goodness. Without Christ’s death, the only way to the Father would be through a perfect obedience to a law and way of life that no fallen human could ever achieve.

Paul calls this a “perversion” of the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:7) and announces a curse upon any who teach it. (Gal. 1:8-9). For Paul, to teach that salvation could ever come from a combination of the work of Christ and the works of man is to teach eternal condemnation instead of salvation.

Paul emphasizes that this core message was not something Paul was taught by humans. Paul walks through his history to show that this was a message that came from God himself. Paul never rebelled against the idea of living righteously before God because of a rebellious or independent streak that Paul possessed. To the contrary – Paul details to the Galatians that Paul had lived a life as near perfect as any man of his day. Paul writes he “was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal. 1:14).

² An “angel” comes from the same root. An angel is one who carries a message.

Yet, when Paul received the revelation from God of the truth about Jesus and the sacrifice on Calvary, Paul immediately left his persecuting of the church and went into Arabia. Paul did not get his understanding and message from any of the apostles, but from God alone. Paul details how he did not even go to Jerusalem or meet the apostles for some time. Three years after his Damascus road experience, Paul finally met with Peter and James in Jerusalem.

In chapter two, Paul continues this history explaining relevant events with Peter. Paul again went to Jerusalem fourteen years later and had conversations with Peter, James, and John. These conversations confirmed Paul's mission to the Gentiles that salvation was theirs directly through the grace of Jesus and not indirectly through Jesus after a conversion to Judaism. The three apostolic church pillars confirmed Paul and Barnabas with the mission God had entrusted to the two.³

Paul tells the Galatians that after the meetings in Jerusalem, Peter came to the Antioch church eating with the Gentile Christians in full fellowship. Peter changed his actions, however, when "those who belonged to the circumcision group" came up to Antioch (Gal. 2:12). Then, Peter and others withdrew from full fellowship with the Gentiles.

Paul writes of his confrontation with Peter which was blunt and clear. Paul accused Peter of not "acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 1:14). In front of a group, Paul challenged Peter's actions proclaiming, "We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). Paul emphasized that "by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:16).

³ Some believe this section of Galatians to be Paul's recitation of the Jerusalem conference detailed by Luke in Acts 15. I concur with Bruce and others that this preceded the conference. The differences between the accounts are compelling as is the fact that Paul doesn't reference the resultant letter we read about in Acts 15. It would certainly fit Paul's purposes to quote the letter if it had been written by the time Paul wrote Galatians.

It is within this message that Paul spoke what many consider the theme of Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing. (Gal. 2:20-21)

B. Application

By reading and trying to understand Galatians in the context and occasion within it was written, we may now take the next step and seek its application to us today. We do not live in a time where folks teach conversion to Judaism and then Christianity. Nonetheless, for the ages, many have taught salvation through some combination of our deeds and Christ's. In fact, it was Galatians that prompted Martin Luther to seek changes within the church teachings of his time. Many today still see the liberating message that salvation does not come from our works making us worthy of Christ' sacrifice. Rather, his sacrifice makes us worthy of our salvation! This message that we are saved because God chose to save us rather than through our own efforts is at once good news and humbling news. Yet it is the gospel...and there is no other.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Grace is an Event.
2. The Event Saves Us.
3. This is Good News!