

XLVIII

GALATIANS

WHO WROTE IT?

Galatians 1:1 clearly identifies the apostle Paul as the writer.

WHEN(ISH) WAS IT WRITTEN?

Galatians is likely the first New Testament book to be written, composed sometime soon after AD 49.

WHY WAS IT WRITTEN?

The churches in Galatia were comprised of both Jewish and Gentile converts. Paul's purpose in writing to these churches was to confirm them in the faith, especially concerning justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the Law of Moses.

Galatians was written because the churches of that region were facing a theological crisis. The essential truth of justification by faith rather than by human works was being denied by the Judaizers—legalistic Jews who insisted that Christians must keep the Mosaic Law. In particular, the Judaizers insisted on circumcision as a requirement for Gentiles who wished to be saved. In other words, convert to Judaism first, and then you are eligible to become a Christian. When Paul learned that this heresy was being taught to the Galatian churches, he composed this letter to emphasize our liberty in Christ and to counter the perversion of the Gospel that the Judaizers promoted.

SOME KEY VERSES

Yet we know that 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.

GALATIANS 2:16

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.

GALATIANS 2:20

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the Law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

GALATIANS 3:11

To redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

GALATIANS 4:5-6

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

GALATIANS 5:1

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

GALATIANS 5:22-23

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

GALATIANS 6:7

A QUICK SUMMARY

The fact that we are justified by grace through faith means we have spiritual freedom. We are not under bondage to the dictates of the Old Testament Law. Paul soundly condemns anyone who would belittle the grace of God and attempt to change the Gospel (Galatians 1:8–10). He gives his apostolic credentials (Galatians 1:11–2:14), and emphasizes that righteousness comes through Christ not the works of the Law (Galatians 2:21). The Galatians must stand fast in their freedom and “not submit again to a yoke of slavery (that is, the Mosaic law)” (Galatians 5:1). Christian freedom is not an excuse to gratify one’s sin nature; rather, our freedom is an opportunity to love one another (Galatians 5:13; 6:7–10). The Christian life is to be lived in the power of the Spirit, not the flesh (Galatians 5:16–18). The flesh has been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20); as a consequence, the Spirit will bear His fruit in the life of the believer (Galatians 5:22–23).

In the end, the issue is not whether a person is circumcised but whether he or she is a “new creation” (Galatians 6:15). Salvation is the work of the Spirit, and we must be born again (see John 3:3). External religious rites such as circumcision are of no value in the realm of the Spirit.

OLD TESTAMENT TIES

Throughout Paul’s letter to the Galatians, saving grace—the gift of God—is juxtaposed against the Law of Moses, which cannot save. The Judaizers urged a return to the Mosaic Law as the source of justification, and they were prominent in the early church. Even Peter was temporarily drawn into their web of deceit (Galatians 2:11–13). The themes connecting Galatians to the Old Testament center on Law vs. grace: the inability of the Law to justify (Galatians 2:16); the believer’s deadness to the Law (2:19); Abraham’s justification by faith (Galatians 3:6); the Law bringing not God’s salvation but His wrath (Galatians 3:10); and love as the fulfillment of the Law (Galatians 5:14). Believers can be seen as the spiritual children of Sarah, not Hagar—that is, we are children of the freedom, not children of slavery (Galatians 4:21–31).

The books of Galatians and James deal with two complementary aspects of Christianity. Galatians highlights the Gospel of grace that produces righteous living (Galatians 3:13–14). James highlights the righteous living that proves faith. There is no conflict;

James, too, emphasizes the new birth through the Gospel (James 1:18), and the book of Galatians spends its final two chapters applying the doctrine of “grace alone” to practical Christian living.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

One of the main themes of the book of Galatians is found in verse 3:11: “The righteous shall live by faith.” We must stand firm in this truth. Any compromise with legalism or the mixture of human effort and the grace of God for salvation leads to heresy. If we could be saved through the keeping of the Law, then Jesus did not need to die (Galatians 2:21). Trying to save ourselves nullifies grace.

Not only are we saved by faith (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8–9), but the life of the believer in Christ—day by day, moment by moment—is lived by and through that faith (Galatians 2:20). Not that faith is something we conjure up on our own—it is the gift of God, not of works (see Ephesians 2:8–9)—but it is our responsibility and joy to exhibit our faith so that others will see the work of Christ in us and to grow in our faith by seeking to become more like Christ.

Jesus said we would be known by the fruit of our lives (Matthew 7:16), which should give evidence of the faith within us. All followers of Christ should strive to live out their faith in word and deed.

MY NOTES