



Galatians

Galatians is written into a very particular situation. After Paul had founded the Galatian Christian community, a community that included both Jews and Gentiles, Jewish Christian evangelists had arrived arguing that those who wanted to follow Christ had to be Jewish and so needed to be circumcised. Paul's vehement rejection of this message is what makes up the letter to the Galatians, where he argues that it is faith in Christ, not observance of the Jewish law, that justifies people with God. It is faith, not anything else, that allows them to participate in the dying and rising of Christ into a new way of being, a way of being marked with true freedom.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 20 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-10; 2.15-21;
 3.1-5; 5.1-6.18



Genre

Epistle



Anything tricky?

Paul's argument about the law and the relationship of Christians to the law is notoriously complex, involved and hard to follow.



Inspiring quotes

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.'
(Galatians 5.1)

²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
(Galatians 3.27-28)

It is no longer I who live, but it is 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)

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.
(Galatians 5.22-23)



About the Author

Galatians, like Romans, is said to be written by Paul alone – unlike many other letters which are attributed to Paul and one or more others.

What do we know about him?

Paul is probably the best known of all the early Christians. Before encountering Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a zealous Pharisee who sought to maintain the purity of Judaism. After his experience on the Damascus road, he turned

his zeal to proclaiming Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. This brought him into conflict with some other early Christians, not least Peter, who thought that followers of Jesus Christ should convert to Judaism. He travelled around the Roman Empire (though primarily in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey – and Greece), proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and founding communities of Christians as he went. He also wrote a large number of letters, 13 of which are preserved in the New Testament.



About the times

There are two main views on the dating of Galatians. Some think it was the first of Paul's letters to be written (around ad 51); others one of his latest to be written (around ad 55-56). The issue is that Galatia was a large area and the question is whether the recipients lived in South Galatia (the earlier date) or North Galatia (the later date).

What were people feeling?

Whenever the letter was written the issues remain the same – the question of whether followers of Christ needed to be Jewish in order to be part of the Christian community. This was a live issue at the time of Paul and caused various conflicts in the first Christians communities.



What kind of Book is it?

An Epistle, or letter, which focusses on one key issue; the question of how someone is justified with God and what difference this makes to their life.



How is it structured?

1.1-5	Opening and greeting
1.6-10	Paul's astonishment about what has happened
1.11-2.14	How Paul began to preach the gospel
2.15-21	The nature of that gospel: being justified by faith in Christ
3.1-4.31	How Paul supports this assertion (arguments from experience, from tradition, from Scripture and elsewhere)
5.1-6.10	The freedom that the gospel brings
6.11-18	What this means



Look out for...

In Galatians, it can feel as though Paul goes on and on about circumcision. Circumcision refers to the way in which someone who is Gentile becomes Jewish. Paul often uses circumcision as shorthand for living according to Jewish laws and customs. Keep an eye out for the language Paul uses throughout the letter and remember that he uses it in the context of the specific question of whether the Gentiles need to become Jews in order to follow Christ.

Paul also talks a lot about living according to the Spirit – look out for this language and ask yourself what living according to the Spirit means for Paul.

Galatians gives us more autobiography about Paul than any other letter, notice the details of Paul's life that are given especially in chapters 1-2.



What could this mean for me?

One of the issues that bemused Paul was why the Galatians, who had been offered true freedom in Christ, were so keen to turn their back on that freedom. What are the ways in which we turn our backs on the freedom that we have been offered in Christ?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did you think the book was about?
- In Galatians Paul, probably, shouts more than he does in any other letter (or at least it feels as though he is shouting while writing!). Why do you think he was so upset? Did you feel sympathetic to him or irritated by him?
- Galatians is written into a very particular context. Is there anything we can learn from what Paul says about Christian life today, or is it too specific to its original context to be relevant today?
- How good are we these days at embracing and living the freedom that Christ brings?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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