

THE BOOK OF GALATIANS

ORIENTING DATA FOR GALATIANS

- Content: a heated argument with the (Gentile) Galatian believers against some Jewish Christian “missionaries” who insist that Gentiles be circumcised if they are to be included in the people of God
- Author: the apostle Paul, joined by “all the brothers and sisters” with him (1:2)
- Date: probably ca. A.D. 55 (although some think as early as 47–48), with no indication of place of origin
- Recipients: Gentile believers in Galatia, either ethnic Galatians (whose territory in central Asia Minor had been earlier settled by people from Gaul [modern France]) or those in the Roman province of Galatia, which also included peoples of Pisidia, Lycaonia, and Phrygia (Acts 13–14; 16)
- Occasion: the churches of Galatia have been invaded by some agitators (5:12) who have questioned Paul’s gospel and his apostleship; apparently some Galatians are on the verge of capitulating to them, which sparks a vigorous defense by Paul of his gospel and his calling
- Emphases: Paul’s apostleship and gospel come directly from God and Christ, not through human mediation; the death of Jesus has brought an end to ethnic religious observances; the Spirit produces the righteousness the law could not; the Spirit enables believers not to yield to sinful desires; one receives the Spirit through faith in Christ Jesus

OVERVIEW OF GALATIANS

Like 2 Corinthians 10–12, this letter is clearly three-sided—*Paul*, to the *Galatians*, against the *agitators*. Paul is obviously red-hot (just like God in the Old Testament when his love for Israel has been spurned). Full of the Holy Spirit and in keeping with the nature of rhetoric under such circumstances, Paul writes with passion and forcefulness. Here you will encounter caustic and biting jibes at the agitators as well as fervent, sometimes cajoling, pleas to the Galatians not to give in to them. What could have inflamed such intensity?

The answer: The gospel is at stake, especially as it includes the Gentiles, law-free, in the people of God—not to mention Paul’s own calling as apostle to the Gentiles. If the Galatians cave in to circumcision, everything God has done in Jesus Christ and is doing by the Spirit to

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

include Gentiles in the people of God will have come to nothing (2:21). God's story itself is on the line.

Thus Paul comes out with guns blazing. First, he takes on the agitators' slander of his apostleship. In a series of three narratives, he starts by distancing himself from Jerusalem (1:13–24; his apostleship and gospel do not have human origins in any form), then points out Jerusalem's concurrence with him (2:1–10), and finally notes that any failure to keep the accord came from Jerusalem itself (2:11–14).

He then uses his speech to Peter on the latter occasion to launch his argument with the Galatians (2:15–21). The rest of the letter fluctuates three times between argument, application, and appeal (3:1–4:7/4:8–11/4:12–20; 4:21–27/4:28–31/5:1–12; 5:13–24/5:25–6:10/6:11–17). His *argument* is that the cross of Christ and the gift of the Spirit have brought observance of the Jewish law to an end. Notice how his *appeals* run the gamut, sometimes reflecting on past relationships (4:12–20; 5:7–10), sometimes pointing out the consequences of their proposed actions (4:8–11; 5:2–6), and sometimes disparaging the agitators (5:7–12; 6:11–13).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING GALATIANS

You may find the argument sections of this letter a bit hard to follow; this will be because of its "in house" nature, where Paul is arguing with the agitators on their own grounds. But with a little background knowledge you should be able to unpack it well enough.

Here is an instance where special vocabulary tells much of the tale. Note how often these key words occur: law 32x; flesh (TNIV 7x "sinful nature") 16x; works 7x (6x "observing the law," lit. "works of law"; 1x "acts of sinful nature," lit. "works of flesh"); circumcision/circumcise 13x; Christ 38x; the Spirit 17x; faith/believe 22/4x; grace 8x; justified/justify 8x; Abraham 9x; promise 10x; son/seed 13/5x; freedom/free 4/6x; enslave/slave/slavery 11x; Gentiles 10x. While most of these words also occur in Paul's other letters, the number of times they appear in Galatians (and Romans as well) is out of proportion to their occurrences elsewhere.

At issue is the question, Who are the true *children/seed of Abraham* and thus true heirs of the *promises* made to Abraham? Paul's answer: Those, especially *Gentiles*, who have *faith* like Abraham's, who are thus *freeborn sons* and not *slaves*. They have become so by *faith in Christ* and the (promised) gift of *the Spirit*; on the other hand, those who would enforce Gentile believers to be *circumcised* are bringing them under the Jewish *law* and thus into *slavery*. *Justification* comes only by *grace*; to revert to *circumcision* is to seek advantage with God through *works of law*, which Paul sees as of the *flesh* (= ultimately putting trust in one's own achievements). All of this boils down to one basic matter: On what grounds are Gentile believers included in the people of God (= become part of Abraham's seed)? On their trusting Christ and their reception of the Spirit (their true identity marker), or by adding Jewish identity markers as well?

But why Abraham, you might well ask? Why not simply remind the Galatians of the story of Christ? The answer lies almost certainly with the arguments of the agitators, who have taken

lit. literally

lit. literally

Genesis 17:1–22 as their primary text. There God established circumcision as “an everlasting covenant” in a context where Abraham was again promised to be the father of “many nations” (repeating the blessing of the Gentiles from Gen 12:3); in this context God promises that Sarah herself would bear a child, the legitimate heir—while Ishmael is already a young man. In all fairness, the agitators were not advocating a righteousness based on works; they had themselves put their faith in Christ. But, they would have argued, just as Abraham believed God (Gen 15:6) and then was given the covenant of circumcision, so the Gentiles who believe in Christ need to be circumcised in order to become the true children of Abraham, and thus heirs of the promise. At stake for them in the end is their own identity as the people of God, since the *marks of identity* for Jews in the Diaspora were especially circumcision, the food laws, and the sacred calendar, including Sabbath keeping.

Paul sees clearly where such an argument leads—to an equation that reads, “grace + works of law = favor with God.” But adding a *plus factor* to grace in fact nullifies grace. Thus he argues that “grace + nothing = favor with God.” Otherwise, believing Gentiles must in fact become Jews in order to be completed as Christians (3:3). Thus Paul appeals first to the Galatians’ own experience of the Spirit (3:1–5) and then to Genesis 15:6 (which *precedes* 17:1–22 in the story), which says of Abraham that his *faith alone* was what God counted as righteousness (Gal 3:6–9). The rest of chapters 3 and 4 spell out various implications of these first two arguments. Paul shows first the preparatory and thus secondary nature of the law in relation to Christ and the Spirit (3:10–4:7), and then he shows that by rejecting Christ, the contemporary Jews have in effect made themselves the heirs of Ishmael rather than of Isaac (4:21–27). In any case their observance of the law is selective, and for Paul, to be under law means that one must observe the *whole* law (3:10; 5:3; cf. 6:13), not just parts of it.

The final argument (5:13–24) points out that the Spirit alone is sufficient for the kind of life in the present that reflects the likeness of Christ and stands over against the “desires” of the “sinful nature” (= flesh, referring to living in a self-centered way that is hostile to God)—which is precisely where the law failed. It could make people religious, but not truly re-formed so as to be shaped into God’s own character (which is what the fruit of the Spirit reflects).¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 340–343.