

Bible Study

The Letter to the **GALATIANS**

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The classic questions a reporter (or any serious inquirer) asks are:

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

This is how we will approach the Letter to the Galatians, by asking

- **Who** is the author?
- **What** is this document?
- **When** was it written?
- **Where** was it sent?
- **Why** was it written?
- **How** was Paul's goal in writing this letter accomplished?

WHO

All scholars agree that Paul is the author of this letter, as Mark Copeland observes:

This was the unanimous view of the early church, and even those modern critics who challenge the authorship of many of the New Testament books concede that Galatians is truly Pauline.

WHAT

It is a letter, written in the classic style of the day, as are most of Paul's letters, and they all follow a similar format:

- (i) Greeting
- (ii) Prayer
- (iii) Thanksgiving
- (iv) Special Content (main body of the letter)
- (v) Salutations and Personal Greetings

This letter, divided into 6 chapters, addresses several concerns and issues that the churches in Galatia were facing. It also provides an opportunity for Paul to defend himself as an 'apostle' and one who is truly transformed by the grace of God.

WHEN

Like all the books in the New Testament, it is difficult to pinpoint the date precisely. Many scholars believe it was one of the earlier, possibly the first, of Paul's letters, and they date it around AD 48-50. Others suggest it was written at least five years later than that, maybe as late as AD 58.

There is also disagreement about where Paul wrote the letter, and when it was sent to the province of Galatia. Mark Copeland, in his commentary, asserts:

I subscribe to the "South Galatia Theory", which identifies the churches of Galatia as those established on Paul's first journey (cf. Acts 13:14-14:23). I also believe that the meeting described in Galatians 2:1-10 took place during the "Jerusalem Conference" related in Acts 15:1-29. This view opens several possibilities for the place and time of writing:

- ♦ Corinth, in the period of Acts 18:1-17
- ♦ Antioch, in the period of Acts 18:22
- ♦ Ephesus, in the period covered by Acts 19:1-41
- ♦ Macedonia or Achaia in the period of Acts 20:1-3

With such uncertainty one cannot be dogmatic, but in view of Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus, that would seem a likely possibility, and the date would be approximately A.D. 55.

(Copeland from executableoutlines.com)

WHERE

If you look at a map showing the cities where there were Christian Churches in New Testament times, you will not find **Galatia**.



That's because **Galatia** is not a city, it is a province of Asia Minor, as seen in the map at the right, which is in modern-day Turkey.

Some of the cities we read about in Acts that were in the province of Galatia were Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Syria).

THE PROVINCES OF ASIA MINOR 1ST CENTURY A.D.



This, then, is a letter written to several churches scattered throughout the province of Galatia. We know from the book of Acts, and from historical and archeological sources, that there were early Christian churches all over Galatia established by Paul. Those in the south were probably established on his first missionary journey (AD 46-48) and those in the north most likely on his second (AD 49-53).

Most scholars suggest that this letter was addressed to the churches in southern Galatia, and some think it may even have been written before he established the churches in the north. Chuck Swindoll posits:

Upon arriving back in Antioch from his first missionary journey after eighteen months on the road, Paul received a report that the churches he had started in Galatia had fallen into hard times – specifically, they had fallen into error. A group of Judaizers – those who sought to make living under the Mosaic Law a requirement of the Christian faith – had gained an influence in the Galatian churches. Paul wrote the book a few months before his attendance at the Jerusalem Council in AD 49, a meeting where the apostles would take up this very topic (Acts 15:1-30).

(Swindoll from *insight.org*)

WHY

William Barclay reminds us that “all Paul’s letters were written to meet an immediate situation and not treatises which he sat down to write in the peace and silence of his study.” And, he notes,

Paul did what most people did in his day. He did not normally pen his own letters but dictated them to a secretary, and then added his own authenticating signature... This explains a great deal. Sometimes Paul is hard to understand, because his sentences begin and never finish; his grammar breaks down and the construction becomes involved. We must not think of him sitting quietly at a desk, carefully polishing each sentence as he writes. We must think of him striding up and down some little room, pouring out a torrent of words, while his secretary races to get them down.

It is not surprising, though, that these letters, written to address specific concerns in a particular place, speak to us today in our situations. For, as Barclay observes, it is precisely because

human need and the human situation do not change that God speaks to us through them today... When Paul composed his letters, he had in his mind’s eye a vision of the folk to whom he was writing, and he was pouring out his heart to them in words that fell over each other in his eagerness to help.*

(*Barclay *Daily Study Bible* pp. xiii-xv)

Paul wrote this letter for several reasons:

1. He was under attack because of his previous persecution of Christians
2. He was under attack because of his claim to be an ‘apostle’
3. He was affirming his call by God and declaring his liberation from Judaism
4. He was addressing the struggle between Jews and Gentiles
5. He was explaining the relationship between Law and Grace

HOW

This comprises the bulk of our study... HOW did Paul achieve his goal? Was he able to communicate effectively to the believers in cities across the province of Galatia? Is his explanation of Law versus Grace plausible? What relevance does this letter, written long ago to people far away, have for us, and Christians elsewhere, today?

We shall look at the letter chapter by chapter, seeking to garner the essential teaching and relevant lessons, following this OUTLINE:

<u>Chapter 1</u>	Introduction	
	- Greetings	1:1-2
	- Prayer	1:3-5
	- The One True Gospel	1:6-12
	Paul Defends his Apostleship	1:13-24
<u>Chapter 2</u>	Paul's Relationship with the other Apostles	2:1-10
	Paul's Rebuke of Peter	2:11-14
	Put Right with God	2:15-21
<u>Chapter 3</u>	The Law vis-à-vis Faith in Christ	3:1-14
	The Promise of the Law	3:15-18
	The Purpose of the Law	3:19-29
<u>Chapter 4</u>	Allegory about Jesus	4:1-7
	Paul's Concern for the Galatians	4:8-20
	The Example of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah	4:21-31
<u>Chapter 5</u>	The Freedom of the Gospel	5:1-15
	The Role of the Spirit	5:16-26
<u>Chapter 6</u>	Be Gentle, Be Helpful, Be Wise	6:1-10
	Conclusion	
	- Rebuke of Those Who Demand Circumcision	6:11-13
	- Paul's Confidence in the Cross	6:14-17
	- Benediction	6:18

You can view an animated outline at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmx4UjRFp0M>

We shall consider each chapter of the Letter in several sections, quoting the scripture and then commenting on that section. Scripture is from *Good News Translation* unless otherwise noted.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Greetings | Prayer | The One True Gospel

From Paul, whose call to be an apostle did not come from human beings or by human means, but from Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from death. All the believers who are here join me in sending greetings to the churches of Galatia: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace. In order to set us free from this present evil age, Christ gave himself for our sins, in obedience to the will of our God and Father. To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

I am surprised at you! In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel. Actually, there is no “other gospel,” but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be condemned to hell! We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell!

Does this sound as if I am trying to win human approval? No indeed! What I want is God's approval! Am I trying to be popular with people? If I were still trying to do so, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Let me tell you, my friends, that the gospel I preach is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any human being, nor did anyone teach it to me. It was Jesus Christ himself who revealed it to me.

(Galatians 1:1-12)

Greetings

As is typical, Paul has greetings near the beginning of this letter -- he sends “greetings to the churches of Galatia” from “all the believers” who are where he is. But that's not his first sentence! He actually begins this letter with an acclamation of his apostleship... obviously that was foremost on his mind, and he blurts it right out. He will pick this up later and expand on it.

Prayer

After the greetings comes a prayer (again, typical of Paul's letters) in which he celebrates God's love and Christ's sacrifice. And, for the believers in Galatia, he prays that God will give them “grace and peace” -- Barclay expands on what is meant by these two words:

Grace: There are two main ideas in this word. The first is that of *sheer beauty*. The Greek word *charis* means grace in the theological sense; but it always means beauty and charm; and even when theologically used the idea of charm is never far away from it. If the Christian life has grace in it, it must be a lovely thing. . .

The second idea is that of *undeserved generosity*, of a gift which one never deserved and could never earn, given in the generous love of God. When Paul prays for grace on his friends, it is as if he were saying, “May the beauty of the undeserved love of God be on you, so that it will make your life lovely too.”

Peace: Paul was a Jew, and the Jewish word *shalom* must have been in his mind, even as he wrote the Greek *eirene*. *Shalom* means far more than the mere absence of trouble. It means everything which is to one's highest good, everything which will make one's mind pure, one's will resolute and one's heart glad. It is that sense of the love and care of God, which, even if one's body is tortured, can keep one's heart serene.

And then Barclay adds:

Paul sums up in one sentence of infinite meaning the heart and the work of Jesus Christ. "He gave himself for our sins." (i) The love of Christ is a love which *gave and suffered*. (ii) The love of Christ is a love which *conquered and achieved*. In this life the tragedy of love is that it is so often frustrated; but the love of Christ is backed by an infinite power which nothing can frustrate and which can rescue its loved one from the bondage of sin.

(*Barclay p. 9)

The One True Gospel

As far as Paul was concerned, the one true gospel was the Gospel of Grace. Others came teaching something different, what Barclay calls "a Jewish version of Christianity," in which:

They declared that, if a man wished to please God, he must be circumcised and then dedicate his life to carrying out all the rules and regulations of the law. Every time a man performed a deed of law, so they said, that was a credit entry in his account with God. They were teaching that it was necessary for a man to earn the favour of God. To Paul that was utterly impossible.

(*p. 10)

Paul's opponents must have felt he was making religion too easy (they didn't have to go through circumcision!) and maybe this was a way to ingratiate himself with the Christians throughout Galatia. Paul denies this, expressing his commitment to the Gospel which "Jesus Christ himself" revealed to him. He emphasizes his assertion that he is not interested in getting "human approval" or being "popular with people." It is "God's approval" he seeks, and his commitment is to be faithful to the Gospel that "is not of human origin" but is directly from God. Paul feels it necessary to confirm his credentials and establish his integrity early on in this letter, so that he can claim this as his authority to chasten and chastise the believers.

Paul Defends his Apostleship

You have been told how I used to live when I was devoted to the Jewish religion, how I persecuted without mercy the church of God and did my best to destroy it. I was ahead of most other Jews of my age in my practice of the Jewish religion, and was much more devoted to the traditions of our ancestors.

But God in his grace chose me even before I was born, and called me to serve him. And when he decided to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach the Good News about him to the Gentiles, I did not go to anyone for advice, nor did I go to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me. Instead, I went at once to Arabia, and then I returned to Damascus. It was three years later that I went to Jerusalem to obtain information from Peter, and I stayed with him for two weeks. I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother.

What I write is true. God knows that I am not lying!

Afterward I went to places in Syria and Cilicia. At that time the members of the churches in Judea did not know me personally. They knew only what others were saying: “The man who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith that he once tried to destroy!” And so they praised God because of me. (Galatians 1:13-24)

Having claimed that the gospel he preached came directly from God, Paul knew he had to give some proof in order to be taken seriously. As Barclays says, “For that proof Paul had the courage to point to himself and to the radical change in his own life.

- (i) *He had been a fanatic for the law*; and now the dominant centre of his life was *grace*. This man, who had with passionate intensity tried to earn God's favour, was now content in humble faith to take what he lovingly offered. He had ceased to glory in what he could do for himself; and had begun to glory in what God had done for him.
- (ii) *He had been the arch-persecutor of the Church*. He had 'devastated' the Church. The word he uses is the word for utterly sacking a city. He had tried to make a scorched earth of the the Church and now his one aim, for which he was prepared to spend himself even to death, was to spread that same Church over all the world.

Every effect must have an adequate cause. When a man is proceeding headlong in one direction and suddenly turns and proceeds headlong in the opposite direction; when he suddenly reverses all his values so that his life turns upside down; some explanation is required. For Paul the explanation was the direct intervention of God.

(*p. 12-13)

Paul further claims that God had chosen him even before he was born -- this reminds us of the prophet Jeremiah, to whom God said the same (Jeremiah 1:4-5). This further strengthened Paul's credibility, that he was called by God to give his life in service, and that this call to serve was part of God's eternal plan. Barclay expounds:

Paul knew himself to be chosen for a task. He thought of himself as chosen not for honour but for service, not for ease but for battles. It is for the hardest campaigns that the general chooses his best soldiers and for the hardest studies that the teacher chooses his best students. Paul knew that he had been saved to serve.

Paul then explains to the believers in Galatia what he did after being knocked off his horse, blinded, and spoken to by Jesus (see Acts 9:1-20). He preached in Damascus for a short while, then he went on a journey, and he names several places where he went. We turn to Barclay for enlightenment as to the significance of these places.

- (i) First, he went to *Arabia*. He went away to be alone and for two reasons. First, he had to think out this tremendous thing that had happened to him. Second, he had to speak with God before he spoke to men.
- (ii) Second, he went back to *Damascus*. That was a courageous thing to do. He was on the way to Damascus to wipe out the Church when God arrested him and all Damascus knew that. He went back at once to bear his testimony to the people who knew best what he had been.

- (iii) Third, Paul went to *Jerusalem*. Again he took his life in his hands. His former friends, the Jews, would be out for his blood, because to him he was a renegade. His former victims, the Christians, might well ostracize him, unable to believe that he was a changed man.
- (iv) Fourth, Paul went to *Syria* and *Cilicia*. It was there that Tarsus was. It was there that he had been brought up. There were the friends of his boyhood and youth. Again he chose the hard way. They would no doubt regard him as quite mad; they would meet him with anger, and, worse, with mockery. But he was quite prepared to be regarded as a fool for the sake of Christ.

In these verses Paul was seeking to defend and prove the independence of his gospel. He got it from no man; he got it from God. He consulted no man; he consulted God. But as he wrote he unconsciously delineated himself as the man who had the courage to witness to his change and preach his gospel in the hardest places of all. (*p. 14-15)

Chapter 2

Paul's Relationship with the other Apostles

Fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went because God revealed to me that I should go. In a private meeting with the leaders I explained the gospel message that I preach to the Gentiles. I did not want my work in the past or in the present to be a failure. My companion Titus, even though he is Greek, was not forced to be circumcised, although some wanted it done. Pretending to be believers, these men slipped into our group as spies, in order to find out about the freedom we have through our union with Christ Jesus. They wanted to make slaves of us, but in order to keep the truth of the gospel safe for you, we did not give in to them for a minute.

But those who seemed to be the leaders—I say this because it makes no difference to me what they were; God does not judge by outward appearances—those leaders, I say, made no new suggestions to me. On the contrary, they saw that God had given me the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as he had given Peter the task of preaching the gospel to the Jews. For by God's power I was made an apostle to the Gentiles, just as Peter was made an apostle to the Jews. James, Peter, and John, who seemed to be the leaders, recognized that God had given me this special task; so they shook hands with Barnabas and me, as a sign that we were all partners. We agreed that Barnabas and I would work among the Gentiles and they among the Jews. All they asked was that we should remember the needy in their group, which is the very thing I have been eager to do. (Galatians 2:1-10)

Having established himself as an apostle, preaching on the authority of Christ himself, Paul now seeks to explain his relationship with the other leaders of the Church. He tells the Galatians about his trip to Jerusalem to meet with them, taking Titus (who was not a Jew) with him. Barclay expounds:

There were those, who, as we have seen, accepted Christianity but believed that God never gave any privilege to a man who was not a Jew; and that, therefore, before a man could become a Christian, he must be circumcised and take the whole law upon him. The Judaizers, as they were called, seized on Titus as a test case. There is a battle behind this passage; and it seems likely that the leaders of the Church urged Paul, for the sake of peace, to give in, in the case of Titus. But he stood like a rock. He knew that to yield would be to accept the slavery of the law and to turn his back on the freedom which is in Christ. (*p. 16-17)

The conclusion Paul drew is that the leadership roles were clearly defined... his was to preach to the Gentiles, while Peter “was made an apostle to the Jews.” James, Peter and John all agreed with this, and shook hands to symbolize their support for each other. As Barclay points out:

From this picture certain characteristics of Paul emerge clearly.

- (i) He was a man who gave authority its due respect. He did not go his own way. He went and talked with the leaders of the Church however much he might differ from them. It is a great and neglected law of life that however right we happen to be there is nothing to be gained by rudeness. There is never any reason why courtesy and determination should not go hand in hand.
- (ii) He was a man who refused to be overawed. Repeatedly he mentions the reputation which the leaders and pillars of the Church enjoyed. He respected them and treated them with courtesy; but he remained inflexible. There is such a thing as respect; and there is such a thing as grovelling, prudential bowing to those whom the world or the Church labels great. Paul was always certain that he was seeking the approval not of men but of God.
- (iii) He was a man conscious of a special task. He was convinced that God had given him a task to do and he would let nether opposition from without nor discouragement from within stop him doing it. The man who knows he has a God-given task will always find that he has a God-given strength to carry it out.

(*p. 17)

Paul's Rebuke of Peter

But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him in public, because he was clearly wrong. Before some men who had been sent by James arrived there, Peter had been eating with the Gentile believers. But after these men arrived, he drew back and would not eat with the Gentiles, because he was afraid of those who were in favor of circumcising them. The other Jewish believers also started acting like cowards along with Peter; and even Barnabas was swept along by their cowardly action. When I saw that they were not walking a straight path in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you have been living like a Gentile, not like a Jew. How, then, can you try to force Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Galatians 2:11-14)

Paul challenges Peter on his hypocrisy, or at least his change of position which results in his duplicitous behaviour. He is referring to the “common meal which they called the Agape or Love Feast,” as Barclay describes:

At this feast the whole congregation came together to enjoy a common meal provided by a pooling of whatever resources they had. For many of the slaves it must have been the only decent meal they had all week; and in a very special way it marked the togetherness of the Christians. (*p. 18)

At first Peter ate with everyone, including the Gentiles (non-Jews), but after being influenced by some of the Jewish believers “who had been sent by James” he and the other leaders withdrew from the common meal. As Barclay observes, Paul spoke “with all the intensity of which his passionate nature was capable, for he saw certain things quite clearly.

- (i) A church ceases to be a church if it contains class distinctions. In the presence of God a man is neither Jew nor Gentile, noble nor base, rich nor poor; he is a sinner for whom Christ died. If men share in a common sonship they must be brothers.
- (ii) Paul saw that strenuous action was necessary to counter-act a drift which had occurred. He did not wait; he struck. It made no difference to him that this drift was connected with the name and conduct of Peter. It was wrong and that was all that mattered to him. (*p. 19)

Put Right with God

Indeed, we are Jews by birth and not “Gentile sinners,” as they are called. Yet we know that a person is put right with God only through faith in Jesus Christ, never by doing what the Law requires. We, too, have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be put right with God through our faith in Christ, and not by doing what the Law requires. For no one is put right with God by doing what the Law requires. If, then, as we try to be put right with God by our union with Christ, we are found to be sinners, as much as the Gentiles are—does this mean that Christ is serving the cause of sin? By no means! If I start to rebuild the system of Law that I tore down, then I show myself to be someone who breaks the Law. So far as the Law is concerned, however, I am dead—killed by the Law itself—in order that I might live for God. I have been put to death with Christ on his cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. This life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me. I refuse to reject the grace of God. But if a person is put right with God through the Law, it means that Christ died for nothing! (Galatians 2:15-21)

Barclay helps us understand what is meant by the expression *Gentile sinners*:

When a Jew used the word *sinners* of Gentiles he was not thinking of moral qualities; he was thinking of the observance of the law. To take an example -- Leviticus 11 lays down which animals may and may not be used for food. A man who ate a hare or pork broke these laws and became a *sinner* in this sense of the term. So Peter would answer Paul, “But, if I eat with the Gentiles and eat the things they eat, I become a sinner.”

Paul’s answer was twofold. First, he said, “We agreed long ago that no amount of observance of the law can make one right with God. That is a matter of grace... Therefore the whole business of law is irrelevant.” Next he said, “You hold that to forget all this business about rules and regulations will make you a sinner. *But*

that is precisely what Jesus Christ told you to do. He did not tell you to try to earn salvation by eating this animal and not eating that one. He told you to fling yourself without reserve on the grace of God. (*p. 20-21)

Jesus had explained all this, but there was still confusion in the early Church. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets” -- so did the law still exist? Yes. However, Jesus added, “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” -- so does the law still apply? No. Following Jesus was the only way to fulfill what the law required. This is the crux of Paul’s argument... it cannot be right for Gentiles to come to God by grace and Jews to come to God by the law. “For Paul there was only one reality, grace, and it was by way of surrender to that grace that all must come.” (*p. 21)

Paul was speaking out of his own experience of trying to fulfill the Law, and failing miserably. As he writes, “if a person is put right with God through the law, it means that Christ died for nothing!” (verse 21). When he trusted in God’s grace, as made known in Christ, it was as if he died, and a new person was born. As Barclay puts it, “So great was the change that the only way he could describe it was to say that he had been crucified with Christ so that the man he used to be was dead and the living power within him now was Christ himself.” (*p. 22)

Chapter 3

The Law vis-à-vis Faith in Christ

You foolish Galatians! Who put a spell on you? Before your very eyes you had a clear description of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross! Tell me this one thing: did you receive God's Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the gospel and believing it? How can you be so foolish! You began by God's Spirit; do you now want to finish by your own power? Did all your experience mean nothing at all? Surely it meant something! Does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you because you do what the Law requires or because you hear the gospel and believe it?

Consider the experience of Abraham; as the scripture says, “He believed God, and because of his faith God accepted him as righteous.” You should realize, then, that the real descendants of Abraham are the people who have faith. The scripture predicted that God would put the Gentiles right with himself through faith. And so the scripture announced the Good News to Abraham: “Through you God will bless all people.” Abraham believed and was blessed; so all who believe are blessed as he was.

Those who depend on obeying the Law live under a curse. For the scripture says, “Whoever does not always obey everything that is written in the book of the Law is under God's curse!” Now, it is clear that no one is put right with God by means of the Law, because the scripture says, “Only the person who is put right with God through faith shall live.” But the Law has nothing to do with faith. Instead, as the scripture says, “Whoever does everything the Law requires will live.”

But by becoming a curse for us Christ has redeemed us from the curse that the Law brings; for the scripture says, “Anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse.” Christ did this in order that the blessing which God promised to Abraham might be given to the

Gentiles by means of Christ Jesus, so that through faith we might receive the Spirit promised by God. (Galatians 3:1-14)

Barclay gives some background to what Paul says to the Galatians in these opening verses of Chapter 3:

Paul uses still another argument to show that it is faith and not works of the law which puts a man right with God. In the early Church converts nearly always received the Holy Spirit in a visible way. The early chapters of Acts show what happened again and again (Acts 8:14-17; 10:44). There came to them a new surge of life and power that anyone could see. That experience had happened to the Galatians and had happened, said Paul, not because they had obeyed the regulations of the law, because at that time they had never heard of the law, but because they had heard the good news of the love of God and had responded to it in an act of perfect trust. (*p. 23-24)

Using Abraham as an example, Paul then goes on to explain how God's promise is fulfilled in one who is obedient and faithful to Him. He explains that the blessing promised to Abraham was in fact for everyone who believes in God... because of faith, not the law. Since Abraham lived before the law was given through Moses, Paul is reminding the Galatian Christians that it was not obedience to the law, but because of his faith that God accepted Abraham "as righteous."

Several verses of scripture are referenced here -- let's identify them:

- Verse 6 "He believed God, and because of his faith God accepted him as righteous" comes from *Genesis 15:6*
"Abram put his trust in the Lord, and because of this the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him."
- Verse 8 "the scripture announced the Good News to Abraham: 'Through you God will bless all people'" comes from *Genesis 12:3 and 18:18*
"His descendants will become a great and mighty nation, and through him I will bless all the nations."
- Verse 10 "Whoever does not always obey everything that is written in the book of the Law is under God's curse!" comes from *Deuteronomy 27:26*
"God's curse on anyone who does not obey all of God's laws and teachings."
- Verse 11 "Only the person who is put right with God through faith shall live" comes from *Habakkuk 2:4*
"Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God."
- Verse 12 "Whoever does everything the Law requires will live" comes from *Leviticus 18:5*
"Follow the practices and the laws that I give you; you will save your life by doing so. I am the Lord."

- Verse 13 “Anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse”
comes from *Deuteronomy 21:23*
“for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse.”

Paul is appealing to those of Jewish heritage in these references to the Old Testament, which was the Jewish Scripture -- they would be able to follow his argument easily. That doesn't mean that they would be convinced, but the references to their scriptures would be a powerful tool of persuasion. The Gentiles, or non-Jews, might see this as an opportunity to learn some of the history prior to, and circumstances that led to, Jesus coming into the world. One would have to do “everything required by the law” in order to be put right with God. None of us can do that... only Jesus could. So it is our *faith in Jesus* that qualifies us as fulfilling the Law's requirements -- through His sacrifice, the ‘curse’ of being crucified -- we (Jews, Gentiles, everyone) can be put right with God if we believe. We all benefit from the promise God made to Abraham if we truly understand Abraham's role, and the point of the Law, in revealing God to His people. Paul addresses that next.

The Promise of the Law

My friends, I am going to use an everyday example: when two people agree on a matter and sign an agreement, no one can break it or add anything to it. Now, God made his promises to Abraham and to his descendant. The scripture does not use the plural “descendants,” meaning many people, but the singular “descendant,” meaning one person only, namely, Christ. What I mean is that God made a covenant with Abraham and promised to keep it. The Law, which was given four hundred and thirty years later, cannot break that covenant and cancel God's promise. For if God's gift depends on the Law, then it no longer depends on his promise. However, it was because of his promise that God gave that gift to Abraham.

(Galatians 3:15-18)

There is another reference to the Jewish Scripture in verse 16 -- it is from *Genesis 22:18*:
and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”
The Good News Translation (quoted throughout this study) translates the Hebrew word as *descendant*; other versions render *offspring* (as above) or *seed*. Paul is reminding his readers that “the way of grace is older than the way of law,” as Barclay puts it. He continues:

[Paul's] aim is to show the superiority of the way of grace over the way of law... When Abraham made his venture of faith, God made his great promise to him. That is to say, God's promise was consequent upon an act of faith; the law did not come until the time of Moses, four hundred and thirty years later. But -- Paul goes on to argue -- once a covenant has been duly ratified, you cannot alter it nor add additional clauses to it. Therefore the later law cannot alter the earlier way of faith. It was faith which set Abraham right with God; and faith is still the only way for a man to get himself right with God.

(*p. 27-28)

Paul is saying the same thing over and over, approaching the point from slightly different angles... this reflects his training by the Rabbis (the Jewish teachers of the law). The Rabbis also liked to approach a theological issue or argument by selecting one word, and building their

entire case around that one word. This is what Paul does with the word *descendant* -- Barclay explains that Paul's argument is based on this word being used

in the *singular* and not in the *plural*... therefore, God's promise points not to a great crowd of people but to *one single individual*; and -- argues Paul -- the one person in whom the covenant finds its consummation is Jesus Christ. Therefore, the way to peace with God is the way of faith that Abraham took; and we must repeat that way by looking to Jesus Christ in faith. (*p. 28)

None of us can succeed in keeping the law, "for man's imperfection can never fully satisfy God's perfection," according to Barclay. We need to "bring ourselves and our sin to God," so that "his grace opens opens its arms to us and we find ourselves at peace with a God who is no longer judge but father." (*p. 28)

The Purpose of the Law

What, then, was the purpose of the Law? It was added in order to show what wrongdoing is, and it was meant to last until the coming of Abraham's descendant, to whom the promise was made. The Law was handed down by angels, with a man acting as a go-between. But a go-between is not needed when only one person is involved; and God is one.

Does this mean that the Law is against God's promises? No, not at all! For if human beings had received a law that could bring life, then everyone could be put right with God by obeying it. But the scripture says that the whole world is under the power of sin; and so the gift which is promised on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ is given to those who believe.

But before the time for faith came, the Law kept us all locked up as prisoners until this coming faith should be revealed. And so the Law was in charge of us until Christ came, in order that we might then be put right with God through faith. Now that the time for faith is here, the Law is no longer in charge of us.

It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised.

(Galatians 3:19-29)

This last section of Chapter 3 is somewhat confusing... William Barclay says that this "is one of the most difficult passages Paul ever wrote, so difficult that there are almost three hundred different interpretations of it!" He highlights four points that Paul made about the law.

- (i) Why introduce the law at all? It was introduced, as Paul puts it, *for the sake of transgressions*. What he means is that where there is no law there is no sin. One cannot be condemned for doing wrong if one does not know that it was wrong. Therefore the function of the law is *to define sin*. But, while the law can and does define sin, it can do nothing whatever to cure it. It is like a doctor who is an expert in diagnosis but who is helpless to clear up the trouble which he has diagnosed.

(ii) The law was not given direct by God. In the old story in *Exodus 20* it was given direct to Moses; but in the days of Paul the Rabbis were so impressed by the holiness and the remoteness of God that they believed that it was quite impossible for him to deal direct with humans; therefore they introduced the idea that the law was given first to angels and then by the angels to Moses (see *Acts 7:53; Hebrews 2:2*). Here Paul is using the Rabbinic thoughts of his time. The law is at a double remove from God, given first to angels, and then to a mediator; and the mediator is Moses. Compared with the *promise*, which was given directly by God, the *law* is a second-hand thing.

(iii) Now we come to that extraordinarily difficult sentence -- "There can be no such thing as a mediator of one; and God is one." What is Paul's thought here? An agreement founded on laws always involves *two* people, the person who gives it and the person who accepts it; and it depends on both sides keeping it...

But a promise depends on only *one* person. The way of grace depends entirely on God; it is his promise. Man can do nothing to alter that. He may sin, but the love and the grace of God stand unchanged. To Paul it was the weakness of the law that it depended on *two* persons, the law-giver and the law-keeper; and man had wrecked it. Grace is entirely of God; man cannot undo it; and surely it is better to depend on the grace of the unchanging God than on the hopeless efforts of helpless men.

(iv) Is, then, the law antithetic to grace? Logically, Paul should answer, "Yes" but, in fact, he answers, "No." He says that scripture has shut up everyone under sin. He is thinking of *Deuteronomy 27:26* where it is said that everyone who does not conform to the words of the law is cursed. In fact, that means *everyone*, because no one ever has, or ever will, perfectly keep the law. What, then, is the consequence of the law? It is to drive everyone to seek grace, because it has proved our helplessness. (*p. 29-30)

Part of the purpose of the law was to tutor, or give guidance, so that we could find grace. Paul described this as being "locked up as prisoners" (verse 22) because the law was in charge. As Barclay puts it, "It was the function of the law to bring a man to Christ by showing him that by himself he was utterly unable to keep it" (* p. 31). When the "the time for faith" came the law was no longer in charge -- this is the freedom we have in Christ (verse 25).

Using baptism to illustrate, Paul gets the attention of both the Gentile believers and those who came to Christ via Judaism, for both knew about baptism. The Christians were baptized into "union with Christ Jesus" (v. 27) and most would have known about the baptism required of Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism. Barclay gives some background:

Baptism was a Jewish rite. If a man wished to accept the Jewish faith he had to do three things. He had to be circumcised, to offer sacrifice and to be baptized. Ceremonial washing to cleanse from defilement was very common in Jewish practice (see *Leviticus*, chapters 11 to 15).

The details of Jewish baptism were as follows: - The man to be baptized cut his hair and his nails; he undressed completely; the baptismal bath had to contain 40 seahs, that is 2 hogsheads, of water [at least 575 litres]. Every part of the body had to be touched with the water. He made confession of his faith before three men who were called *fathers of baptism*. While still in the water parts of the law were read to him, and

benedictions were pronounced upon him. When he emerged he was a member of the Jewish faith; it was through baptism that he entered into that faith... just as really as the Jewish convert was united with the Jewish faith, the Christian convert was united with Christ (see *Romans* 6:3ff; *Colossians* 2:12). Baptism was no mere outward form; it was a real union with Christ. (*p. 31-32)

Just as one could not tell the difference between the newly baptized when they donned their white robes, so there is no difference spiritually between “Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women” -- all are “one in union with Christ Jesus” (v. 28). This is the only thing, observes Barclay, that can

wipe out the ever sharpening distinctions and separations between humans; when all are debtors to God's grace and all are in Christ, only then will all be one. It is not the force of humans but the love of God which alone can unite a disunited world. (*p. 33)

Chapter 4

Allegory about Jesus

But now to continue—the son who will receive his father's property is treated just like a slave while he is young, even though he really owns everything. While he is young, there are men who take care of him and manage his affairs until the time set by his father. In the same way, we too were slaves of the ruling spirits of the universe before we reached spiritual maturity. But when the right time finally came, God sent his own Son. He came as the son of a human mother and lived under the Jewish Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might become God's children.

To show that you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who cries out, “Father, my Father.” So then, you are no longer a slave but a child. And since you are his child, God will give you all that he has for his children. (Galatians 4:1-7)

Barclay gives us the background to this passage -- with which his readers would immediately identify, though we (half-way around the world, and two thousand years later) might not.

In the ancient world the process of growing up was much more definite than it is with us.

(i) In the Jewish world, on the first Sabbath after a boy had passed his twelfth birthday, his father took him to the Synagogue, where he became *A Son of the Law*. The father thereupon uttered a benediction, “Blessed be thou, O God, who has taken from me the responsibility for this boy.” The boy prayed a prayer in which he said, “O my God, and God of my fathers! On this solemn and sacred day, which marks my passage from boyhood to manhood, I humbly raise my eyes unto thee, and declare with sincerity and truth, that henceforth I will keep thy commandments, and undertake and bear the responsibility of mine actions towards thee.” There was a clear dividing line in the boy's life; almost overnight he became a man.

(ii) In Greece a boy was under his father's care from seven until he was eighteen. He then became what was called an *ephebos*, which may be translated *cadet*, and for two years he was under the direction of the state. The Athenians were divided into ten *phratryai*, or *clans*. Before a lad became an *ephebos*, at a festival called the *Apatouria*, he was received into the clan; and at a ceremonial act his long hair was cut off and offered to the gods. Once again, growing up was quite a definite process.

(iii) Under Roman law the year at which a boy grew up was not definitely fixed, but it was always between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. At a sacred festival in the family called the *Liberalia* he took off the *toga praetexta*, which was a toga with a narrow purple band at the foot of it and put on the *toga virilis*, which was a plain toga which adults wore. He was then conducted by his friends and relations down to the forum and formally introduced to public life. It was essentially a religious ceremony. And once again there was a quite definite day on which the lad attained manhood. There was a Roman custom that on the day a boy or girl grew up, the boy offered his ball, and the girl her doll, to Apollo to show that they had put away childish things. (*p. 33-34)

Assured that his readers would be familiar with these customs, Paul used this information to illustrate how the law was applicable to the spiritually immature, but when Jesus Christ brought spiritual maturity, the law no longer applied. As Barclay puts it:

Paul says that when the Galatians -- and indeed all men -- were mere children, they were under the tyranny of the law; then, when everything was ready, Christ came and released men from that tyranny. So now men are no longer slaves of the law; they have become sons and entered into their inheritance. The childhood which belonged to the law should be past, the freedom of manhood has come. (*p. 35)

Paul's Concern for the Galatians

In the past you did not know God, and so you were slaves of beings who are not gods. But now that you know God—or, I should say, now that God knows you—how is it that you want to turn back to those weak and pitiful ruling spirits? Why do you want to become their slaves all over again? You pay special attention to certain days, months, seasons, and years. I am worried about you! Can it be that all my work for you has been for nothing?

I beg you, my friends, be like me. After all, I am like you. You have not done me any wrong. You remember why I preached the gospel to you the first time; it was because I was sick. But even though my physical condition was a great trial to you, you did not despise or reject me. Instead, you received me as you would an angel from heaven; you received me as you would Christ Jesus. You were so happy! What has happened? I myself can say that you would have taken out your own eyes, if you could, and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Those other people show a deep interest in you, but their intentions are not good. All they want is to separate you from me, so that you will have the same interest in them as they have in you. Now, it is good to have such a deep interest if the purpose is good—this is true always, and not merely when I am with you. My dear children! Once again, just like a mother in childbirth, I feel the same kind of pain for you until Christ's nature is formed in you. How

I wish I were with you now, so that I could take a different attitude toward you. I am so worried about you! (Galatians 4:8-20)

Paul explains to the Galatians that when they “did not know God” they were slaves, but now that they know God (then he corrects himself -- God has revealed himself to them) they are free. They have the power of the grace of God through Christ. So why turn back to that from which they came, what he calls the “weak and pitiful ruling spirits” that want only to enslave them by ritualistic obedience to rules and regulations?

There is nothing wrong with observing special days and occasions, so long as they do not themselves become the object of our worship. Barclay explains what Paul is referring to here:

One of the features of Jewish law was its observance of special times. In this passage the *days* are the Sabbaths of each week; the *months* are the new moons; the *seasons* are the great annual feasts like the Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles; the *years* are the Sabbatic years, that is, every seventh. The failure of a religion which is dependent on special occasions is that almost inevitably it divides days into sacred and secular; and the further almost inevitable step is that when a man had meticulously observed the sacred days he is liable to think that he has discharged his duty to God. . .

It was Paul's fear that those who had once known the splendour of grace would slip back into legalism, and that those who had once lived in the presence of God would shut him up to special days. (*p. 36-37)

Now Paul makes an appeal for the Galatians to be like him -- this is a personal appeal, not a theological one. He is reminding them that he had become like them... that is, he had dropped his Jewish traditions and become a ‘gentile’ so as to win them to Christ. He first preached among them when he was sick (his ‘thorn in the flesh’ as in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10?) and they showed great compassion. He is questioning if that has now changed?

And he warns them against listening to, and being persuaded by, those “other people” whom they do not know as well as they know Paul. They are wolves in sheep's clothing, Paul suggests, because their intentions are not good. He cautions the Galatian Christians about what they will be expected to do if they listen to these “other people.” They will be required to separate themselves from Paul, and to follow the others into slavish obedience to the law.

Paul uses the phrase “my dear children” (verses 19) as he appeals to the Galatians to listen to him, because he cares for them like a mother cares for her children. This is the same phrase that John uses often in his Letters, sometimes translated “little children.” But this is the only time Paul uses this expression -- it is not found in any of his other letters. It is obviously a heart-wrenching experience for him, as Barclay describes it:

In the end Paul uses a vivid metaphor. His bringing the Galatians to Christ cost him pain like a mother's travail; and now he has to go through it all again. Christ is in them, as it were in embryo; he has to bring them to birth. (*p. 39)

The Example of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah

Let me ask those of you who want to be subject to the Law: do you not hear what the Law says? It says that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman, the other by a free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the usual way, but his son by the free woman was born as a result of God's promise. These things can be understood as a figure: the two women represent two covenants. The one whose children are born in slavery is Hagar, and she represents the covenant made at Mount Sinai. Hagar, who stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia, is a figure of the present city of Jerusalem, in slavery with all its people. But the heavenly Jerusalem is free, and she is our mother. For the scripture says,

“Be happy, you childless woman!

Shout and cry with joy, you who never felt the pains of childbirth!

For the woman who was deserted will have more children
than the woman whose husband never left her.”

Now, you, my friends, are God's children as a result of his promise, just as Isaac was. At that time the son who was born in the usual way persecuted the one who was born because of God's Spirit; and it is the same now. But what does the scripture say? It says, “Send the slave woman and her son away; for the son of the slave woman will not have a part of the father's property along with the son of the free woman.” So then, my friends, we are not the children of a slave woman but of a free woman. (Galatians 4:21-31)

For commentary on this passage I can do no better than quote extensively from Barclay, as he gives important background as well a clear explanation of the allegory. He titles this section of his notes *An Old Story and a New Meaning*:

When we seek to interpret a passage like this we must remember that for the devout and scholarly Jew, and especially for the Rabbis, scripture had more than one meaning; and the literal meaning was often regarded as the least important. For the Jewish Rabbis a passage of scripture had four meanings:

- (i) *Peshat*, its simple or literal meaning.
- (ii) *Remaz*, its suggested meaning.
- (iii) *Derush*, the meaning deduced by investigation.
- (iv) *Sod*, the allegorical meaning.

The first letters of these four words -- *P R D S* -- are the consonants of the word *Paradise* -- and when a man had succeeded in penetrating into these four different meanings he reached the joy of paradise!

It is to be noted that the summit of all meanings was the *allegorical* meaning. It therefore often happened that the Rabbis would take a simple bit of historical narrative from the Old Testament and read into it inner meanings which often appear to us fantastic but which were very convincing to the people of their day. Paul was a trained Rabbi; and that is what he is doing here. He takes the story involving Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac (*Genesis*, chapters 16, 17, 21), which in the Old Testament is a straightforward narrative and he allegorises it to illustrate his point.

The outline of the story is as follows: - Abraham and Sarah were far advanced in years and Sarah had no child. She did what any wife would have done in those patriarchal times and sent Abraham in to her slave

girl, Hagar, to see if she could bear a child on her behalf. Hagar had a son called Ishmael. In the meantime God had come and promised that Sarah would have a child, which was so difficult to believe that it appeared impossible to Abraham and Sarah; but in due time Isaac was born. That is to say, Ishmael was born of the ordinary human impulses of the flesh; Isaac was born because of God's promise; and Sarah was a free woman, while Hagar was a slave girl. From the beginning Hagar had been inclined to triumph over Sarah, because barrenness was a sore shame to a woman; there was an atmosphere charged with trouble. Later Sarah found Ishmael "mocking" (Authorized Version) Isaac -- this Paul equates with persecution -- and insisted that Hagar should be cast out, so that the child of the slave girl should not share the inheritance with her freeborn son. Further, Arabia was regarded as the land of slaves where the descendants of Hagar dwelt.

Paul takes that old story and allegorises it. Hagar stands for the old covenant of the law, made on Mount Sinai, which is in fact in Arabia, the land of Hagar's descendants. Hagar was herself a slave and all her children were born into slavery; and that covenant whose basis is the law turns men into slaves of the law. Hagar's child was born from merely human impulses; and legalism is the best that man can do. On the other hand Sarah stands for the new covenant in Jesus Christ, God's new way of dealing with men not by law but by grace. Her child was born free and -- according to God's promise -- all his descendants must be free. As the child of the slave girl persecuted the child of the free woman, the children of the law now persecute the children of grace and promise. But as in the end the child of the slave girl was cast out and had no share in the inheritance, so in the end those who are legalists will be cast out from God and have no share in the inheritance of grace.

Strange as all this may seem to us, it enshrines one great truth. The man who makes the law the principle of his life is in the position of a slave; whereas the man who makes grace the principle of his life is free. . . It is the power of that love, and not the constraint of law, that will keep us right; for love is always more powerful than law.

(*p. 40-42)

Chapter 5

The Freedom of the Gospel

Freedom is what we have—Christ has set us free! Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again.

Listen! I, Paul, tell you that if you allow yourselves to be circumcised, it means that Christ is of no use to you at all. Once more I warn any man who allows himself to be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the whole Law. Those of you who try to be put right with God by obeying the Law have cut yourselves off from Christ. You are outside God's grace. As for us, our hope is that God will put us right with him; and this is what we wait for by the power of God's Spirit working through our faith. For when we are in union with Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor the lack of it makes any difference at all; what matters is faith that works through love.

You were doing so well! Who made you stop obeying the truth? How did he persuade you? It was not done by God, who calls you. "It takes only a little yeast to make the whole batch of dough rise," as they say. But I still feel confident about you. Our life in union with the Lord makes me confident that you will not take a different view and that whoever is upsetting you will be punished by God.

But as for me, my friends, if I continue to preach that circumcision is necessary, why am I still being persecuted? If that were true, then my preaching about the cross of Christ would cause no trouble. I wish that the people who are upsetting you would go all the way; let them go on and castrate themselves!

As for you, my friends, you were called to be free. But do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires control you. Instead, let love make you serve one another. For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." But if you act like wild animals, hurting and harming each other, then watch out, or you will completely destroy one another. (Galatians 5:1-15)

Paul had referenced 'freedom' earlier -- in chapter 2, verse 4 he suggests that the reason the Judaizers "slipped into our group as spies," was to "find out about the freedom we have through our union with Christ Jesus." Now he declares it boldly: "Christ has set us free!"

This is another way of expressing the contrast between following the Law (which enslaves us in a never-ending struggle which we will never win) and following Christ (who liberates us to overcome by grace). For Paul "the way of grace and the way of Law were mutually exclusive," according to Barclay. This is because the Law makes salvation dependent on one's own strength to obey and one's achievements in keeping the rules. Whereas grace requires us to 'cast ourselves' and our sin on Christ, who has fulfilled the Law.

Encouraging the Galatian Christians to be strong, Paul again warns the Gentiles against being talked into being circumcised, because to accept one part of the Law meant that you were under obligation to obey all of it. It is the "power of God's Spirit working through our faith" that makes the difference, Paul says. Barclay expresses this concept like this:

To Paul all that mattered was faith which works through love. That is just another way of saying that the essence of Christianity is not law but a personal relationship to Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is founded not on a book but on a person; its dynamic is not obedience to any law but love to Jesus Christ. (*p. 43)

Paul seems upset by the change in attitude of the Galatians... they were doing so well! He is perplexed by who or what persuaded them to "stop obeying the truth." Like a little yeast affects the entire batch of dough, he suspects one person was able to influence many. He does not lose confidence, however, in the power of God through the union in Christ, to keep them on track. He uses a rather bizarre phrase when he suggests that those who are upsetting the believers should go all the way and "castrate themselves!" While this may strike us as odd, it would resonate with the Christians in Galatia who are receiving this letter. Barclay gives the background:

Galatia was near Phrygia and the great worship of that part of the world was of Cybele. It was the practice that priests and really devout worshippers of Cybele mutilated themselves by castration. Paul says, "If you

go on in this way, of which circumcision is the beginning, you might as well end up by castrating your selves like these heathen priests." It is a grim illustration at which a polite society raises its eyebrows, but it would be intensely real to the Galatians who knew all about the priests of Cybele. (*p. 44)

In the next few verses Paul turns from theology to ethics -- in his characteristically practical mind theology was useless unless it could be lived out. His theology always ran one danger, as Barclay explains:

When he declared that the end of the reign of law had come and that the reign of grace had arrived, it was always possible for someone to say, "That, then, means that I can do what I like; all the restraints are lifted and I can follow my inclinations wherever they lead me. Law is gone and grace ensures forgiveness anyway."

Paul cautions against this attitude of slackness, that you can do whatever you like, and reminds them that the 'freedom' Christ brings is the freedom to love as He loves us. He warns them that they can destroy each other if their selfishness is all that motivates them. Love is required -- in fact, love sums up the whole law! -- because it is the evidence of freedom of Christ. Jesus said the same thing in John 15:8, where he said to his followers, "When you bear (produce) much fruit, My Father is honored *and* glorified, and you show *and* prove yourselves to be true followers of Mine." (Amplified Bible, Classic Edition)

The Role of the Spirit

What I say is this: let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of the human nature. For what our human nature wants is opposed to what the Spirit wants, and what the Spirit wants is opposed to what our human nature wants. These two are enemies, and this means that you cannot do what you want to do. If the Spirit leads you, then you are not subject to the Law.

What human nature does is quite plain. It shows itself in immoral, filthy, and indecent actions; in worship of idols and witchcraft. People become enemies and they fight; they become jealous, angry, and ambitious. They separate into parties and groups; they are envious, get drunk, have orgies, and do other things like these. I warn you now as I have before: those who do these things will not possess the Kingdom of God.

But the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. There is no law against such things as these. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death their human nature with all its passions and desires. The Spirit has given us life; he must also control our lives. We must not be proud or irritate one another or be jealous of one another. (Galatians 5:16-26)

"No man was ever more conscious of the tension in human nature than Paul," says Barclay. Paul addresses this tension in another of his letters -- Romans 7:18-20 -- where he looks at the negative results, just like in verses 19-21 of Galatians 5. Paul says to the Roman Christians:

I know that good does not live in me—that is, in my human nature. For even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it. I don't do the good I want to do; instead, I

do the evil that I do not want to do. If I do what I don't want to do, this means that I am no longer the one who does it; instead, it is the sin that lives in me.

In Galatians Paul describes both side, the negative and the positive, the evil and the good. He points out that what human nature wants is opposed to what the Spirit wants -- these two are enemies. So, if our human nature is leading us, subject to the law, we will never overcome the negative because we “cannot do what [we] want to do” (verse 17). He lists all the results of trying to do it on our own, how human nature ‘shows itself’ in all the negativity. Paul draws the same conclusion in his letter to the Romans -- the evil always wins the ‘tug-o-war’ that’s going on inside us -- and I eventually “do the evil that I do not want to do.” He draws this conclusion (Romans 7:25):

This, then, is my condition: on my own I can serve God's law only with my mind, while my human nature serves the law of sin.

Most of the long list of negative attitudes and wicked behaviour -- how human nature shows itself -- are clearly understood, and we know that they are contrary to God’s will. But we need to look more closely at a few of them. Barclay offers some explanation of how much is covered in the Greek terms:

[Paul] gives us a catalogue of evil things. Every word he uses has a picture behind it... it has been said, and said truly, that the one completely new virtue Christianity brought into the world was chastity. Christianity came into a world where sexual immorality was not only condoned, but was regarded essential to the ordinary working of life...

Witchcraft: this literally means *the use of drugs*. It can mean the beneficent use of drugs by a doctor; but it can also mean *poisoning*, and it came to be very specially connected with the use of drugs for sorcery, of which the ancient world was full.

Jealousy: this word (*zelos* from which our word *zeal* comes) was originally a good word. It meant *emulation*, the desire to attain to nobility when we see it. But it degenerated; came to mean the desire to have what someone else has, wrong desire for what is not for us.

Envy: this word (*phthonos*) is a mean word... The essence of it is that it does not describe the spirit which desires, nobly or ignobly, to have what someone else has; it describes the spirit which grudges the fact that the other person has these things at all. It does not so much want the things for itself; it merely wants to take them away from the other.

Drunkenness: in the ancient world this was not a common vice. The Greeks drank more wine than they did milk; even children drank wine. But they drank it in the proportion of three parts of water to two of wine.

Greek and Christian alike would have condemned drunkenness as a thing which turned a man into a beast.

And, Barclay concludes:

When we get to the root meaning of these words, we see that life has not changed so very much. (*p. 46-49)

Good intentions are not sufficient. Which is why, Paul says, “you must let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of the human nature” (verse 16), for “if the Spirit leads you, the you are not subject to the law” (verse 18). And then he lists the things that Spirit

produces in the lives of believers -- the fruit that Christ expects us to bear, as proof we are His disciples. And, Paul reassures his readers, “there is no law against such things as these” (verse 23).

We cannot miss the contrast between the two lists -- the fruit of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit -- for while the former are all actions or patterns of behaviour (outside), the latter are all values or attitudes (inside) that inform and determine our actions. Again we turn to Barclay for some help in translating the Greek so that we better comprehend what is being said -- we quote sections of his commentary:

Love: the New Testament word for love is *agape*. This is not a word which classical Greek uses commonly. In Greek there are four words for love: (a) *Eros* means the love of a man for a maid; it is the love which has passion in it. It is never used in the New Testament at all. (b) *Philia* is the warm love which we feel for our nearest and dearest; it is a thing of the heart. (c) *Storge* rather means affection and is specially used of the love of parents and children. (d) *Agape*, the Christian word, means unconquerable benevolence. It means that no matter what a man may do to us by way of insult or injury or humiliation we will never seek anything else but his highest good. It is therefore a feeling of the mind as much as of the heart; it concerns the will as much as the emotions...

Joy: the Greek here is *chara*, and the characteristic of this word is that it most often describes the joy that has a basis in religion... a joy whose foundation is God.

Peace: usually in the New Testament the Greek word *eirene* stands for the Hebrew *shalom* and means not just freedom from trouble but everything that makes for a man's highest good.

Patience (makrothumia) is a great word... Generally speaking the word is not used of patience in regards to things or events but in regard to people... commonly used in the New Testament of the attitude of God towards men...

Kindness and Goodness are closely connected words. For *kindness* the word is *chrestotes*. It, too, is commonly translated *goodness*... The word Paul uses for *goodness* (*agathosyne*) is a peculiarly Bible word and does not occur in secular Greek... The Christian needs that goodness which at one and the same time can be kind and strong.

Faithfulness (fidelity): this word (*pistis*) is common in secular Greek for *trustworthiness*. It is the characteristic of the man who is reliable.

Gentleness [or meekness, here humility]: *praotes* is the most untranslatable of words. In the New Testament it has three main meanings. (a) It means *being submissive to the will of God* (b). It means *being teachable*, being not too proud to learn. (c) Most often of all it means *being considerate*... What throws most light on its meaning is that the adjective *praus* is used of an animal that has been tamed and brought under control; and so the word speaks of that self-control which Christ alone can give.

Self-control: the word is *egkrateia*... it is used of the athlete's discipline of his body (1 Cor. 9:25) and of the Christian's mastery of sex (1 Cor. 7:9)... It is the virtue which makes a man so master of himself that he is fit to be the servant of others.

And Barclay sums it up simply and eloquently:

It was Paul's belief and experience that the Christian died with Christ and rose again to a life, new and clean, in which the evil things of the old self were gone and the lovely things of the Spirit had come to fruition. (*p. 49-52)

Chapter 6

Be Gentle, Be Helpful, Be Wise

My friends, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted, too. Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will obey the law of Christ. If you think you are something when you really are nothing, you are only deceiving yourself. You should each judge your own conduct. If it is good, then you can be proud of what you yourself have done, without having to compare it with what someone else has done. For each of you have to carry your own load.

If you are being taught the Christian message, you should share all the good things you have with your teacher.

Do not deceive yourselves; no one makes a fool of God. You will reap exactly what you plant. If you plant in the field of your natural desires, from it you will gather the harvest of death; if you plant in the field of the Spirit, from the Spirit you will gather the harvest of eternal life. So let us not become tired of doing good; for if we do not give up, the time will come when we will reap the harvest. So then, as often as we have the chance, we should do good to everyone, and especially to those who belong to our family in the faith.

(Galatians 6:1-10)

Paul knew that even the best of us slip sometimes... none are perfect and without fault. He refers to "being caught" in any kind of "wrongdoing." Barclay explains what is really meant here:

The word Paul uses (*parptoma*) does not mean a deliberate sin; but a slip as might come to one on an icy road or a dangerous path... if a man does make a slip, the real Christian duty is to get him on his feet again. The word he uses for 'correct' is used for executing a repair and also for the work of a surgeon in removing some growth from a man's body or in setting a broken limb. The whole atmosphere of the word lays the stress not on punishment but on cure; the correction is thought of not as a penalty but as an amendment. And Paul goes on to say that when we see a man fall into a fault we do well to say, "There but for the grace of God, go I." (*p. 53)

Paul encourages the believers to help to "carry one another's burdens" as a way of obeying "the law of Christ" (verse 2). Doing so will make us more empathetic for those who stumble or fall, as well as discourage us from being over confident or self-righteous. "We are to compare our achievement," observes Barclay, "not with the work of our neighbours but with what our best would have been. When we do that, there can never be any cause for conceit." (*p. 53).

Paul seems to be contradicting himself, for after saying “carry one another’s burdens” (v.2), he goes on to say, in verse 5, that “each of you have to carry your own load.” It is not contradictory if we understand him to be referring to two different types of burdens. There are the ones we share in common with all believers... the struggles to be obedient, to offer forgiveness, to rise above our emotions to be guided by what is true and what is right. These we can help each other with, as the hymn-writer encourages:

*Help us to help each other, Lord, each other's cross to bear;
let each his friendly aid afford, and feel another's care.*

*Help us to build each other up, our little stock improve;
Improve our faith, confirm our hope, and perfect us in love.*

(Charles Wesley - Hymn 717)

“But there is also a burden which a man must bear himself,” explains Barclay. “The word Paul uses is the word for a soldier’s pack. There is a duty which none can do for us and a task for which we must be personally responsible.” (*p. 53)

Paul then puts in a plug for himself and the others who teach and encourage the young Christian churches -- one way they can help them ‘bear their burdens’ -- for the believers to share “all the good things you have with your teacher” (v.6). We know that Paul was a tent-maker by trade (see Acts 18:1-3), and the income from that craft would have funded his missionary journeys in part, but there were times he needed more support (see 2 Corinthians 11:7-9). Most of the missionaries and teachers would have been in need of funds to pay for food, accommodation, transportation; or some may have been given in kind (see 2 Corinthians 9). We also know that some of the churches raised funds to help others in their time of need (see 2 Corinthians 8:1-7). So it was not unusual to ask for assistance, so Paul does, but doesn’t dwell on it -- one quick appeal and he moves on!

Using the metaphor of planting and harvesting Paul reminds his readers of this eternal truth: you will reap what you sow. Applied to the spiritual life, he discourages them from planting “in the field of [their] natural desires” and, instead, to “plant in the field of the Spirit” (verse 8). This echoes the previous chapter, where Paul compared and contrasted the fruit of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. Here again he emphasizes that we will gather the harvest of what we sow -- it is unreasonable to think otherwise; the only harvest you can reap is that which you planted. Jesus said the same thing:

You will know them by what they do. Thorn bushes do not bear grapes, and briars do not bear figs. A healthy tree bears good fruit, but a poor tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a poor tree cannot bear good fruit.

(Matthew 7:16-18)

Paul encourages the believers in Galatia to stay strong in obedience to God, and in doing good. He wants them to reap a good harvest when the time for ‘labouring in the vineyard’ is over. Every opportunity to do good should be embraced, he says, especially the opportunities to serve fellow Christians, those who “belong to our family in the faith” (verse 10). These may be avenues we can use to set others “right” (in a gentle way) if they have stumbled (v.1), and “help carry one another’s burdens” (v.2). Barclay makes an interesting point:

What we do not sufficiently remember is this -- it is blessedly true that God can and does forgive men for their sins, but not even he can wipe out the consequences of sin. If a man sins against his body, soon or late he will pay in ruined health -- even if he is forgiven. If a man sins against his loved ones, soon or late hearts will be broken -- even if he is forgiven. . . We cannot trade on the forgiveness of God. There is a moral law in the universe. If a man breaks it he may be forgiven, but, nonetheless, he breaks it at his peril.

Paul finishes by reminding his friends that sometimes the duty of generosity may be irksome, but no man who ever cast his bread upon the waters found that it did not return some day to him. (*pp. 54-55)

Conclusion:

Rebuke re the Demand for Circumcision | Paul's Confidence in the Cross | Benediction

See what big letters I make as I write to you now with my own hand! The people who are trying to force you to be circumcised are the ones who want to show off and boast about external matters. They do it, however, only so that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even those who practice circumcision do not obey the Law; they want you to be circumcised so that they can boast that you submitted to this physical ceremony. As for me, however, I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; for by means of his cross the world is dead to me, and I am dead to the world. It does not matter at all whether or not one is circumcised; what does matter is being a new creature. As for those who follow this rule in their lives, may peace and mercy be with them—with them and with all of God's people!

To conclude: let no one give me any more trouble, because the scars I have on my body show that I am the slave of Jesus.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all, my friends. Amen.

(Galatians 6:11-18)

As we heard earlier, in Paul's day most letters would have been actually written by a scribe or secretary, and the author of the letter would normally add his signature at the end, to authenticate it. But here Paul takes the quill and personally writes the closing words of this letter in "big letters" with his "own hand" (verse 11). Barclay explains:

The large letters may be due to three things: (a) This paragraph may be written large because of its importance, as if it were printed in heavy type. (b) It may be written large because Paul was unused to wielding a pen and it was the best that he could do. (c) It may be that Paul's eyes were weak, or that the blinding headache was on him, and all he could produce was the large sprawling handwriting of a man who can hardly see.

(*pp. 55-56)

Before he ends his letter, Paul goes back to the central issue that he has already addressed a few times: the demand for circumcision as a prerequisite for faith in Christ. He suggests three reasons why the 'Judaizers' are making this demand:

1. They want to "show off and boast." By circumcision and keeping the rules of the law, "they were trying to to put on a show that would win the approval of God," suggests Barclay.
2. So they "may not be persecuted." As Barclay reminds us,

The Romans recognized the Jewish religion and officially allowed Jews to practice it. Circumcision was the unanswerable mark of a Jew; and so these people saw in it a passport to safety should persecution arise. Circumcision would keep them safe from the hatred of Jews and the law of Rome alike.

3. So they could brag about their *converts*, those who they got to submit “to this physical ceremony.” As Barclay explains it:

Those who desired the Galatians to be circumcised did not themselves keep all the law. No man could. But they wanted to boast about the Galatians as their latest trophies. They wanted to glory in their power over people whom they had reduced to their own legalistic slavery.

Instead, says Paul, the only thing he will boast about is “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Those who are not in Christ do not understand the significance of the cross, the sacrifice it required and the salvation it represents. But the Galatians should know -- Paul himself had taught them! This ‘confusion’ about the cross was not uncommon in the early church, for Paul also had to address the church in Corinth along the same lines:

For the message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Again he stresses that circumcision or uncircumcision do not matter -- what matters is “being a new creature” (verse 15). He used this same kind of language in writing to the Christians in Corinth as well, when he said,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17 NKJV)

That is the only ‘rule’ Christians have to follow: do what we need to do to become the new creation Christ has made us to be. Peace and mercy will be with those who live this way.

Typically at the end of a letter Paul greets some individuals, or sends the greeting of others from where he is writing, or remembers someone for their kindness (e.g. Rom. 16:21-24; 1 Cor. 16: 15-19; Phil. 4:18, 21-22; Col. 4:14, 17; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Tim. 4:19-21; Phil. 23-24;). But not here. No greetings, no remembrances, thanks... Paul takes a parting shot -- he just has to get this word out before he closes -- “nobody give me any more trouble!”

He claims he has scars that show he is “the slave of Christ” even as he celebrates the freedom in Christ! Most slaves were branded with a mark that identified their owner, so it may be that Paul is using this analogy to claim that he is easily identified as belonging to Christ. It is his way of driving home the point that he is *free* to be Christ’s *slave*, but that free choice carries danger and discomfort, and will likely leave one battered and scarred. Interestingly, Barclay observes, “In the end it is not his apostolic authority that he uses as a basis of appeal; it is the wounds he sustained for Christ’s sake.” (*p. 57)

Paul’s final sentence is his benediction upon his “friends.” Barclay sums it up simply:

After the storm and stress and intensity of the letter comes the peace of the benediction. Paul has argued and rebuked and cajoled but his last word is GRACE, for him the only word that really mattered. (*p. 57)

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