

0295
God's gospel
Introducing Galatians
August 14, 2022

Introduction

We are starting a new series today from the Book of Galatians.

I want to give some introductory information on the Book of Galatians and I'll close by talking about the main themes of this book. Because of that, this message will be a little shorter than usual. I'm just trying to dip our toes in the water of Galatians and prepare to enter the world of this book.

Intro to Galatians

Autorship

Galatians is a letter that is addressed from the Apostle Paul.

Paul wrote at least 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament. All of them were written as letters either to churches or to individual people. I say at least 13 because there's been a longstanding debate about whether or not he wrote the Book of Hebrews as that letter does not have an identified author.

Some scholars debate Paul's authorship of certain letters, but interestingly, Galatians is almost universally agreed upon to be authentically Pauline. The theology of Galatians is thoroughly Pauline and this letter also includes a high degree of autobiographical material. No serious scholar questions that Galatians is from Paul.

Most of what we know about the Apostle Paul comes from his letters and from stories involving Paul in the Book of Acts.

Paul tends to not talk a ton about himself in his letters. Just little pieces of information here and there but Galatians is different. From the middle of chapter 1 through about the middle of chapter 2, Paul has a prolonged section where he does talk about himself. He's talking about his status as an apostle and about his various travels in the years after he came to faith.

Now if you've ever noticed the maps in many Bibles, there will be a map in the back that displays the travels of Paul's three missionary journeys.

The first missionary journey is when Paul visited churches in the region known as Galataia, which is in modern day Turkey. We see these events recorded in Acts chapter 13 and 14, and those travels are Paul's introduction to this Galatian region.

Most conservative Biblical scholars believe that the letter to the Galatians was authored after this first missionary journey which would make Galatians Paul's earliest writing. In the late 40s to early 50s A.D. That would also make it the earliest writing in the entire New Testament.

Think about that for a moment. Less than a generation after Jesus walked the earth. With most of the apostles still living and with many others who had personally interacted with Jesus still living, Paul wrote Galatians. Interestingly, Paul will have a prolonged section where he talks about living eyewitnesses to Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15.

The Apostle Paul

I want to say a little bit more about the Apostle Paul. And as I mentioned a few moments ago, Paul's apostolic authority will be something that he addresses in the Book of Galatians. Paul is not writing as merely a pastor who has some theological thoughts.

He is writing as someone who was called by Jesus himself to be an apostle. And it is because of that, that his writings were recognized by the early church to be scriptural.

What else do we know about Paul?

We don't know exactly when he was born but most scholars think it was shortly after Christ, maybe around the year 4 or 5 A.D.

Paul goes by two different names in the New Testament: Saul and Paul.

A common misconception is that Saul's name changes to Paul after his conversion. There is no Biblical evidence to support that. In reality, the name Paul comes from the name Paulos which is a Greco-Roman name. Acts 13:9 says:

Saul, who was also called Paul

And so it appears as though he went by two names. Saul was a Jewish name, likely named after King Saul, the first King of Israel. Like King Saul, Saul/Paul was also from the Tribe of Benjamin.

Paul was born in Tarsus, which was one of the most cultured and educated cities of the first century Roman world. It's unclear how long he stayed there but we also know that part of his formative years were spent in Jerusalem.

He talks of this in Acts 22:3:

³“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers

Paul was famously a persecutor of the early church. The first time we see Paul in the New Testament is when he's giving approval to the martyrdom of the Apostle Stephen in Acts 7.

Acts 7:58:

they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

There are other references to Paul's authority. In Acts 26, Paul is reflecting back on his life before coming to faith when he says:

⁹“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.

Paul had been a pharisee: part of the group of religious teachers and experts in the law who we constantly see having conflicts with Jesus in the gospels.

He would have grown up celebrating the holy days of the Old Testament and reciting Biblical passages from the Torah. He would have also had his own beliefs about the Messiah of Israel.

He talks about his past life in Judaism in Philippians 3.

Philippians 3:4-7:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Paul would have been extremely well versed in the Old Testament. It's no surprise to consider the many connections and allusions he makes to the Old Testament in his writings.

Just considering Galatians, we see Paul connect the idea of justification by faith to Abraham. In Galatians 4, he talks of the sons born to Hagar and Sarah as being symbolic of the covenants of grace and works. He also talks extensively of the law of the Old Testament.

The Christian response to the law seems to be a major impetus for the writing of this letter but I'll say more on that in just a moment.

In Acts chapter 9, Paul has a dramatic conversion where Jesus appears to him on the Road to Damascus. This is probably around the year 34-35, a year or two after the resurrection of Jesus.

We see his call by Jesus.

I didn't make a slide for this but I'll read from the text:

Acts 9:1-6:

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

The great persecutor of Christians becomes a Christian.

And we know that Paul himself was heavily persecuted throughout his ministry.

Acts 16:20-23, just after Paul has arrived in Philippi, he's attacked by an angry mob:
²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.

Paul was imprisoned multiple times, beaten multiple times, his life was endangered multiple times. On his first visit to the Galatian region, he gets stoned by an angry crowd in Acts 14.

Five of Paul's letters were written while imprisoned: Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy.

2 Timothy was his final letter, written shortly before he was martyred. From that letter, even after the various persecutions, beatings, and imprisonments, Paul seemed to know that he didn't have much time left.

2 Timothy 4:6-8:

⁶For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Other information about Paul.

To supplement his ministerial earnings, he also worked as a tentmaker.

He was likely never married. No wife is ever mentioned and Paul talks about the gift of singleness in 1 Corinthians 7.

Paul seemed to have been afflicted in his missionary journeys at different times by poor health. We see that in Galatians where Paul is thanking the Galatian Churches for their kindness to him.

Galatians 4:13-15:

it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, ¹⁴ and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

The fact that he refers to them being willing to gouge out their eyes has provoked many to suggest that Paul might have had poor eyesight.

In Galatians 6:11, Paul draws attention to his handwriting:

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

While Galatians is his letter, he most likely did not write in his own hand, but dictated the letter through a scribe.

Paul also refers to his thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12.

Occasion

Next, I want to talk about the occasion of Paul's writing of Galatians.

Think of all of the many different Christian denominations today. Thousands of them.

So many different schools of thought, different ways people read the Bible.

Well in the early church, they had a lot of theological disagreements too. Christianity was new. There were a lot of theological questions related to the connection of Christianity to Judaism. There were questions of if Christians still needed to follow laws in the Old Testament: did you still have to eat a kosher diet? Did you still have to observe Old Testament holy days and a weekly Sabbath? Did men still need to be circumcised?

In Galatians, Paul is addressing some of those very issues as people had sought to still enforce elements of the Old Testament law on new converts to Christianity. Because of that, justification by faith is a major theme of this book.

He states this most clearly in Galatians 2:16:

we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But there are numerous other references in this letter to justification by faith. And so Paul is combatting these false teachings in the Galatian churches with the truth of the gospel.

Early in the letter, Paul expresses his concerns over people being led astray from the truth of the gospel.

Galatians 1:6-7:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. We see his frustrations with the fruit of these false teachings in chapter 3 when Paul says;

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ²Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Themes

Last thing I'll touch on as I introduce us to Galatians. The primary themes of this book. Some of them I've already covered.

I would argue that justification by faith is the main theme of Galatians. Galatians is Paul's love letter to the Doctrine of Justification by Faith.

Other significant themes in Galatians include the relationship of the gospel to the law, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and Paul's apostolic authority.

I'll close with this.

One of the key verses in the book.

Galatians 1:11-12:

¹¹For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹²For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ

The gospel is God's gospel. It is not invented or created by men. It is not up for a vote. It is not dependent upon popularity.

The message that we are sinners and that there is grace through Jesus Christ is a message offered to the whole world and it is the only message that points to eternal life.

Galatians points us to that gospel. And it points us to the life that we have in Christ in light of that gospel.

Galatians is a great book. We're going to have a great study in this book.