

GALATIANS

REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

A Companion Series to the Reformed Expository Commentaries

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GALATIANS

THE GOSPEL OF FREE GRACE

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON


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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary
Author of *Galatians* (REC)

INTRODUCING GALATIANS

Galatians is the epistle of free grace. Its **main purpose** is to bring freedom from bondage to any works of the law—freedom that can only come through faith in Jesus Christ. This liberating purpose was well summarized by the fourth-century Roman scholar Gaius Marius Victorinus, writing in his later years, after he had finally put his personal trust in Christ: “The Galatians are going astray because they are adding Judaism to the gospel of faith in Christ. Disturbed by these tendencies, Paul writes this letter in order that they may preserve faith in Christ alone.”¹

The **author** of Galatians introduces himself in the very first verse. It is Paul, the famous evangelist, missionary, and church planter, who wrote the majority of the letters that we read in the New Testament. In fact, this may have been the first biblical epistle that the apostle wrote. From the outset, he is agitated and alarmed—much more so than in any of his other epistles. This is because, to his amazement and astonishment, some of the churches that he had helped to start were under serious theological attack and thus in danger of abandoning a biblical understanding of their salvation. To address this error, Paul impatiently and somewhat angrily mounts a vigorous defense of his authority as an apostle and of the accuracy of the gospel that he preached in Galatia. He was not some second-rate apostle with a secondhand gospel, as some of his critics were saying. On the contrary, the good news he preached came straight from God.

The precise **audience** for Paul’s epistle is somewhat difficult to determine. At first glance, it is easy enough to see that Paul wrote his letter to “the churches of Galatia” (1:2). The trouble is that in Roman times “Galatia”

1. Gaius Marius Victorinus, quoted in Leland Ryken, Philip Ryken, and James Wilhoit, *Ryken’s Bible Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2005), 524.

referred to several different and sometimes overlapping regions in Asia Minor, and it is not entirely certain how Paul was using the term. To give a contemporary analogy, it would be like someone writing a letter to “the churches in Carolina,” without specifying North or South Carolina. Possibly Paul was writing to churches in the Roman province of Galatia—churches in cities such as Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, which Paul had visited on his first missionary journey (Acts 14). Other scholars suggest that the apostle wrote Galatians after his second missionary journey, to churches in north-central Galatia.

In any case, the **context** for Paul’s letter is clear enough. At first, the Galatian Christians had eagerly embraced the good news about Jesus Christ (see Acts 13–14). But apparently a group of Jewish-Christian missionaries had come along later to tell Gentiles in Galatia that in order fully to belong to Christ, they had to receive the Old Testament sign of circumcision (the removal of the male foreskin; see the covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 17:9–14). The doctrinal position of these “Judaizers,” as they are sometimes called, is conveniently summarized in Acts 15:1: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” As far as Paul was concerned, this teaching was causing a theological crisis. He rightly saw that making circumcision mandatory was a form of legalism that would undermine the freedom of the gospel.

It is important to understand that the Judaizers did not deny that justification came by faith. However, by adding works to faith—instead of trusting only in Christ—they did deny the vital biblical doctrine of justification by faith *alone*. As a result, they were guilty of preaching another gospel, when in fact there is no other gospel. Here is how John Stott describes the situation: the Judaizers “did not deny that you must believe in Jesus for salvation, but they stressed that you must be circumcised and keep the law as well. In other words, you must let Moses finish what Christ has begun. Or rather, you yourself must finish, by your obedience to the law, what Christ has begun.”²

There are several well-known passages in the book of Galatians, but perhaps the **key verse** is chapter 2, verse 16: “We know that a person is not

2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), 22.

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.” Paul could hardly be more emphatic. Not once, not twice, but *three times* in one verse he declares that we are justified by faith (or trust) in Christ. And not once, not twice, but *three times* he insists that we cannot be justified (that is, declared righteous) before the bar of God’s justice by doing works of the law. Such repetition is the Bible’s way of adding exclamation points. Paul doesn’t want the Galatians or anyone else to miss his point: the way to get right with God is not by doing good works, but by trusting completely in what Jesus has done—specifically, what Jesus has done by living a righteous life, dying an atoning death, and rising from the grave with the power of eternal life.

Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, is the central doctrine of Galatians, but the book contains other vital **theological themes** as well. Galatians has as much to say about the Holy Spirit as it does about Jesus Christ—specifically, the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying believers who are justified by faith. Nor is justification the only important aspect of salvation that is discussed in Galatians. Paul’s letter also teaches basic truths about adoption (by the gift of the Holy Spirit, every child of God is able to call God “Father” and will receive an eternal inheritance; see 4:6–7), redemption (we have been rescued from slavery through the payment of a price; see 3:13), and union with Christ (through baptism, every believer is joined to Jesus and becomes one with his body, the church; see 3:28). Once we understand salvation properly, we can also come to a better understanding of the law, which is a curse to sinners who cannot keep it, but becomes a blessing to believers by showing us our need for Christ. The law exposes our guilt, so that we can see our need for a Savior.

Like everything else in Scripture, Galatians was written for our spiritual benefit. In considering the book’s **practical application**, a good place to start is by admitting that we are all legalists at heart. Even if the sign of circumcision is no longer a live issue for most of us, it is still tempting to think that there is something we can do to make ourselves good enough for God—or at least to put ourselves more in his favor.

Galatians was written to liberate us from any form of performance-based religion. Whenever we try to improve our standing with God by observing religious rituals, doing charitable deeds, or performing pious acts of devotion,

we are placing a surcharge on God's free grace. The good news is that God accepts us simply on the merits of Jesus Christ. We do not receive this gift of grace by doing anything for ourselves, but simply by trusting in what Jesus has done. We cannot earn God's favor; it only comes free. Rather than needing to justify ourselves, therefore, we are justified by Jesus.

Once we put our trust in Christ—specifically, in his death and resurrection—we are free to live a life that is more pleasing to God. First, we must be crucified with Christ (2:20); then we must put to death our old sinful nature, with its unholy passions and ungodly desires (5:24). The goal is “faith working through love” (5:6)—a life that is free from sins of the flesh (5:16–21) and full of the fruit of the Spirit instead (5:22–23). In other words, liberty should never become an excuse for license; it should always lead us into a life of loving service to others instead.

The letter to the Galatians has had a life-changing impact for many people who lived in spiritual bondage and wanted to be set free. Alongside Romans, Galatians is the biblical book that launched the Protestant Reformation by liberating a monk named Martin Luther from works righteousness and helping him rediscover the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Thankfully, Luther was not the last person to be set free by Paul's most passionate epistle. “With its trumpet-call to Christian freedom,” Galatians “has time and again released the true gospel from the bonds in which well-meaning but misguided people have confined it so that it can once more exert its emancipating power in the life of mankind, empowering those who receive it to stand fast in the freedom with which Christ has set them free.”³

To understand the flow of Galatians, it may be helpful to keep a **simple outline** in mind. In the first two chapters (1:1–2:21), Paul shares his *spiritual autobiography* and defends his gospel of free grace by asserting his independent authority as an apostle. In the next two chapters (3:1–4:31), he makes his *theological argument* and explains his gospel of free grace with a series of biblical and theological examples. Finally, in the last two chapters (5:1–6:18), Paul gives an *ethical exhortation* to live a free and holy life by keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. To provide a little more detail:

3. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 278.

Introduction

Salutation (1:1–5)

Denunciation (1:6–10)

Personal: The Autobiography of an Authentic Apostle

Paul's Conversion (1:11–17)

Paul's First Visit to Jerusalem (1:18–24)

Paul's Second Visit to Jerusalem (2:1–10)

Paul's Rebuke of Peter (2:11–14)

Paul's Life as a Justified Sinner (2:15–21)

Doctrinal: The Gospel of Free Grace

The Experience of the Galatians (3:1–5)

The Example of Abraham (3:6–9)

Justification by Faith, not Works (3:10–14)

The Difference between Law and Promise (3:15–25)

From Slavery to Sonship (3:26–4:11)

An Appeal to Trust Paul's Message (4:12–20)

The Allegory of Hagar and Sarah (4:21–31)

Practical: Living Free in Christ

Exhortation to Freedom from Circumcision (5:1–12)

Living by the Spirit, Not Giving In to License (5:13–26)

Bearing People's Burdens and Other Good Works (6:1–10)

Conclusion and Benediction (6:11–18)

Philip Graham Ryken

LESSON 1

NO OTHER GOSPEL

Galatians 1:1–10

THE BIG PICTURE

In some ways, Paul’s opening remarks to the Galatian believers are typical of all his epistles sent to churches. He identifies himself as an apostle; he speaks words of “grace and peace” to them; he affirms a common faith in Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. But the letter does not proceed with any specific commendation (as there is in the opening verses of Philippians, for example), and the pleasantries end abruptly! Paul launches into a stinging rebuke with intense and emotional language: “I am *astonished* . . .” (Gal. 1:6). He goes on to use some of the strongest language of any of his epistles to cast judgment on those who would preach “a different gospel” (v. 6), calling for such opponents of Christ to be “accursed” (v. 8). The apostle is identifying a major problem—a radically dangerous affront to the faith of the believers to whom he writes. Any gospel that is contrary to the one preached by the apostles is a road away from Jesus Christ himself. Particularly pernicious are the distortions of the gospel that take away from the sufficiency of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, the benefits of which are received by faith alone.

Read Galatians 1:1–10.

GETTING STARTED

1. Have you ever received a stern rebuke from someone you love and trust? How did it feel? How was the rebuke ultimately helpful?

2. Consider any experience in which you have distinguished something that is fake, or counterfeit, from something real. What are some of the best ways to identify a counterfeit?

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. Compare and contrast the first few verses of Philippians and Ephesians with the first few verses of Galatians. What do you notice that is unique or noteworthy about Paul's greeting in Galatians? What about the opening section (beginning with verse 6), after the greeting?

The Importance of Galatians, pg. 4

Paul's epistle to the Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty. Its theme verse is a declaration of independence: "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). Whenever the church has understood this gospel message, Galatians has brought life and freedom to recovering Pharisees.

4. How would you describe Paul's general tone in these opening verses of the letter? If you had to ascribe an emotion to this section, what would it be? What specific words or phrases from the text lead you to answer that way?

5. What hints do you get about the Galatian churches' context, just from these opening verses? What influences, people, and/or teachings seem to be present in their community?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. What does Paul say about himself? To whom is the letter addressed? Why might it be significant that Paul is writing to "churches" (plural) in Galatia? See 1:1–2.

7. Look at verse 1 and then at verse 10 (the first and last verses of this opening section). What common phrases or ideas are present? Why do you think Paul is so intent—right at the beginning of this letter—to contrast a gospel ministry that is from man with one that is from Christ?

8. What problem is Paul addressing in verses 6–9? What does he say about the true gospel? Why does he think that the Galatians are moving in a direction that is so terribly dangerous?

9. How can Paul be so confident that the gospel he preached to the Galatians was true? How does verse 10 help to answer that question?

10. Paul does not specifically define or explain the gospel in this passage, although he will do so later in the letter. Take a moment and read Galatians 2:15–21. What are the key elements of the gospel of Christ, preached by Paul, that he emphasizes in those verses? What seem to be the elements, or core teachings, of the “different gospel” that Paul opposes, according to that passage?

Dangerous Judaizers, pg. 9

Religious traditionalists, probably from Jerusalem, were trying to teach the Galatians a new gospel. These men dogged Paul’s footsteps all over Asia Minor. Often they are called the “Judaizers” because they wanted to require Gentiles to follow Jewish customs. . . . In short, their gospel was Jesus Christ plus the law of Moses.

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

11. Paul is, from the opening verses of this epistle, pushing back on the influence of false teachers who are sometimes called “Judaizers.” These men sought to bring Christians under the rule of the Jewish law. Read 1 Samuel 15:22–23 and Psalm 40:6–8. What clues do these Old Testament passages give us about the insufficiency of merely keeping the law?
12. Read Hebrews 7:23–28. According to this passage, what is the perfect and final salvation that is offered through the gospel of Jesus Christ? Why, given what is described in Hebrews 7, would it be so foolish to go back to being under the law?

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

13. As you may know, one of the rallying cries of Martin Luther and the other Reformers of the sixteenth century was *sola fide* (“by faith alone”). How might Galatians have been a key letter for shaping the convictions of the Reformers? How might their passion and zeal have been similar to Paul’s? How might they have seen the gospel of Jesus Christ being distorted in their day?

14. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, we find this statement about justification by faith: “Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone” (11.1). Discuss the importance of this teaching. How does this teaching connect to the central concern Paul has about the false gospel being promoted to the Galatian believers?

APPLYING THE TEXT

15. In what ways might some people (even well-meaning people) “distort the gospel” of Jesus Christ, or even preach/teach a “different” gospel? What motivations tend to drive such teachers? What appeals to their followers? What examples of this might we see in the church today?
16. What can we learn from Paul’s intense and angry reaction to the Galatians’ desertion of the gospel of Jesus Christ? How can his passion guide and shape our convictions about guarding the pure gospel of Jesus Christ?

17. In what ways are you personally tempted to drift from the gospel of Jesus Christ? How are you prone to legalism, or the impulse to try to earn favor with God through what you do? How are you prone to embrace “cheap grace,” relying on God’s forgiveness without pursuing obedience and godliness?

PRAYER PROMPT

Consider ways that you are tempted to forget the gospel of Jesus Christ and salvation through faith in him alone. Pray that this study in Galatians would lead you to a stronger embrace of the true gospel. Pray for wisdom and clarity to recognize other gospels or distortions of the true gospel.

A Counterfeit Gospel, pg. 21

The church’s greatest danger is not the anti-gospel outside the church; it is the counterfeit gospel inside the church. The Judaizers did not walk around Pisidian Antioch wearing T-shirts that said, “Hug me, I’m a false apostle.” What made them so dangerous was that they knew how to talk the way Christians talk . . . [but] they did not have the gospel after all.