

Love Letters

Lesson 1: Galatians 1–2

Introduction

When God has a story to tell, He chooses a man or a woman to live it out. When God chose Saul of Tarsus, the history of the Christian church began to take shape. Unlike the original twelve apostles, who remained closer to their home base of Jerusalem, Saul went out to blaze a trail for the Lord that covered thousands of miles and impacted countless lives for the kingdom of God. Unrivaled in his relentless efforts and passionate pursuit, Paul's proclamation of the gospel message inspired and challenged everyone from the lowliest of slaves to kings and queens in palaces, and heads of state in positions of great power. And for all that Paul would eventually accomplish, the true success of this remarkable servant was cloaked in the certainty that he was nothing—and that Christ was everything!

Throughout the next twenty-three weeks of in-depth study, we will come to know and appreciate the early struggles the churches had to deal with, which helped develop the pattern of sound doctrine and conduct for Christians and church leaders—a pattern that is still in existence today. As we examine these timeless truths with spiritual ears to hear and hearts to obey, God will make Himself known and, along the way, challenge each of us personally to want to impact our world for Christ!

Fast Facts ~

- Paul was a native of Tarsus, born around the time of Jesus. He was brought up in a strict Jewish home and educated in the finest elementary schools. At the age of thirteen, he traveled to Jerusalem to study under the well-known rabbi Gamaliel, receiving training in the Hebrew and Greek languages and culture.
- Both a Pharisee and a citizen of Rome, Paul adopted his father's trade of tent-making in order to be self-supporting as he traveled and ministered.
- Paul's conversion occurred on the Damascus Road around AD 35. He subsequently spent three years in Damascus, where his ministry began.
- He returned to Jerusalem but, after an attempt on his life, the apostles sent him to Tarsus and then on to Antioch, where he taught.
- His first missionary journey took place between AD 46 and 48. He founded the church in southern Galatia, a region of modern Turkey.
- The letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul's first, was written from Antioch in AD 49, to refute the influence of false teachers—legalists—who believed that good works must be added to faith in Christ in order to be saved. Paul's argument was based on the truth that Christians are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ—the free gift of God.
- Paul trekked and sailed the globe to complete three missionary journeys as God's apostle to the Gentiles, leading the way for many to come to know Christ.
- Repeatedly persecuted, beaten, and imprisoned for preaching, the apostle remained tireless in the cause of Christ. His last imprisonment was in Rome (AD 67) during the reign of Emperor Nero. He was martyred—beheaded—in AD 68.

Day One:

A Church in Crisis

First impressions often make lasting impressions, and such is the case in Paul's letter to the Galatians. In this text, Paul wrote what has come to be widely acknowledged as the *Magna Carta* of the Christian church—the epistle of freedom! To do so, he put pen to paper in the context of controversy and crisis in the church. The reader recognizes his convictions are clear and his inner voice is strong: the words are forming in Paul's head as the passion flows freely from his heart.

Read Galatians 1:1–24, focusing on verses 1–5.

At a Glance ~

1. What is Paul's overall tone in Galatians 1?
2. What is the basis of Paul's authority in stating his case to the people?
3. From your initial observations, what problem does Paul intend to address?

Memory verse: Galatians 2:20 NKJV

Write the verse out below; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me;
and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave Himself for me.*

Our rapidly evolving age of technology affords us the conveniences of smart phones; and with it comes the challenge (but ever-so-nice thought) of receiving a handwritten note or letter. However, not so easy is remembering the component parts of a proper letter, which include: a heading (address and date), salutation (opening greeting), body (writer's thoughts), closing thoughts, and personal signature. As you examine Paul's letters this year, see if you can recognize these elements—they are all graciously in evidence. It mattered to Paul that he did things well, particularly when it came to communicating the gospel truths to individuals. How important is this to *you*?

Paul dictated most of his letters to a scribe (secretary), often signing the last few lines in his own hand to prove authenticity.

4. How does Paul reveal his calling and the authority bestowed on him in verse 1?
 - a. Who is included in his salutation (verse 2)?
 - b. What does Paul highlight to the Galatian believers in his greeting (verses 3–5)?

Paul wanted his readers to know that he was not sent by men as if to need their approval; but by Jesus Christ and God the Father. The believers who are with him are united in agreement with Paul about what he will now convey.

5. Review this week’s memory verse. What can you take away from it about the strength—reality—depth of *your faith*?

Day Two: Paul’s Call as an Apostle

Galatians 1:6–24

The believers in Galatia originally knew where to find the truth about salvation; they had heard the apostle Paul preach the Good News and placed their faith in Christ to save them. Over time however, some had begun listening to false teachers who emphasized the addition of *works* along with *faith* in order to be saved. Confused and disillusioned, these believers were turning away from God and turning to the world for their answers. The problem was they had abandoned the gospel and were deceived into believing it had to mean Jesus *plus something else*. Paul aggressively addresses his readers by a rigorous defense of the gospel.

1. What is Paul’s response to the changing views of the Galatian believers (verse 6)?
 - a. Why do *you* think Paul was so personally astonished by them?
 - b. What (whom) again did Paul say they were turning away from and turning towards?
 - c. Is there “another gospel”? What does Paul say about this?
2. If anyone—Paul the apostle or even an angel from heaven—preaches another gospel, what does that person deserve (verse 8)?

The strongest meaning is intended here; in other words, such a person should be eternally condemned—*anathema* in the Greek translation.

Putting It in Perspective ~

Sometimes in the Christian life we believers try to apprehend Scripture through our distorted upside-down view of our circumstances. The problem is this never makes sense and we often wind up *squinting*, meaning that we: *close our eyes while looking* (as in bright sunlight); *quickly look or glance sideways*; *look askance, or as in disapproval*. When this happens we can easily dismiss God's Word as irrelevant. Sound familiar? Instead, what we ought to be practicing is turning it around to view our present circumstances through the clear lens of God's Truth. In a practical sense it means putting Christ directly in the middle of our situation; and out of His inclusion will flow meaning and direction and purpose.

For instance, using the resources you have on hand (i.e., additional Bible translation, dictionary, Bible dictionary, concordance, etc.), write a definition for the following words:

- a. Grace (Galatians 1:3)
 - b. Peace (1:3)
 - c. Personal: What is the biggest struggle facing *you* right now? How could these two gifts of God (grace and peace) impact your perspective?
 - d. If you were to embrace any "gospel" other than the one you receive by putting your faith in Jesus Christ, how might it affect the genuine grace and peace you now so freely enjoy?
3. Paul spent the earlier part of his adult life persecuting Christians (verses 13–14). But he realized on the Damascus Road that God had called him apart. What did Paul do that would help prepare him for the role of apostle (verses 15–17)?
 4. For three years Paul stayed in the desert of Arabia before returning to begin preaching. What would have been some of the benefits and blessings that come to mind from spending this time alone with God?
 5. Whom did Paul visit first upon his return to Jerusalem? Why would this have been important to him (verses 18–21)?
 6. Paul was unknown throughout the churches in Judea; but *what* did they know *about* him? What godly response did it prompt in them (verses 22–24)?

Day Three: Defending the Gospel: Concrete Love

Read Galatians 2:1–21. Review this week’s memory verse.

Paul earlier had established several churches in the region of Galatia on his first missionary journey. Now after fourteen years and during his second missionary journey, he learned that his work there was being undermined by Judaizers, Jewish loyalists, who were violently loyal to the principles and practices of the Mosaic Law. In order to protect the unity of the church, Paul had to first defend his apostolic ministry. (Pay attention to the way Paul refutes the Judaizers to understand more about their belief based on the law.)

1. In your reading through of this chapter, note what stands out to you as the priority of Paul’s heart regarding the people he loves.

Paul took with him Barnabas, his early spiritual mentor, and Titus, a convert of Paul’s preaching who later worked with him on the mission field. He communicated—or *gave a full exposition*—of the gospel to the Gentiles while speaking privately to the church leaders, adding his respect to their authority. The presence of Titus brought into clear focus the debate of whether Gentile Christians should be welcomed into the fellowship of Jewish Christians without subjecting them to the Old Testament rite of circumcision (Acts 15:1). Paul’s answer to the debate (verse 3) was a resounding yes!—that God accepted Titus based on his faith in Christ and not on circumcision.

2. Who apparently stirred up the matter at hand (verses 4–5)?
 - a. How did Paul and Barnabas respond to them?

Paul was not denying Jews the right to be circumcised (Genesis 17:9–14); he was stating that Gentiles should not be forced to become Jews first by being circumcised before becoming Christians.

3. In your own words, summarize how the Jerusalem leaders validated the testimony and teaching of Paul (verses 6–9).
 - a. What was the only stipulation the leaders placed upon Paul (verse 10)? What does this reveal about their hearts?

The phrase *right hand of fellowship* (verse 9) refers to more than a friendly handshake. It involves a partnership in the work of evangelism. Paul and Barnabas would go to the Gentiles; Peter, James, and John would go to the Jews.

Selah ~

Are there false believers in the church today? What are some ways they might attempt to promote their agenda? How can *you* guard your freedom and your faith against those who would hinder the grace of God at work in your life?

Day Four:

No Turning Back!

Reread Galatians 2:11–21. Review this week’s memory verse.

Paul became alarmed, sounding the warning bells as he mounted a defense of his own credentials and then urged the believers not to go back to their former belief in keeping the law to save them. Everything Paul represented and advocated pointed to what mattered most—the free grace of God which comes only through trusting in Jesus Christ. The illustration Paul used to drive home his point was none other than Peter, the pillar, to whom Paul directly pointed with a word of correction.

1. What had Peter done and what term does Paul use regarding his behavior (verses 11–13)?
2. Why specifically was Paul so angry (verses 14–16)?
 - a. Look up the word *hypocrite* (verse 13) and write a definition.
 - b. Think about it: what does Peter’s behavior reveal about the intenseness of peer pressure and the power of its influence?
 - c. How did Paul address the issue head on (verse 16)?

Paul here uses the word *justified* for the first time, which means to *declare righteous*. It is the sovereign act of God to declare a sinner righteous in Christ Jesus. The Judaizers were arguing that if people weren’t living under the law, they would freely sin against God; plus if people could be righteous in Christ and yet continue to live as they wanted, their own sinful action would make Christ an advocate of sin. Paul’s answer to them is an emphatic “No!” His point about the reality of faith is that grace leads God’s people from the slavery of sin to the freedom of obeying God.

3. In verses 18–21, Paul transitions from using the pronoun *we* (verses 15–17) to that of *I*. The perspective in these remaining verses is a personal one that is based on Paul’s own experience of walking with the Lord. What does Paul say about his Christian walk?
 - a. Verse 18
 - b. Verse 19
 - c. Verse 20
 - d. Verse 21
 - e. What does it mean to be “crucified with Christ”?

Day Five:

In Touch with Jesus ~

This section of the lesson is intended to be a review of what you have learned and what God has spoken to you this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark those places and points that stand out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share with your discussion group.

- 1. *LISTEN*: In what way did the Lord Jesus meet *you* in His Word this week? Be specific.

- 2. *LEARN*: How can you apply this understanding to your daily Christian walk?

- 3. *LIVE*: Take the next step of obedience and record the difference it makes in your life.

Prayer Requests ~

*"True Christian behavior is not a means to an end.
It is the expression of reality—of who we are and of who God is."* (Peter Haile)

Notes
