

Introduction to Galatians

Galatians 1:1-5



We are going to be looking at a letter for the next few weeks. So let's think about letters a little. When you write a letter do you expect it to be cherished for many years? Normally we expect they will be trashed soon after being read. We sent these in the photo to my mom from when we lived in Kenya. My mom saved them! She saved them because she loved us.

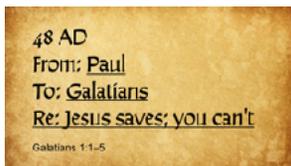
Jay's family saved their letters too. He's made them part of the Prospect House museum. But here's what's important to understand about those letters: the writers didn't intend that their letters would become a museum exhibit to be studied; they were acts of love. And we cherish them for just that reason. The Prospect House keeps them for just that reason; Jay loves his family.

Letters are personal and talk about events going on right then. But letters to people we don't know can be hard to understand. It's listening to someone talking on their cell phone. You don't know what they are talking about. Like that, to know what the letters in the New Testament mean we need to try reconstructing what was going on. What was the writer responding to?

Book	Chapter	Verse	Page
Matthew	1	1	141
Mark	1	1	146
John	1	1	149
Acts	1	1	151
Romans	1	1	152
1 Corinthians	1	1	156
2 Corinthians	1	1	157
Galatians	1	1	148
Philippians	1	1	145
Colossians	1	1	147
1 Thessalonians	1	1	143
2 Thessalonians	1	1	143

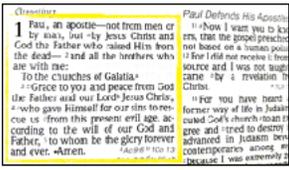
So, in his letters in the Bible, Paul was responding to what was going on at the time. I doubt he wrote them with the intention of adding to inspired scripture. They were not meant to set down commandments for all people everywhere in all circumstances. Like all personal letters, they offer advice and teaching about particular problems in a particular community in a particular culture.

Yet, these letters from Paul were valued because some of the problems they address and the encouragement they offer are universal and so, have been helpful for Christians everywhere throughout the ages. They show us how much Paul loved the people he was writing to. Still, it's important to remember that they are letters, written from a heart of love and personal concern.



In Galatians, Paul is not yelling at all Christians for all time. No, in Galatians we can feel Paul's anguish for these particular people. He must have felt like a father whose child has run away. His heart is breaking! Let's find out why he is so upset with them. Let's look at Paul's letter to the Galatians. And let's start with his introduction.

Remember that he had just returned from Galatia. He and Barnabas had organized churches of new believers in Messiah Jesus. Now, he hears that others have followed in his footsteps saying "Paul is a fraud!" He is livid as well as heart broken.



Let's read it. Galatians 1:1–5 (HCSB)

1 Paul, an apostle—not from men or by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead— 2 and all the brothers who are with me: To the churches of Galatia. 3 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave Himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. 5 To whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Right from the beginning, in verse 1 Paul refutes his opponents. He says he is not a fraud as they claim. He is in fact an apostle. The Greeks used the word apostle to mean someone authorized to represent another person or group of people. Maybe we could think of giving someone power of attorney over our legal affairs.

But Christians began to use the word to mean someone personally authorized by Jesus to be his representatives. He authorized them to tell the truth about the kingdom of God. He sent them as witnesses to the salvation he had accomplished on the cross.

But that's a problem for Paul.

Apparently his opponents are saying that he took the title on himself or was ordained by someone other than Jesus, someone with no authority to ordain him. It's true that Paul hadn't followed Jesus around and he wasn't one of the twelve disciples. In fact, he had opposed Jesus! So how can he claim to be an authorized apostle?

Even so, Paul says he is in fact an apostle of Jesus Christ and he will refute his opponents in this letter.

He will prove that he was not given his title and mission of apostle by men or by any individual.



Yes, he would agree that Ananias had prayed for him after Jesus had met him on the road to Damascus, but Ananias did not ordain him to be an apostle; Jesus had already done that.



Yes, he would agree that Barnabas had introduced him to the disciples in Jerusalem, but that council had not made him an apostle.



Yes, he would agree that the church in Antioch had sent him and Barnabas on their mission to Galatia, but they had not declared him an apostle; they had only commissioned them to do this trip.



No, Paul says he was made an apostle directly by the risen Jesus who spoke to him from heaven.

How else to explain his own about face?

Overnight he went from violent persecutor to become the devoted advocate of the very faith he had tried with all his might to destroy! The only explanation is that he had indeed talked with the living, ruling, Jesus Christ himself! So, the Christian gospel of Jesus Christ is a divine revelation. It was not invented by humans.

Verse 2.

Apparently, there were a number of Christians in Antioch with Paul who agreed with the contents of his letter. Paul is appealing to them as witnesses. These are people who know him and his mission. In fact, they are the church who sent him out on his mission trip in the first place.

Paul addresses the letter, "To the churches in Galatia." Where is that?

For most of Christian history it was thought to be the Celtic tribes who settled in northern Galatia.

But for several reasons, most biblical commentators now say it was southern Galatia along the Roman road. Southern Galatia is where the cities are that Luke says Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey. Paul is writing to them.

So, we can date this letter about 48 AD, just before the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. We will return to Acts 15 after studying Galatians. This letter will help us understand how important that Council will be for Christians.

Verse 3 is Paul's prayer for the Galatian Christians.

What does he mean by saying, "Grace to you and peace?" Well, to invoke the gods' blessing on the recipients is an expected part of a letter's introduction.

But what does Paul mean by "grace and peace?"

We think we know what those words mean, but we don't know the half of it.

The Greek word for grace is "charis." It means something beautiful, but not merely visual beauty; it also means what we would say is charming. It's so attractive in many ways.

The grace of God is a beautiful thing, so appealing that we are drawn to it like a thirsty deer to a fresh pool full of spring water. The grace of God charms us.

But its meaning goes even further.

Grace means a gift. This lovely charming thing is freely given to us as a gift.

It's like this: I'm a member of a Facebook group of people beginning to paint in acrylic paints. This Christmas more than one member posted how their spouses overwhelmed them with complete sets of paints, brushes, canvases, and even their studio space! Like that, the word grace means God gives because he loves us and wants to delight us with life in his joyful presence.

So what does Paul mean by "peace?"

The word has its Hebrew meaning when used by a Jew like Paul. The Hebrew word is "shalom." It means there is no conflict, but it means far more than that.

It means full of joy in life,

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and purity of mind,
and resolute spirit,
and full of happiness,
and abundant provision.

As Micah 4:4 promises, "Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken."

So, Paul is not praying that they will have grace and peace as if it were just something nice to say in the introduction to his letter. No, grace and peace are the bed rocks of his message from Jesus. He expects Jesus to bring it to them.

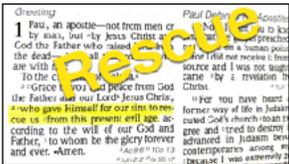
Paul is teaching that we are saved by the charming grace of God through Messiah Jesus, so we have abundant peace with God.

And it's real, not just nice wishful thinking.

But the people Paul is sending this letter to are in danger!

They are in danger of falling out of the grace of God.

They are trying to save themselves through slavery to the Jewish Laws.



So, in verse 4 Paul says what he will be writing about.

He reminds them of the center of the gospel message.

It's that Jesus came to sacrifice himself to rescue his people from this evil age.

To rescue someone is to deliver them from danger.

It's like in the news we have heard so many accounts of heroic firefighters in California rescuing people from terrible danger of catastrophic fires.

That's what Jesus did.

He rescued us.

Jesus is our hero!

But what is he rescuing us from?

Paul says he rescued us from the present evil age.

What does that mean?

What is Paul is talking about?

He's talking about the biblical world view.

Jewish thought divides history into two ages.

This present age is where evil rules and fights against good.

People are seen as slaves.

Our passions rule over us.

And spiritual forces who desire our destruction stimulate our worst impulses.

But there will be another age.

It will be the future age in which God will destroy all evil and establish everlasting peace.

Jesus declared that he was bringing in that new age of peace.

But when he was crucified, that hope was dashed until he was raised from the dead!

Christians know that the new age has infiltrated this old evil age.

Jesus is now at work.

He is transferring people from that evil age and its destructive behaviors to the new age.

Jesus calls it "the kingdom of God."

Eventually God will destroy the evil age and Jesus' new kingdom will last forever.

So, now we can see what the Galatians were doing that was placing them in danger. They were setting aside the grace of God through Jesus.

They were telling God, "This gift is trash!"

Instead of trusting Jesus' sacrifice, they were deciding to save themselves by obeying the Jewish law!

They were returning to the present evil age from which they had been rescued.

This letter will be a very pointed message to the mistaken Galatians,

"Jesus saves, you can't."



Then, in verse 5, Paul wants his readers to stand in wonder at the grace and peace that God offered to humanity. He is overwhelmed with awe as he thinks of the glory that comes to God through the heroic sacrifice of his Son, Jesus.

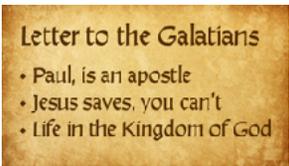
God is bringing billions of people into a love relationship with himself through the self-sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.

So the love of God now encompasses a whole world of people!

The kingdom of God has come to earth

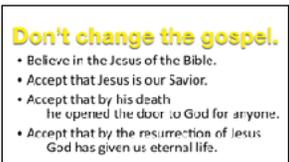
in the person of the Holy Spirit

living within his people.



So, in this introductory greeting, Paul has touched on the big lessons for the Galatians that he will address in the letter:

1. his right to be an apostle,
2. Jesus saves, we can't,
3. what life is like in the kingdom of God.



The lesson for us is the same as for the Galatians:

Don't try to change the gospel in any way.

There isn't another gospel.

Believe in Jesus, the Jesus of the Bible.

Accept that Jesus is our Savior.

Accept that by his death he opened the door to God for anyone.

Accept that by the resurrection of Jesus God has promised us eternal life.



So, anyone who wants to can walk right into the presence of God.

Because, through Jesus, there is complete forgiveness for our sin.

God did it because he loves us.

Accept that he loves you.