

# Week 1: Overview of Galatians <sup>1</sup>

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## Getting Acquainted

Paul's letter to the Galatians presents a paradox: How can something so severe bring so much delight? Here is a letter that attacks and assaults its original readers—and all of us who attempt to prove our worth to God and others: “O foolish Galatians!” Paul writes ([Gal. 3:1](#)). And yet we have here a letter capable of bringing inexpressible joy and peace and freedom, as those who truly hear Paul's passionate message find themselves basking in the light of the grace of God found in Christ Jesus.

Galatians sounds a clear call to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. It teaches that Jesus, and only Jesus, provides the way for us to be accepted by God and fully a member of his family. We are righteous through his righteousness. Any addition to Jesus as the basis for our standing before God is ultimately a deadly subtraction; to say we need more than Jesus to be justified before God is to lose everything.

Beyond proclaiming to us the way we become members of God's family, freedom of being his children, the freedom that Christ has won for us. Even as Christianity must begin by faith in Jesus, so also must it continue in the same manner. Avoiding the dangers of slavery to either religion or irreligion, a Spirit-led trust in Jesus enables the believer to discover the joyful freedom of serving others in love.

At the heart of Galatians are the glorious words, “no longer I . . . but Christ.” Joined to Christ by faith, the believer has been crucified with him: the previous self, with its ties to this evil age and its vain attempts at independence, is no more. Now believers live by faith in Christ, empowered by his resurrection life, filled with hope because of their newfound status as sons of God, heirs of his extravagant promises, members of his unimaginably great new creation.

(For further background, see the English Standard Version Study Bible, pages 2241–2244, available online at [www.esvbible.org](http://www.esvbible.org).)

## **Definition: Justification / Definition: New creation / Placing It in the Larger Story**

Though Galatians is (rightly) understood as an epistle that proclaims the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, a careful study of this letter must recognize the redemptive-historical context in which it was written. During the 2,000 years leading up to the coming of Christ, God's people believed that the only way to experience God's saving blessings was by becoming a part of ethnic Israel and placing oneself under the law of Moses. This understanding was upended when Peter was sent by God to proclaim the gospel to Cornelius, a Roman centurion ([Acts 10](#)). Ten years later, when Paul writes this letter, there remains a significant amount of confusion regarding how a person enters the family of God. What is required to become an heir to the promises of blessing God made to Abraham? What place do Gentiles have in God's redemptive plan for humanity? These questions lie near the center of the controversy addressed in Galatians.

## **Definition: Redemptive-historical context**

### **Key Verse**

“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.” ([Gal. 2:20](#)).

## Date and Historical Background<sup>2</sup>

The absence of any references to the Jerusalem council—certainly an event that would have been highly relevant to the subject matter of this letter—suggests that Paul wrote Galatians some time after his first missionary journey and before the meeting of that council. Thus AD 48 is a likely date for its composition.

Paul had a personal relationship with the Galatian Christians. He visited the cities in the Galatian region while experiencing physical weakness. As some of its residents cared for him, he proclaimed to them the gospel of God's salvation of all peoples through Jesus ([Gal. 4:13–16](#)). Those who believed were filled with joy and experienced miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit ([Gal. 3:2–5](#); [4:15](#)). This resulted in churches being established throughout the region.

Following Paul's subsequent departure, other teachers have arisen who have brought considerable confusion. Motivated in part by a desire to win the favor of Jewish leaders and avoid being persecuted by them ([Gal. 6:12–13](#)), these teachers have sought to persuade the Galatian Christians that individuals are not full members of God's people until they join the Jews in observing the requirements of the Old Testament law (referred to in Galatians as "works of the law"). The Galatians have responded to this teaching by beginning to observe Jewish feast days ([Gal. 4:10](#)) and are considering becoming circumcised ([Gal. 5:2](#)). Paul is deeply concerned that these young believers are beginning to believe a different (and thus, false) gospel. He writes this passionate letter to persuade them that they must resist the influence of these teachers and return to their previous way of faith.

### Definition: Jerusalem council Outline

1. **Initial Greetings** ([Gal. 1:1–5](#))
2. **The Irreplaceable Gospel** ([Gal. 1:6–2:10](#))
3. **Paul's rebuke: you are turning to a different, false gospel!** ([Gal. 1:6–9](#))
  1. **Paul's story: the gospel that I preach comes from God alone** ([Gal. 1:10–2:10](#))
4. **The Heart of This Gospel: Our Identity in Christ** ([Gal. 2:11–21](#))
  1. **Confrontation with Peter: you are out of line with the gospel!** ([Gal. 2:11–14](#))
  2. **The gospel that defines us** ([Gal. 2:15–21](#))
5. **Becoming an Heir of Abraham** ([Gal. 3:1–29](#))
  1. **Entrance requirements** ([Gal. 3:1–14](#))
    1. **Evidence from experience** ([Gal. 3:1–5](#)).
    2. **Evidence from Abraham** ([Gal. 3:6–9](#))
    3. **Evidence from Scripture** ([Gal. 3:10–14](#))
  2. **Why the Law?** ([Gal. 3:15–29](#))
    1. **The law does not invalidate the promises** ([Gal. 3:15–18](#))
    2. **The purpose of the law** ([Gal. 3:19–24](#))
    3. **Now that faith has come** ([Gal. 3:25–29](#))
6. **The Freedom of Sonship** ([Gal. 4:1–6:10](#))
  1. **From slaves to sons** ([Gal. 4:1–11](#))
    1. **Brought by Christ into sonship** ([Gal. 4:1–7](#))
    2. **The temptation to return** ([Gal. 4:8–11](#))
  2. **Two kinds of sons** ([Gal. 4:12–5:1](#))
    1. **Two kinds of teachers** ([Gal. 4:12–20](#))
    2. **Two kinds of lives** ([Gal. 4:21–5:1](#))
  3. **Danger! Turn back!** ([Gal. 5:2–12](#))
    1. **Where this teaching will lead** ([Gal. 5:2–6](#))
    2. **Where these teachers are headed** ([Gal. 5:7–12](#))
  4. **How to live in true freedom** ([Gal. 5:13–24](#))
  5. **Sowing to the Spirit** ([Gal. 5:25–6:10](#))
    1. **The way of the Spirit in a specific context** ([Gal. 5:25–6:6](#))
    2. **Why we should live by the Spirit** ([Gal. 6:7–10](#))
7. **Conclusion: Defined by the Cross** ([Gal. 6:11–18](#))

## **As You Get Started . . .<sup>3</sup>**

If Galatians could somehow be erased from the Bible and wiped from our memories, what would we lose? What do you think are some of the important truths that Galatians has for the church?

As you have studied Galatians in the past, what have you found most notable or striking? What key ideas or passages come to mind as you think of Galatians?

What aspects of the book of Galatians have confused you? Are there any specific questions that you hope to have answered through this study?

One of the challenges in applying Galatians to our context is that few of us seek to demonstrate our worth before God and others by placing ourselves under the Jewish law. As you prepare to consider this letter, list some modern-day examples of ways that people seek to demonstrate their self-worth apart from Christ.

## **As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a few minutes to ask God to bless you with increased understanding and a transformed heart and life as you begin this study of Galatians.

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### ***WE WILL CONTINUE THIS COURSE FOR 12 WEEKS AND HERE IS A PREVIEW:***

**Week 2: The Irreplaceable Gospel (Gal. 1:1–2:10)**

**Week 3: Our Identity in Christ (Gal. 2:11–21)**

**Week 4: Entrance Requirements (Gal. 3:1–14)**

**Week 5: Why the Law? (Gal. 3:15–29)**

**Week 6: From Slaves to Sons (Gal. 4:1–11)**

**Week 7: Two Kinds of Sons (Gal. 4:12–5:1)**

**Week 8: Danger! Turn Back! (Gal. 5:2–12)**

**Week 9: How to Live in True Freedom (Gal. 5:13–24)**

**Week 10: Sowing to the Spirit (Gal. 5:25–6:10)**

**Week 11: Defined by the Cross (Gal. 6:11–18)**

**Week 12: Summary and Conclusion**