

TERM 1 2026



These studies contain contributions from studies by Matt Shannon, as well as *Galatians: Free For All* by Phillip Jensen & Kel Richards (Matthias Media, 1994), and *Galatians: Why God Accepts Us* by Jack Kuhatschek (Lifeguide/Inter-Varsity Press, 1986). Several helpful insights are owed to *The Message of Galatians* (BTS) by John Stott, and *Galatians For You* (The Good Book Company) by Timothy Keller.

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INTRODUCTION

Galatians is a hard-hitting letter – in its content and in its tone it packs a profound spiritual/theological punch. At its heart it brings its readers face to face with the gospel of salvation – the grace of God shown to sinners in Jesus Christ. But Galatians also reminds us that we never ‘move on’ from the gospel or mature past it. As Tim Keller puts it: *The gospel is the A to Z of the Christian life. It is not only the way to enter God’s kingdom; it is the way to live as part of God’s kingdom.*

AUTHOR

The opening verse identifies the author of Galatians as the apostle Paul. Apart from a few 19th-century scholars, no one has seriously questioned his authorship. Most scholars agree that the letter was written around 50AD (only 15–20 years after the death and resurrection of Christ).

Paul was a church-planting missionary. After he planted a church and left a region, he continued to supervise new congregations through his letters – such as those in the area of Galatia in Asia Minor (present-day Türkiye).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT & TEACHING

Galatians addresses a social and racial division in the churches of Galatia, at the heart of which was false teaching. A group of Jewish professing Christians (known as *Judaizers*) were insisting that Gentile Christians needed to adopt Jewish religious practices (such as circumcision) in order to be fully saved. This was a perversion of the gospel that not only placed the Gentile believers back in ‘spiritual slavery’ (or worse), it had caused divisions – within the church between Jew and Gentile, and between the church and Paul.

To get them back on the right track, Paul wrote this letter. And as we make our way through Galatians, we are reminded that as Christians we have been set free in order to live free; that it is by grace through faith alone that we are justified, and it is by faith alone that we live out our new life in the freedom of the Spirit.

STUDY 1

NO OTHER GOSPEL

GALATIANS 1:1–10

1. What are some areas in life where it's fine to change something or add to it? What are some examples where this is not good (dangerous even)?

READ Galatians 1:1–10

2. How would you describe the overall tone/mood of this passage?

3. Consider how Paul introduces himself in verse 1. What does he say about himself and what distinction does he make? Why might he be concerned about this distinction?

4. 'Grace and peace to you' (v.3) was a Christian form of 'Greetings' that was also a summary of the gospel.

- i. In what way does 'grace and peace to you' summarise the gospel?
- ii. What specifically do we learn about the nature of Jesus' death from verses 4 and 5?

READ Galatians 1:6–10

5. Paul doesn't continue with his standard greeting but gets straight down to business (see *Introduction*). In verse 6 what does Paul say the Galatians have done? Why would this 'astonish' him?

Later in his letter Paul goes into detail about what this 'different gospel/no gospel' is. But here it is clearly something other than 'grace' (that salvation is entirely the result of God's mercy), which means it promotes human works/merit in some way. This, Paul says, is a deliberate and pernicious attempt to 'pervert the gospel of Christ' (v.7).

- Briefly, what are some examples of 'different gospels' that you can think of (from history and from the present)?

6. Paul says some pretty hard things about those who preach a gospel other than gospel of grace.

- i. What does Paul say are the consequences of preaching a different gospel?
- ii. Why do you think Paul feels so strongly about this?

7. What are the implications of all this for our understanding of the gospel of grace?

8. What does Paul say in verse 10? How does this round off what he's being saying about the gospel?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. How would you answer the person who says, 'Religion is just a matter of opinion – people should believe whatever is true for them'?

10. Consider our sharing of the gospel:

- i. How might the way we present the gospel be different if we were seeking the approval of people instead of God (v.10)?
- ii. How can we ensure that the gospel we believe and preach is the true gospel?

STUDY 2

THE GOSPEL UNDER ATTACK

GALATIANS 1:11–2:10

1. What kind of attacks on Christianity do you hear today? Is it Christians or the gospel itself under attack? How might this show itself?

READ Galatians 1:11–24

2. What does Paul say about 'the gospel [he] preached'? How does his brief autobiography in vv.13–24 back up this claim?
3. What practical difference would it make to the Galatians whether Paul received his gospel 'from men' or 'from God'?
4. What does Paul say about his former Jewish faith (v.14)? How does it add to the point he's making here?
 - What are some ways we can ensure the true gospel is preached in our church(es)?

READ Galatians 2:1–10

5. Fourteen years after his conversion Paul went to Jerusalem a second time. What reason does he give for this?

6. Who accompanied Paul on this trip? Why is this notable?

7. Paul presented his gospel to the Jerusalem apostles 'for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain'. What do you think he means by this?

8. What was the response from the Jerusalem apostles (vv.6–10; also v.3)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. Why was the Jerusalem apostles' endorsement of Paul's gospel and ministry important both then and now?

10. In the early church the challenge to the gospel of grace was insisting upon circumcision/Jewish tradition. What might be comparable challenges in the church today?

11. Paul refused to give in to 'false brothers' on matters of circumcision 'so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you' (2:5). How can we show our concern to preserve the truth of the gospel:

- As individuals?

- As the church?

STUDY 3

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

GALATIANS 2:11–21

1. In your experience, how do most people think they can get right with God and be accepted by him?

READ Galatians 2:11–21

2. What did Paul do when Peter came to Antioch, and why?
3. What specific explanation does he give for his opposition (vv.12–14)?

The background for this incident is found in Acts 15:

¹ Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The rest of Acts 15 records the council at Jerusalem and the discussion around this question. After the testimony of Paul and Barnabas – and Peter – it was agreed that forcing Gentile believers to adopt Jewish customs was not part of the gospel, and a formal letter was sent back to Antioch confirming this.

- What nonessential customs do Christians sometimes force on one another?

READ Galatians 2:15–21

4. What does it mean to be 'justified'? What does this mean *spiritually* (i.e. what does it mean for a person to be justified before God?)
5. What does Paul say will *not* justify a person? What does Paul say *will* justify a person?
6. Why can't a person be justified by observing the law? Why is it only by faith in Jesus Christ?
7. Paul goes on to answer an accusation from his Judaizer critics, which essentially was: *if God justifies bad people, what's the motivation for doing good? Can't we just do as we like?*
 - i. How does Paul refute this accusation (vv.17–19)?
 - ii. How has Christ enabled us to die to the law and to live for God?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. In what ways can we as Christians be tempted to get right with God through rules and law keeping or good works?
9. How would you explain the difference between being moral and being a Christian to someone who thinks being good makes them acceptable to God (N.B. think about *motivation*)?
10. Practically speaking, what does it mean to 'live for God'? What are some ways you might seek to do that this week?

STUDY 4

GROWING IN THE GOSPEL

GALATIANS 3:1–18

1. Can you think of a situation where it's important to finish how you started? Or where changing things created damage?

READ Galatians 3:1–5

2. What does Paul call the Galatians in verse 1?
3. Why? What about their behaviour made no sense (consider the multiple rhetorical questions Paul poses)?
 - In what ways do we sometimes try to earn God's favour by what we do?

READ Galatians 3:6–14

4. Paul turns to the example of Abraham. On what basis was Abraham made righteous before God? Why is Abraham a good example here?
5. Who, then, does Paul say are 'children of Abraham'? How does Paul show that this was always God's plan?

6. How does Abraham's experience contrast with that of the person who seeks to earn God's acceptance (via law-keeping, vv.10–12)? Why is this so?

7. The word *redeemed* means to free someone/something by paying a price. When applied to people it means to deliver from some evil. From what did Christ redeem us, and how and why did he do it (vv.13–14)?

- How have you been blessed by the Spirit's presence in your life?

READ Galatians 3:15–18

8. After the historical example of Abraham, Paul gives one final example, this time 'from everyday life': making covenants (contract agreements).

What does Paul say about how covenants work (in general, v.15)? How does it relate to his point about the law and promise?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. What kinds of rules or regulations are today's Christians tempted to elevate to a way to God?

10. When are you most tempted to look to your own efforts to make yourself acceptable to God?

STUDY 5

SONS NOT SLAVES

GALATIANS 3:19–4:7

1. What are some of the privileges of being a son or daughter?

While Paul is addressing all the Galatians (Gentile and Jewish), the content and nature of his argument in this section seems to be directed primarily to those of a Jewish background.

READ Galatians 3:19–25

2. What does Paul say was the purpose of the law? Note the words he uses to describe what the law did for the Jews.

3. Could the Jews ever follow the law perfectly? If not, how did the law deal with sin?

- Before you came to faith, to what extent did you realise that you were a prisoner of sin (v.22)?
- How might a knowledge of the law's purpose affect our evangelism?

READ Galatians 3:26–4:7

- 4.** What relationship can we now have with God, and how? And what's the connection with Abraham?

- 5.** In verse 28 Paul lists several ways in which people have been categorised. How have these categories sometimes functioned as barriers? How does shared faith in Christ affect them?

- 6.** What is Paul saying about difference and diversity in the church – and what is he *not* saying?
 - In what ways have you/have you not seen this reality expressed in your Christian/church relationships?

READ Galatians 4:1–7

- 7.** In verses 1–2 Paul refers to practices in Roman society.
 - i. How was a Roman child-heir no different from a slave?

 - ii. How was life under the law like being a spiritual 'child-heir' (v.3)?

8. In verses 4–7 Paul describes a profound spiritual change: *God sent his Son.*

i. List the circumstances of Jesus' coming. Why do these matter?

ii. When did he do this? What might this mean?

iii. What was the result, and why is it so much better?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. How does knowing that you are a beloved son or daughter of God *make you feel?*

10. How does knowing that you are a beloved son or daughter *affect the way you live?*

- Are there ways you sometimes still live/act like a 'spiritual slave'? What might help you to live/act more like God's beloved son or daughter?

11. Consider the barriers that divide people in our area.

- How are these barriers broken down within our church?

- In what ways could we do more to realise the vision of Galatians 3:28 (as individual Christians and as a church)?

STUDY 6

A TALE OF TWO COVENANTS

GALATIANS 4:8–31

1. Can you think of a time when you took matters into your own hands and you really shouldn't have (i.e. something went wrong)? Was it fixed? How?

Having primarily directed his argument in the previous section towards those of a Jewish background, now Paul appears to address more directly the Gentile believers in the Galatian church.

READ Galatians 4:8–20

2. What does Paul say about the former spiritual status of his Gentile readers (the 'you' of v.8)? How was it different to the Jews? How was it similar?
3. What does Paul say his Gentile readers were doing? Why does this seem 'incredible' to Paul (i.e. he sees no credible reason for doing it)? Note what Paul said in vv.1–7.
4. What is Paul's appeal to the Galatians? What do you think he means by it?

5. How and why had the Galatians' attitude towards Paul changed?

- How do these verses illustrate the care and concern we should have for other members of God's family?
- Think about the various subtle ways we might be motivated by the same misplaced goals as the false teachers. For example, ask yourself: *do I ever find it appealing to have people relying on me? Why?*

After this personal appeal, Paul moves to one final example to show difference between law and gospel, between spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom: the Old Testament account of Hagar and Sarah.

To understand the background to Paul's analogy here, read Genesis 15–18, 21.

READ Galatians 4:21–31

6. How were Abraham's two sons (Ishamel and Isaac) different according to verses 21–23 (consider the difference between born *the ordinary way* and born *as the result of a promise*)?

7. In verse 24 Paul says that the Hagar–Sarah account may be understood ‘figuratively’ as representing the difference between the Old and New Covenants.

i. Who and what does Paul connect with the Old Covenant/the law? How are they connected?

ii. Who and what does he connect with the New Covenant/the gospel? How are they connected?

8. How does all this illustrate the point Paul is making about the Judaizers’ teaching and the Galatians?

Here, Hagar is depicted negatively and Sarah positively, whereas in the actual story, Hagar is an innocent victim, and Sarah is an unbelieving collaborator. It’s important to remember that Paul is only using this account as an allegory, he’s not teaching the theological and moral lessons of the account itself; he simply sees in it a helpful illustration of grace and works.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. If faith is all that counts, does that make the Christian life a matter of passively waiting? Why/why not?

10. In what ways/areas of our lives can we be like the Galatians, and re-enter 'spiritual captivity'?

11. What might constitute other present-day threats to Christians' spiritual freedom? (N.B. 'cultural freedom' is not the same as 'spiritual freedom').

STUDY 7

FREEDOM IN CHRIST

GALATIANS 5:1–26

1. What are some of the freedoms our society potentially takes for granted (and would sorely miss if they were somehow taken away)?

READ Galatians 5:1–15

2. Chapter 5 begins with a declaration and an exhortation (v.1):
 - i. What is the truth that Paul reminds the Galatians?
 - ii. What is Paul's subsequent exhortation to them?
3. In verses 2–4, Paul cites circumcision (a physical sign of Jewish belonging) as a chief legal requirement the Judaizers were urging the Galatians to keep.

If the Galatians listened to them and insisted on circumcision, what does Paul point out they'd be obligated to do? What is the result of this, spiritually?

4. The righteousness for which we hope, Paul says, can only come by faith. Given this, in verse 6 we might have expected Paul to say, *the only thing that counts is faith*. But he says a bit more than that.

How does Paul's actual statement give us a balanced view of the Christian life?

- What are some examples of how we can express our faith through loving acts?

Paul compares the Galatians to runners in a race and a batch of dough (vv.7–9). The Judaizers have 'cut in' and knocked them off the true race course, and their negative influence has been 'yeast-like': though small it has affected the whole batch. And because of that, Paul has some harsh things to say about those who are troubling the Galatians...

5. In verses 10–12 Paul makes a couple of severe statements about the Judaizers (esp. v.12!). Why is he so harsh?

READ Galatians 5:16–26

6. Paul says there are two conflicting desires in the life of a Christian. What are they?

7. If we live by the Spirit, what does Paul assure us will happen?

8. What does Paul say that living according to the sinful nature/the flesh will lead to?

9. In verses 22 and 23 Paul memorably contrasts these sinful behaviours with 'the fruit of the Spirit'.

- i. What do you notice about these qualities/behaviours (compare them with list that precedes them)?
- ii. Why is fruit a good description of the Spirit's work in us?
- iii. Does this mean we're passive in this process of spiritual growth?
- iv. What, then, is the connection between godly living and spiritual freedom?

The word 'fruit' is singular – it means 'a crop', not different 'fruits'. As Philip Jensen puts it: *There are not meant be 'kindness' Christians and 'goodness' Christians and 'faithfulness' Christians. Rather, the Christian is meant to be producing a crop of all these things.*

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. What might it look like for us to let ourselves be 'burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (v.1)?

11. In v.15 Paul accuses the Galatians of 'biting and devouring each other'.

- Where do you see this happening among Christians today?
- What are some practical ways we can help to prevent this?

12. Looking at the list of the fruit of the Spirit:

- In what ways do you see the Spirit's fruit ripening in your life?
- Which 'fruitful qualities' do you perhaps not see in your life? How might you prayerfully grow these qualities?

STUDY 8

CROSS-SHAPED LIVING

GALATIANS 6:1–18

1. Why do you think people are so concerned about being accepted by their peers and being impressive in the eyes of others? Why are we prone to compare ourselves with others?

Following on from the end of chapter 5 and what life by the Spirit vs life according to the sinful nature looks like (and the climactic exhortation to 'let us keep in step with the Spirit', v.25), Paul wraps up his letter by painting a few pictures of how our cross-shaped identity helps us to bear one another's burdens and boast in Christ.

READ Galatians 6:1–10

2. In verse 1, Paul gives us a particular example of burden bearing. What is it?
3. What 'guidelines' does Paul offer for dealing with such a person?

That gentleness is needed in restoring a sinful brother or sister ought to be unsurprising – it is listed as a fruit of the Spirit, and that's because it is a quality of our gentle and lowly Lord (Matthew 11:28–29), who will not break a bruised reed, or put out a smouldering wick (Isaiah 42:3).

- What do you find encouraging about this? What, perhaps, do you find challenging about this?

4. What does Paul warn against regarding bearing one another's burdens? What is his advice?

5. Consider the metaphor Paul uses in verses 7–10:

i. What is it? What's its principle?

ii. How is its principle applied spiritually? What is Paul's warning and promise?

- What are one or two new ways you could begin 'sowing to please the Spirit' (a) *personally* (b) in relationships *with other Christians*, and (c) in relationships *with non-Christians*?

READ Galatians 6:11–18

In this final section, Paul appears to take over from his scribe (...with my own hand) and proceeds to write in large, emphatic letters. The epistle may be coming to an end, but Paul's zeal for the Galatians and the gospel isn't.

6. What do verses 12 and 13 reveal about the motives of Paul's opponents? How would urging others to be circumcised achieve their goals?

7. What is the only thing Paul is prepared to boast about? What does it mean to do this?

8. Two of the false accusations against Paul were that he tried to please people rather than God (1:10), and that he still preached circumcision (5:11). How does he refute these claims in verse 17?

- What are the 'marks of Jesus' in your life?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. The approval of others was most important to Paul's opponents (v.12). In what situations have you been tempted to hide your Christianity in order to 'make a good impression outwardly'?

10. Think back to verse 2. What other burdens might Paul have had in mind in? What are some ways you might help a fellow Christian carry these?

