

Galatians (August 18)

Reading Galatians

A guardian calls the seven-year-old boy in from play to make an introduction. Pointing to a young man, he explains that tomorrow at dawn this fellow will lead the boy to and from school, making certain the boy has the tools of learning: wooden tablets and a stylus. Though the young man is a slave, the boy must mind him and learn from him until the boy is ready to be self-sufficient.

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul refers to such first-century life situations in order to explain our relationship to the law (moral, civil, and ceremonial commands) and the gospel (God's promise to us in Christ). A typical schoolboy's guardian had temporary authority. Similarly, the law given by Moses served as a temporary guardian, according to the will of our legal guardian, the Lord himself. As Paul explains, the Lord had greater plans to fulfill the law and his life-changing promise. He adopted us, making us co-heirs with his true Son, our Savior Jesus. In this way, Paul explains and illustrates the life-changing effects of the law and the gospel, the two essential teachings of the Christian faith.

Author and Date

The opening verse identifies the author of Galatians as the apostle Paul. Aside from a few 19th-century scholars, no one has seriously questioned his authorship. The date of Galatians depends to a great extent on the destination of the letter. It may have been written between AD 53 and 57, or written early in AD 48-49 after Paul's first missionary journey.

Occasion and Purpose

Judaizers were Jewish Christians who believed, among other things, that a number of the ceremonial practices of the Old Testament were still binding on the New Testament church. Following Paul's successful campaign in Galatia, they insisted that Gentile converts to Christianity abide by certain Old Testament rites, especially circumcision. The Judaizers argued that Paul was not an authentic apostle and that out of a desire to make the message more appealing to Gentiles, he had removed from the gospel certain legal requirements.

Paul responded by clearly establishing his apostolic authority and thereby substantiating the gospel he preached. By introducing additional requirements for justification (e.g. works of the law), his adversaries had perverted the gospel of grace and, unless prevented, would bring Paul's converts into the bondage of legalism. It is by grace through faith alone that man is justified, and it is by faith alone that he is to live out his new life in the freedom of the Spirit. Galatians stands as an eloquent and vigorous apologetic for the essential New Testament truth that man is justified through faith in Jesus Christ – by nothing less and nothing more – and that he is sanctified not by legalistic works but by the obedience that comes from faith in God's work for him, in him, and through him by the grace and power of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Blessings for Readers

The proper distinction of law and gospel, described in Galatians, leads one away from the misunderstandings of God's word mentioned above. Paul certainly affirmed a limited role for the law in the life of a believer. He explained the life-changing blessings of the gospel, which make us God's children and give us freedom to do good, not evil. Yet Galatians shows that, though we never outgrow the law because we are sinners, it is God's promise that assures our place in his family, with all the privileges he bestows by word and Spirit.

As you study Galatians, pray that the Holy Spirit would teach you rightly to discern and apply God's law and gospel. He who generously gives his good Spirit through the promise will surely grant you a discerning heart.