

Chapter Summary: Galatians

The “super apostles” in Corinth weren't the only ones trying to discredit Paul. In the Roman province of Galatia, a region in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), some “troublemakers” were bringing a different version of the Good News about Jesus into the churches Paul had founded. They were teaching that even those who had faith in Jesus needed to obey certain parts of the Jewish law, particularly circumcision. These false teachers evidently claimed that Paul had learned this from the other apostles and was teaching this elsewhere.

Even though Paul was about to leave for Jerusalem, he recognized the urgency of writing a letter to the Galatians right away. The meaning of the gospel itself was at stake. In his letter, Paul sets the record straight regarding what he taught, where he learned it, and what following Jesus really involves.

We can tell immediately that Paul is upset by what's happening in Galatia. A standard feature of Paul's letters is an opening word of thanksgiving for the recipients, but Paul skips it and goes straight to his reprimand: “I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God... You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all.”

Paul first explains that he received the gospel message directly from Jesus, not the apostles. He goes on to say that the apostles in Jerusalem believe the same thing he does: Gentiles who follow Jesus don't need to keep the Jewish law.

Next, Paul describes a confrontation he had with the apostle Peter over this issue. Peter had stopped eating meals with Gentiles because of pressure from some Jewish believers who thought all Gentile believers should be circumcised. This struck at the heart of God's revelation that there is a new, single family based on faith in Jesus. Paul had challenged Peter publicly because he was “not following the truth of the gospel message.”

Paul then devotes the bulk of this letter to explaining why it isn't necessary for Gentiles to keep the Jewish law. He reminds the Galatians that God gave them the Holy Spirit and worked miracles among them as soon as they believed the message about the Messiah. They already had signs of God's new world existing in their community, so why should they now think they needed to follow Jewish observances?

Paul provides an in-depth discussion of Israel's history, including the crucial sequence of Abraham, the giving of the Law under Moses, and then the coming of Jesus. Although Abraham lived before the Jewish law was established, he received God's promises of land and a worldwide family, and he believed those promises by faith: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith."

Paul argues that the later coming of the Jewish law can't undo the covenant made with Abraham. The Law was given to God's people only for a period of time, as a "guardian" until the Messiah came. Now that Jesus has come, everyone who has faith in Him becomes a true child of Abraham and an heir of the promises made to him. The dividing lines between Jew and Gentile are dissolved, and now one family of Abraham exists through faith in Jesus.

Because of their equal status in God's family, starting to follow the requirements of the Jewish law would be a giant step backward for the Galatians. God's story has already moved on! All people are now welcome to receive Jesus and join the family - without having to become Jewish or follow Jewish law.

Now just one question remains: If the Gentiles don't follow the Jewish law, what will keep them from living immoral lives? Paul emphasizes that God's Holy Spirit living in them empowers them to follow the good ways of God's Kingdom. As Paul says in closing, "It doesn't matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation. May God's peace and mercy be upon all who live by this principle; they are the new people of God."