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Introduction

The Gospel in Galatians¹

Paul's letter to the Galatians has been called a spiritual "bomb." Besides the book of Romans, no other book in the Bible has sparked as much interest in spiritual reform and change as this letter to the Galatians. Out of the pages of Galatians (along with Romans), Protestantism² itself was born. While reading Galatians, Martin Luther was first touched with the glorious good news of righteousness by faith.³ "The Epistle [letter] to the Galatians," Luther said, "is my epistle. To it I am married."

In turn, it was Luther's gospel-centered writings that changed the life of John Wesley on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738. Wesley, a powerful preacher, then started a spiritual change for all English-speaking people.

Seventh-day Adventists also owe much to Galatians. Through the study of Galatians, the famous Adventist preachers E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones helped the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the 1880s and 1890s rediscover the truth of righteousness by faith.

What has made Galatians such a powerful book in its encouragement of spiritual change? Why has it been able to touch the hearts of so many? Unlike any other book in the Bible, the letter to the Galatians touches upon many themes important to the Christian soul. It is in Galatians that Paul discusses issues such as freedom, the role (part) of the law in salvation, our condition in Christ, and what it means to live a Spirit-led life. Paul also brings up the age-old question: how can sinful humans be made right before a holy and just God?

Of course, other books, such as Romans, touch upon some of these same questions. But Galatians is different. Galatians is short and clear. And its rich themes are written in a powerful and moving style that touch hearts and open them to the Spirit of God, even today.

Paul's letter speaks to us personally. But our understanding can be strengthened if we know of the historical background in which the book was written.

Many scholars believe that Galatians may be the earliest of Paul's letters. It was perhaps written in A.D. 49, after the famous Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The book may be the oldest Christian letter known. As Acts and Galatians make clear, the early church found itself in a fierce battle over the nature (truth) of salvation, especially in the case of people who were Gentiles (not Jewish). Certain

1. Galatians—believers of the church in New Testament times, who lived in the city-state of Galatia, located in what is now the eastern part of Turkey.

2. Protestantism—the 16th-century religious movement started by Martin Luther that went against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and led to the start of the Protestant churches.

3. righteousness by faith—full forgiveness upon belief in, and acceptance of, the gospel.

Jewish believers, called Judaizers,⁴ believe that Jesus alone was not good enough for Gentiles. They believe that Gentiles must also be circumcised⁵ and follow the laws of Moses (Acts 15:1). When Paul founds a church of Gentiles in Galatia, he discovers that some of these Judaizers have traveled there to “straighten things out.”

When word of this problem reaches Paul, he becomes angry and decides to do something about it. Paul knows that this false gospel of salvation by faith and works threatened to destroy the work of Christ. So he writes the Galatians a powerful defense of the gospel. With strong words, Paul calls this false teaching legalism⁶—pure and simple.

This quarter’s Bible study guide invites us to journey with the apostle Paul as he begs the Galatians to remain true to Jesus. At the same time, it also gives us a chance to test our own understanding of the gospel. It is our sincere hope that, through this quarter, God’s Spirit will start a spiritual change in our hearts as we rediscover what God has done for us in Christ.

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4. Judaizers—Jewish Christians who tried to force certain things about the Jewish religion on Gentile (not Jewish) Christians.

5. circumcised—to have the skin (called the foreskin) cut off at the end of the penis of a man or boy.

6. legalism—the belief that one can earn salvation by obeying the law.