

An Explanatory Outline of Galatians

John Hepp, Jr.¹

In this epistle the apostle Paul fiercely defends the divine gospel, the only message that can save. I quote from the New International Version, sometimes using the royal title Messiah instead of its equivalent Christ.²

Greetings & Occasion (1:1-9)

1. The apostle Paul greets the Galatians (vv. 1-5). First he claims to be an apostle by divine appointment and summarizes the gospel he preaches—“Jesus Messiah...raised...from the dead” (vv. 1-2). He wants (a) the Galatians to have grace and peace from God and from Messiah, who died to rescue us, and (b) God to be glorified (vv. 3-5).
2. Paul expresses shock that the Galatians are turning to a different “gospel”—whose advocates should be condemned (vv. 6-9).

I. Paul’s Gospel Is from God. (1:10 to 2:21)

Evidence of this fact from Paul’s life:

A. Introduction. (1:10-12) Paul did not get his gospel from men but through God’s revelation of Jesus Messiah to him.

B. Incidents that show this. (1:13 to 2:21)

1. First Incident. (1:13-17) When God called him, Paul was zealously trying to destroy the church. Right after being called, he did not consult with men, even the original apostles, but went to Arabia.
2. Second Incident. (1:18-24) Three years after his conversion Paul visited Peter³ in Jerusalem for two weeks, but saw no other leaders except James.
3. Third Incident. (2:1-10) Fourteen years after his conversion (?), Paul again went to Jerusalem. He went with Barnabas and took Titus, a Greek. Though some urged it, Titus was not required to be circumcised. In private consultations the leaders showed Paul full approval for his message and approach to the Gentiles.
4. Fourth Incident. (2:11-21) Paul rebuked Peter at Antioch for the sake of the gospel.
 - a. While visiting Antioch, Peter at first ate with the Gentiles. When some came from Jerusalem, however, he withdrew as though such fellowship were wrong. Other Jews joined him. (2:11-13)
 - b. Paul publicly rebuked Peter for making it look as though the gospel (which offers salvation by faith, not by law) favors sin rather than holiness. By rebuilding the wall of separation (the law), Peter had implied

¹ Some of my other writings on this epistle are available on my website, www.kingdominbible.com: (a) “Questions and Answers on Galatians,” designed for self-study of the book; (b) “Message of a Visitor from Jerusalem,” presenting in letter form the arguments to which Paul was responding; (c) “When Paul Rebuked Peter,” an analysis of 2:11-21.

² Aramaic *Messias* and Greek *Cristos* both mean “Anointed [to be king].” See John 1:41.

³ This apostle had the birth name of Simon. Jesus promised to change it to Aramaic *Cephas*, which, like Greek *Petros*, means “rock” (see John 1:42). His promise was fulfilled in Matthew 16:18. Galatians has *Cephas* in 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14 and the equivalent *Petros* in 2:7, 8. NIV uses “Peter” for both forms.

that tearing it down—as Jesus required—had been wrong. Yet a life pleasing to God cannot come through the law but only through being united with Messiah in His death and new life. (2:14-21)

NOTE: Galatians 2:16 states three times the same truth about Jewish salvation: justification is not by works of law but by faith in Messiah. Verses 19-21 are keys to the whole epistle and should be memorized (at least v. 20).

II. **Salvation Is by Faith and Not by Law Works.** (3:1 to 4:31)

Evidence of this fact is given from experience, Scripture, and theology. The whole argument revolves around Abraham.

A. Introduction.⁴ (3:1-5) Through faith in a crucified Messiah, the Galatians have already received God’s Spirit. Now they are foolish to try to please God (complete their salvation) by works of the law—that is, by relying on “human effort”⁵ instead of the Spirit.

B. The law cannot make one inherit the blessing promised through Abraham⁶—but faith in Messiah can. (3:6-29)

1. Introduction. (3:6-9) Just as Abraham was made right by faith, so the blessing promised through Abraham comes to those who are Abraham’s sons by faith.

NOTE: The incident cited from Abraham’s life took place long before he was required to be circumcised.

2. The law does not give the promised blessing. (3:10-24)

a. The law is defective (inadequate) in operation. (3:10-14)⁷

(1) Two defects of law (3:10-12)

(a) It brings a curse on all who are not perfect. (3:10)

⁴ 3:1-5. Chapters 1-2 are personal and historical; chapters 3-4 are primarily scriptural and theological. This paragraph (3:1-5) has similarities to both parts. Like 1-2 it (a) argues from experience and (b) contrasts the works of law to believing in a crucified Messiah (see 2:19-21). However, in regard to (a), the experience in chapters 1-2 is that of Paul; whereas in 3:1-5 it is that of the “foolish Galatians” (but see 4:11ff). In regard to (b), the contrast of law works and believing continues well beyond this paragraph (e.g., see 3:9-14).

For two other reasons 3:1-5 seems to introduce chapters 3-4 rather than close chapters 1-2: (a) It begins a personal appeal that continues in chapters 3-4 (see 3:26 and 4:8, 12). (b) Although it does not yet cite Scriptures nor mention the covenant with Abraham, it prepares for the detailed scriptural discussion of that covenant.

⁵ 3:3. “Human effort” represents the Greek word *sarks*, often translated “flesh.” In Galatians it is used eighteen times: 1:16; 2:16, 20; 3:3; 4:13, 14, 23, 29; 5:13, 16, 17 (twice), 19, 24; 6:8 (twice), 12, 13. Sometimes it simply refers there to the body (2:20; 4:13, 14) or any person (1:16, “any man”; 2:16, “no one”). More often, however, it refers to human nature apart from God. For example, in 4:23 and 29 with the preposition *kata* (according to), it means “in the ordinary way.” Since human nature is prone to sin, NIV sometimes translates *sarks* “the sinful nature” (5:13, 16, 17, 19, 24; and 6:8).

⁶ 3:6-29. The blessing through Abraham is not primarily justification but all the eternal treasure justification will secure. Studies in context of biblical words like *promise*, *hope*, *calling*, *heir*, and *inheritance* can uncover that treasure. It includes “the world” (Rom. 4) and “all things” (1 Cor. 3:21; see my appendix on Gal. 3:16). Perhaps the two best summaries of that blessing are *eternal life* and *the kingdom*.

⁷ 3:10-14. “The law is holy” (Rom 7:12); “the law is good” (Rom. 7:16). Yet, “the law was powerless to do” what it required (Rom. 8:3) because it could appeal only to man’s sinful nature.

- (b) It does not operate on the basis of faith (the way of life God prescribes). (3:11-12)
 - (2) Messiah overcomes these defects. (3:13-14)
 - (a) He takes the law's curse on Himself. (3:13)
 - (b) He thereby frees us to obtain Abraham's blessing (since we receive the Holy Spirit) by faith. (3:14)
- b. The law could not annul the promise but helped prepare for its fulfillment. (3:15-24)
 - (1) The law could not annul the covenant of promise. (3:15-18)
 - (a) It came centuries after the covenant. (3:15, 17)
The covenant was designed for a single heir, Messiah. (3:16; see the appendix)
 - (b) It required performance, but the promise did not. (3:18)
 - (2) The law was designed to prepare for the promise. (3:19-24)
 - (a) It was temporary, to hold transgressions in check until the time came to bestow what was promised. (3:19a)
 - (b) It required intermediaries,⁸ whereas the promise was direct from God. (3:19b-20)
 - (c) It did not give righteousness but shut up all men under sin. (3:21-23)
 - (d) It was a temporary guardian/disciplinarian for those destined to inherit the promise. (3:24)
- 3. The Galatians are not under law but in Messiah. (3:25-29)
 - a. Since the period of fulfilled faith has come, there is no more need for the guardian/disciplinarian. (3:25)
 - b. All who are baptized into Messiah are part of the Heir of Abraham's blessing.⁹ (3:26-29)¹⁰
- C. God's messenger to them appeals to them with three arguments. (4:1-31)**
 - 1. Don't be enslaved again. (4:1-11)
 - a. Until an heir-to-be reaches a predetermined age, he is treated like a slave. So were we. But now God has adopted us as sons with full rights, giving us His Spirit. (4:1-7)
 - b. By going under the law, they are submitting again to "weak and miserable [religious] principles."¹¹ This makes Paul fear for their salvation. (4:8-11)

⁸ 3:19b-20. The law was given through angels to Moses to Israel (Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2).

⁹ 3:26-29. As promised by John and by Jesus (Matt. 3:11; Acts 1:4-5), Messiah baptizes them in His Spirit. This refers to His giving them the Spirit, as He started doing at Pentecost. It results in their becoming members in His body (1 Cor. 12:12-13). This is one thing water baptism symbolizes. Those so baptized are not made alike in gifts and functions but are accepted alike (not as Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, or female).

¹⁰ It is possible to include 4:1-7 in this section ("...not under law but in Messiah"). That is how I treated it in my Questions and Answers document.

¹¹ 4:3, 9. The word translated "basic principles" in 4:3 and "principles" in 4:9 is Greek *stoicheia*. This word was used of the list of letters of the alphabet that a child would carry on a little tablet to memorize. When the word referred to religious principles, God's law included such things—as did heathen religions (see Heb. 5:11 to

2. Don't forsake the bond of love between them and God's messenger. (4:12-20)
 - a. They had welcomed Paul as God's messenger—despite his physical weakness—when he first preached to them. But not now. (4:12-16)¹²
 - b. The Judaizers seek them only to get personal followers. Paul is willing to travail—and is doing so again—to produce Messiah in them. (4:17-20)
3. Don't forget the standing God has given them. (4:21-31)
Paul makes this third argument with an allegory that could be titled "Abraham's Two Sons & the Two Covenants." (a) Abraham's son by the slave woman, relating to the Mt. Sinai covenant and the present Jerusalem, was born naturally. (b) His son by the free woman, relating to the covenant of the Spirit and the Jerusalem above, was born of promise. We stand with the latter. The slave son persecutes the free son. But the slave will be thrown out; whereas the free will multiply and inherit.

III. Exhortation to live in freedom, by the Spirit. (5:1 to 6:10)¹³

In these chapters Paul passes to practical exhortations.

A. Introduction. Messiah set us free to live in freedom. (5:1)

In Galatians this freedom is primarily from the law, although (as in Romans 6:6-7, 11-23) it includes freedom from sin.¹⁴

B. Depicts the serious nature of legalism. (5:2-12)

1. Whoever puts himself under the law cuts himself off from the grace of Messiah. (5:2-6)¹⁵

6:3). Such principles included the observance of certain ceremonies and symbolic regulations about food and days (Gal. 4:10 and Col. 2:8, 20-23). How sad when someone prefers such symbolic observations to the reality and perfection in Messiah!

¹² 4:12. "Become like me, for I became like you." Compare Acts 26:28-29; Paul was a free man, even when in chains. He became like other people in non-moral matters, in order to win them (1 Cor. 9:20-22).

¹³ 5:1 to 6:10. Is this a continuation of the exhortation begun in chapter 4? In both chapters 4 and 5 Paul contrasted the experiences the Galatians had with him and with the Judaizers (4:8-20; 5:7-12). However, the context of his exhortation changed. In chapter 4 it was still the scriptural argument about the blessing through Abraham (4:1-7, 21-31). In chapter 5 it moved to the practical aspects of relating to Messiah and the Spirit.

¹⁴ 5:1. Stott comments on freedom in Galatians: "What Christ has done in liberating us, according to Paul's emphasis here, is not so much to set our *will* free from the bondage of sin as to set our *conscience* free from the guilt of sin. The Christian freedom he describes is freedom of conscience, freedom from the tyranny of the law, the dreadful struggle to keep the law, with a view to winning the favour of God. It is the freedom of acceptance with God and of access to God through Christ." (John R.W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians*, p. 132)

Yet, bondage to the law makes our bondage to sin worse. "The power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:46). In Romans 6-8 Paul discusses in much detail the relationship between these two bondages.

¹⁵ 5:3. "Every man who lets himself be circumcised." Although circumcision is a minor surgical operation on the body, here it means much more. Here "it stood for a particular type of religion, namely salvation by good works in obedience to the law. The slogan of the false teachers was: 'Unless you are circumcised and keep the law, you cannot be saved' (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). They were thus declaring that faith in Christ was insufficient for salvation. Circumcision and law-obedience must be added to it. This was tantamount to saying that Moses must be allowed to finish what Christ had begun." (Stott, op. cit., p. 133)

- a. Reliance on law works alienates one from Messiah. (5:2-4)
“Fallen away from grace” (5:4) does not describe people careless about sin. Instead, they were seriously attempting to avoid sin by keeping the law, which could not work. Would God accept them no matter what they did? If so, why did Paul bother to write Galatians?
 - b. Saving faith will lead to complete righteousness. (5:5-6)
“By faith we eagerly await the righteousness for which we hope” (5:5). This is not the righteousness already credited (imputed) to the believer’s account.¹⁶ Instead, “we eagerly await” it; “we hope for” it.¹⁷ This future righteousness is the completed sanctification we seek, according to Hebrews 12:14: “Pursue...the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (NASB). Our part in attaining it is the same faith by which we started, “faith expressing itself in love” (5:6). Saving faith is not static (cf. James 2:14, 17-20, 26); it always involves hope and love (cf. 1 Thess.1:3; Col. 1:4-5).
2. Whoever teaches lawkeeping for salvation must be judged. (5:7-12)
In these verses the emphasis is on the false preachers who were hindering the Galatians from living by faith (5:7, 10).¹⁸ Their teaching was so destructive that Paul wished they would “emasculate themselves” (5:12), as the priests of Cybele actually did. That would make them incapable of reproducing themselves. Those preachers actually accused Paul of preaching circumcision when convenient (5:11). If he had, he would have avoided persecution from such fellow Jews (5:12).
- C. Describes the life of freedom.** (5:13 to 6:10)
1. Not indulgence but loving service. (5:13-15)
“You...were called” (5:13a) repeats a thought from 1:6 and 5:8 (see also 1:15). It again reminds the Galatians that God Himself had invited them to a future with Himself.¹⁹
Since those called are not yet perfect, however, their freedom comes with risks. Freedom can be used “to indulge the sinful nature” (5:13b), which is

¹⁶ 5:5. “To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).

¹⁷ 5:5. “We eagerly await...the righteousness for which we hope.” “Who hopes for what he already has?...we hope for what we do not yet have” (Rom. 8:24-25). But that hope for holiness is not just a fond desire; it is a sure expectation. Hebrews 12:14 says we should “pursue” it. Yet, we do not doubt what the final result will be. In the new covenant God not only declares us righteous but also puts His laws into our minds and hearts (Heb. 8:10). He transforms us into Messiah’s likeness (2 Cor. 3:18).

¹⁸ 5:7. “Cut in on...kept you from” is a single verb in Greek (*enekopsen*). In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 Paul used it to describe what happened when he often wanted to revisit that church: “Satan **stopped** us.” In military usage this verb referred to cutting off a road by destroying bridges, etc. It is far more serious to turn people off of “the road that leads to [eternal] life” (Matt. 7:14).

¹⁹ 5:13a. This is God’s “efficacious call,” which truly accomplishes what it proposes (Rom. 8:30). In it God “calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:12).

still active (though “crucified,” 5:24).²⁰ “To indulge” translates a Greek noun used by the military: “for a **base of operations.**”

Notice that believers, though not under the law, yet fulfill the law through loving service²¹ (5:14; Rom. 13:8, 10; see also Gal. 6:2).

2. Not obeying the sinful nature but obeying the Spirit. (5:16-25)
 - a. Since the inner conflict persists, we should live by the Spirit. (5:16-18)

The sinful nature and the Spirit “are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (5:17; similar to Rom. 7:18).
 - b. Acts of the sinful nature are contrasted to fruit of the Spirit. (5:19-23)
 - (1) Acts of the sinful nature (5:19-21)

This is a sample list; note “and the like” (5:21). The great goal that “those who live like this” will miss is to “inherit the kingdom of God” (5:21b; see Matt. 25:34).

The list of acts is in four categories: sex (5:19), religion (5:20a), anger (5:20b-21a), and drink (5:21a).
 - (2) Fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23)
 - c. We should recognize that our sinful nature is crucified and that we live—and should walk—by the Spirit. (5:24-25)
3. Restoring those who fall but carrying our own responsibility. (5:26 to 6:5)
 - a. Walking by the Spirit will put an end to prideful self-seeking. (5:26)
 - b. Gently restore²² a sinning brother. (6:1-2)

This is a prime example of fulfilling the law of Messiah, which is love (6:2).²³ If we do not love someone, we will not make the effort or take the risk to restore him.
 - c. “Each one should carry his own load,” that is, his own responsibility. (6:5; cf. Rom. 14:12)²⁴
4. Sowing spiritually in order to reap spiritually. (6:6-10)
 - a. This includes helping (including financially) those who instruct us spiritually. (6:6)

²⁰ 5:13b. “Sinful nature” is the NIV translation of *sarks* seven times in 5:13—6:8. See the note for 3:3.

²¹ 5:14, “The whole law is fulfilled in one word, . . . love.” That is also the point in Romans 8:2-4, which explains why “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Jesus” (8:1). The reason is that through “the law of the Spirit of life . . . the righteous requirements of the [Mosaic] law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” This new law really works to produce righteousness.

²² 6:1. The Greek verb for “restore” (*kataridzo*) has many uses, referring to putting back in order or equipping. Medically it was used for *setting* a fracture or dislocated bone. In fishing it could refer to *mending* (also, perhaps, cleaning and folding) fishing nets (Mark 1:19).

²³ 6:2. Usually we speak of Messiah’s “commandment” of love (John 13:34; 15:12; 1 John 3:23). Here, however, it is called a “law.” James 2:8 calls it “the royal law” (cf. “the perfect law that gives freedom,” James 1:25). Also Hebrews 7:12 says that a new Priest requires “a change of the law.” From another perspective, the new covenant is “the law of the Spirit of life” (Rom. 8:2; see the note for 5:14).

²⁴ The “burdens” of 6:2 are heavy weights of sin and failure that no Christian should carry alone. “Burden” in 6:5 is a different word, sometimes used of a soldier’s pack, which he must carry himself.

- b. The principle is that we reap what (and in proportion to what) we sow. (6:7)
- c. The principle applied to holiness. (6:8) Pleasing the sinful nature will result in destruction. Pleasing the Spirit will result in eternal life.
- d. The principle applied to well-doing. (6:9-10)

Postscript: Motives of Judaizers and Paul, Farewell (6:11-18)

1. Introduction. (v. 11) Paul's "large letters" may refer only to this postscript. They probably indicate his intensity of feeling rather than poor eyesight.
2. Motives of Judaizers. (vv. 12-13) They "want to make a good impression outwardly" (v. 12). They made converts to parade them before others.
3. Paul's Motives. (vv. 14-16) He gives three reasons for glorying in the cross:²⁵ (1) his commitment to Messiah rather than the world (v. 14b), (2) his freedom from the ceremonial law (v. 15), and (3) the new principle of conduct²⁶ that the cross leads to (v. 16).
NOTE: The NIV translation "even to the Israel of God" (v. 16) implies that "Israel" here means the church. It takes Greek *kai* to mean "even," which sets "Israel of God" in apposition to "all who follow this rule." Though possible grammatically, that meaning for *kai* is unusual. It probably means "and" here, as it usually does. In that case, *Israel* here refers to ethnic Israel, as it always does elsewhere (about eighty times in the New Testament). It is the believing segment of that nation, which Paul distinguishes from the non-believing segment in Romans 9:6 and 27 (see also Rom. 11:5).
4. Paul's Farewell. (vv. 17-18) He reminds them of
 - "the marks of Jesus" on his own body (v. 17). These were probably "brands" of ownership, implicitly contrasted to circumcision.²⁷
 - the great value of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Messiah" (v. 18)

²⁵ 6:16. David Levy, in *Israel My Glory* for February/March 1994, p. 26.

²⁶ 6:16. "Follow this rule" uses the same verb as "keep in step with the Spirit" in 5:25. In each passage the NET Bible translates, "Behave in accordance with."

²⁷ 6:17. David Levy (op. cit., p. 26) says that such brands often marked (1) a slave in a Phrygian temple, with the name of the god he served; (2) a soldier, with the name of his commanding general; (3) a household slave, with the name of his owner; (4) a criminal, to identify him in society.

Appendix: Galatians 3:16

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Messiah. (Gal. 3:16)

Blessing through Abraham and his seed. Galatians 3:6 to 4:7 shows that the law cannot enable one to inherit the blessing promised through Abraham—but faith in Messiah can. The introductory words (3:6-9), as is fitting, remind us of our necessary connection to Abraham. Just as he was made right by faith, so the blessing promised through him comes to those who are his sons by faith. In 3:15-29 Paul calls God’s arrangement with Abraham a “covenant” with a “promise” or “promises.” Verse 16 (quoted above) shows that those promises are for Abraham and for Messiah. What proves that they are for Messiah? God’s words to Abraham: “and to your seed.” Paul quotes those exact words from Genesis 13:15 and 17:7, 8 (cf. Gen. 12:7; 24:7). Then he explains that they mean “one person, who is Messiah.”

Paul knew quite well that “seed” in both Hebrew and Greek is a collective noun, singular in form but referring to many (see Genesis 13:15, 16; 15:5; 17:7-8, 10). In fact, at the end of this chapter in Galatians (3:29), he gives the same word from the same context a plural meaning. (He does the same thing in Roman 4:16.) We may conclude that in Galatians 3:16 the meaning “one person” is an additional meaning Paul reveals for the singular form “seed.”

Inherit the land. Notice something else remarkable about the words Paul quotes from Genesis. It is what God promised to Abraham and to his Seed. In each of the three possible passages being quoted, what He promised was the land Abraham “would later receive as his inheritance” (Heb. 11:8). Of course, Abraham and his family “did not receive the things promised [“not even a foot of ground,” Acts 7:5]; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance” (Heb. 11:13). How, then, will God fulfill such promises? Only by raising Abraham and others from the dead (which is the meaning of Jesus’ argument for resurrection in Luke 20:37-38). That land is God’s land (Lev. 25:23) and Immanuel’s land (Isa. 8:8). When Jesus promised that “the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5), He used the same language to refer to the same thing (as in Ps. 37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34; Isa. 60:21). To use Paul’s words in Romans 4:13-16, in the future kingdom Abraham, along with all his seed, will be “heir of the world.”

No wonder that early church writers expected to inherit the Promised Land! Hear what Justin Martyr (ca. 100-163) said, speaking of the land promised to Abraham and his seed.

There shall be a future possession of all the saints in this same land. And hence all men everywhere, whether bond or free, who believe in Christ and recognize the truth in His own words and those of His prophets, know that they shall be with Him in that land, and inherit incorruptible and everlasting good.²⁸

²⁸ Justin Martyr, in *Dial. Trypho*, ch. 139, as quoted by George N. H. Peters in *The Theocratic Kingdom of our Lord Jesus, the Christ*, II:446. Peters quotes Irenaeus to the same effect.