

OneBook.

DAILY - WEEKLY

The Letter to the Galatians

David A. deSilva



AN EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

The Letter to the Galatians

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WELCOME TO ONEBOOK DAILY-WEEKLY

John Wesley, in a letter to one of his leaders, penned the following:

O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first, will afterwards be pleasant. Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether.

Rarely are our lives most shaped by our biggest ambitions and highest aspirations. Rather, our lives are most shaped, for better or for worse, by those small things we do every single day.

At Seedbed, our biggest ambition and highest aspiration is to resource the followers of Jesus to become lovers and doers of the Word of God every single day, to become people of One Book.

To that end, we have created the OneBook Daily-Weekly. First, it's important to understand what this is not: warm, fuzzy, sentimental devotions. If you engage the Daily-Weekly for any length of time, you will learn the Word of God. You will grow profoundly in your love for God, and you will become a passionate lover of people.

How Does the Daily-Weekly Work?

Daily. As the name implies, every day invites a short but substantive engagement with the Bible. Five days a week you will read a passage of Scripture followed by a short segment of teaching and closing with questions for reflection and self-examination. On the sixth day, you will review and reflect on the previous five days.

Weekly. Each week, on the seventh day, find a way to gather with at least one other person doing the study. Pursue the weekly guidance for gathering. Share learning, insight, encouragement, and most important, how the Holy Spirit is working in your lives.

Welcome to OneBook Daily-Weekly

That's it. Depending on the length of the study, when the eight or twelve weeks are done, we will be ready with the next study. On an ongoing basis, we will release new editions of the Daily-Weekly. Over time, those who pursue this course of learning will develop a rich library of Bible learning resources for the long haul.

OneBook Daily-Weekly will develop eight- and twelve-week studies that cover the entire Old and New Testaments. Seedbed will publish new studies regularly so that an ongoing supply of group lessons will be available. All titles will remain accessible, which means they can be used in any order that fits your needs or the needs of your group.

If you are looking for a substantive study to learn Scripture through a steadfast method, look no further.

WEEK ONE

Galatians 1:1–10

The One and Only Gospel

ONE

Who Speaks for *God*?

Galatians 1:1 *Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—*

Key Observation. Only the apostolic gospel that faithfully preserves God’s invitation, issued on God’s terms, has the power to lead us to life.

Understanding the Word. Galatians is one of Paul’s most passionately written letters. Some of his converts in the cities of Galatia are being won over by other Jewish Christian teachers who have come along after Paul’s departure. These teachers have very different ideas about where to draw the boundaries around the people of God. They also differ significantly concerning the role the law of Moses ought to play in Christian life. They are taking advantage of Paul’s absence to pull the Galatian Christians in a very different direction from the course on which Paul had set them. Paul’s own authority has come under fire in the process. The new teachers may not have anything against Paul personally. However, they will no doubt have found it necessary to call Paul’s motives, credibility, and correctness into question if they are going to win over his converts. The stakes are very high for Paul. From what he hears about the situation, he believes that following the rival teachers’ recommendations for moving forward will essentially mean renouncing Jesus and his death on their

behalf. He will dramatically warn his converts: “You are cut off from Christ! . . . You fell from grace!” (Gal. 5:4, author’s translation).

Paul comes out fighting from the very first sentence. A typical letter in the first-century Roman world would have begun: “Paul to the churches in Galatia, greetings.” Every expansion of and departure from the standard form would have been heard as significant. Paul’s first expansion asserts that the origin of his commission and the agent through whom his commission came are divine. He does not come to Galatia as the representative of any human group, including the circle of the original apostles in Jerusalem. He comes to represent God and to communicate God’s astounding offer of gracious favor. This offer includes reconciliation with God through God’s Son, reception of God’s transforming Spirit, and rescue thereby from “the present evil age” (1:4). The rival teachers may have come claiming to represent the Jerusalem apostles. If Paul’s message does not align with theirs, however, this doesn’t mean that Paul has departed from *his* commission and *his* Commissioner. Paul will support this bold claim at some length in 1:10–2:14.

Paul no doubt has strong feelings about rival teachers leading his converts down a different path. He is not immune to turf issues (see 2 Corinthians 10:13–16). He sees enough of the big picture, however, not to be *merely* concerned with defending turf (see Philippians 1:15–18). Paul believes that the rival teachers in Galatia have missed the essential point. They fail to perceive the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection for defining the people of God and for discovering the path to justification before God. Paul will fight to keep his converts grounded in the gospel that *God* has given him for them. He does not want them to set aside *God’s* grace and power (2:21). The rival teachers’ gospel will give them neither a reliable vision for, nor the spiritual power to attain, the transformation God sought to work in God’s “new creation” (Gal. 6:15).

1. What are some areas in which you, your congregation, or your denomination struggle to discern *God’s* good news from human distortions of the good news?
2. What do you do to help make sure that you’re following a divinely authorized message as gospel and as a reliable pointer to holiness, and not merely a human invention?

TWO

All in the Family

Galatians 1:2 and all the members of God's family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

Key Observation. When we join ourselves to Christ, we become part of a global family. We inherit all the mutual obligations and support that natural sisters and brothers ought to share.

Understanding the Word. Paul often names teammates who are working alongside him as cosenders of his letters. We encounter Sosthenes as a cosender of 1 Corinthians, Timothy as a cosender of 2 Corinthians, and both Silvanus and Timothy as cosenders of 1 Thessalonians. Galatians is distinctive among his letters. He doesn't name a coauthor, but he also doesn't write as if acting on his own either (as in Romans and Ephesians). Instead, he enlists the support of "all the members of God's family who are with me." He reminds the Galatians that his gospel is not his own invention. It is the gospel embraced by a significant number of those whom God has called together in Christ.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) reads "all the members of God's family who are with me." We could read this more closely as "all the brothers and sisters who are with me." Paul consistently speaks about Christians as a group of siblings. He constantly reinforces the conviction that those whom God has gathered together in Christ form a new family. This family is as real as any family related by blood. Indeed, it *is* related by blood; namely, the blood of Jesus. One Father unites all members together by their adoption into a global "household of faith" (1:3; 4:4-7; 6:10 ESV). Paul leads them, as a new family, to adopt a new ethos and to accept new obligations to one another. They are called to set aside competition, manipulation, deceit, and all the behaviors accepted as appropriate among people who are strangers and outsiders. Instead, they are to give one another the gifts of cooperation, trust, truth-telling, loyalty, and sharing resources (see Colossians 3:5-17; Hebrews 13:1-3, 15-16). They are to invest themselves in advancing one another's interests, not in advancing their individual interests at another's

expense (see Philippians 2:3–4). Learning to see and care for one another as family is the backbone of early Christian identity and community.

The fact that Christians meet together in the homes of the wealthier members of the group may make it easier to think of one's fellow Christians as the "household of faith." The Greek *ekklēsiai*, traditionally rendered "churches" (as in Galatians 1:2), is better rendered "assemblies" or "gatherings." There are no churches in the sense of designated buildings in the first century. There are only gatherings of believers in homes (see Romans 16:4–5, 23; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). It is to such gatherings that Paul sends his letter.

Most commentaries on Galatians include a lengthy discussion of *where* in the vast Roman province of Galatia Paul's addressees are located. This also involves discussions of where in the time line of Paul's ministry this letter and the situation it addresses should be placed. I believe that a solid case can be made for identifying these congregations with those Paul and Barnabas planted together on their first joint mission recounted in Acts 13–14. I imagine Galatians being written to the churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Galatians may also be Paul's earliest surviving letter.

1. How can an awareness of what Christians have believed across the ages and across the continents help you avoid local and modern innovations that might distort the gospel?
2. When have you been a part of Christian groups that shared the level of intimacy and mutual commitment that we would associate with a well-functioning family? What facilitated or impeded this?

THREE

Redemption, Rescue, and Response

Galatians 1:3–5 *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Key Observation. Christian life is a life of responding gratefully to Jesus' self-giving love. It is the grateful acceptance of freedom from being dominated by all the powers of this age, including sin, death, the flesh, and Satan.

Understanding the Word. The typical letter opened with the formula: "Sender to Recipient, Greetings." Paul consistently replaces the formal "greetings" with a wish for "grace and peace" to rest upon his addressees. *Grace* is the watchword for this letter. It is centrally at stake in the Galatians' situation (2:21; 5:2-4); it is what Paul desperately wants his converts to continue to experience (1:3; 6:18).

Peace is a watchword of Roman imperial propaganda. Augustus and his successors justify their power based on the peace that they have brought to the Mediterranean, whether through conquest, suppression of revolt, or elimination of pirates and brigands. Paul suggests that peace must come from a different source. It must come from God the Father and the Lord Jesus, who will usher in a new order under new leadership. In God's kingdom, peace will be genuine and not a mere campaign slogan (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

Paul opens by reminding his hearers of the display of grace at the core of the Christian confession. Jesus gave himself for the sins we committed (see also Galatians 2:19-21; 3:10-14; 4:4-5). Both Jews and Greeks are familiar with stories of righteous, innocent people who gave up their lives for the sake of others. Jews especially remember the faithful who allowed themselves to be tortured to death rather than break faith with God's covenant. They have already interpreted the deaths of these martyrs as an offering of obedience to God on behalf of the whole people. These martyrs atoned for the disobedient and turning God's wrath to mercy (see 4 Maccabees 6:28-30; 17:21-22). Jesus is such a benefactor and more, as Paul will remind his converts throughout this letter. Such selfless generosity on Jesus' part demands absolute loyalty and gratitude in response, as Paul will also remind his converts (see 2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Jesus' death is not just a *ransom* for sins, but a *rescue* from "the present evil age" (1:4). Roman propaganda speaks of life under Augustus and his successors as the return of a Golden Age. Paul has a very different outlook. While God had created everything "good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, etc.), the whole cosmos is perverted by human and angelic disobedience. Human beings

labor under the oppressive powers of sin, death, flesh, and the devil. But Jesus' death and resurrection signal the end of this present evil age. It signals the dawning of the age to come, in which God's good vision for human existence will come to full fruition. It is a decisive turning point in God's dealings with human beings, ushering in a new era of freedom that the Holy Spirit is already making real in the lives of Christ's own and in the new community forming in his name.

All of this is the outworking of "the will of our God and Father" (1:4). If we see in Jesus' death a man's attempt to appease an angry God on our behalf, we need to look again. Paul will have us see, in Jesus' death, a generous God's invitation to his alienated creatures both to return to his favor and to move forward together into the new creation where all will be restored.

1. How fully does Jesus' *giving* of his life for you shape your *living* of your life for him? In what specific ways?
2. Where do you fall on the spectrum of seeking rescue "from the present evil age" and seeking rootedness and fulfillment in this age? How does this correlate to your investment of yourself in your own transformation, in Christian community, and in mission?

FOUR

The Other Gospel

Galatians 1:6–7 *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

Key Observation. The apostolic gospel that positions us to live in line with God's Holy Spirit is the only *genuine* good news.

Understanding the Word. The core of the problem in Galatia is the proclamation there of a very "different gospel" (1:6). Paul and the rival teachers who follow him to Galatia can agree that Jesus' death and resurrection was an

act of decisive importance in God's dealings with humanity. They can agree that it sounded the call to gather all the nations to worship the one God. They disagree, however, as to the response that God seeks to this call.

The rival teachers believe that circumcision is the way all people, Jew or Gentile, join themselves to God's people and number themselves among Abraham's heirs (see Genesis 17:9–14). Jesus' death indeed cleanses both Jew and Gentile from their past sins, but for the purpose of a fresh opportunity to take on the yoke of God's eternal covenant. The law of Moses remains the means to "choose life" (Deut. 30:15–20). This Law is God's provision for mastering the passions and desires of the flesh. It is the path to experiencing freedom at last from the power of sin and to attaining a consistent life of righteousness (see 4 Maccabees 1:13–17; 5:22–24). Like Paul, these rival teachers believe in the unity of the one body of the church. Unlike Paul, they believe that the Gentiles need to adapt their practice to the Jewish way of life in order to enjoy that unity of fellowship.

Paul's rivals promote obedience to the Torah as the perfect way to complement and complete the Galatians' faith in Jesus. Paul, however, presents this course of action as the desertion and rejection of their divine patron (1:6). He opens the body of his letter by expressing his shock that his converts are contemplating such an ugly course of action to so generous a Savior. He uses words that have become standard by his time for expressing a rebuke. He adds to their shame by highlighting the ease with which they were allowing themselves to be turned aside. How could they be "so quickly" diverted from the noble course on which Paul, acting on God's behalf, has set them?

Paul quickly shifts from calling the rival teachers' message "a different gospel" to denying that it even qualifies as "another gospel." Paul brings a message to the Galatians that God has validated by pouring out his Holy Spirit upon them. A "*different* gospel" (1:6, author's emphasis) therefore turns out to be "no gospel at all" (1:7). The rival teachers have gotten the gospel *sufficiently* wrong to have gotten it *all* wrong, as Paul will explain at length (2:15–5:12).

We need to be careful not to imitate the rival teachers in their mishandling of the good news. They have a stack of scriptures on their side. Indeed, they have many more than Paul has, if the truth be told. They have a wealth of tradition and history on their side. What they lack, however, is all important—an appreciation of the value and the reliability of the Holy Spirit, that "best gift

divine”¹ secured for us by Jesus (3:13–14), as the guide and guardian of God’s work on this side of Christ’s coming.

1. To what extent do you rely on traditional or scriptural rules to make decisions? To what extent do you rely on the Holy Spirit’s leading?
2. Where do you find temptations to pervert the gospel of Christ in your setting? (Try to think here not only of perversions of the gospel that you oppose, but of perversions of the gospel that you embrace!)

FIVE

The Integrity of Message and Messenger

Galatians 1:8–10 *But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!* ⁹*As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!*

¹⁰*Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

Key Observation. We must take great care not to deform or reduce the gospel either for the sake of our cherished traditions or our desire to please people.

Understanding the Word. Paul’s rebuke builds up to a solemn curse upon anyone who comes along trying to turn Christ’s good news into something that it is not. The word rendered *accursed* here is used in other contexts to speak of someone or something that has been consigned to destruction. In Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people of Israel not to shelter anything that God has destined for destruction. If they do so, they will bring destruction on themselves as well (see Deuteronomy 7:26). At Jericho, Achan keeps some of the Canaanites’ possessions instead of destroying them as God commanded. As a result, he brings death upon himself and his family (see Joshua 6:18; 7:1–26).

1. Follitt S. Pierpoint, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” 1864.

The goal of these commands is to save Israel from bad influences and false teaching (see Deuteronomy 20:16–18).

The significance of Paul's curses is clear. Preserving the contours of God's message of deliverance is of utmost importance. Perverting those contours is the gravest offense. Why? Misrepresenting God will lead untold numbers astray. It will cause them to miss the deliverance that God holds out to them—a deliverance that has cost no less than God the Son's giving himself over to death on their behalf. It is noteworthy that Paul places himself under the same threat. The message authorizes the messenger, not the other way around. Paul must hold himself also to remaining true and steadfast in his proclamation of *God's* message.

Paul's curse calls us to be watchful in regard to the gospel we embrace *and* the gospel we promote! The rival teachers' mistake is to limit the Spirit's flow to the well-worn channels of the Torah. This should make us careful not to insist that the practices that *we* embrace as ways to honor God are the *only* ways real Christians can honor God. We also need to exercise care not to build false boundaries within which the Spirit must flow (as if we could control that!). At the same time, we need to observe the boundaries within which the Spirit *does* work his full transformation of our lives and relationships.

Paul's spirited objections in 1:10 seem to come out of nowhere. Paul is probably responding to something the rival teachers have been saying about him. We don't have to imagine malice on their part. It is enough that they have had to explain to Paul's converts why Paul didn't tell them about the importance of getting circumcised and taking on the Torah's yoke: "Paul's an energetic evangelist, but he's too keen on winning people over to tell them the *whole* truth about what God requires."

Paul affirms that he is not out to talk God and humanity into some workable compromise. He has faithfully declared the message that God gave him and he trusts God's Holy Spirit to carry conviction home. (His bold opening in Galatians should be proof enough of this!) He knows that he can't serve Christ wholeheartedly and consistently and be a slave to public opinion at the same time. We, too, need to discover how to remove all unnecessary stumbling blocks between God's transforming work and the people around us. We also need to allow all *necessary* stumbling blocks to remain in place, to poke, and to provoke the necessary change in all of us if we are to become God's "new creation" (6:15).

Week One

1. Where are the absolute boundaries of Christian faith and practice to be drawn? Where is there wiggle room or room for toleration of diversity?
2. When has your desire for acceptance or affirmation from people stopped you from witnessing to God's whole truth?

WEEK ONE

GATHERING DISCUSSION OUTLINE

- A. **Open session in prayer.** Ask that God would astonish us anew with fresh insight from God's Word and transform us into the disciples that Jesus desires us to become.
- B. **View the video for this week's readings.**
- C. What were key insights or takeaways that you gained from your reading during the week and from watching the video commentary? In particular, how did these help you to grow in your faith and understanding of Scripture this week? What parts of the Bible lesson or study raised questions for you?
- D. **Discuss selected questions from the daily readings.** Invite class members to share key insights or to raise questions that they found to be the most meaningful.
 - 1. **KEY OBSERVATION:** Only the apostolic gospel that faithfully preserves God's invitation, issued on God's terms, has the power to lead us to life.
DISCUSSION QUESTION: What do you do to help make sure that you're following a divinely authorized message as gospel and as a reliable pointer to holiness, and not merely a human invention?
 - 2. **KEY OBSERVATION:** When we join ourselves to Christ, we become part of a global family. We inherit all the mutual obligations and support that natural sisters and brothers ought to share.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: When have you been a part of Christian groups that shared the level of intimacy and mutual commitment that we would associate with a well-functioning family? What facilitated or impeded this?

3. **KEY OBSERVATION:** Christian life is a life of responding gratefully to Jesus' self-giving love. It is the grateful acceptance of freedom from being dominated by all the powers of this age, including sin, death, the flesh, and Satan.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: How fully does Jesus' *giving* of his life for you shape your *living* of your life for him? In what specific ways?

4. **KEY OBSERVATION:** The apostolic gospel that positions us to live in line with God's Holy Spirit is the only *genuine* good news.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: To what extent do you rely on traditional or scriptural rules to make decisions? To what extent do you rely on the Holy Spirit's leading?

5. **KEY OBSERVATION:** We must take great care not to deform or reduce the gospel either for the sake of our cherished traditions or our desire to please people.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: When has your desire for acceptance or affirmation from people stopped you from witnessing to God's whole truth?

- E. **As the study concludes, consider specific ways that this week's Bible lessons invite you to grow and call you to change.** How do they call us to think differently? How do they challenge us to change in order to align ourselves with God's work in the world? What specific actions should we take to apply the insights of the lesson into our daily lives? What kind of person does our Bible lesson call us to become?

- F. **Close session with prayer.** Emphasize God's ongoing work of transformation in our lives in preparation for loving mission and service in the world. Pray for missing class members as well as for persons whom we need to invite to join our study.