PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

The King Who Sets Us Free

Galatians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Who Sets Us Free: Paul's Letter to the Galatians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

Galatians is the angriest letter Paul ever wrote. There's no warm thank-you at the beginning. He calls his readers foolish. He confronts the apostle Peter to his face. He says some things about his opponents that would get a modern pastor in serious trouble. He's upset because he loves these people, and someone is trying to take away the most important thing they have.

What is it? Freedom. Not the freedom to do whatever you want, but the freedom of knowing that God accepts you completely because of what Jesus did, not because of what you do. Some teachers had come to the churches in Galatia and told the new believers that Jesus was a good start, but to really belong to God's people they needed to add a list of rules. Paul's answer is a loud, clear, six-chapter no.

You may not be tempted to get circumcised or keep the food laws of Moses. But you've probably felt the same pressure in other forms. You're a Christian, but are you a good enough Christian? Do you read your Bible enough, pray enough, look the part, fit in at church, keep the unwritten rules? Galatians is for anyone who has ever felt that God's love depends on their performance.

Martin Luther loved this letter so much that he called it his Katie, the name of his wife. People have called it the charter of Christian

freedom. It's short. You can read it in twenty minutes. But it might change the way you think about God for the rest of your life.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all six chapters of Galatians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Because Galatians is short and packed, each chapter here goes slowly, explains Paul's argument and the key words he uses (gospel, justified, law, flesh, Spirit, freedom), and adds background about the people, places, and controversies behind the letter.

Before chapter 1, a longer-than-usual section called Setting the Scene explains where Galatia was, who the troublemakers were, how this letter connects to the story in Acts, and why scholars still debate exactly when and to whom it was written. Don't skip it. Galatians makes much more sense when you know what was going on.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

Because Galatians is so short, this book quotes it sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words. So keep a Bible open next to it. Read the whole letter in one sitting first, the way the Galatians heard it, and then go chapter by chapter. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, Romans, and the Corinthian letters, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the Romans and Corinthians volumes, walking through Galatians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Galatians raises several questions that scholars and churches discuss: where exactly the Galatian churches were and when Paul wrote; how Paul's account of his Jerusalem visits fits with Acts; what Paul means by works of the law; whether faith in Christ should be translated faithfulness of Christ, as the NIV footnotes suggest; and how Paul's statement that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female applies today. I've presented these briefly and fairly, without trying to settle every debate.

Paul's language is strong in places, especially in 1:8–9 and 5:12. I've explained these passages honestly and in context. Paul's harshness

is directed at teachers who were leading young believers astray, not at Jewish people; I've been careful to make that clear, since Galatians has sometimes been misused to support contempt for Judaism.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader who feels they have to earn God's love will discover that in Christ they are already His children, and that real freedom looks like serving one another humbly in love.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Where Was Galatia?

Galatia was in the middle of what is now Turkey, a region of high plains, mountains, and harsh winters. Its name comes from the Gauls, Celtic tribes from Europe who invaded the area around 278 BC and settled there. (They were related to the Celts of ancient France and Britain, and Galatia and Gaul come from the same root.) For centuries they were known as fierce warriors.

In 25 BC, the Romans made Galatia a province. Here's the tricky part. The Roman province of Galatia was much bigger than the old Celtic territory. It stretched south to include cities that weren't ethnically Galatian at all, like Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. So when Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, he could mean two different places.

North or South?

This is one of the classic debates about Paul's letters. The North Galatia view says Paul was writing to churches in the old Celtic heartland in the north, around cities like Ancyra (modern Ankara, the capital of Turkey). Acts mentions Paul passing through the region of Galatia on his second and third journeys (Acts 16:6 and 18:23), and supporters of this view say that's when he founded these churches. Many older scholars, and many in Europe, held this view.

The South Galatia view says Paul was writing to the churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, cities in the southern

part of the Roman province. Acts 13 and 14 tell the story of Paul and Barnabas founding those churches on the first missionary journey. Many scholars today, especially in Britain and North America, favor this view, partly because Acts tells us a lot about those churches and nothing specific about churches in the north, and because Barnabas, whom the Galatians seem to know, traveled with Paul only on the first journey.

Which is right? We can't be certain, and nothing in Paul's message depends on it. But it does affect the next question.

When Did Paul Write?

If the South Galatia view is right, Galatians may be Paul's earliest surviving letter, written around AD 48 or 49, soon after his first journey and possibly just before the big meeting in Jerusalem described in Acts 15. That would make it one of the oldest documents in the New Testament.

If the North Galatia view is right, Paul wrote it later, probably in the mid-50s, around the time he wrote Romans and the Corinthian letters. Some scholars who hold the South Galatia view also date it to the 50s.

One clue people use is that Galatians and Romans cover many of the same ideas, like Abraham's faith and justification by faith, but Galatians is hotter and more urgent, while Romans is calmer and more organized. Whatever the date, you can read Galatians as Paul's first blast on a subject he explained more fully in Romans.

The Troublemakers

After Paul left the Galatian churches, some other teachers arrived. Paul never names them. They were probably Jewish Christians,

believers in Jesus, possibly connected with Jerusalem. Their message seems to have been something like this: Jesus is the Messiah, that's wonderful. But God's people have always been marked by circumcision, the food laws, and the Jewish calendar. If you Gentiles want to be full members of God's family, you need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.

These teachers are often called Judaizers, from a Greek word Paul uses in 2:14 for making Gentiles live like Jews. It's important to be clear: Paul's fight was not with Jewish people or with Judaism itself. Paul was Jewish and proud of it. His fight was with the idea that Gentiles had to become Jewish to belong to Jesus, because that would mean Jesus wasn't enough.

The teachers also seem to have attacked Paul personally, saying he wasn't a real apostle, that he got his message secondhand from the leaders in Jerusalem, and that he watered it down to make it easier for Gentiles. That's why Paul spends the first two chapters telling his own story.

Circumcision

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 17, a small surgery for males that marked them as part of God's people. For Jewish families, it was a sacred, centuries-old practice, performed on baby boys eight days after birth. For adult Gentile men in the Roman world, it was a painful operation, without modern medicine. The Greeks and Romans also thought it was strange and embarrassing, because athletes competed naked in the gymnasium.

So the Galatian men were being asked to do something costly and permanent. And Paul says doing it as a requirement for belonging to God would be like saying the cross wasn't enough.

The Meeting in Jerusalem

Acts 15 describes a meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, sometimes called the Jerusalem Council, around AD 49. It happened because some men from Judea had come to Antioch teaching that Gentile believers had to be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabas argued with them, and the church sent them to Jerusalem to settle the question.

At the meeting, Peter reminded everyone how God had given the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, like Cornelius, without circumcision. James, the brother of Jesus, quoted the prophets and concluded that the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles who were turning to God. The council sent a letter to the Gentile churches saying they did not have to be circumcised, asking only that they avoid a few things that would especially offend Jewish believers.

How does this connect to Galatians? In Galatians 2, Paul describes a visit to Jerusalem where the leaders agreed with his gospel. Some scholars think that's the Acts 15 meeting, seen from Paul's side. Others think it was an earlier, private visit, the famine relief trip in Acts 11, and that Galatians was written before the council. If so, it would explain why Paul doesn't mention the council's letter, which would have helped his argument. Either way, Galatians and Acts 15 are fighting the same battle, and the church came down on Paul's side.

How Paul Wrote It

Most of Paul's letters begin with a thank-you to God for the readers. Galatians doesn't. Paul skips straight to his astonishment. It's the only one of his letters to churches with no thanksgiving at all, which tells you how alarmed he was.

At the end, Paul picks up the pen himself and writes in large letters. Some think his eyesight was poor (Galatians 4 hints at an illness that may have affected his eyes). Others think he wrote big on purpose, like using bold type or capital letters, to underline his main point one last time.

The Map

Chapters 1 and 2: Paul's story. His gospel came from Jesus, not from other people. The leaders in Jerusalem agreed with him. And when Peter wavered in Antioch, Paul confronted him.

Chapters 3 and 4: Paul's argument. The Galatians received the Spirit by faith. Abraham was made right with God by faith. The law was a temporary guardian until Christ came. Now believers are God's children and heirs, not slaves.

Chapters 5 and 6: Paul's application. Stand firm in freedom. Don't use freedom as an excuse to sin. Live by the Spirit, who produces love, joy, peace, and more. Carry each other's burdens. And boast only in the cross.

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CHAPTER 1

No Other Gospel

Galatians 1

Paul opens the letter with his name, and right away he does something unusual. He says he is an apostle sent not by people or by any human authority, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead. That's not just a fancy introduction. It's his first shot in the argument. Someone in Galatia had been saying Paul was a second-rate messenger, and Paul wants everyone to know exactly who sent him.

Then comes the greeting, grace and peace, and a one-sentence summary of the gospel. Jesus gave Himself for our sins, Paul says, to rescue us from this present evil age, because that was what the Father wanted. Notice the word rescue. The gospel isn't a self-improvement plan. It's a rescue mission.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Apostle**
>
> The word apostle means someone who is sent, like an ambassador or messenger with authority to speak for the one who sent him. The twelve disciples were apostles because Jesus personally chose and sent them. Paul wasn't one of the Twelve, and he hadn't followed Jesus during His ministry, so some people questioned whether he really counted. Paul's answer is that the risen Jesus appeared to him and sent him, which is what Acts 9 describes.

And then, where every other letter Paul wrote to a church has a thank-you, Galatians has this: "I am astonished." Paul can't believe

how fast they're turning away from the God who called them by grace and heading toward a different gospel. Then he corrects himself. It isn't really another gospel at all. There's only one. Some people are just confusing them and trying to twist the good news of Christ into something else.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Gospel**
>
> Gospel means good news. In the Roman world, the word was used for big public announcements, like the birth of a new emperor or a victory in battle. When the first Christians called their message the gospel, they meant an announcement: something has happened. Jesus died, rose again, and is Lord. The gospel isn't advice about what you should do. It's news about what God has done.

Paul's next words are some of the strongest in the New Testament. If anyone, even Paul himself, or even an angel from heaven, preaches a gospel different from the one the Galatians first received, let that person be under God's curse. And in case they missed it, he says it twice.

That sounds harsh. Why would Paul say something like that? Because he believed the stakes were life and death. If you tell a drowning person that the lifeguard can only save them after they've swum halfway to shore by themselves, you haven't given them a slightly different version of the truth. You've taken away their only hope. Paul's anger isn't about winning an argument. It's about protecting people he loves from a message that would cut them off from grace.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Under a Curse**
>
> The Greek word is anathema, which in the Old Testament Greek translation referred to something handed over to God for destruction. Paul isn't swearing. He's saying that a false gospel deserves God's judgment, and he

applies it to himself first. It's a reminder that the message matters more than the messenger. Nobody, no matter how impressive, gets to change it.

Then Paul asks a question that might hit close to home: is he trying to win people's approval, or God's? If he were still trying to please people, he says, he wouldn't be a servant of Christ. Apparently his critics said he told people whatever they wanted to hear. Paul's point is that if he were a people-pleaser, he'd have taken the easy road and told the Galatians to get circumcised. That's what would have kept everyone happy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Approval Trap**

Everyone wants to be liked. It's built into us. But when other people's approval becomes the thing you can't live without, it starts running your life. You say what the crowd wants. You hide what you believe. You become whatever the room needs you to be. Paul had found something better: he already had God's approval in Christ, so he didn't need to earn everyone else's.

Now Paul starts telling his story, and he's going to keep telling it until the end of chapter 2. His main point is that his gospel didn't come from any human being. He didn't get it from a committee or learn it in a class. He received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

He reminds the Galatians of his past. He was a rising star in Judaism, ahead of most people his age, extremely zealous for the traditions of his ancestors. And he persecuted the church violently, trying to destroy it. If anyone was the least likely person to become a Christian, it was Paul.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Zeal**

In Paul's day, zealous didn't just mean enthusiastic. It was connected to heroes in Israel's history, like Phinehas in Numbers 25 and the Maccabees, who used violence to defend God's honor and the purity of God's people.

When Paul says he was zealous, he means he was willing to hurt people for what he believed. That's what makes his change so dramatic.

But God, Paul says, had set him apart even before he was born, and called him by grace. The wording echoes the calls of prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah's servant. God was pleased to reveal His Son in Paul, so that Paul would preach Him among the Gentiles.

After that, Paul didn't rush off to Jerusalem to get permission. He went to Arabia, then back to Damascus. Only three years later did he go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas, which is Peter's Aramaic name. He stayed with him fifteen days and didn't see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother. And Paul adds, very seriously, that he isn't lying.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Arabia**

Arabia here probably doesn't mean the desert of modern Saudi Arabia. It likely refers to the Nabataean kingdom, south and east of Damascus, whose capital was Petra, the famous city carved into rock. We don't know what Paul did there. Some think he spent the time praying and rethinking the Scriptures in light of Jesus. Others think he started preaching, which may be why the Nabataean king's governor later tried to arrest him, as Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 11.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fifteen Days with Peter**

The Greek word for getting to know Peter is where we get our word history. It suggests visiting someone to learn from them firsthand. Imagine two weeks of Peter telling stories about Jesus: the fishing boat, the walk on the water, the denial by the fire, the breakfast on the beach. Paul insists his gospel came from Jesus directly, but he clearly valued hearing from Peter too.

After that, Paul went to Syria and Cilicia, the region around his hometown of Tarsus. The churches in Judea didn't even know his face. They only heard the news: the man who used to persecute us is

now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they praised God because of him.

That's how the chapter ends. Not with Paul's achievement, but with people praising God for what He did in Paul. Your story can do that too. The point isn't how good you look. It's what God has done.

KEY VERSE

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians 1:10 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says there's only one gospel. Why do you think he took changes to it so seriously?
2. Where do you feel the most pressure to please people: friends, family, social media, church? What does that pressure push you to do?
3. Paul was the least likely person to follow Jesus. Who is someone you've written off? Could God change them?
4. If someone asked you to explain the gospel in one or two sentences, what would you say?

TRY THIS *This week, notice one moment when you're tempted to change what you say or do to get someone's approval. Pause and ask yourself whose approval you're really living for.*

CHAPTER 2

Face to Face

Galatians 2

Fourteen years later, Paul says, he went up to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas, and he brought Titus along. He went because of a revelation, not because anyone summoned him. And he met privately with the leaders of the church to lay out the gospel he was preaching among the Gentiles. He wanted to make sure he hadn't been running his race for nothing.

Then he mentions Titus, and you can tell this is important. Titus was a Greek, a Gentile believer. And the leaders in Jerusalem didn't force him to be circumcised. That was the test case. If Titus could be a full member of the church without circumcision, so could the Galatians.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Which Visit?**
>
> Acts describes several trips Paul made to Jerusalem after his conversion. Galatians 2 might describe the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where the same question was debated publicly. Or it might describe the famine relief visit in Acts 11:30, when Paul and Barnabas brought money from Antioch to the believers in Judea. Supporters of the second view point out that Paul says this meeting was private, and that Paul mentions being asked to remember the poor. Either way, the result was the same: the leaders agreed with Paul.

Some people Paul calls false believers had slipped in to spy on the freedom believers have in Christ Jesus, and to bring them back into

slavery. Paul didn't give in to them for a moment. Why? So that the truth of the gospel would remain for the Galatians. He was fighting for people he hadn't even met yet.

As for the leaders, the ones who seemed to be important, Paul says their reputation didn't matter to him, since God doesn't play favorites. And they didn't add anything to his message. Instead, they saw that God had given Paul the job of taking the gospel to the Gentiles, just as He had given Peter the job of taking it to the Jews. The same God was working through both of them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Pillars**
>
> Paul names three leaders who were considered pillars of the church: James, Cephas, and John. James was the brother of Jesus, who hadn't believed in Him during His ministry but met the risen Jesus and became the leader of the Jerusalem church. Cephas is Peter. John is the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve. A pillar holds up a building, and the early Christians thought of the church as God's new temple.

So James, Peter, and John gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, a handshake that meant partnership. They agreed: you go to the Gentiles, we'll go to the Jews. The only thing they asked was that Paul keep remembering the poor, which he says he was eager to do anyway. Paul spent years collecting money from Gentile churches for poor believers in Jerusalem, as you'll know if you've read 2 Corinthians.

Then comes one of the most dramatic scenes in the New Testament. Peter came to Antioch, the big city in Syria where Jewish and Gentile believers worshiped together. And Paul says, "I opposed him to his face."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Antioch**

Antioch was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria. It was the place where followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). It was also the church that sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. It was a mixed church, Jewish and Gentile together, which made it the perfect place for this conflict to break out.

Here's what happened. When Peter first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers. That was a big deal. Many Jewish people of the time avoided eating with Gentiles because of the food laws and concerns about ritual purity. But Peter had learned, through a vision and through Cornelius in Acts 10, that God doesn't call any person unclean.

Then some men came from James. And Peter began to pull back from the Gentile believers and eat separately, because he was afraid of the circumcision group. The other Jewish believers followed his lead. Even Barnabas, Paul's partner, was led astray. You can hear the hurt in that line. Even Barnabas.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Meals Mattered**

In the ancient world, eating together meant accepting each other. It was a sign of friendship and equality. The early church ate together regularly, and the Lord's Supper was often part of a shared meal. So when Peter moved to a different table, the message to the Gentile believers was loud and clear: you're not really one of us. You're second-class unless you become Jewish.

Paul saw that they weren't acting in line with the truth of the gospel. So in front of everyone, he confronted Peter. You're a Jew, he said, but you've been living like a Gentile. How can you now force Gentiles to live like Jews?

Think about how hard that must have been. Peter was the most famous apostle. He had walked with Jesus for three years. Paul was

the newcomer, the former persecutor. But Paul cared more about the truth than about keeping the peace or looking polite. He wasn't attacking Peter as a person. He was defending the Gentile believers who were being pushed out.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did Peter Listen?**

Galatians doesn't say how Peter responded. But in Acts 15, Peter stands up at the Jerusalem Council and argues that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and that both are saved by grace. And years later, 2 Peter 3 speaks of Paul warmly as a dear brother, while admitting some of his letters are hard to understand. It seems the friendship survived the confrontation.

Then Paul explains the heart of the issue. We who are Jews by birth, he says, know that a person isn't made right with God by doing what the law requires, but by faith in Jesus Christ. That's why even Jewish believers put their trust in Christ. If keeping the law could make people right with God, then nobody would need Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Justified**

To be justified means to be declared in the right, the way a judge declares someone not guilty. It's a courtroom word. But in Galatians, it also has a family meaning: to be counted as a member of God's people. The question in Antioch was who belongs at the table. Paul's answer is that everyone who trusts Jesus has been declared right with God, so everyone who trusts Jesus belongs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Works of the Law**

What does Paul mean by works of the law? Traditionally, many readers understood it as doing good deeds to earn God's favor. Some scholars, in what's called the New Perspective on Paul, argue that Paul especially means the practices that marked Jews off from Gentiles, like circumcision, food laws, and the Sabbath. Both ideas are present in the discussion. Either way, Paul's point is the same: nothing we do can be the basis for our standing with God. Only Christ can.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Faith in or Faithfulness of?**

Where the NIV says faith in Jesus Christ in this chapter, a footnote offers another possible translation: the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. The Greek phrase can be read both ways. If it means faith in Christ, Paul is emphasizing our trust. If it means the faithfulness of Christ, Paul is emphasizing Jesus' perfect obedience to the Father, all the way to the cross. Scholars disagree, but both ideas are true and both appear in Paul's letters. We're saved because Jesus was faithful, and we receive it by trusting Him.

Paul then answers an objection. If we stop relying on the law, doesn't that make Christ someone who encourages sin? Absolutely not, Paul says. In fact, if he rebuilt the old system he had torn down, that's what would really make him a lawbreaker.

Then he writes one of the most loved sentences in the Bible. I have been crucified with Christ, he says, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life he lives now, he lives by trusting the Son of God, who loved him and gave Himself for him.

Read that slowly. Paul doesn't say Jesus loved the world in general. He says Jesus loved me. Personally. The old Paul, the one trying to prove himself, is dead. Now Jesus lives in him. Being a Christian isn't about trying harder to be good. It's about a new life, Jesus' life, living in you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Does the Speech End?**

Paul's words to Peter start in verse 14, but it's not clear where they stop. The NIV puts closing quotation marks at the end of verse 21, but a footnote says that some interpreters end the quotation after verse 14. Ancient Greek didn't have quotation marks, so translators have to decide. Either way, verses 15 to 21 explain the reasoning behind Paul's challenge to Peter.

Paul ends the chapter with a powerful claim. He refuses to set aside God's grace. Because if people could be made right with God by

keeping the law, then Christ died for nothing. Let that sink in. If you could earn it, the cross was a waste.

KEY VERSE

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Peter moved tables because he was afraid of what others would think. Where do you see people at your school, or in your church, sitting at separate tables? What would it look like to change that?
2. Paul confronted Peter in public. When is it right to call someone out, and when should it be done privately?
3. What's the difference between trying to be good so God will love you, and being good because God already loves you?
4. Paul says Jesus loved me and gave Himself for me. How does it feel to think of Jesus' love as personal?

TRY THIS *This week, sit with someone who usually sits alone, at lunch, at church, or anywhere. Don't make a big deal of it. Just make room at the table.*

CHAPTER 3

Foolish Galatians

Galatians 3

Paul has finished telling his story. Now he turns to the Galatians directly, and he doesn't hold back. "You foolish Galatians!" he says. "Who has bewitched you?" It's as if someone had cast a spell on them. When Paul was with them, he had preached about Jesus' crucifixion so clearly it was like a public poster in front of their eyes. How could they now be looking somewhere else?

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Bewitched**
>
> The word Paul uses was connected to the evil eye, a common superstition in the ancient world. People believed someone could put a curse on you just by staring at you with jealousy. Paul isn't saying he believes in that. He's using a vivid picture: something has hypnotized you. And the cure for the evil eye was to fix your eyes on something else. Paul says: you saw Jesus crucified. Keep your eyes on Him.

Then Paul asks them one simple question. When you received the Holy Spirit, was it because you kept the law, or because you believed what you heard? They knew the answer. They had experienced God's Spirit, maybe even miracles, long before anyone told them about circumcision.

So, Paul says, are you really so foolish? You started with the Spirit. Do you now think you can finish by your own effort? That's like

being given a ride home in a car and then deciding to get out halfway and push it the rest of the way.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Flesh**
>
> Where the NIV says human effort in this chapter, the footnote notes that the Greek word is sarx, which literally means flesh. Paul uses it a lot in Galatians, and it doesn't just mean your body. It means human nature on its own, without God: our self-reliance, our pride, our weakness, and our tendency to sin. When the troublemakers wanted the Galatians circumcised, they were literally asking for a mark in the flesh, and Paul plays on that double meaning.

Now Paul goes back to Abraham. That makes sense, because the troublemakers were probably saying that you have to be a child of Abraham, through circumcision, to be part of God's people. Paul says: look at how Abraham himself was made right with God. Genesis 15 says he believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. That happened before he was circumcised and centuries before the law of Moses.

So who are Abraham's real children? Those who have faith, like him. And Paul points out that Scripture saw this coming. When God first called Abraham in Genesis 12, He promised that all nations would be blessed through him. The gospel was announced to Abraham in advance. God's plan always included the Gentiles.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Credited**
>
> Credited is a banking or accounting word. It means to put something into someone's account. Abraham didn't earn righteousness. God put it into his account when he trusted God's promise. Paul uses the same picture in Romans 4. The idea is that God gives us a righteousness that isn't ours, the way a parent might pay off a child's debt and put money into their account besides.

Then Paul makes a hard point. Everyone who relies on keeping the law to be right with God is actually under a curse. Why? Because the law itself, in Deuteronomy 27, puts a curse on anyone who doesn't keep everything written in it. And nobody keeps everything. Paul then quotes the prophet Habakkuk: "the righteous will live by faith." Life with God comes through trusting, not through scoring perfectly.

But here's the good news. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." Paul quotes Deuteronomy, which says anyone hung on a pole is under God's curse. For a Jewish person, that made a crucified Messiah seem impossible. How could God's chosen one die under a curse? Paul's answer is that He took our curse on Himself, so the blessing God promised Abraham could come to the Gentiles, and so we could receive the promised Spirit by faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Redeemed**
>
> To redeem means to buy back or set free by paying a price. It was used for buying a slave's freedom or paying a ransom for a prisoner of war. In the Old Testament, God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. Paul says Jesus paid the price to set us free from the curse. And as we'll see, freedom is one of the big words of this letter.

Next Paul uses an example from everyday life. Once someone makes a legal agreement, like a will, nobody can add to it or cancel it. God made promises to Abraham and his seed, Paul says, and the seed is Christ. The law came 430 years later. It couldn't cancel the promise God had already made. If the inheritance depends on keeping the law, then it isn't really a promise anymore. But God gave it to Abraham as a gift.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seed**

Paul makes an argument from the fact that the word seed, or offspring, in Genesis is singular, not plural. To modern readers that can seem like a stretch, since seed can mean many descendants. But Jewish teachers often made points from single words, and Paul's bigger idea is that God's promises to Abraham's family find their fulfillment in one person, the Messiah, and then in everyone who belongs to Him. Later in the chapter, he applies the word to all believers.

So, someone might ask, what was the point of the law? Paul says it was added because of sin, until the promised seed came. It was temporary. It wasn't against God's promises, but it could never give life. It showed that the whole world was locked up under sin, so that what was promised could be given to those who believe.

Then Paul gives us a great picture. Before faith came, we were held in custody under the law. The law was our guardian until Christ came. But now that faith has come, we're no longer under a guardian.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Guardian**

The Greek word is paidagogos, where we get pedagogy, the study of teaching. But a paidagogos wasn't really a teacher. He was usually a slave who looked after a wealthy family's son from about age six until his teens. He walked the boy to school, carried his books, kept him out of trouble, and sometimes disciplined him. Every kid was glad to be free of him when they grew up. Paul's point: the law had an important job, but it was for a season. When you grow up, you don't need a babysitter anymore.

Now Paul reaches the high point of the chapter. In Christ Jesus, he says, you are all children of God through faith. Everyone who has been baptized into Christ has clothed themselves with Christ. And then he says: There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor

free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

That was explosive in Paul's world. A Jewish morning prayer recorded in later sources thanks God for not making the one praying a Gentile, a woman, or an ignorant person, with slave appearing in some versions, and Greek writers credited philosophers with a similar saying about not being born a barbarian, a slave, or a woman. Paul flips all three. In Christ, the walls that divided people into higher and lower are gone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Neither Male nor Female**

Christians discuss how this verse applies today. Paul isn't saying differences disappear; Jews were still Jews and women were still women. He's saying that in Christ, none of these differences make anyone more or less a child of God, and none of them give anyone a better seat at the table. Some Christians believe this verse means all roles in the church should be open to everyone; others believe Paul's other letters describe some different roles for men and women. Both sides agree on the main point: everyone who belongs to Christ is equally God's child and heir.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Clothed with Christ**

In the Roman world, when a boy came of age, he put on a special adult toga as a sign that he was now a full member of the family and a citizen. Paul may be thinking of that. In baptism, believers put on Christ like a new set of clothes. When God looks at you, He sees you wearing His Son.

And if you belong to Christ, Paul says, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. The troublemakers said the Galatians needed circumcision to become Abraham's children. Paul says they already were. Everything God promised Abraham belongs to them, because they belong to Jesus.

KEY VERSE

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul asks the Galatians if they're trying to finish by their own effort what God started by His Spirit. Where do you try to do that in your own life?
2. What do you think it means that Jesus became a curse for us?
3. If Paul wrote verse 28 to your school or church today, what groups might he name?
4. The law was like a guardian for a season. What rules in your life now are meant to help you grow, and what would it look like to outgrow the need for them?

TRY THIS *Make a list of the labels people use to rank each other where you live: popular or not, rich or poor, smart or not, athletic or not. Next to the list, write: "you are all one in Christ Jesus." Pray for someone on the other side of a label from you.*

CHAPTER 4

Children, Not Slaves

Galatians 4

Paul keeps going with his picture of growing up. Imagine a wealthy family's son, the heir to everything his father owns. As long as he's a child, Paul says, he's no different from a slave. He owns the whole estate, but he can't make decisions. He's under guardians and managers until the date his father has set.

That's what we were like, Paul says. Before Christ came, we were like underage heirs, enslaved to the basic principles of the world.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Basic Principles**
>
> The Greek word stoicheia can mean the ABCs, the basic elements of something, like the letters of the alphabet or the elements earth, water, air, and fire. It can also mean spiritual powers, which many ancient people believed controlled the stars, the seasons, and human lives. The NIV footnote mentions both possibilities. Paul may mean that both Jewish life under the law and pagan religion were ways of living under elementary, limited powers, before the real freedom of God's children came.

But then, at just the right time, when the date the Father set had fully come, God sent His Son. Jesus was born of a woman, fully human. He was born under the law, a Jewish boy who kept the law perfectly. And He came to redeem those under the law, so that we could be adopted as God's children.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Adoption**

The NIV footnote says the Greek phrase means adoption to sonship. In the Roman world, a wealthy man without an heir might adopt an adult son to carry on his name and inherit his estate. Adoption was legal and permanent. The adopted son's old debts were cancelled, and he had all the rights of a natural-born son. Paul uses this picture to say that believers, male and female alike, have the full rights of heirs in God's family.

And here's how you know it's real. Because you are His children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, and the Spirit cries out, "Abba, Father." That's not just a theological fact. It's an experience. The Spirit inside you gives you the confidence to talk to God as your Father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Abba**

Abba is the Aramaic word for father, the language Jesus spoke at home. It was the word Jewish children used for their dads, though adults used it too. It's warm and personal, but also respectful. Jesus used it when He prayed in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). Paul keeps the Aramaic word even when writing in Greek to Gentiles, which suggests the early church remembered how Jesus prayed and learned to pray the same way.

So Paul sums it up: you're no longer a slave, but God's child, and if you're His child, God has made you an heir. You don't have to work your way up from slave to son. You've already been adopted.

That's why Paul is so frustrated. The Galatians used to worship gods that weren't really gods. Now they know God, or better, Paul corrects himself, they are known by God. So how can they turn back to those weak and miserable principles and want to be enslaved again? He says they're observing special days, months, seasons, and years, probably the Jewish calendar of festivals and Sabbaths that

the troublemakers were pushing as requirements. Paul is afraid all his work with them was wasted.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Known by God**
>
> Paul's correction is beautiful. It's good to know God. But it's even better to be known by Him. Your relationship with God doesn't depend on how well you know Him, how much theology you've learned, or how good you are at praying. It depends on the fact that He knows you and chose to love you. Your grip on Him may be weak. His grip on you isn't.

Then Paul changes tone completely. He stops arguing and starts pleading, like a parent. Become like me, he says, for I became like you. He reminds them of the first time he came to them. He was sick. It was because of an illness that he first preached the gospel to them. And though his condition was a trial for them, they didn't treat him with contempt or scorn. Instead, they welcomed him as if he were an angel of God, or even Christ Jesus Himself.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul's Illness**
>
> We don't know what Paul's illness was. Some have suggested malaria, which was common in the lowlands of Pamphylia, near the southern Galatian cities. Others point to an eye problem, since Paul says the Galatians would have torn out their own eyes and given them to him if they could, and later mentions writing in large letters. Some connect it with the thorn in the flesh Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12. In the ancient world, some people spat to protect themselves from sick people, thinking illness might be a curse. The Galatians didn't. They loved him.

Where did that joy go? Paul asks. Has he become their enemy by telling them the truth? The troublemakers were working hard to win them over, but not for good reasons. They wanted to cut the Galatians off from Paul, so the Galatians would be devoted to them instead.

Then Paul calls them "My dear children" and says he feels like he's in the pains of childbirth again, until Christ is formed in them. That's a striking image for a man to use. Paul feels the agony of a mother in labor. He wants to see them become more and more like Jesus. And he wishes he could be with them in person and change his tone, because he's confused about what to do with them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Christ Formed in You**
>
> Paul's goal for the Galatians wasn't that they would follow the right rules, or even the right teacher. It was that Christ would take shape in them, the way a baby grows in the womb. Christian growth isn't about becoming a better version of yourself through sheer effort. It's about Jesus' character growing in you, by His Spirit, over time. That's slow, and sometimes painful. But it's real.

Paul ends the chapter with an illustration from the story of Abraham that has puzzled readers for centuries. Abraham had two sons. Ishmael was born to Hagar, a slave woman, in the ordinary way, because Abraham and Sarah tried to fulfill God's promise on their own. Isaac was born to Sarah, the free woman, as the result of a promise, when Sarah was far too old to have children.

Paul says these two women can represent two covenants. Hagar stands for Mount Sinai, where the law was given, and for the earthly Jerusalem, which in Paul's view was in slavery with her children. Sarah stands for the Jerusalem that is above, which is free, and she is our mother. Paul quotes Isaiah 54, which tells a woman who has never had children to celebrate, because her children will be many.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Figuratively Speaking**
>
> Paul says he's reading the story figuratively. He isn't saying Genesis didn't happen. He's using it as an illustration, a way of seeing a pattern in the story. Jewish teachers sometimes read Scripture this way too. It's important to see what Paul is and isn't saying. He's not attacking Jewish people. He's saying

> that trying to belong to God through the law, rather than through God's promise, leads to slavery. And the teachers pressuring the Galatians were the ones who needed to hear it.

So, Paul says, we are children of the promise, like Isaac. And just as Ishmael mocked Isaac, the children of the flesh are now pressuring the children of the Spirit. Paul quotes Sarah's words from Genesis 21 about sending away the slave woman and her son. His conclusion: we aren't children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

KEY VERSE

So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

Galatians 4:7 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between relating to God as a slave and relating to Him as a child?
2. Paul says it's even better to be known by God than to know Him. Why might that be comforting on a day when you feel far from God?
3. The Galatians welcomed Paul when he was sick and weak. How do people at your school or church treat those who are struggling?
4. Paul says he's in labor until Christ is formed in the Galatians. Who has invested in you like that? Who could you invest in?

TRY THIS *When you pray this week, try starting with "Father" or "Abba, Father" and talk to God the way a child talks to a parent who loves them. Notice if anything changes.*

CHAPTER 5

Free to Love

Galatians 5

Chapter 5 opens with the sentence many people consider the theme of the whole letter: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." So, Paul says, stand firm. Don't let anyone put the yoke of slavery back on your shoulders.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Yoke**
>
> A yoke was a wooden beam fitted over the necks of two oxen so they could pull a plow or cart together. It became a picture for being under someone's control. Some Jewish teachers spoke positively of taking on the yoke of the law. Jesus said His own yoke was easy and His burden light (Matthew 11:30). In Acts 15:10, Peter warned against putting on Gentile believers a yoke that neither the Jews of his day nor their ancestors had been able to bear.

Now Paul gets very direct. If you get circumcised to be right with God, he says, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Everyone who does that is obligated to keep the whole law. You can't pick and choose. If you're trying to be justified by law, you've been cut off from Christ. You've fallen away from grace.

That doesn't mean circumcision itself was evil. Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), probably so he could minister among Jewish communities. The problem was treating it as a requirement for salvation. Paul says that in Christ, circumcision and

uncircumcision don't count for anything. What counts is faith expressing itself through love.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith Expressing Itself through Love**
> This phrase is a great summary of Paul's thinking. Faith isn't just believing the right facts. Real faith is alive, and it always shows up in love. Paul isn't against good works. He's against good works as a way to earn God's acceptance. When you know you're already accepted, love starts flowing out of you, not to earn anything, but because that's what God's Spirit produces.

You were running a good race, Paul says. Who cut in on you? Like a runner who trips another runner, someone had knocked them off course. And that pressure didn't come from God, who called them. Paul quotes a proverb: a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. A little false teaching can spread through a whole church.

Then Paul says something that shocks modern readers. As for those agitators, he wishes they would go all the way and castrate themselves. If they're so eager to cut, let them keep cutting.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Did Paul Really Say That?**
> Yes. Paul is angry, and he uses biting sarcasm. In Galatia, there were priests of a pagan goddess, Cybele, who castrated themselves as an act of devotion. Paul may be saying that if the troublemakers think cutting the flesh makes you holier, they're no better than those pagan priests. It's not a model for how Christians should talk to each other on a normal day. But it shows how seriously Paul took anything that endangered the people he loved.

Now Paul turns a corner. He's spent four and a half chapters talking about freedom. But he knows freedom can be misunderstood. So he says: you were called to be free, but don't use your freedom as an excuse to indulge the flesh. Instead, serve one another humbly in love.

That's not what most people mean by freedom. We usually think freedom means doing whatever I want. Paul says real freedom is being free from the need to prove yourself, so that you can give yourself away for others. The whole law, he says, is summed up in one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you keep biting and devouring each other, watch out, or you'll destroy each other.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Freedom**

In the Roman world, a large share of the people in big cities, perhaps a quarter or more by some estimates, were slaves or former slaves. Everyone knew what slavery was, and everyone knew how precious freedom was. Paul uses that picture. But he turns it upside down. He tells free people to serve one another, using a word related to slavery. Freedom in Christ means choosing to serve out of love rather than being forced to serve out of fear.

So how do you live free without sliding into selfishness? Paul's answer is the Holy Spirit. Walk by the Spirit, he says, and you won't satisfy the desires of the flesh. The flesh and the Spirit want opposite things. They're in conflict with each other. The NIV footnote gives two possible ways to read the end of verse 17, but the struggle Paul describes is familiar to anyone who has tried to follow Jesus. But if you're led by the Spirit, you're not under the law.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Inner Battle**

If you've ever wanted to do the right thing and done the wrong thing anyway, you know what Paul means. Following Jesus doesn't mean you'll never struggle. In fact, the struggle can be a sign that the Spirit is at work in you, because before, you might not have cared. The answer isn't to try harder in your own strength. It's to keep in step with the Spirit, one step at a time.

Then Paul gives two lists. First, the acts of the flesh, which he says are obvious. They include sexual immorality, impurity, and

debauchery. Idolatry and witchcraft. Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy. Drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. People who live this way, Paul warns, won't inherit the kingdom of God.

Notice how many of these are relational sins. Most of the list isn't about sex or partying. It's about fighting, jealousy, rivalry, and dividing into groups. Exactly the kinds of things that were happening in Galatia.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Witchcraft**
>
> The Greek word is pharmakeia, which is where we get the word pharmacy. In the ancient world, it referred to sorcery, magic spells, and potions, often involving drugs or poisons. Magic was everywhere in the Roman Empire. People bought charms and curses and tried to control the spirits. Paul includes it in his list because it's an attempt to get power without trusting God.

Then comes the second list, and Paul calls it not acts but fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against things like that, he says, there's no law.

Why fruit? Because fruit isn't manufactured. It grows. A tree doesn't strain to produce apples. It just stays connected to its roots, and the fruit comes in season. In the same way, these qualities grow in you as you stay connected to Jesus. Notice that Paul says fruit, singular, not fruits. It's one harvest with nine flavors. The Spirit doesn't give you love but skip patience. He grows the whole thing.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Forbearance**
>
> Forbearance is an old-fashioned word for patience, especially patience with people who frustrate you. Older translations say longsuffering. It's the ability to put up with someone's annoying habits, slowness, or even unkindness,

without exploding or giving up on them. It's one of the hardest fruits to grow, and one of the most needed.

Paul finishes the chapter by saying that those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let's keep in step with the Spirit. That's a marching image, like soldiers or a band keeping time together. And then a very practical warning: let's not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

KEY VERSE

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:22–23 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. How would you define freedom? How does Paul's definition compare?
2. Most of the acts of the flesh are about how we treat each other. Which ones do you see most among people your age?
3. Which fruit of the Spirit do you see growing in your life? Which one do you most need God to grow?
4. What do you think it looks like, practically, to keep in step with the Spirit on an ordinary school day?

TRY THIS *Pick one fruit of the Spirit and ask God to grow it in you this week. Look for a chance to practice it, especially with someone who makes it hard.*

CHAPTER 6

Carry Each Other's Burdens

Galatians 6

Paul's last chapter is full of practical advice for life together in a church. First, if someone gets caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person, gently. The word restore was used for setting a broken bone or mending a fishing net. The goal isn't to punish or shame. It's to heal. But Paul adds a warning: watch yourself, or you may be tempted too.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Gently**
>
> Gentleness was just listed as a fruit of the Spirit. Now Paul shows what it looks like in action. It's easy to be harsh with someone who has messed up, especially if you feel superior. Gentleness comes from remembering that you could be in their place. It's strength under control, like a doctor who knows how to set a bone without causing more pain than necessary.

"Carry each other's burdens," Paul says, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." The troublemakers wanted the Galatians to keep the law of Moses. Paul says there's a different law that matters: the law of Christ, which is the way of love Jesus lived and taught.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Law of Christ**
>
> Paul doesn't define the law of Christ, but the context suggests it's the command to love one another, which Jesus called a new command in John 13:34. Jesus didn't just teach this law, He lived it. He carried our burdens all

the way to the cross. When we carry each other's burdens, we're living the way He lived.

Then Paul says something that sounds like a contradiction. If you think you're something when you're nothing, you're fooling yourself. Each person should test their own actions, without comparing themselves to someone else. Then Paul says each one should carry their own load. Wait, didn't he just say to carry each other's burdens?

BACKGROUND CHECK **Burden or Load?**

Paul uses two different Greek words. The burdens in verse 2 are heavy weights, the kind of crushing troubles nobody can carry alone, like grief, temptation, or a crisis. The load in verse 5 is more like a soldier's backpack, the ordinary responsibility each person is expected to carry. So both are true. Help others with what's too heavy for them, and take responsibility for your own stuff.

Paul also reminds them to share good things with those who teach them God's word. In other words, support your teachers. And then a serious warning: Don't be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A person reaps what they sow. If you plant seeds to please your sinful nature, you'll reap destruction. If you plant seeds to please the Spirit, you'll reap eternal life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sowing and Reaping**

Almost everyone in the ancient world knew farming. If you plant corn, you don't get tomatoes. If you plant nothing, you get weeds. Your habits are like seeds. What you watch, what you think about, how you spend your time, and who you spend it with all grow into something. The good news is that small, faithful seeds planted with the Spirit grow into a harvest too.

Then comes the Key Verse for this chapter, a great encouragement for anyone who is tired of trying to do the right thing. Don't get

weary of doing good, Paul says, because at the right time you'll reap a harvest, if you don't give up. So whenever you have the chance, do good to everyone, especially to the family of believers.

Notice Paul says everyone. Christians are called to do good to people who aren't Christians too. But the church is a family, and families take care of their own first. That's not exclusion. It's a starting point.

And now Paul takes the pen. "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!" Up to this point, Paul had probably dictated the letter to a scribe, which was normal at the time. Now he writes the last lines himself, in big letters, so everyone would know this was really from him and that this was the bottom line.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ancient Letters**
>
> In the Roman world, most letters were written by professional scribes. The sender would dictate, and the scribe would write it down, sometimes in shorthand and then a clean copy. At the end, the sender often added a personal greeting in their own handwriting as a kind of signature. In Romans 16:22, the scribe, Tertius, even adds his own greeting. Paul mentions his own handwriting in several letters, including 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians.

Paul's final summary is sharp. The people pushing circumcision want to look good in the flesh. They want to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even they don't keep the whole law, he says. They just want to boast about how many Gentiles they've signed up, like collecting trophies.

But Paul wants something else. He never wants to boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through the cross, Paul says, the world has been crucified to him, and he to the world. The world's way of keeping score, who's important, who's in, who's out, doesn't have any power over him anymore.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Boasting in the Cross**

In Paul's world, the cross was the most shameful thing imaginable. It was a punishment for slaves and rebels, designed to humiliate. Romans considered it so disgusting that polite people didn't talk about it. Boasting in the cross would be like bragging that your hero died in the electric chair. But Paul says the cross is the one thing worth boasting about, because it's where God's love was shown most clearly.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, Paul says. What counts is the new creation. That's the whole point. God isn't just patching up the old world. He's making something new, and everyone who belongs to Jesus is part of it.

Peace and mercy, Paul says, to all who follow this rule, and to the Israel of God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Israel of God**

This phrase is debated. Some think Paul means the church, Jewish and Gentile believers together, as the people of God. Others think he means Jewish believers in Jesus, or the Jewish people whom God has not forgotten, as Paul discusses in Romans 11. The NIV footnote shows that the Greek can be translated in slightly different ways. What's clear is that Paul ends with a blessing, not a curse.

Paul's last personal words are a little bit raw. From now on, he says, let no one cause me trouble, because I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The troublemakers wanted to boast about marks of circumcision. Paul has a different kind of mark: the scars from being whipped, beaten, and stoned for preaching Jesus. In Lystra, one of the southern Galatian cities, he had been stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19). The Galatians may have seen those scars themselves.

And then, after all the anger and argument, Paul ends the same way he began. With grace. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

KEY VERSE

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Galatians 6:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Think of a time someone helped you carry a heavy burden. What did they do that helped most?
2. When someone you know messes up, is your first instinct to restore them or to judge them? Why?
3. What seeds are you planting in your life right now? What do you think they'll grow into?
4. Paul says the only thing worth boasting about is the cross. What do people your age boast about? What would it look like to boast in the cross instead?

TRY THIS *Ask God to show you one person who is carrying a heavy burden right now. Then do one concrete thing to help them carry it: a message, a meal, a ride, a prayer, or just showing up.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul was willing to fight his friends, his fellow apostles, and even Peter over one question: is Jesus enough? His answer was yes. Jesus plus nothing. That's the gospel he refused to let anyone change.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He wants you as His child.

Paul says God sent His Son so that we could be adopted as His children, calling Him Abba, Father. You weren't an accident. You were made to belong to Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Religious people and irreligious people alike. Nobody keeps God's law perfectly. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus took the curse.

Paul says Jesus did more than die for us. He took the curse we deserved on Himself when He was hung on a cross, so that the blessing promised to Abraham could come to us. And God raised Him from the dead.

> *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,* **Galatians 3:13 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

This is the whole point of Galatians. You don't add anything to what Jesus did. Not rules, not rituals, not performance. Salvation is a gift you receive by trusting Him.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. It doesn't mean you'll never fail again. It means you're no longer a slave. You're a child of God, and the Spirit lives in you.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself, and I can't earn Your love by trying harder. I believe Jesus died for me, took the curse I deserved, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You that I'm Your child. Fill me with Your Spirit, and help me use my freedom to love others. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Galatians straight through in one sitting. Then read Ephesians, the next letter in the New Testament, which tells you who you are in Christ.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored, and where grace matters more than looking good. Carry each other's burdens. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. You can call Him Father. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Paul himself spent years fighting against Jesus before he met Him. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, you don't have to earn God's love. You can stop performing and start living as His child. That's worth finding out for yourself.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Galatians 5:1 (NIV)