

“THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS - 1”
“WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?”
Galatians 1:1-10

How are we to live as Christians? What makes a person a Christian? How should we live in order to be distinctive, to distinguish ourselves from “the world”?

People attempt to answer questions like that in a variety of ways according to their own background and according to the standards and expectations of the society in which they live. Some will draw up a strict set of rules – no dancing, no cinema, wear certain clothes in church, and so on. Others will reject anything that smacks of legalism and say that we’re free to do whatever we want because Jesus will forgive anything. Yet others, rejecting both the old legalism and the “anything goes” attitude, will establish a new legalism – do what the leaders tell you, tithe strictly, speak in tongues, and so on.

The apostle Paul had similar problems to deal with in his role as pastor, evangelist and church leader – although for him the problems may well have seemed much greater because they had never occurred before. It’s fairly obvious what many of those problems were because of the way in which he writes in his letters, responding to particular needs in particular places. In *Romans*, for example, he is anxious to set out his basic theology for people he doesn’t know who may be a bit suspicious of him. In *Corinthians* he is trying to put the Christians in Corinth right on matters of worship and church government. In *Timothy* he wants to give his young protégé encouragement in the face of hassles in his own congregation. Over the next few weeks we’re going to spend some time on Sunday mornings (and, for those who want it, there is material for the housegroups too) looking at his letter to the *Galatians*. It is a masterpiece of Christian doctrine, which some people have called “The Magna Carta of the Church”. In it, Paul addresses in a forthright and straight-talking way some of the problems that we still have to face in our Christian lives today.

The first part of this letter is mainly doctrinal and the second part is concerned more with the practical aspects of living the Christian life. Despite what some people would like to think, both parts are vitally necessary. Without doctrine we have no real reason for behaving as we do: we must know **why** we are called to live as Christians in this world. But without practice, our doctrine is sterile, just words on a page, facts in our heads, knowledge that does not affect our lives and cannot touch those around us.

This morning, I just want to sketch in a little of the background to this letter so that it might perhaps become a bit more real to us and use these first few verses, which we’ve just read, to introduce some of the themes that we will encounter later on. It is so easy to forget that these letters were written by a real person to real people living in a particular place on the map and at a particular time in history. Round about one thousand nine hundred and fifty years ago, there was a group of Christians sitting round in a room in someone’s house and the leader would have taken a piece of parchment that had been delivered earlier in the week and begun to read it to the group. It was a letter from Paul, an evangelist who had led a mission in their area a few years before and under whose ministry many of the group had become Christians. The leader would have read the letter right through from beginning to end, and those who heard it would not have needed to go into it in the detail that we will need to because it spoke to them of things that they knew and which were very relevant to their situation at the time. Paul’s words of rebuke would have stirred their hearts and reminded them of their shortcomings. His references to the Old Testament would have been immediately understandable to the Jewish people who made up a large part of the group. His mention of Barnabas would have brought back memories of the other evangelist who accompanied Paul on the mission.

This little group of believers were in a part of what was then the Roman Province of Asia Minor called Galatia. They weren’t in a town, like Rome or Philippi or Corinth, but in an area which included several large towns. So this letter would have been passed around the various groups who were the Christian Church in Galatia, rather like a circular newsletter (as happened with the letter to the Colossians:

Colossians 4:16). Linking that up with what we know of Paul's missionary journeys that are described by Luke in *Acts* we can work out that the letter was written in about 48AD, which makes it one of the first letters that Paul wrote. We could go into a lot of detail about that this morning, but I won't bother you all with that. Any good commentary or Bible handbook will give you the background to the actual writing of the letter. I mention it, though, for two reasons.

Firstly, this gives us a sense that these words were written to real people at a specific point in history. The letter had a particular purpose: it wasn't intended by Paul that it should end up in the Bible, any more than Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* so that it could appear on the GCSE curriculum. Those Christians over there in Galatia had the same problems that we do. They were people very much like we are. They were part of the tradition of the Church in which we now stand. Although we need to be constantly re-assessing the way in which we communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must never forget that the truth of that Gospel is the same now as it was then – and be thankful for those who laid the foundations before us.

Secondly, as we try to fit together the pieces about when and where it was written, we become more aware that the Bible is a whole book. It hangs together and validates itself. It is easy to get the impression – particularly if we only read the Bible a few verses at a time – that there is no overall cohesiveness about it. But the books are interconnected and tell a single story – the story of God's love for humankind since the very beginning of Creation. Never forget that. Maybe you could try to read through the whole of this letter at one go – and read the books of *Acts* as well, to see how this fits in with Paul's missionary travels.

As to **why** Paul wrote this letter – well, that's what we are going to be looking at over the next few weeks, but let me just try to sum it up at the beginning so that you have some idea in your mind of where we're going. Paul had heard that some of the teachers in Galatia were trying to add extra qualifications to the Gospel and thus slipping back into a form of legalism that was completely alien to the message that Jesus came to bring. Being put right with God, having our broken relationship with him restored is possible only by faith in Jesus Christ alone. But we must not abuse that freedom and turn it into a licence to do whatever we want. The Holy Spirit helps us in that and it is his dynamic that enables us to use our freedom responsibly. The key verses in this letter are, therefore, *2:20,21* and *5:25*.

So let's have a look at what Paul has to say in these opening paragraphs, which we've read this morning. He greets his readers and explains in fairly direct terms his reason for writing to them.

The letter actually begins very abruptly. Paul is clearly keen to get to the meat of what he has to say and doesn't want to waste time on the formalities. As usual, he puts his own name, the name of the recipients and a brief wish for grace and peace for the readers. What is missing, though, is any expression of praise and commendation for the churches of Galatia, something which is a feature of all the other letters that he wrote. Look, for example, at *Romans 1:8-10*, *1 Corinthians 1:4-9* or *Colossians 1:3-8*. Paul is quite clearly not pleased by the reports he has received about the way in which the Galatian Christians are behaving.

How ever, in these opening sentences there are some very clear indications as to the character of Paul's doctrine and the truth of the Gospel which he preaches. They point very emphatically away from Paul himself and towards God, and Paul stresses those points which the false teachers in Galatia have been calling into questions – namely the sufficiency of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is his thrust in *1:6-9*; and his own authority as an apostle, which we can see is an issue from the way he writes in *1:10*.

1. **PAUL WAS SENT BY GOD**

Paul introduces himself immediately as an apostle, sent from God himself, not a mere messenger of men. This is something that is easily forgotten about both the early apostles and about God's messengers today

– including each one of us as we participate in sharing the Gospel. God’s call to proclaim the good news of salvation is always something that men and women have been reluctant to answer, for all kinds of reasons. Paul himself didn’t volunteer for the job and his conversion and call were dramatic enough to prove to him and to others that this was a very particular call from God.

We’ll look at this in more detail next time, but we can just note this morning that Paul was very careful to stress that his authority was from God, that he was not just pushing his own line, nor even the line of the other apostles. That’s something that we, as those who have been given the task of spreading the gospel, must never forget; and it is particularly important for those of us who from time to time have the privilege of preaching God’s word from the pulpit. By the desk in my study, I have prominently displayed the words of *1 Thessalonians 2:4*, which remind me that “*We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men, but God, who tests our hearts.*” There were obviously people in Galatia who were casting doubt on Paul’s credentials as an apostle, but he tries to scotch that in his opening words and in *1:10*. Next week we will look at the lengths he goes to to relate his life story and testimony, so that his readers are left in no doubt as to the genuineness of his conversion and of his call to be an apostle.

2. SALVATION WAS WILLED BY GOD

After his opening words, Paul gives a fairly standard greeting in *1:3-5*. But although it is much the same as he writes at the beginning of all his letters, these few concise words really contain the gospel in a nutshell. Here we have the elements of almost all the things that Paul elaborates on in the rest of the letter. Of course, we will deal with them in greater detail as we work through the subsequent chapters, but let’s just isolate them now, so that we can see what a great wordsmith Paul is.

a) **God wishes us to have grace and peace**, not a constant striving to work our way into God’s favour, and not a community which is characterised by conflict.

b) **God is our Father**. Paul builds on this in the opening sentences of chapter 4.

c) **Jesus Christ is our Lord**. We must never forget that Jesus is not only our Saviour, one who has given himself for us, but also our Lord, who expects a response of obedience from us in gratitude for all that he has accomplished on our behalf.

d) **Jesus died on our behalf to rescue us**. That is obviously the very heart of the message of the gospel and we cannot overlook it or we have no gospel to proclaim at all.

e) **This present world is full of evil**. We can easily overlook the fact that, if there is no inherent evil in the world to save us from, Jesus’ sacrifice was a vain and empty gesture. It is this aspect of our fallen nature that so many people and so many political and philosophical systems neglect, and which means that they are terminally flawed.

f) **God willed it all**. How necessary that is for our assurance of salvation! It is his work entirely and we can claim no credit whatsoever for our own salvation. It is all of grace.

g) **All the glory is due to God**. We worship him because of his grace and his mercy. All our lives should be lived in such humble submission to him that his glory is demonstrated to those around us. We are “*the thin spots in the curtain*” as one preacher put it: God’s glory should shine through us into a dark world.

Now everything that Paul believed about the gospel seems to be encapsulated there. In a sense all the rest of the letter is a commentary on those words. So Paul goes on to stress, in *1:6-9*, that the gospel is unique.

3. SALVATION IS ONLY FROM GOD

In these few verse we discover Paul's real reason for writing the letter. He is "*astonished*" that the Galatians have allowed themselves to be duped by false teaching. They are turning away to that which appears to be the gospel but, as J B Phillips translates it, "*is a travesty of the gospel*". It may have started off OK, but men have twisted it, warped it and added to it.

That danger is just as great today. The gospel is twisted, distorted and denigrated by men and women who have, no doubt, the highest motives, but have added extra qualifications to what should be a simple expression of God's grace. It's that new legalism which we spoke of earlier that sees tithing, abstinence, tongue-speaking, isolationism and so on as **necessary** adjuncts to what God has revealed to us.

But that's not to say that are not certain patterns of behaviour and clear moral implications of the gospel, but we need to be very clear about what is and what is not part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. There were others in Galatia who went to the opposite extreme and rejected any form of ethical system. The grace of God meant, for them, that they could do whatever they wanted and expect forgiveness. The danger is as real for us today. We can be so eager to show that God has set us free that we don't remain within the bounds of what is acceptable Christian behaviour. Bits of the gospel – especially that stuff about the **lordship** of Jesus Christ, get left out. We need to be ever on our guard.

So, as we read through this letter and reflect on what Paul had to say to those early Christians in Galatia, let us heed his words and always weigh carefully the gospel that we proclaim. We must ensure that we stick to the Bible, God's own revealed word to us, and make sure that we are neither tricked ourselves, nor guilty of leading others into confusion.

(House group notes on next page)

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS
1. "What's the problem?"
Galatians 1:1-10

Paul's letter to the Christians in Galatia (an area in Asia Minor – modern Turkey) is written to address particular problems which are affecting the church there. Following Paul's mission to the area and the planting of a number of churches (this letter would have been circulated around several congregations), other teachers have begun to preach erroneous doctrines, the main one of which seems to be that there is a need for Christians also to keep to a system of rules and regulations (very likely drawn from the Old Testament Law).

Paul writes to express his astonishment (1:6) and his eagerness to get to the point means that he has no words of praise for the Galatian Christians, as he does in other letters. He stresses from the outset that he is **an apostle who has been sent by God**, a theme which he develops later in chapter 1.

His brief greeting (1:3-5) admirably sums up the main points of the gospel which he is so keen to reiterate and develop in the rest of the letter.

- **God wishes us to have grace and peace**
- **God is our Father**
- **Jesus Christ is our Lord**
- **Jesus died on our behalf to rescue us**
- **This present world is full of evil**
- **God willed it all**
- **All the glory is due to God**

In vv6-9 he contends that **salvation is only from God** and he uses some fairly direct language to emphasise his point, calling down curses on those who stray from the gospel truth.

Questions for discussion

1. What differences do you find between the greeting in this letter and the greeting he writes to the Thessalonians (1:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:1)?
2. Compare the spirit in which Paul opens his letter to the Galatians with his spirit in some of the other letters (1:6-10; e.g. Romans 1:8ff; Philippians 1:3ff; Colossians 1:3ff). Why do you think this is?
3. What contemporary philosophies or religions can you think of which seem designed to please humans and not God? How many of these are "do-it-yourself" philosophies or religions? What is it, according to Paul, that pleases God?
4. What causes people to be confused about the gospel of Christ?
5. How can we guard against "*deserting the one who called us*"?
6. How can we best communicate the simple truth of God's grace to those around us?