

## **You've got the time 5: Galatians – Hebrews**

***(Galatians 3:1-5 & 23-29)***

### **Introduction**

We've reached the penultimate week of our series giving an overview of the New Testament. For those of you who have been listening to the Bible Society's 'You've got the time' then the end is in sight! For those of you who are visitors this morning and don't know what I'm talking about, we've been reading or hearing the New Testament over a forty day period, and thinking about different sections of it each Sunday.

This morning's task is to cover the letters from Galatians through to Hebrews. That's no mean feat as I'm sure you'll appreciate, particularly if you've been listening to or reading all those eleven letters this week! So what I propose to do is give a quick overview of the letters and then focus in on a small part of Galatians that we heard read a few minutes ago.

### **Illustration**

I wonder whether you've ever been to the Black Country Living Museum, or Blists Hill Victorian town, or to Beamish open air museum? If you have you'll know that at each 'living museum' a miniature town has been created to reflect a particular period of social history. In each there is a row of shops where it's possible to visit, browse, purchase items and learn what it would have been like to shop in Victorian times. In the case of Blists Hill there is a bank, a chemist, a grocer, a sweet shop, a printers, a bakers and others. Each of these shops has a different function, and in a time before supermarkets these would each have been visited according to need. As we visit these recreated shops today we find them fascinating, but we don't always quite understand what life would have been like then, what it would really have been like for example to purchase hand-made pills from the pharmacy. The culture is different.

That's the best way I can find to describe what is happening when we're confronted with these eleven letters from the New Testament. Each letter is written to meet, to cater, for a particular need so they're quite different from each other. The way they have been presented or placed in the New Testament puts them in a row one after another. But with the added complication that when we visit them we do so from a different culture. We don't quite get where they're coming from....

### **Overview of the letters**

So, let me give you a whistle-stop tour of the letters: Apart from Hebrews, all these letters before us this morning were written by the apostle Paul. The letter to the Galatian Christians and the two letters addressed to the church in Thessalonica are probably the earliest ones Paul wrote, around AD 48. The ones addressed to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon were written from prison in Rome over a couple of years beginning AD 60.

Most of the letters are Paul trying to set the new believers straight on certain matters. Either he's received letters from them to which he responds, or he's heard reports that concern him enough to write.

In the case of Philippians, Paul is writing to thank them for a gift, and the letter to the Ephesians was a circular letter that went round a group of churches.

1 and 2 Timothy & Titus are the 'pastoral' letters where he gives advice to young church leaders.

As for Hebrews, it was written for an audience of Jewish Christians, but when it comes to the author, as the church father Origen is reported to have said 'only God knows...'

### **Problems of the letters**

The thing that makes understanding and applying these letters difficult for our own time is that we are always working backwards from what we have in our Bibles. As Ian said last week when referring to Romans & Corinthians, we don't have the information that Paul had, the letters and reports he received. What we do have are his responses.

It's a bit like over-hearing one end of a phone conversation, and trying to work out from what's being said who's on the other end. It might even be possible to work out what the topic of discussion is, but the detail is a mystery. And to add to the difficulty, it's coming from a culture we haven't experienced and so don't really understand.

And when we are trying to apply Paul's writings to our own Christian journey it's worth bearing in mind that these are letters to real people about real issues, not step by step doctrine. At no point did Paul set out to write a manual for Christian living to be followed down through the centuries. So given all these factors, we should be cautious about how we use what's contained in these letters.

### **Galatians**

So, keeping all that in mind, let's turn specifically to Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians.

About one thousand nine hundred and fifty years ago, a group of Christians would have sat round in a house listening to their leader read out a letter. It was a letter from a chap who'd visited the area a few years before. In fact he'd held a mission in their area, and that's how most of them present had become Christians. Now the chap, Paul, was writing to them to point out that they'd veered off track in certain areas of their faith. It wasn't comfortable listening by any means! He was telling them off severely for listening to leaders who had added extra qualifications and requirements to the gospel.

Chapter 3 is a really good example of this. Paul starts off abruptly, 'you foolish Galatians! Why were they foolish? Because they'd been listening to false teaching, and worse than just listening to it, really taking notice of it too. These false teachers had been insisting that circumcision and adhering to the letter of the law was necessary for salvation. Paul knew otherwise, and what really got his goat was the fact that the Christians in Galatia knew that as well, but had let themselves be led astray.

Paul tells the Galatians that they have a choice. They can either live 'under the law' or live 'in Christ'. Either they live according to the teaching of Moses, or the teaching of Jesus. Either they are still waiting for the fulfilment of the promise, or they've already inherited the promise. That was the choice facing each Christian in Galatia.

Because of the difficulties of understanding and applying the letters that I've already mentioned this morning, we have to be cautious in drawing similarities between that of the Galatians and ourselves. There is no one insisting, for example, that we should be circumcised! (sighs of relief from a number in the room!!)

Although the detail is different, the general principle remains the same and we need to decide whether we are bound by religiosity, lots of rules that we must keep, or have we moved on to experience freedom in Christ ?

Perhaps sometimes we're not one hundred percent sure which we're living by. It's not always obvious to us, as it wasn't for the believers in the churches of Galatia. Paul gives us two examples of what being 'under law' means, and these might help us to decide where we stand.

### **The prison and the custodian.**

The first is about being prisoners – (v23) *Before faith came we were held prisoners by the law, locked up...*

Is that how Christian living makes you feel, locked up, like it is restricting your life, stopping you doing what you want, holding you back, taking away your choices and freedom ?

The second example Paul gives is of a 'custodian'. Verse 24 says the law was '*put in charge*'. Other translations say the law was our '*baby sitter*', or the law was our '*disciplinarian*'.

Paul was using the example of a tutor who was in charge of boys. Now a tutor then wasn't what we understand by tutor now. He wasn't a teacher, but was responsible for supervising boys and youths movements, making sure they were escorted to and from school, etc. They were usually a slave, and often harsh in the treatment of their charges. So the law is likened to somebody telling us how we can and can't behave, and warns us about the penalties for bad behaviour. Like a bad tempered minder shoing us into line and threatening us when we dare to overstep the mark.

Do you find that Christian living is all about making sure you don't break the rules. Doing exactly what you're told and when, or else ?

But look, said Paul, there is a much more attractive alternative available to us, and that is to live not 'under the law' but instead to live 'in Christ'.

But what does living 'in Christ' mean? The one word answer is 'freedom'! Paul writes to the churches of Galatia about a freedom that comes from Christ, that releases them from things that may well restrain them, keep them feeling restricted. He says, '*you are all one in Christ Jesus*'. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.*

What a radical statement that was to make in a culture where being Jewish (or not) defined everything, and where these Galatian Christians were being expected to take on the trappings of Judaism.

**Living in Christ** means accepting that he died for all people, regardless of their religion or culture.

**Living in Christ** means knowing that social distinctions have been blown apart. We may not live in a society where slavery is acceptable, as it was for the churches in Galatia, but there are still huge differences of wealth and poverty and how we treat people accordingly.

**Living in Christ** means that there is no distinction made on the basis of sex. What a very radical thing for Paul to say in a culture where women were despised and often exploited and ill-treated— sex equality two thousand years ahead of its time— and coming from someone who is supposed by many to have been very anti women. Jesus died for each one of us, male and female alike.

So Paul was calling the Galatian Christians back to freedom. Freedom from the things that bound them and held them and imprisoned them. Freedom from religious and cultural and social and sexual expectations. He was calling them out of a metaphorical cage that they had climbed back into.

As we gather around the Lord's table in a few moments we will remember again Jesus' sacrifice and death, made for those Christians in Galatia all those years ago, and made for us here today.

So let's embrace and celebrate the freedom that life in Christ brings. And be on a guard against climbing into cages of rules and regulations un-noticed.

**House Group Notes**  
**You've got the time 5: Galatians – Hebrews**  
**(Galatians 3:1-5 & 23-29)**

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## For Discussion

1. Of the eleven letters covered this week, which is your favourite/least favourite? Why?
2. In what ways do we need to be careful when we apply Paul's teaching to our own lives?
3. How do we know whether we are living 'under the law' or 'in Christ'? Is it always possible to tell?
4. Circumcision may not be the issue for us, but what religious rules might we find ourselves involved in?
5. What can we do as a church to help others find freedom in their faith rather than restrictions? Do our church structures sometimes restrict? How?

What would you like to be 'set free' from?