DISCOVERY

Paul's Letter to the Galatians



SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Galatians 1:1 through 6:18

KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

BACKGROUND

The exact geographic location of the Galatian churches remains uncertain. In Paul the Apostle's time, the Romans gave this name to an area in north central Asia Minor that came into their possession around 25 B.C., which they made into a province. In broader traditional usage, Galatia referred to a small southeastern portion of that province encompassing such cities as Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia. Most likely the letter was addressed to the churches in these locations which Paul had founded on his first missionary journey, as recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts.

Bible scholars estimate that Paul wrote this letter around A.D. 53-55. Like many of the New Testament letters authored by Paul, this epistle was written as a corrective message to churches going through challenging times after being founded under his authority, teaching, and tender care. It addressed the first major doctrinal controversy that plagued the Early Church in its formative years—a contention regarding whether Gentile believers had to adhere to requirements of the Mosaic Law, specifically the rite of circumcision. Apparently a group of teachers from Jerusalem had come and undermined Paul's teaching. Their faulty teaching that the Gospel required adherence to the old Law brought great bondage rather than the freedom offered by the Gospel of justification through faith in Christ. Of the epistle's six chapters, the first four and a half primarily concern this issue, and the remaining chapter and a half focus on how the Gospel should be lived out in daily life.

While the main theme of the letter is a defense of the doctrine of justification by faith and warnings against reverting to the requirements of Jewish legalism, Paul first established his authority as an Apostle. Other highlights include a charge to stand firm in Christian liberty, a comparison of the works of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit, and a warning that what is spiritually planted, either to the flesh or the Spirit, will grow into a crop with eternal consequences.

QUESTIONS

1. After his opening salutation, Paul asserted that the Galatian believers had removed themselves from what they had been taught to "another gospel." The Greek word translated "removed" in Galatians 1:6 implies changing sides or turning away. The verb tense used shows that this was taking place as Paul wrote, so this was an attempt at halting these believers' movement away from the true Gospel. In verses 6-9, how did he make clear the seriousness of what they were doing?

2. Paul stated in Galatians 2:19 that he had died to the Law, meaning that he no longer tried to justify himself by keeping the Law, and thus was free from its dominion. The following verse, Galatians 2:20, introduces one of the Apostle's most significant theological concepts. How would you explain what it means to be "crucified with Christ" and yet continue to live?

3. In the first two chapters of this epistle, Paul defended the authority of his message. In chapter 3, he addressed the spiritual error that was overtaking the Galatians: the false belief that obedience to the Mosaic Law was necessary for justification. Based on Galatians 3:19-25, how would you summarize the purpose for which the Law was given? What role did Paul point to in verse 24 to illustrate this purpose?

4. In chapter 4, Paul continued his explanation of spiritual liberty by describing the difference between slaves and sons. He reminded the Galatians that they had been promoted from servitude to sonship, and expressed his deep concern about their choice to return to enslavement. Near the end of chapter 4, Paul used the Old Testament account of Abraham's two sons as an allegory or teaching tool. What basic contrast was Paul pointing out by his series of comparisons in verses 21-31?

5. Toward the end of his letter, Paul took the concept of justification by faith and applied it to everyday life. He stated that the real test of a relationship with Christ was not the old covenant sign of circumcision, nor did uncircumcision have any merit. What had true value in God's sight was faith that was worked out in the life by love (see Galatians 5:6). List some ways that faith in Christ can be evidenced (or worked out) through love for others.

6. In verses 19-21 of chapter 5, Paul presented a list of behaviors that he identified as "works of the flesh." Which activities on this list pertain to relationships between individuals?

7. In contrast to the works of the flesh, verses 22-23 of chapter 5 list the fruit of the Spirit—the evidence that is apparent in the lives of those who are controlled by the Spirit. The first three (love, joy, and peace) are inner characteristics reflecting a person's relationship with God. The next three (longsuffering, gentleness, and goodness) are qualities related to a believer's dealings with others. The final three (faith, meekness, and temperance) are inner attitudes. What are some specific ways these godly attributes can be exemplified in our lives?

8. Paul's dual list of works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:19-24 is bracketed before and after by the clear commands, "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (verse 16) and "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (verse 25). How would you describe what it means to walk in the Spirit?

9. The Apostle closed this epistle by writing the final verses himself, rather than dictating them to a scribe (Galatians 6:11). He noted that those who were insisting upon circumcision were doing so in order to avoid the stigma associated with the Cross of Christ, and "that they may glory in your flesh" (or take pride in their own supposed religious superiority). In contrast, what did the Apostle say that he was determined to glory in, and why do you think he stated this so forcefully at the close of his epistle? Galatians 6:14-15

CONCLUSION

Paul challenged Galatian believers to stand firmly within the "good news" of spiritual freedom purchased by Jesus Christ on Calvary, and not to revert to the old requirements of the Law. He insisted that justification was not obtained by any human effort, but by a simple response of faith to God's unspeakable gift of grace in Christ. That justification is still available today.