

Introduction to Galatians

Revelation, Interpretation, and Application

- Whenever we seek to understand any book in the Bible, we should approach it first by looking at the revelation that was given.
- We should then seek to interpret the verse, passage, chapter, and book by understanding the author, the context, why the book was written, to whom the book was written, the cultural background when the book was written, and how a verse, chapter, or book fits into the overall narrative of Scripture.
- Finally, we should determine how the truth learned can be applied to our lives. Though the Scriptures were written thousands of years ago, they are ever-relevant to every person no matter what time period we live.
- This will be the pattern we follow as we seek to understand Galatians.

Background

- In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit speaks to the church leaders at Antioch and sends out Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey. John Mark also went with them, whom many believe recorded Peter's account of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark.
- This is Paul's first missionary journey.
- The journey is between 47-49 A.D.
- Paul plants four churches in Galatia: 1) Pisidian-Antioch; 2) Iconium; 3) Lystra; and 4) Derbe.
- During this time, Paul was sick (Galatians 4:13-15).
- Most of the Gentile converts in Galatia are full-blown heathens. They worship false gods, practice sexual immorality, witchcraft, and are superstitious.
- They have no Old Testament knowledge and most are illiterate.
- After Paul's miraculous conversion, he goes from Damascus, Syria to Arabia and spends three years in the wilderness. Then he goes to Jerusalem and meets with Peter. Then he goes on his first missionary journey. Finally, he travels back to Jerusalem in Acts 15 to discuss the influence of Judaizers with the 12 apostles.
- At some point before Galatians is written, Peter goes to the church at Antioch and has table fellowship with the Gentile believers. Judaizers, supposedly with a letter from James, go to Antioch and persuade Peter and Barnabas to stop eating with the Gentile converts. This is defiling them. As a result, all the Jews in Antioch stop eating with the Gentiles. When Paul finds out about this, he's furious. He rebukes Peter in front of everyone and tells the Jews and Gentiles to eat together.
- Judaizers were Jews who converted to Christianity but still believed they had to obey the Law of Moses. They also believed that Gentiles who converted to Christianity had to obey the Law of Moses.
- After Paul returns back from his missionary journey, some Judaizers, likely from Jerusalem, hear about the churches that Paul planted in Galatia. They don't like Paul's gospel of grace apart from the works of the Law. So, led by one main Judaizer, a group of Judaizers travel to Galatia and convince the Galatians that they must obey the Law of Moses and receive circumcision. They preached faith in Jesus Christ plus full obedience to the 613 commandments in the Law of Moses, for this is how people are both justified and sanctified.

Introduction to Galatians

- Paul writes Galatians after his first missionary journey and after the Judaizers have disturbed the churches of Galatia.
- Many scholars believe that Galatians was the first piece of Christian literature ever penned.

The Judaizers Claims

- In the words of F.F. Bruce, the late British scholar, when we are reading the New Testament letters, "we are in a position of people listening to one end of a telephone conversation; we have to infer what is being said at the other end in order to reconstruct the situation for ourselves."
- Known as mirror-reading, this interpretative method of reading the Bible makes the NT epistles come alive. It adds much depth to our understanding of what is taking place.
- Using mirror-reading, we can deduct some of the Judaizers claims against Paul. Here's some of what they were saying:
 - Paul is an illegitimate minister since he's not part of the 12 and is not part of the Jerusalem church (1:1).
 - Paul is a man-pleaser (1:10). He changes his message to please his audience. To Jews, he preached the Law. But not to Gentiles.
 - Paul was only a disciple of the 12. He did not have legitimate authority since he did not receive direct revelation.

Paul's Defense

- Paul's tone in Galatians is one of frustration, perplexion, defense, and even anger.
- He spends quite a bit of time defending the legitimacy of his ministry.
- Paul defended his apostolic ministry saying he received his gospel by direct revelation (11-12).
- Paul goes through his resume to persuade the Galatians to receive his pure gospel (1:13-17). He persecuted the church and was advanced in Judaism until his Damascus road experience. He didn't go to the 12 in Jerusalem until 3 years after his conversion and wilderness experience in Arabia.
- Paul wants the Galatians to know that there was about 14 years before he verified the revelations he received and his gospel message with the 12 apostles (2:1-2). Paul let the Galatians know that the 12 agreed with his revelations and his gospel message.
- Building the case for his authority, Paul reiterates that those of reputation contributed nothing to Paul. They didn't give him the gospel. He received it from Jesus Christ directly (2:1-2).

The Main Theme of Galatians

- Perhaps the greatest defense against legalism in the Scripture. It's not Christ plus something else. It's not Christ plus obedience. Christ plus Bible reading. Christ plus prayer. We are justified by faith alone by grace alone. It's not by the works of the Law.
- This gospel comes by an internal revelation of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to Galatians

- The entire Christian life is summarized in Galatians 2:20: Crucified with Christ and now we live by His indwelling life and by His faith.
- After being justified and having a good beginning, we are to still live by the Spirit. Justification is by grace through faith. So also is sanctification.
- If you walk by the Spirit, meaning you are led by the Spirit, you will bear the fruit of the Spirit, will overcome the flesh, and will not be subject to any Law.

Understanding the Law

- Since almost every chapter in Galatians mentions the Law of Moses, we need to spend a bit of time talking about the Law. You really can't understand Galatians without understanding the Law.
- Paul's first-century Jewish audience was intimately familiar with the Law. During that time, it was normal for Jewish boys to memorize the Torah, which consisted of the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). However, for us Gentile Christians who have mainly studied the New Testament, the Law is more of a mystery to us. Yes, we have all read the Ten Commandments and know some of the "you must" and "thou shall not" commands. But our understanding of the Law is very limited. Having said that, this short teaching is not intended to give a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of the Law, for that would take an entire book. But hopefully it will help you begin to understand the Law in a deeper way.

A Summary of the Law

- As the main document of Israel's national covenant from God, the Law can be viewed as the constitution for the ancient nation of Israel. As Israel's national constitution, the Law contains instructions for Israel's socio-judicial system as well as personal moral issues. Great prominence was also given to the religious temple system, the most prominent features being priesthood and the sacrifices.
- In summary, the Law both reflects God's universal and eternal moral standards and relates specifically to Israel's calling as a nation and its identity.
- The easiest way to understand the intricacies and complexities of the Law, which has 613 commandments, is to break it down into the following four categories:
 1. The moral Law;
 2. The civil Law;
 3. The ceremonial Law;
 4. The dietary Law.

Even though the Scriptures do not explicitly segment the Law in this way, scholars have used this type of categorization to help simplify the learning process and to make it easier for those who are uneducated in the intricacies of the Law to understand it at a high level.

The Moral Law

- The moral Law is summarized by the Ten Commandments, which can be categorized as follows:

Commandment	Category
First and Second	Idolatry
Third	Blasphemy

Introduction to Galatians

Fifth	Honor
Sixth	Murder
Seventh	Sexual Immorality
Eighth	Stealing
Ninth	Honesty
Tenth	Coveting

- Please note that the Sabbath will be dealt with as part of the ceremonial Law.
- The Ten Commandments are the hub of the Law, for without a central moral Law, the civil and ceremonial Law become meaningless. For example, how can the civil Law state how transgressions should be punished if there is no central moral law identifying sins? Or how can the bloody animal sacrifices described in the ceremonial Law cover sins if there is no central moral law to define sins?
- While the Ten Commandments summarize the moral Law, the entire moral Law is interspersed throughout Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The other moral laws and instructions in these books are expansions and additions to the basic ordinances listed in the Ten Commandments.
- For example, while the second commandment summarizes the prohibition against idolatry (Exod. 20:4), the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy describe in explicit detail all that God considers idolatry, such as the commandments against consulting mediums (Lev. 19:31), deriving any type of benefit from idols (Deut. 7:25; 13:16-18), prophesying in the name of idols or listening to one who prophesies in the name of idols (Deut. 18:20; 13:2-3), divination, soothsaying, enchanting, sorcery, charming, consulting ghosts or familiar spirits, and communicating with the spirits of the dead (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10-11).
- Another example is the seventh commandment, which summarizes the sexual sins in the moral Law by the statement, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14). Adultery, as we know, is sex between a married person and a partner other than their lawful spouse. But the moral Law does not just limit sexual immorality to adultery. The moral Law also forbids homosexuality (Lev. 18:22), incest (Lev. 18:7-18), bestiality (Lev. 18:23), intimate physical contact with someone other than your spouse (Lev. 18:6), prostitution (Deut. 23:17-18), and sexual relations while your wife is menstruating (Lev. 18:19).
- The same type of summary and expansion pattern could easily be applied to the remaining Ten Commandments, such as keeping the Sabbath, showing honor, murder, stealing, bearing false witness, and coveting.
- The moral Law, which represents God's righteous character and holy nature, reveals God's universal, unchanging, and eternal moral standards and is therefore binding for everyone everywhere for all time. Even though the moral Law was part of God's covenant with Israel, the moral Law was also a detailed revelation of God's righteous standard for everyone. A great example of this is found in Leviticus 18, where God details what He considers as sexual immorality. As we have seen, He prohibits such things as adultery, homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. But if you read this passage closely, this righteous standard of morality was not only for Israel; it was for every nation, for the Lord said, "Do not defile yourselves by any of these things [the sexual sins mentioned]; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled" (Lev. 18:24-25).
- The Lord was telling Israel that the inhabitants of Canaan would be spewed out of their land for defiling it. How did they defile the land? By living in constant violation of God's eternal, universal moral Law. As

Introduction to Galatians

a result of these abominable practices, the land would spew out its inhabitants through God's righteous judgment (Lev. 18:25). This same pattern is repeated throughout the Bible (Gen. 6:5-7; Gen. 18:20-19:29; Jon. 1-4; Amos 1:3-2:3; Isa. 24:4-5).

- In summary, even though the moral Law was part of Israel's covenant and national constitution, it reveals God's eternal, universal righteous standard of morality. The moral Law is therefore binding for everyone everywhere for all time.

The Civil Law

- The civil Law contained the criminal code outlining the procedures and punishments for violations of the moral Law, social laws related to property, inheritance, family, marriage, and divorce, a means for the redistribution of wealth, honesty in business, and instructions of how to care for the poor, needy, orphan, widow, stranger, and slave.
- While the moral Law is God's righteous standard for everyone at a personal level, the civil Law, which only related to the ancient nation of Israel, detailed the procedures and punishments for breaking the moral Law. For example, the moral Law states, "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Exod. 20:4-6). Idolatry is an issue of morality and holiness for everyone everywhere for all time but it only applies to us at a personal level. The civil Law, on the other hand, described how ancient Israel was to punish individuals who committed idolatry or enticed others to commit idolatry. For instance, if an Israelite persuaded someone to worship an idol, the civil Law stated, "But you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. So you shall stone him to death because he has sought to seduce you from the Lord" (Deut. 13:6-10).
- Obviously, the civil Law only applied to ancient Israel. Can you imagine if a Jew living in twenty-first century America stoned a Muslim because he tried to convert him to Islam? Standing before a judge, this American Jew could not argue that the Law of Moses commands me to stone an idolater. This person would be guilty of murder under the civil laws of the United States because the U.S. Court system does not follow the civil Law detailed in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.
- The civil Law, therefore, as part of ancient Israel's national covenant with God and constitution, was a set of specific laws given for the culture and people of Israel thousands of years ago and no longer applies to believers nor to the modern-day nation of Israel, which is built upon secular laws. In 135 A.D., when the Roman Emperor Hadrian banned the Jews from Jerusalem and turned the Holy Land into a pagan shrine, the civil Law vanished into the sands of time.

The Ceremonial Law

- The ceremonial Law includes purity laws, ordinances about the yearly feasts and weekly Sabbath, statutes regarding the priesthood, sacrifices, and offerings, and instructions about tabernacle and temple worship.
- The purity laws, as part of the ceremonial Law, were instructions on how to deal with such things as menstruation, seminal emission, skin disease, and mildew.
- The ceremonial Law, specifically Leviticus 23, outlines the ordinances for celebrating the feasts of Israel, such as the spring feasts of Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost and the fall feasts of Trumpets and Tabernacles. The ceremonial Law also outlines the specific instructions for keeping the weekly Sabbath, describing in detail the type of work that is outlawed and how that day should be set apart exclusively for God.
- In addition, the ceremonial Law gave instructions on how the sacrifices and offerings should be administered, including the sin offering, burnt offering, whole offering, heave offering, Passover

Introduction to Galatians

sacrifice, meal offering, wave offering, peace offering, drink offering, thank offering, dough offering, incense offering, red heifer, scapegoat, and first fruits. The ceremonial Law also detailed the requirements for the priesthood and high priest and instructed ancient Israel how the tabernacle furniture should be constructed and administered.

- With all of this in mind, let's answer the question of what, if any, part of the ceremonial Law still applies to born-again believers. Let's begin by answering the easy part first. Hebrews 8:13, which in the context of discussing the priesthood, sacrificial system, and temple worship under the Mosaic Covenant, states, "He has made the first obsolete [the Mosaic Covenant]. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear." From this verse and after reading the book of Hebrews, it is obvious that Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, the high priest of the New Covenant, and that He inaugurated a new method of worship in spirit and truth; therefore, all of the statutes pertaining to the priesthood, sacrificial system, and temple in the ceremonial Law have been replaced by Jesus and the finished work of the cross. The purity laws would also fall into the category of being superseded by what Jesus accomplished on the cross.
- Now let's talk about the Sabbath. This topic is a hotly debated subject in some circles. At issue is not whether believers should take a day of rest, but whether they should rest on Saturday. Most Gentile Christians love the idea of worshiping God at church on a Sunday morning and then taking the rest of the day to relax, take a nap, and spend time with the family. The issue is not about whether we should take a day of rest, but whether our day of rest should be on a Saturday. After all, the Sabbath is part of the Ten Commandments, which contains God's righteous and eternal moral standards. So are born-again believers required to take a day of rest every Saturday?
- The best answer on this topic comes from Messianic Jew, Dan Juster. In his book *Jewish Roots*, he writes,

It has been thought strange by some that God would place the Sabbath at the center of His lofty commands which deal with the highest dimensions of morality. How is it that there is then this intrusion of a ritual command?...Unfortunately, the whole debate has lost sight of a contextual understanding of the Sabbath command....Sabbath, however, is an integral part of God's treaty between Himself and Israel. Although there may be marvelous applications from a humanitarian and religious point of view for Christians, we need first to understand the covenant context. The Sabbath is called a sign "between me and the people of Israel." In the ancient covenants the center of the treaty would bear a symbol or sign of the king—suzerain—which might have been related to his chief god. However, no representation of God could be made in ancient Israel. Therefore, the representation would not be a symbol, a picture, or an idol, but a unique cycle of life. Only Israel had a seven-day cycle of weeks....This seven-day cycle—with rest and worship on the last day—was a unique testimony to the covenant relationship between God and Israel. Hence, the whole of the commands are part of a covenant with Israel, and although we can discern the universal principles of this treaty which apply to all peoples (as Paul's quoting "Honor your mother and father" to the Ephesians), the treaty is an indivisible whole as given to Israel; Sabbath-keeping is just as much a part of this treaty as "Thou shalt not kill." To spurn the Sabbath as a covenant sign was to spurn the covenant and the special relationship between God and the nation Israel.
- So although taking a day of rest, whether on a Saturday or Sunday is a good and even healthy thing to do, the Sabbath, though included in the Ten Commandments, is part of the covenant between God and Israel and is not part of the moral Law, which is universal and eternal. Therefore, born-again believers are not obligated to keep the Sabbath.
- Now the third question to answer is whether Gentile believers are obligated to celebrate the feasts. Does God require Gentile Christians to observe Passover, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Trumpets, or the Feast of Tabernacles? Before answering this, we have to understand that these festivals are "a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

Introduction to Galatians

- Christ is the fulfillment of everyone of the feasts. For instance, Jesus is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world and He fulfilled the Feast of First-Fruits by His resurrection from the dead. Christ also fulfilled Pentecost when He sent the Spirit to baptize His people with power and to write the Law on our hearts. And when Jesus came the first time to tabernacle among men (John 1:14), it was a partial fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles. When Jesus returns the second time as the reigning King, He will completely fulfill this festival as “all the nations...go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths [the Feast of Tabernacles]” (Zech. 14:16). So Christ is the substance and fulfillment of everyone of the feasts.
- The feasts did not pass away in the New Covenant and will even be celebrated in the Millennial Kingdom when Jesus returns (Zech. 14:16). Nevertheless, when the Jewish elders met in Jerusalem to discuss the requirements for Gentile believers, they did not make celebrating the feasts an obligation (Acts 15). Their basic declaration was that Gentiles should not be forced to become Jews. Therefore, Gentile believers are not required to celebrate the feasts, but neither are we forbidden from participating. For the many Gentile believers who do celebrate the feasts, they have found rich meaning in celebrating Jesus as the Passover Lamb and the first fruits of the resurrection. They have found great joy commemorating Pentecost and rejoicing in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And they celebrate the fall festivals of Trumpets and Tabernacles with great anticipation for the soon return of Jesus. So Gentiles are not required to keep the feasts, but the feasts do add a deeper dimension to our walk with God.

The Dietary Law

- Many Gentile believers are somewhat familiar with the dietary laws listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21. We know that orthodox Jews who are still under the Law cannot eat pig, shrimp, or lobster. Others, who are friends with kosher Jews, know that eating meat and dairy products together is prohibited. No matter what we know about the dietary laws, the main thing to realize is that it consumed their entire way of life, developing an attitude of obedience to God deep within their heart.
- The dietary laws involved much more than just abstaining from pork, shrimp, or lobster; these laws dictated the way food should be stored, cooked, and consumed. As a result of these stringent requirements, the dietary laws separated the Israelites from their polytheistic neighbors and became a distinguishing mark of their national identity.
- Stop for a moment and think of how many activities take place around a meal—family time, meeting with friends, building relationships, strategizing about business or ministry. Now imagine if you could not just sit down with anybody and enjoy a meal with them because of dietary restrictions. This would produce real separation and isolation, which was one of the purposes of the dietary laws. In fact, when the Jews were dispersed into the nations, these dietary laws erected a high barrier against assimilation into various cultures and helped the Jews maintain their racial identity. So the dietary laws were an essential part of Israel's special calling to be God's unique and holy possession.
- For those of us who love BBQ and seafood, we get a little nervous that these dietary laws might somehow apply to us. Please don't tell me that I can no longer go to Bucky's BBQ or the all-you-can-eat seafood buffet! For all who feel a little nervous, you can relax. Jesus made it crystal clear that food does not make us holy or unholy, stating,
- "Whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:18-23).

Introduction to Galatians

- Because the Law placed such a strong emphasis on ritual purity alongside moral purity, Jewish people naturally thought that eating forbidden food or eating with unwashed hands resulted in the same defilement as moral impurity. But Jesus made it clear that real defilement is related to the condition of the heart, not what we eat. Since Jesus "declared all foods clean," the debate is over! You can eat as much lobster, shrimp, bacon, ham, sausage, and BBQ pork as you want and still be clean (of course, as long as you don't become gluttonous!).
- Though believers do not have to follow the dietary laws, some Messianic Jews choose a kosher diet in order to maintain their Jewish identity and heritage. Other Messianic Jews follow the dietary laws as a method of evangelism, to connect with their fellow Jew who has not been born again and to demonstrate that you can still be Jewish and a follower of Jesus.