

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON ONE)

AN INTRODUCTION

How do new-born believers in Christ live out their Christian lives? If the Christian life begins when we place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, how is this faith to be expressed in our daily lives?

There are many persons who believe that the most effective way of ordering their Christian life is by a strict observation of the rules, regulations and standards of the church organization that they are a part of. Such an approach however, almost inevitably results in legalism. The Christian life then becomes a caricature of what it was meant to be. Legalism turns Christianity into a strict observance of a set of rules, rather than a free and loving response to God's grace in Christ. Moreover, those who approach the Christian life legalistically often include in their list of priorities items that are burdensome to them, and dishonourable to God! (See **Matthew 23**)

This is exactly what was happening with the believers in Galatia in the middle of the first century. In response to the preaching of the Apostle Paul, they had put their faith in Jesus Christ for their salvation, and began living their Christian lives on the basis of faith. But before long, they had begun shaping their lives according to a list of do's and don'ts. In this effort, the Galatians were influenced by the **Judaizers** who claimed to be Christians and who insisted that Gentile converts to Christianity be required to submit to circumcision and keep the Law of Moses.

Paul wrote **Galatians** to counter the erroneous, legalistic teaching of these **Judaizers** which was undermining the central New Testament doctrine of justification by faith. Ignoring the expressed decree of the

Jerusalem Council (**Acts 15:23-29**), the **Judaizers** continued to spread their dangerous teaching that Gentiles must first become Jewish proselytes and submit to all the Mosaic law in order to be saved.

Paul was shocked by the openness of the Galatian believers to the damning heresy of the **Judaizers** and he wrote this letter to defend the precious doctrine of justification by faith, and warn the believers of the dire consequences of abandoning that essential doctrine. **Galatians** is the only epistle Paul wrote that does not contain a commendation for its readers. In fact, Paul does not even greet the believers! This obvious omission reflects how urgently he felt about confronting the defection of the believers and defending the authentic Gospel.

As **Charles Swindoll** remarks, "Galatians exhibits Paul at his angriest, as he risked the good favor of the converts in those churches to make sure they were on the path of truth and not led off into deception. In fact, to emphasize the seriousness of his purpose, he took the pen from his scribe and wrote the end of the letter himself in large letters (**Galatians 6:11**)."

Biblical scholars almost unanimously agree that **Galatians** was written by the Apostle Paul to a group of churches in the Roman province of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey, sometime between AD 49 and 58. Paul was writing to churches that he had pioneered through the preaching and teaching of the good news of Jesus Christ. These churches existed in a culturally and religiously diverse environment. In his response to the **Judaizers** and their pernicious doctrine, Paul underscores the freedom that believers have in Christ.

Before we attempt to examine Paul's letter to the believers in Galatia, it will I believe, be profitable for us to consider the following questions: first, "Who were the Galatians?" And second, "Who were the **Judaizers** and what did they teach?"

There has been vigorous debate among Bible scholars as to who these Galatians were to whom Paul addressed his letter. While the arguments

are complex, it seems likely that Paul was writing to believers who lived in the Roman province of Galatia, which would have comprised the cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in southern Galatia. We know from Luke's account in **Acts 13** and **14**, that Paul and Barnabas visited these cities on their first missionary journey.

This area was full of flourishing cities, and was enriched by the constant flow of commerce across it. This constant flow of commerce was the natural result of its geographical position and its political history. In ancient times it was the highway along which the rulers of Asia kept up their communications with the western coast of Asia Minor. The Greeks planted colonies of Jews and Greeks along the extent of this highway. The Romans inherited the policy of the Greeks, and planted fresh colonies along this road in order to secure this important route to the east for their armies and their commerce.

The location of the Galatian churches in South Galatia, helps us to understand the identity of the Galatian believers. It was Paul's practice to establish groups of churches around the capitals of the Roman provinces. These groups of churches would be connected together by chains of churches along the principal roads, and would comprise something of an informal church organization closely corresponding to the divisions of the Roman Empire.

The popular religious practices of the Gentiles in the South Galatian cities were hedonistic and degraded, and were therefore unable to appeal to the conscience of even a pagan community to which the influences of western civilization had come. Greek philosophy and Roman morality created a more noble idea of human dignity and divine government than could be reconciled with the popular religion. It was into this conflict of religious ideas that the Jewish synagogue entered. The Gentiles flocked to the more enlightened conceptions taught in the synagogues. However, while they gave adherence to the exalted ethics of the synagogue, yet they would have nothing to do with the sacrificial system which centered

in the Jerusalem Temple. However many of them enthusiastically welcomed and embraced Paul's preaching.

In the synagogue at Antioch (**Acts 13:14-43**), the Jews heard Paul declare that the Law which they held in such high esteem, and clung to with such tenacity, was impotent to save them. The Gentiles heard the offer of a salvation secured at the Cross and given in answer to faith in Christ alone. From that hour the Jews recognized in Paul the most formidable adversary of Judaism—a religion which had been set aside by God at the Cross, but which was still being clung to by an apostate nation. The Gentiles on the other hand saw in Paul the foremost champion of the Gospel of the grace of God.

Before Paul's first missionary journey, the Church had been predominately Jewish. The teachers were Jewish with an Old Testament background. Even though they were interpreting the Old Testament in a new light, they still fixed their hopes on the future kingdom of a national Messiah. But now, the newly formed churches were predominately Gentile, and the Gentiles recognized the Lord Jesus, not as the Messiah of Israel only, but as the Saviour of the whole world.

This brings us to our second question, "Who were the **Judaizers**, and what did they teach?" The noted New Testament Scholar of the mid-twentieth century, **Kenneth Wuest**, explains that in order to answer this question properly, we must go back to Cain, for he was the first person who exhibited the legalistic, works-based tendencies which form the background of the teachings and activities of the **Judaizers**.

According to **Wuest**, Cain and Abel had been instructed as to the proper approach of a sinner to a holy God. That approach was by means of a blood sacrifice which pointed to, and symbolized the Lord Jesus Christ who would become the **actual** sacrifice for sin which God would someday present. However, the offering of such a blood sacrifice **in and of itself**, would **not** result in the salvation of the one presenting the offering. The offering was to be only an **outward visible manifestation** of an **inward reality**. That inward reality was the act of the one

presenting the offering, placing his faith in the coming seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent, Satan. Without that act of faith, the offering of the sacrifice would be a mere form, and a mockery in the eyes of God.

Cain's reaction to God's instruction was to reject the teaching of salvation through faith in a substitutionary sacrifice. Instead he sought salvation on the basis of his own personal merit and good works. Abel followed Yahweh's instruction, and his faith leaped across the centuries to the Cross of Christ, and he was thus declared righteous by faith. Since the time of these two men, these two diametrically opposed tendencies are seen in the human race. They are clearly seen in the history of the nation of Israel.

There was always a remnant in Israel, a small group of believers who offered the symbolic sacrifices as an indication of a real living faith in the future substitutionary sacrifice. And there was always also a larger group, which went through the ritual of the Levitical sacrifices, but exercised no heart-faith to appropriate a salvation offered in grace on the basis of justice satisfied by the atonement. This group depended upon personal merit and good works for salvation. These two groups were in existence in Israel in the first century. An illustration of the remnant is found in such believers as Zacharias and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna, and our Lord's disciples excluding Judas. An illustration of the second group is found in the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Herodians, who while observing the sacrificial ritual of the Temple, ignored its significance and depended for salvation upon personal merit and their own good works. The **Judaizers** came from this latter group.

There have always been, and there will always be persons who strongly oppose the idea of God's salvation being offered freely to those who believe. They reason that such a wonderful gift from such a holy God must require some kind of payment from us. Their view is that while we ought to thank God for His grace, we must also understand that He expects us to somehow merit or earn that grace. In other words, there

must be something that we can and must do to pay off the debt we owe to God.

Such were the **Judaizers** who taught that salvation was a combination of God's grace and human effort. Unfortunately, the majority of persons who profess Christianity believe this, even if they may not admit it. The doctrine of the **Judaizers** was a mixture of grace (through Christ) and works (through the keeping of the Law). They tried to enforce Jewish circumcision upon the Gentile converts to Christianity and were strenuously opposed and criticized for their behaviour by the Apostle Paul, who employed many of his epistles to refute their doctrinal errors.

Paul in his letters to the churches and particularly in **Romans** and **Galatians**, distinguishes between the righteousness which is of the law and the righteousness which is by faith. The righteousness which is of the law would be possible to a perfect sinless person. By his perfect obedience to God, he could accumulate righteousness to himself. But no sinner can perfectly obey the legal enactments of the Mosaic Law, and therefore any attempt to produce righteousness by works would result in what Isaiah calls "*filthy rags*" (**Isaiah 64:6**). The **Judaizers** clothed themselves with these.

The righteousness of God offered to the believing sinner in answer to his faith, is infinitely more precious and meritorious than any righteousness which a sinless person could accumulate to himself or herself by a perfect obedience to the will of God, because the righteousness of God is Christ Himself! In **Philippians 3:9**, Paul says that he will have nothing to do with the righteousness which the **Judaizers** have. He will have nothing else but the "*righteousness that comes by way of Christ's faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is in fact based on Christ's faithfulness*" (**New English Translation**).

Paul was the chief exponent of grace, and the apostle to the Gentiles. It was therefore necessary for the **Judaizers** to continually endeavour to undermine, and if possible, to destroy his work.

They tried to do so, using two methods. First, they endeavoured to depreciate Paul's apostolic position and set up the Twelve Apostles as the real interpreters of Christ in order that they might thereby discredit his authority as a teacher of grace. They argued that since Paul was not one of the original Twelve, he had not personally listened to Christ's voice, he had not seen Christ, he had not attended on Christ's earthly ministry, and he had not been sent out like them at Christ's express command. Furthermore, they said that he had not received the gospel by direct revelation from Christ as had the others, but had learned of it from the Twelve.

The second method they used was to substitute a performance based system of salvation for the doctrine of pure grace which Paul preached. Paul therefore found it necessary to defend his apostolic authority, which he does in chapters **1** and **2** of **Galatians**. He also had to prove that salvation was by grace **before** the Mosaic Law was given, and that the coming in of the Mosaic Law did not supersede nor affect salvation by grace in the least, and this he does in chapters **3** and **4**. Then, because the teachings of the **Judaizers** were wreaking havoc in the lives of the Galatian believers, he found it necessary to introduce some corrective measures emphasizing the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the lives of those who have been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. He deals with this in chapters **5** and **6**.

In our next Lesson we will begin our exegesis of this important letter.