

John MacArthur :: Bible Introductions - Galatians

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Title

Galatians derives its title (pros Galatas) from the region in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) where the churches addressed were located. It is the only one of Paul's epistles specifically addressed to churches in more than one city ([1:2](#); cf. [3:1](#); [1 Cor. 16:1](#)).

Author and Date

There is no reason to question the internal claims that the apostle Paul wrote Galatians ([1:1](#); [5:2](#)). Paul was born in Tarsus, a city in the province of Cilicia, not far from Galatia. Under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel, Paul received a thorough training in the OT Scriptures and in the rabbinic traditions at Jerusalem ([Acts 22:3](#)). A member of the ultra-orthodox sect of the Pharisees ([Acts 23:6](#)), he was one of first-century Judaism's rising stars ([1:14](#); cf. [Phil. 3:5, 6](#)).

The course of Paul's life took a sudden and startling turn when, on his way to Damascus from Jerusalem to persecute Christians, he was confronted by the risen, glorified Christ. That dramatic encounter turned Paul from Christianity's chief persecutor to its greatest missionary. His 3 missionary journeys and trip to Rome turned Christianity from a faith that included only a small group of Palestinian Jewish believers into an Empire-wide phenomenon. Galatians is one of 13 inspired letters he addressed to Gentile congregations or his fellow workers. For further biographical information on Paul, see [Introduction to Romans: Author and Date](#).

In [chap. 2](#), Paul described his visit to the Jerusalem Council of [Acts 15](#) (see *note on 2:1*), so he must have written Galatians after that event. Since most scholars date the Jerusalem Council about A.D. 49, the most likely date for Galatians is shortly thereafter.

Background and Setting

In Paul's day, the word Galatia had two distinct meanings. In a strict ethnic sense, Galatia was the region of central Asia Minor inhabited by the Galatians. They were a Celtic people who had migrated to that region from Gaul (modern France) in the third century B.C. The Romans conquered the Galatians in 189 B.C. but allowed them to have some measure of independence until 25 B.C. when Galatia became a Roman province, incorporating some regions not inhabited by ethnic Galatians (e.g., parts of Lycaonia, Phrygia, and Pisidia). In a political sense, Galatia came to describe the entire Roman province, not merely the region inhabited by the ethnic Galatians.

Paul founded churches in the southern Galatian cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe ([Acts 13:14–14:23](#)). These cities, although within the Roman province of Galatia, were not in the ethnic Galatian region. There is no record of Paul's founding churches in that northern, less populated region.

Those two uses of the word Galatia make it more difficult to determine who the original recipients of the epistle were. Some interpret Galatia in its strict racial sense and argue that Paul addressed this epistle to churches in the northern Galatian region, inhabited by the ethnic descendants of the Gauls. Although the apostle apparently crossed the border into the fringes of ethnic Galatia on at least two occasions ([Acts 16:6](#); [18:23](#)), Acts does not record that he founded any churches or engaged in any evangelistic ministry there.

Because neither Acts nor Galatians mentions any cities or people from northern (ethnic) Galatia, it is reasonable to believe that Paul addressed this epistle to churches located in the southern part of the Roman province, but outside of the ethnic Galatian region. Acts records the apostle's founding of such churches at Pisidian Antioch ([13:14–50](#)), Iconium ([13:51–14:7](#); cf. [16:2](#)), Lystra ([14:8–19](#); cf. [16:2](#)), and Derbe ([14:20, 21](#); cf. [16:1](#)). In addition, the churches Paul addressed had apparently been established before the Jerusalem Council ([2:5](#)), and the churches of southern Galatia fit that criterion, having been founded during Paul's first missionary journey before the Council met. Paul did not visit northern (ethnic) Galatia until after the Jerusalem Council ([Acts 16:6](#)).

Paul wrote Galatians to counter judaizing false teachers who were undermining the central NT doctrine of justification by faith. Ignoring the express decree of the Jerusalem Council ([Acts 15:23–29](#)), they spread their dangerous teaching that Gentiles must first become Jewish proselytes and submit to all the Mosaic law before they could become Christians (see [1:7](#); [4:17, 21](#); [5:2–12](#); [6:12, 13](#)). Shocked by the Galatians' openness to that damning heresy (cf. [1:6](#)), Paul wrote this letter to defend justification by faith, and warn these churches 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—that obvious omission reflects how urgently he felt about confronting the defection and defending the essential doctrine of justification.

Historical and Theological Themes

Galatians provides valuable historical information about Paul's background ([chaps. 1, 2](#)), including his 3-year stay in Nabatean Arabia ([1:17, 18](#)), which Acts does not mention; his 15-day visit with Peter after his stay in Arabia ([1:18, 19](#)); his trip to the Jerusalem Council ([2:1–10](#)); and his confrontation of Peter ([2:11–21](#)).

As already noted, the central theme of Galatians (like that of Romans) is justification by faith. Paul defends that doctrine (which is the heart of the gospel) both in its theological ([chaps. 3, 4](#)) and practical ([chaps. 5, 6](#)) ramifications. He also defends his position as an apostle ([chaps. 1, 2](#)) since, as in Corinth, false teachers had attempted to gain a hearing for their heretical teaching by undermining Paul's credibility. The main theological themes of Galatians are strikingly similar to those of Romans, e.g., the inability of the law to justify ([2:16](#); cf. [Rom. 3:20](#)); the believer's deadness to the law ([2:19](#); cf. [Rom. 7:4](#)); the believer's crucifixion with Christ ([2:20](#); cf. [Rom. 6:6](#)); Abraham's justification by faith ([3:6](#); cf. [Rom. 4:3](#)); that believers are Abraham's spiritual children ([3:7](#); cf. [Rom. 4:10, 11](#)) and therefore blessed ([3:9](#); cf. [Rom. 4:23, 24](#)); that the law brings not salvation but God's wrath ([3:10](#); cf. [Rom. 4:15](#)); that the just shall live by faith ([3:11](#); cf. [Rom. 1:17](#)); the universality of sin ([3:22](#); cf. [Rom. 11:32](#)); that believers are spiritually baptized into Christ ([3:27](#); cf. [Rom. 6:3](#)); believers' adoption as God's spiritual children ([4:5–7](#); cf. [Rom. 8:14–17](#)); that love fulfills the law ([5:14](#); cf. [Rom. 13:8–10](#)); the importance of walking in the Spirit ([5:16](#); cf. [Rom. 8:4](#)); the warfare of the flesh against the Spirit ([5:17](#); cf. [Rom. 7:23, 25](#)); and the importance of believers bearing one another's burdens ([6:2](#); cf. [Rom. 15:1](#)).

Interpretive Challenges

First, Paul described a visit to Jerusalem and a subsequent meeting with Peter, James, and John ([2:1–10](#)). There is a question to be resolved in that text, as to whether that was his visit to the Jerusalem Council ([Acts 15](#)), or his earlier visit bringing famine relief to the Jerusalem church ([Acts 11:27–30](#)). Second, those who teach baptismal regeneration (the false doctrine that baptism is necessary for salvation) support their view from [3:27](#). Third, others have used this epistle to support their attacks on the biblical roles of men and women, claiming that the spiritual equality taught in [3:28](#) is incompatible with the traditional concept of authority and submission. Fourth, those who reject the doctrine of eternal security argue that the phrase "you have fallen from grace" ([5:4](#)) describes believers who lost their salvation. Fifth, there is disagreement whether Paul's statement "see with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!" refers to the entire letter, or merely the concluding verses. Finally, many claim that Paul erased the line between Israel and the church when he identified the church as the "Israel of God" ([6:16](#)). Those challenges will be addressed in the notes to the appropriate passages.

Outline

1. Personal: The Preacher of Justification ([1:1–2:21](#))
 - A. Apostolic Chastening ([1:1–9](#))
 - B. Apostolic Credentials ([1:10–2:10](#))

C. Apostolic Confidence ([2:11–21](#))

2. Doctrinal: The Principles of Justification ([3:1–4:31](#))

A. The Experience of the Galatians ([3:1–5](#))

B. The Blessing of Abraham ([3:6–9](#))

C. The Curse of the Law ([3:10–14](#))

D. The Promise of the Covenant ([3:15–18](#))

E. The Purpose of the Law ([3:19–29](#))

F. The Sonship of Believers ([4:1–7](#))

G. The Futility of Ritualism ([4:8–20](#))

H. The Illustration from Scripture ([4:21–31](#))

3. Practical: The Privileges of Justification ([5:1–6:18](#))

A. Freedom from Ritual ([5:1–6](#))

B. Freedom from Legalists ([5:7–12](#))

C. Freedom in the Spirit ([5:13–26](#))

D. Freedom from Spiritual Bondage ([6:1–10](#))

E. Conclusion ([6:11–18](#))

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