

Paul's letter to the Galatians



Background to Galatians

Introduction

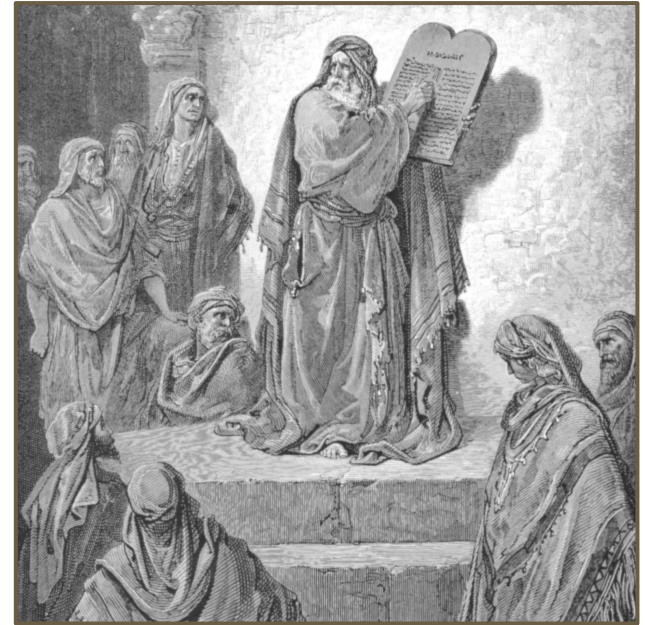


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Examining the historical context

- God has always worked through those who honor Him and who put their trust in Him.
- God formed a nation from the descendants of Abraham, to be a repository for His Word and a blessing to all other nations (Gen 12:2; Rom 9:4-5).
- Over time Israel became increasingly exclusive, venerating the Law as a cultural institution rather than worshipping the God who had given the Law.
- Israel's ritualistic observance of their legal code became an offense to God (Isa 1:11-17).



To the time of Jesus and beyond

- Law-keeping meant everything to pious Jews, especially to the Pharisees who saw themselves as God-ordained defenders and enforcers of the Mosaic code for the Jews.
- Jesus focused on the underlying purpose and intent of the Law, rather than strict obedience to the letter of the Law (Matt 23:23).
- The woman caught in adultery:
"I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more" (John 8:11).



Ongoing opposition to Jesus from the leaders of Israel

- They succeeded in having Jesus crucified, but everything changed with that event.
- Christ's substitutionary death, followed by His resurrection and ascension, inaugurated God's New Covenant (Luke 22:20). This opened the door to blessings by grace through faith for Jews and Gentiles alike (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6).
- God's promised New Covenant provided redemption, regeneration, and renewal through the work of the indwelling Spirit of God in the life of those who trust solely in what Christ accomplished for them (e.g., Isa 49:6; Ezek 36:25-27; Joel 2:28).

“But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”
(Matt 12:6-8)

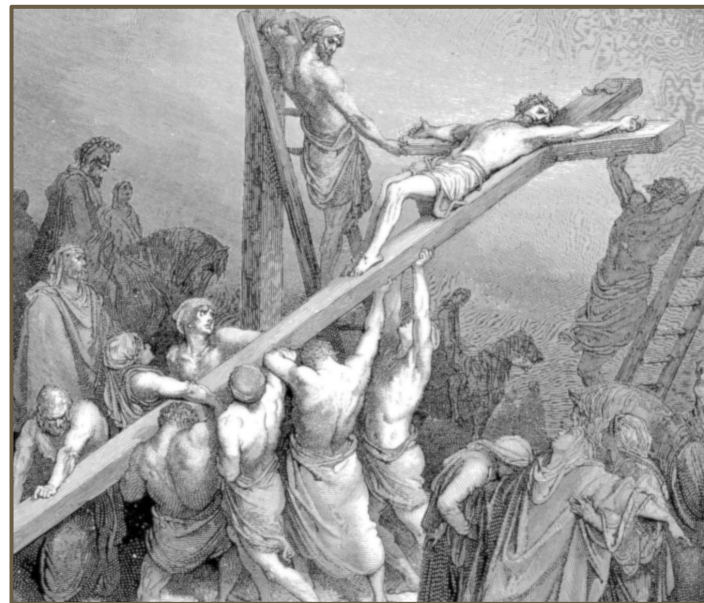
Growing understanding of the New Covenant

- On the occasion of Peter's first public sermon during the feast of Pentecost, many visiting Jews became believers and were brought into the church (Acts 2:1-41). Most were Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora who began to understand that their obligation to the Law had been superseded in the New Covenant.
- This was illustrated in the events surrounding the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:1-8:3). In the words of his accusers, he had declared that "Jesus will destroy this place (the Temple) and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (Acts 6:14).
- Paul (called Saul) was present at Stephen's execution (Acts 7:58).



Saul – zealously loyal to the Old Covenant

- Saul probably witnessed or participated in the debate with Stephen in the Synagogue of the Freedmen.
- Jesus had been put to death by crucifixion, which incurred a curse in the Law (Deut 21:22-23).
- Since He had been hanged on a tree and was therefore cursed of God, Saul believed He was disqualified from being the Messiah. Saul and like-minded Jews would have viewed as blasphemy any claim that Jesus is the Messiah.



Jewish persecution of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 8-9)

- The persecution focused primarily on Hellenistic Jewish believers who posed the greatest threat to the traditions of the Old Covenant. They fled to Cyprus and to the larger cities in the north.
- While Saul was pursuing believers who had fled to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him on the road and he was confronted with the truth – Stephen and the other believers had been right about Jesus the Messiah.
- Soon Saul understood that it was worthless to try gaining a right standing with God by self-effort in obedience to the Mosaic Law.
- He began to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world, but he then became the target of the persecution he himself had instigated (Acts 9:23, 29). For his own safety, the disciples sent him away to his home of Tarsus in Cilicia.

The church in Antioch of Syria

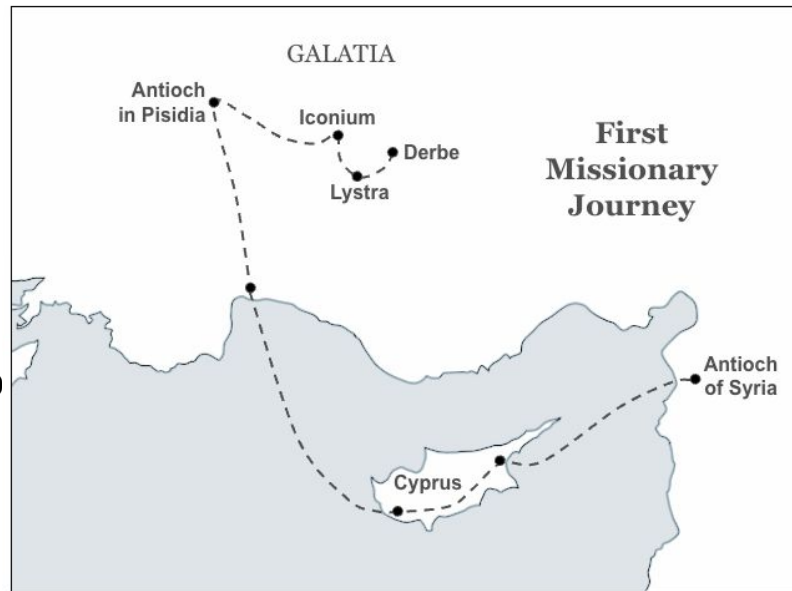
- Meanwhile a vibrant church grew at Antioch in Syria, with its membership consisting increasingly of Gentile believers.
- In the past, Gentiles could loosely associate themselves with the Jewish synagogue as "**God-fearers**," but to fully participate in the synagogue they must become "**proselytes**" who would commit to the entire Jewish Law.
- But the gospel declared that salvation came through faith in Christ alone, that Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice on their behalf gave Gentiles the privilege of entering the family of God on the same terms as Jews, without requiring circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic Law.
- However, the legalistic Jews (and even many Hebrew believers in the Jerusalem church) were troubled by talk of salvation apart from the Law.

The first missionary journey (Acts 13-14)

- As the church in Antioch grew and matured, God prompted them to send missionaries to spread the gospel to remote parts of the empire. They commissioned Barnabas and Paul, who traveled first to Cyprus and then planted churches in the Roman province of Galatia in southern Asia Minor.
- They recognized that Gentile "*God-fearers*" in the Jewish synagogues would eagerly respond to the gospel. In Jesus, the blessings of God's saving grace were available to Gentiles as well as to Jews. The old distinction between Jews and Gentiles had been abolished, and Gentile "*God-fearers*" welcomed this good news.
- Unbelieving Jews refused to accept this truth, however, and they clung to the Old Covenant as a means of being justified before God.

The first missionary journey (Acts 13-14)

- Their synagogue ministry worked well in the cities of Cyprus (Acts 13:5), Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14), and Iconium (Acts 14:1). Inevitably, however, the tradition-bound Jews opposed them (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:4-6, 19-20).
- In Lystra (Acts 14:8-18) they were faced with pagan worshippers of Greek gods who were unfamiliar with God's Word and His work through the nation of Israel. Paul tailored his message to that audience and was able to communicate the gospel and establish a church there (Acts 14:8-21).



The first hint of doctrinal trouble

- After planting churches in the cities of southern Galatia, the missionaries returned to their sending church at Antioch in Syria.
- Shortly, however, news reached Paul and Barnabas that believers in Galatia were being taught that in order to receive salvation they must become full Jewish proselytes by being circumcised and following the Law of Moses.
- This immediately invoked a strong response from Paul and Barnabas. The views of these “**Judaizers**” ran counter to everything Paul knew about life under Christ’s New Covenant. This led Paul to write his letter to the churches in Galatia.
- Even the church in Antioch of Syria was not immune to these teachers (Acts 15:1), but Paul and Barnabas vigorously debated them.

The Galatian encounter with the Judaizers

- “You must be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses.”
- *“That’s not what we were taught.”*
- “Who was your teacher?”
- *“Paul, the traveling missionary.”*
- “Paul was not authorized to teach anything other than the doctrines authorized by the Jerusalem church” (Gal 1:15-17).
- “We are from Jerusalem and are teaching the true gospel.”
- “The Jerusalem apostles still keep the Mosaic Law and every one of them is circumcised. If you Galatians want to be on the same level as the Jerusalem Christians, you too must be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses” (Gal 2:3; 5:2; 6:12-13).

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

- A summit meeting was held with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to resolve the issue: ***Must Gentile converts become Jewish proselytes?***
- After much debate Peter recounted how God saved the Gentiles by grace through faith alone (Acts 10), even though they were uncircumcised foreigners. James announced the decision of the Council: ***Gentiles are NOT required to become Jewish proselytes in order to receive salvation.***



Delivering the decree to the Galatians

- Paul had written to the Galatians some time after he and Barnabas had returned from their first missionary journey, but before the decree of the Jerusalem Council had been available.
- The decision of the Jerusalem Council conclusively settled the issue of whether Gentiles would be required to submit to the Mosaic Law.
- Paul decided to visit the churches that had been established on their first missionary journey. He chose Silas and traveled by land through Syria and Cilicia to deliver the official decree of the Jerusalem Council to the churches in Galatia which had recently been troubled by the false teaching of the Judaizers (Acts 16:4).

The relevance of Paul's letter to the Galatians

- Paul's epistle to the Galatians defended the doctrine of salvation by God's grace through faith alone, apart from any human effort through law-keeping or external obedience to a set of rules and regulations.
- Paul correctly understood that the requirements imposed by the Old Covenant no longer apply for the New Covenant inaugurated through Christ's atonement, resurrection, and glorification.
- His letter has lasting value because people have always attempted to attain righteousness before God by their own self-effort. The heart of Christianity is recognizing that we are incapable of saving ourselves or earning righteousness by our own efforts, and that we agree to rely only on what Christ accomplished for us in order to be accepted by God.