



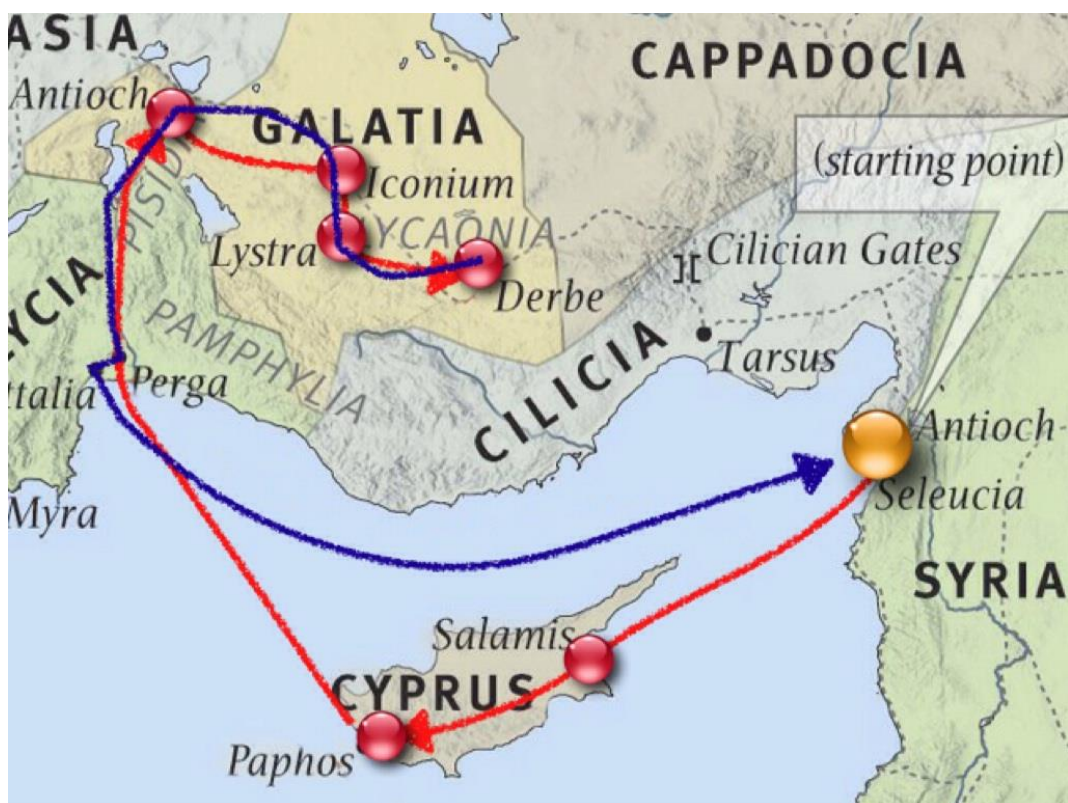
INTRODUCTION

In our journey into Galatians so far, I have avoided a contextual emphasis. The reason for that is that the first chapter of Paul's letter lends itself to getting to the heart of an issue that transcends any specific setting. From the foundational reality of being ones acted upon by God, and God's acting being a rescue accomplished out of joy and delight despite the cost, to the ever-recurring danger that we trade that good news of God's action for another gospel, a lie about God, a false-image of who God is and how God works, to the unique clarity that is shown us in Jesus above all else, and finally Paul's connection of his story into the pages of God's Story as an example for us to follow, all these are elements of a life of faith that we too walk in our day and time. In this first chapter, Paul could have been writing to any church in America, in Dallas, to Christ City herself, and we would hardly need to alter the words. Jesus, who we are because of Jesus, how we discern how to live life by the revelation of Jesus, and how we learn to understand our past, present, and future through the cosmic story of scripture in Jesus...is the foundation for our faith still, some nineteen hundred years later.

But as we transition from chapter 1 to chapter 2, we transition from the general (if not universal) to the particular, and so it's time to catch us up a bit. The Bible Project also offers a helpful overview video of Galatians, which has some of this history as well. You can find a link to that video on the Galatian's resource page on the church website.

But for now, a little cultural and historical context will be helpful as we move from Paul's introductory chapter into the details of the issue facing the Galatian church.

GETTING TO GALATIA



While we do not know the exact dates of Paul's travels, most scholars and historians believe that Paul unintentionally found himself in the prolonged presence of the Galatians to whom he writes on his first missionary journey sometime around 47 AD. He stopped in the region due to an ailment, probably something to do with his sight, maybe even the persistent thorn in his flesh that Paul shares about in another letter. Regardless, Paul had not intended to stay in the region known as Galatia for very long as he was headed to Cilicia. But the circumstances forced him to depend on the kindness of Galatians in the middle of his distress. When Paul was ready to travel again, he did so, making his way back to the place he started his journey, Antioch in Syria, and to the faith family that had sent he and Barnabas out to take the gospel to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people of Asia Minor in the first place. All of these travels are chronicled for us in Acts, chapters 13 and 14.

Even before Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch, the word was making its way to Jerusalem and the predominately Jewish church of Jerusalem that many Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus, and therefore now following a Jewish rabbi as their Savior or Messiah.

Sometime in late 48 AD, Paul, along with his ministry partner Barnabas and a converted Greek named Titus, begin to make their way to Jerusalem. Paul had a "revelation" (Gal. 2:2) that an issue already brewing in the church of Antioch between a group called the Judaizers, and the newly freed Gentile believers was more pervasive and more critical to the future of the gospel than merely a local annoyance.

A JEWISH CHURCH

Now, many of us have heard the term “Judaizer” as the label for the people who Paul is confronting in Galatians. The name comes from Paul’s description of Peter in chapter 2, when Paul confronts Peter for behaving “not in step with the truth of the gospel,” for Peter himself “though a Jew,” is living “like a Gentile and not like a Jew,” so “how can [he, Peter] force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” The Greek word “live like Jews” is where we derive our English word, “Judaizer,” to “be like a Jew.” Peter was living in a way that was not at Jewish as certain other Jewish believers, primarily in his association with non-Jews and his loosening of the ceremonial laws regarding food, and the extra Sabbath regulations, but as soon as these certain Jewish Christians came in town, Peter reverted to behaving like the Jewish Christians, refusing to associate with, share meals and enter the homes, of Gentiles—even if they too were Christ-followers.

Now, in this particular case in Galatians, the Judaizers causing division within the family of were members of the Pharisee party (Acts 15:5)—yep that same group that Jesus engaged, argued with, invited into the kingdom, and was regularly frustrated with, but never gave up on—many whom, after Jesus’ resurrection, believed that he was the long-awaited “messiah” of the Jewish people. The Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, believed in the resurrection from the dead, and the overwhelming evidence of Jesus’ appearances between Easter and Pentecost, marked afterward by the Spirit-filled preaching and shared life of the disciples, convinced many Pharisees and even temple priests that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the one they had been waiting for (see Acts 2-6).

Though they became “obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7), these “pharisaical Christians” also brought with them into the early church a devout Jewishness. They were arguing and teaching, rather convincingly it seems, the newly converted Greek believers that if they were to indeed receive the benefits of being “God’s children,”—his presence, his favor, his blessing, and promises—they needed to become like Jews, keeping to the Mosaic ceremonial regulations (i.e., circumcision) and moral commands (the Levitical law). Acts 15 summarizes the issue facing all the Jewish and Gentile Jesus followers saying,

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers and sisters, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question...When [Paul and his companions] came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’”

(Acts 15:1-2, 4-5)

“Unless you become Jews, live as Jews, the immediate and eternal benefits of being a child of God, one rescued from slavery to live in the promised land, cannot be yours.” That was the argument this particular segment of Judaizers was making. They believed that faith in Jesus as the Messiah was the right starting place, but customary and nationalistic traditions of the Hebrews was necessary to keep you in the covenant. After all, it was the Pharisees in all the years between the end of the Old Testament (the return from exile) to the current Roman occupation who had fought hard to keep pure the faith, returning to and expanding the Levitical laws to ensure

that whenever the Messiah did arrive on the scene that the people would be ready, clean, and righteous enough for God's re-establishing of their kingdom and remaining with them forever.

Because of the particular lie about God, this "different gospel," that they were teaching to the Galatians, and the Galatians were accepting (buying), Paul will go into extensive detail in Jewish law/history in chapters 3 and 4. And the reason for his is because the context of the New Testament was a Jewish context.

It's important for you and I, so far removed from the first century and the formation of the church, not to lose just how Jewish the world of the New Testament really was. While the overall customs of the day were certainly not Jewish, the seedling churches being planted around the Roman empire were sprouting up in Jewish soil. Look briefly at Paul and Barnabas' church starting strategy in Acts 13 and 14,

"When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God **in the synagogues to the Jews.**" (13:5)

"they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went **into the synagogue** and...Paul stood up, and motioning with his hands said: 'Men of Israel **and** you who fear God, listen.'" (13:14, 16-17)

"Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, **and** those who fear God, to **us** has been sent the message of this salvation." (13:26)

"And **when the Gentiles heard this**, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." (13:48)

"Now at Iconium they entered together into **the Jewish synagogue** and spoke in such a way that a great number of **both** Jews and Greeks believed." (14:1)

The birth of the church in the world outside of Judea, or Palestine, came first amid the Jewish communities spread throughout the empire. So, there were many, both of Jewish background, and those "who feared God" and thus familiar with the Jewish faith, who saw in Jesus—just as they did in the days of Jesus' ministry—something they wanted and desired to follow him...but often in their own manner. And so, it is fair to say that...Judaizers within the first-century Christian setting may be classified into three general categories, all of which could include ethnic Jews as well as Gentile converts to Judaism (i.e., "God-fearers"):

1. Custom-observing Judaizers maintained distinct Jewish customs within Graeco-Roman society but placed no salvific or membership significance on the observance of the Mosaic law.
2. Social Judaizers who placed social or membership significance on the observance of the law and insisted on social separation from Gentile Christians. Which probably what Peter got caught up in Galatians (2:11-14).
3. Elitist Judaizers, who placed salvific and membership significance on the observance of the law and insisted on circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions in order to belong to and stay within God's people, to get salvation at the end.

CUSTOM-OBSERVING JUDAIZERS

The first generation of Christians included Jews and Gentiles. The book of Acts shows that the apostles generally continued to follow Jewish religious and social customs. For instance:

- Acts 2:46 indicates that Jewish Christians kept the Sabbath and worshiped at the temple.
- Paul had Timothy circumcised for the sake of Jewish sensibilities (Acts 16:1–3).
- Acts 21:24 indicates that Paul kept the law (see also 1 Cor 9:20).
- Paul went to the Jerusalem temple, performed some of the rites associated with the temple, and took a vow (Acts 21:23–26; see also Acts 18:18).

Paul's letter to the Roman churches assumes that they respected Jewish sensibilities. Paul discusses the issue of ritual cleanliness of food and observance of days for the sake of personal conscience (Rom 14). The "weak in faith" refers to Jewish Christians whose consciences would not have allowed them to eat certain foods (Schreiner, Romans, 712–15). These same Christians observed certain "sacred" days (Rom 14:5–6). Paul admonishes the "strong" (non-Judaizing Christians) to accept the "weak" (Judaizing Christians) and admonishes the "weak" not to judge the "strong." These categories of "weak" and "strong" refer to social rather than salvific distinctions.

The issue is not with Judaism per se, but with what role the traditions of Judaism play in the life of the believer as he or she follows Jesus. And this is where the social and elitist Judaizers become divisive in the early church.

SOCIAL AND ELITIST JUDAIZERS

The social and elitist Judaizers were some of Paul's primary opponents. They were separatists who, according to Paul, were preaching a different gospel.

Evidence of social Judaizing is found primarily in the first chapters of Acts and in Paul's confrontation with Peter, described in Galatians. This social separation can be seen in Jews' separation from Gentiles during meals (Acts 11:1–3; Gal 2:12–13). Jews could not associate with Gentiles at certain social levels without being defiled (Acts 10:14, 28; 11:1–3). This social aspect was so deeply ingrained in Jewish life that Peter seemingly required two lessons to overcome it:

1. Peter received a vision and a subsequent call to preach at Cornelius' home in Caesarea Maritima (Acts 10).
2. Peter was rebuked by Paul in Antioch (Gal 2:11–16).

The narrative of Acts suggests that church elders in Jerusalem did not begin to understand that God's plan was transcending the Jew/Gentile divide until after Peter witnessed the Holy Spirit's work in Cornelius' home. The Jerusalem Council met around ad 49 AD to discuss whether Gentile believers must follow Jewish religious customs (Acts 15:1–29). Even after the council determined that Gentile Christians need not practice the Mosaic law, elitist Judaizers apparently continued to require law-observance for all Christians, whether Jew or Gentile. Paul charges that such a view distorts the gospel (Gal 1:6–7).

The Jewish-Christian response to how Gentiles become a part of God's people was central to the various issues described already. Related to this question of the Law's function were other issues such as the saving operation of faith (Gal 2:16–3:29), the inauguration and reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1–2; 10:45; 11:15), and God's elective purposes for Israel (Rom 9–11). Christianity's Jewish beginnings manifested at least three basic responses as witnessed by the New Testament:

1. Following the apostolic example, some Jewish Christians lived in harmony with Gentiles, recognizing that the Mosaic law's function was limited. Although these Jews continued to retain many of the culturally distinctive elements that characterized them as Jews, such as dietary habits (Rom 14), they lived without socially separating from the Gentiles (e.g., Paul). This theme is developed particularly in the early chapters of Acts.
2. Some Jewish Christians though separated themselves from Gentile Christians for reasons associated with Jewish purity laws and social distinctions (e.g., Peter, the Galatian confrontation (Acts 10; Gal 2:11–14). Entrance into the temple precincts and seasonal feasts played a significant role in this group's practices, particularly before the destruction of the temple in ad 70.
3. Some Christian Judaizers (e.g., many of Paul's opponents; the Jewish teachers of Acts 15:1) **imposed the requirements of the Mosaic Law**—primarily but not exclusively circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and dietary laws—on Gentile Christians, insisting that receiving the full benefits of salvation, or remaining in the covenant as the people of God, rested on obedience to the Mosaic law.

In post-Pentecostal Christianity, the Jewish Christian, introduced to God's unexpected and presently unfolding program in Jesus Christ, had to reckon with the purposes of the Mosaic law, particularly as it related to Gentile inclusion in the people of God, and how the Law functioned in salvation history and this newly inaugurated messianic age.¹ In Acts 15, we have the first example of how the early church began to work through their history, experience, and theology in relation to Jesus. As Paul says in Galatians 2, what we now call the Jerusalem Council, sided with Paul on the centrality of freedom through and in Jesus, and sent with Paul and Barnabas along with a contingent to return to the Gentile regions with a letter encouraging the free faith of those responding to Jesus.

So, within a year of Paul's leaving Galatia, the Judaizers in Antioch had made their way north to the Galatians while Paul had went south to Jerusalem. The letter to the Galatians that we are journeying through was written around 49 – 50 AD, and in it Paul is catching up the church he started on the things that have happened since he left. Paul will return to see the Galatians face to face in another year or two (around 51-52 AD), but he knows that if were to let the lie of God, the "different gospel" (1:6) of the Judaizers spread and deepen in the Galatians' minds and hearts, that it would be nearly impossible to uproot. So he writes to them succinctly here of what the Jewish church has said about these particular Jewish "Christians" sent in to spy out their freedom.

¹ Adapted from, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, via Logos Software.

WHAT'S THE ISSUE

The issue is faith. Specifically, faith in Jesus. Faith in what Jesus has done and how that gives shape to how we live with God and with others.

What is the role of faith in Jesus not just in starting life with God but living life with God, finishing life with God...again, the Pharisees were still trying to extend Jewry...nationalism(?)...traditions and ceremonies as the means to perfection or sanctification or keeping your salvation...pleasing God so you can stay in relationship verses the idea that Paul will argue at the end of Galatians, that you reap what you sow regardless of what traditions you hold sacred. You either follow the Spirit or the flesh. You either live by faith in what God started, that God will finish it, or your try and finish it yourself.

This is why, in the following chapters, Paul will argue that the history of Judaism, the history in which Jesus steps into, lives out of, and continues forward, comes from the Abrahamic covenant and not the Mosaic law. Both of which we will talk more about in the coming weeks. But do you remember that we started Galatians in John 8, and Jesus' declaration for rescue,

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (vs. 31-32)

But those who heard Jesus' good news, argued that they were not slaves but the “offspring of Abraham” (v. 33). However, Jesus said that if they were truly ones whose history and faith was that of Abraham, they would have accepted him, not rejected him, for

“Your father Abraham rejoiced to that he should see my day. He saw it and was glad.” (v. 56).

The story of Abraham was one, who like Paul, was chosen by grace for a purpose. Back in Genesis, Abraham was chosen by God, set apart, and blessed to be a blessing. As we have seen in Galatians, God made, God chose, God rescued Abraham out of a godless land and gave him a future. And you know how Abraham was counted as righteous, how Abraham remained in good or right relationship with God? Through faith,

“And Abraham believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6)

Faith in God's acting, in God's word, in God's presence, and God finishing what God started was the foundation of Abraham's standing with God, all without traditions or ceremonies or laws. This is why, when the apostle John begins his gospel story, also writing to a primarily Jewish background people, he says of Jesus,

“And from Jesus' fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:16-17)

Galatians chapters 2 -4 will be Paul working out in experience, history, and theologically the validity and importance of John's introductory statement about Jesus for all those who have faith in Christ. So, as we make the turn in our journey towards the specifics of the Galatian issue, my hope is that this contextual background will help us have a little better insight into what is going on in the story, *and* allow us to make connections to similar ways in which our traditions, histories, experiences, and theology can entangle us rather than free us if Jesus does remain our revelation.

Our Shared Prayer

We have prayed this prayer² as an *expectation* of what the broken body and shed blood of Christ on the cross makes possible for us. We have prayed it as *a confession* of our individual and collective need for deliverance, to live free indeed. We have prayed this prayer *against the lies about God*, about who he is and what he is up to, that keep ourselves and our neighbors imprisoned in a less-than life. We have prayed this prayer as ones whose *lives are stories of freedom in Jesus*. And today, we pray this prayer as *ones who desire to remain free in Jesus*, to let our faith in what Jesus has done keep us *free to live in a way that sees Jesus finish what he started*.

We join our prayers today in intercession for the men and women in our faith family, in our daily lives, and in our city who are trapped:

those who are trapped in poverty and debt with no sign of relief;
those who are trapped in jobs and stages of life that engage but a fraction of their powers;
those who are trapped in families and relationships where love has ebbed away;
those who are trapped in unwanted alliances out of which they cannot break;
those who are trapped by the fear of discovery, or by dependency on others, or by the need for drugs, or by an addiction to any other distraction;
those who are trapped by sin, their own, and others.

O Father, whose will it is that we be free, and who did give Your Son that we might be delivered from all coercive powers;

make us examples of Your freedom,
proclaimers of Your freedom, and
instruments of Your freedom;

snap our chains that we may loose the chains of others.

Then shall the joy of the liberated rise from the earth like a mighty hymn of praise, Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Ernest T. Campbell, *Where Cross the Crowded Ways*, 44.