

GALATIANS

Galatians 1. Paul Prepares His Audience to Hear the Gospel

Many verses in this chapter subtly depict an environment of uncertainty regarding what the gospel of Jesus Christ was during the apostolic period. Thus, Paul must first establish or reemphasize his credentials as an Apostle (meaning “someone sent out” by Jesus Christ Himself), so that his epistle will be taken seriously by people in this remote part of what was modern-day Turkey. Paul does not explain the nature of false doctrines that had been taught in Galatia. Instead, he laconically explains how he became an unlikely yet special Apostle as he chose to receive Jesus’s obliging grace (*charis*) to preach to the Galatians (verse 15) and thus became obligated by Jesus’s obliging, atoning gift. Apparently, other teachers were not so bound and devoted, first and foremost, to Jesus.

In the Roman world of Paul’s time, grace was a vertical, reciprocal gift in the patron-client system that, if received, obligated the recipient to have a relationship with the giver since God the Father revealed His Son to him (verse 16). Having left behind a potentially illustrious career that began when he surpassed his Jewish contemporaries in zeal (verse 14), Paul instead reciprocated Jesus’s two-way gift of obliging grace by not only sharing Jesus’s gospel in Arabia, Jerusalem, Damascus, Syria, and Judea but by also remaining faithful and counseling with other Apostles including Peter and James, thereby granting Paul a measure of implied authority to pen this epistle. Luke’s account of Paul’s harrowing and serious challenges throughout his long ministry demonstrate Paul’s commitment to reciprocating grace with God the Father through following His Son Jesus Christ. In addition, early Church members, who had previously feared Paul in Judea, now received an obliging gift of grace from the Lord as Paul had remained faithful as a minister in the new covenant of Jesus Christ (verse 24).

Key text: Galatians 1:11–12. Truth known only by revelation

For I make it known to you brothers and sisters, the gospel which was taught by me is not derived from any person. For I did not receive it from a person neither was it taught but it was taught by revelation from Jesus Christ. (BYUNR)

The accounts of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus center on Paul’s decision to fulfill Jesus’s special charge given to him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, including kings, throughout the Mediterranean world. Instead of aggrandizing himself by means of his rabbinical education to gain further power, fame, and prestige within the Jewish community, Paul decided to work under the authority of the so-called unlettered leaders of Christ’s primitive Church (Acts 4:13). Later in this epistle, Paul added that he ministered under the uplifted right hands of Peter, James, and John, “the pillars” who were themselves guided by Peter’s prophetic revelation to extend the blessings of the gospel to the Gentiles as recorded in Acts 10 (Galatians 2:9). Paul knew that following this revelation was very challenging to Jewish Christians, yet it was something he rejoiced in receiving.

Likewise, as Paul knew, the Prophet Joseph Smith later explained that the revelation of good doctrine “tastes good. I can taste the principles of eternal life, and so can you. They are given to me by the revelations of Jesus Christ; and I know that when I tell you these words of eternal life as they are given to me, you taste them, and I know that you believe them. You say honey is sweet, and so do I. I can also taste the spirit of eternal life. I know it is good; and when I tell you of these things which were given me by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, you are bound to receive them as sweet, and rejoice more and more.”¹ Brigham Young added that the revelations of Jesus Christ will enable the Saints to handle wealth and use it “only as a means with which to gather Israel, redeem Zion, subdue and beautify the earth, and bring all things in readiness to live with God in heaven.”²

Galatians 2. Righteousness Only through the Faithfulness of Jesus Christ

In Galatians 2, Paul reports how he sought to imitate Christ’s faithfulness through personal sacrifice and service to God the Father. Part of Paul’s apostolic service involved attending a distant Church conference in Jerusalem that was plagued by disunity regarding circumcision of adult male converts (verse 1). One of Paul’s companions, Titus, was a Greek who had to be circumcised to placate contentious Judaizing Christians because, as the Joseph Smith Translation clarifies, “*there were some brought in by false brethren unawares, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage*” (Joseph Smith Translation, Galatians 2:4). The false brethren who brought in spies desired to force all Christians such as Titus to give up their agency to follow only Jesus’s commandments, instead requiring them to be bound to restrictive details of the law of Moses. In our dispensation, the Prophet Joseph Smith counseled, “In these critical times, be careful; call on

the Lord day and night. Beware of pride; beware of false brethren, who will creep in among you to spy out your liberties.”³ The key to righteousness is to remain fully faithful and obedient to Jesus Christ.

Centuries later, beginning with Christian thinkers including Augustine as promoted by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and most Protestants, Paul’s message in verse 16 came to be misconstrued to mean that salvation results only from a mere mental assent of passive feeling of faith in Christ because righteous actions of discipleship were supposedly not necessary for salvation. It is true that one is not saved by the “works of the law,” but that phrase here refers only to the antiquated observances of the law of Moses, including circumcision, dietary restrictions, and holy days (Romans 3:27–31), which had been rendered unnecessary for salvation after Christ’s Atonement had been performed.

Key text: Galatians 2:20

But I no longer live but Christ lives *with* me. That lifestyle which I now live in mortality, I live *with faithfulness* in the Son of God the Father who cares for me and handed himself over for me. (BYUNR)

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. (KJV)

Notably, the division of verse 20 is slightly different when one compares the King James Version with older Greek manuscripts. The ancient Greek verse suggests a participation with Christ, expressed through the Greek preposition *en* meaning “in” or “with,” by a new lifestyle of faithfulness. Because of Jesus’s loving concern for Paul in sacrificing Himself as an atoning sacrifice, Paul became spiritually alive and willing to be faithful within Christ’s new covenant through experiencing the many challenges of his apostolic ministry. However, centuries after Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians, during what Latter-day Saints call the Great Apostasy, some church fathers gradually transformed the meaning of faith (*pistis*) from an understanding leading to faithfulness within a relationship to one of mere mental assent to doctrine (the rule of faith) or a passive emotion that allegedly grants immediate salvation because of the influence of Neoplatonism.

The King James Version’s “and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God” has historically been interpreted as passively accepting Jesus without involving any accompanying actions of discipleship (*sola fide*) in order to receive immediate salvation. Restoring the Pauline, first-century doctrine of faith as understanding leading to covenantal faithfulness (*pistis*) in Galatians now clarifies that Paul’s writing is in harmony with Jesus’s teachings that necessitate discipleship.

Galatians 3:1–18. Blessings through Covenantal Faithfulness

Paul worried that the Galatians had been deceived into not obeying the truth since faithfulness in Christ’s new covenant comes about by means of hearing, which leads to understanding and increased faithfulness

(verses 1–2). Paul reasoned that because Abraham trusted God, Abraham became just, or righteous, and through that covenant (*pistis*) one becomes a child of Abraham and of Jesus (verses 6–7). This Abrahamic covenant contracted with Jesus Christ would bless all the faithful with faithful Abraham, even hundreds of years before the law of Moses was given (verses 8–9, 17).

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “Abraham offered sacrifice, and notwithstanding this, had the gospel preached to him. That the offering of sacrifice was only to point the mind forward to Christ. . . . From these few facts, we conclude, that whenever the Lord revealed himself to men in ancient days, and commanded them to offer sacrifice to him, that it was done that they might look forward in faith to the time of his coming, and rely upon the power of that atonement for a remission of their sins.”⁴ Knowing these truths assists modern disciples in becoming faithful through making and keeping covenants, like faithful Abraham did. Thus, the Lord has commanded all to do the works of Abraham in this and other dispensations (Doctrine and Covenants 132).

Key text: Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Mosaic law, becoming cursed on behalf of us as it has been written, cursed is every one hanging on a tree. (BYUNR)

Many Jews held that Jesus could not have been the Messiah because He had disgracefully been crucified, or symbolically hung on a tree.⁵ Jesus’s critics referred to a passage in Deuteronomy stating that any criminal who was put to death by being hung on a tree was “accursed of God,” so they argued that Jesus was cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:22–23). However, Paul promoted a new way of thinking about “cursed” as applied to Jesus the Messiah. He taught that Jesus willingly took our sins upon Himself in order to be able to thus redeem humankind and thereby becoming “cursed” as a substitute: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, *being made a curse for us*: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Galatians 3:13). Certainly, strong evidence from Jewish legal sources suggests this detail, which Jesus’s Atonement provides, was an important simile ritual for cleansing the community.⁶

Galatians 3:19–4:7. Becoming Children of God through Christlike Faithfulness

The blessings of Abraham’s covenant of priesthood, posterity and a land of inheritance were first offered to Abraham’s literal posterity of Isaac and Jacob, which subsequently became the house of Israel. Beginning in New Testament times, these Abrahamic blessings were finally offered to the Gentiles (see Acts 10). Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all who accept the gospel are entitled to these blessings of Abraham through faithfully entering into and keeping sacred covenants, beginning with baptism (verse 27). The reception of the gift of the Holy Ghost will especially bless Gentiles within this new covenant. Joseph Smith taught, “The effect of the Holy Ghost upon a Gentile is to purge out the old blood, and make him

actually of the seed of Abraham. That man that has none of the blood of Abraham (naturally) must have a new creation by the Holy Ghost. In such a case there may be more of a powerful effect upon the body, and visible to the eye, than upon an Israelite, while the Israelite at first might be far before the Gentile in pure intelligence.”⁷

The covenant path beginning at baptism and guided by the Holy Ghost will allow Jews and Gentiles to properly “put on [*enduō*] Christ” (verse 23). For Paul’s ancient, Greek-speaking readers, the Greek verb *enduō* had three important meanings: (1) “to progress onward,” (2) “to put on new clothing,” and (3) “to endow” oneself with the attributes, ordinances, and power of the Savior Jesus Christ. The power of godliness is manifest in those sacred ordinances (Doctrine and Covenants 84:20). Since Christ is the mediator of the first covenant of the law and His new covenant, only those faithful to these covenants made in Christ’s name will receive the fulness of these blessings in the celestial kingdom during the eternities (Joseph Smith Translation, Galatians 3:19–20).

Key text: Galatians 4:7

So you are no longer a bondsman but a son and if so, even an heir through God. (BYUNR)

Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. (KJV)

Paul taught the members of the Church in Galatia that one’s relationship with God is better understood as that of a legitimate son or a daughter through Jesus’s new covenant in contrast to being a bondsman to false gods. Unlike the false Celtic gods that the Galatians had traditionally worshipped out of fear in Northern Europe before arriving in the center of modern-day Turkey, Heavenly Father desires all of His children to bind themselves to Him through covenantal ordinances, beginning with baptism. Jesus clearly taught this doctrine in the parable of the prodigal son by means of the character of the younger son, who wasted his inheritance and felt that he was worthy only to become a bondsman or slave to his father, but his father still accepted and welcomed him back home as a legitimate son (Luke 15:17–24). Jesus’s atoning sacrifice has redeemed all to become sons and daughters of God on conditions of repentance and obedience to the laws and ordinances of His gospel (Articles of Faith 1:3).

Galatians 4:8–31. Free Children of God through the Eternal Covenant

Paul praised the blessings of freedom by becoming spiritually faithful to the Abrahamic covenant in this section. Paul encouraged faithfulness through a reference to a conventional Jewish interpretation of the free status of Sarah and the lowly bondswoman status of Hagar. As a pious Jew, Paul associated physical bondage of Hagar’s descendants, who in Paul’s thinking, became separated from Sarah’s more spiritual

descendants (verse 29). Paul clearly stressed the importance of being born of the Spirit by means of the Abrahamic covenant, which brings about the blessings of priesthood, posterity, and a land of inheritance.

Likewise, one must gather with the Saints and keep an eternal, spiritual outlook regarding the special promises of Abraham to remain faithful to receive the blessings of these promises. Brigham Young noted that “it is very true we gather the Saints; and when they get here and gather around them the comforts of life, and become the possessors of a little wealth, the spirit of the world enters into a few of them to that degree that it crowds out the Spirit of the Gospel. They forget their God and their covenants, and turn to the beggarly elements of the world, seek for its riches and finally leave the faith. But we had better gather nine that are unworthy than to neglect the tenth if he is worthy. If they come here, apostatize and turn our enemies, they are in the hands of God, and what they do will be to them everlasting life or everlasting condemnation.”⁸

Key text: Galatians 4:28

Nevertheless, brothers and sisters, we are children of the promise because of Isaac. (BYUNR)

The Abrahamic promises were eventually fulfilled through Isaac because Abraham and Sarah accepted God’s covenant and thereby received the promise that they would have a faithful son even in their old age (Genesis 18). Certainly, because nothing is too hard for the Lord, disciples who enter into the Abrahamic covenant and have children may likewise expect the covenantal blessings of priesthood, posterity, and a blessed land of inheritance through also demonstrating their faithfulness (Genesis 18:14; Doctrine and Covenants 132).

Galatians 5. Liberty Only through Christ and the Fruits of the Spirit

Paul’s teachings about the Abrahamic covenant, which allowed for spiritual freedom through moral agency and was renewed by Isaac and his descendants, led to the people’s ability to do good by the influence of the Spirit and not by fixation on the details of the Mosaic law. Because it is possible to fall out of an obliging covenantal relationship based on the obliging grace of Jesus’s Atonement and not become renewed again,⁹ disciples should choose to use their agency to move in line with the promptings of the Holy Ghost and thus avoid the deeds of the flesh (verse 4). These deeds are listed in verses 19–21 and include (1) sexual sins of any kind (“fornication” here refers to any immoral sexuality, and “lasciviousness” refers to unbridled desires); (2) idolatry and witchcraft (which demonstrate an interest and perhaps a love for other gods or false powers), seditions, and heresies; (3) sins against other persons including discord, hatred, and jealousy; and (4) sins associated with alcohol, including drunkenness and “boisterous revelings.” Paul warned the Galatians that individuals who habitually participate in these sins “shall not inherit

the kingdom of God” unless they repent (verse 21). In contrast, the Spirit’s blessings are love for others, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, meekness, and trust and faith in Jesus Christ (verse 23).

Key text: Galatians 5:25

If we live spiritually, let us spiritually move in line. (BYUNR)

If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (KJV)

Paul’s original Greek in this verse suggests that those who are living by the Holy Spirit will not just walk but will move together in line (*stoichōmen*) with the Holy Ghost to progress spiritually and thereby live in accordance with the will of God.¹⁰ In contrast, the King James Version is unduly influenced by the jussive form of the Latin word *ambulemus*, meaning “let’s walk.” This form was introduced into the text by Jerome in his Vulgate (Latin) translation. It has conveyed a sense to modern readers that one may mystically and independently go about one’s life with no obligations of discipleship, no purpose or attachment to others, or even a church, and still be counted as holy and righteous.

Galatians 6:1–18. Be Active in Doing Good

Paul concluded this epistle by reminding the Galatians of the importance of acting in faithful, Christian discipleship instead of only considering oneself righteous. The desired actions include being gentle, bearing others’ burdens, and bearing one’s own burdens (verses 1–2, 5). Joseph Smith notably commented, “All the religious world is boasting of righteousness—‘tis is the doctrine of the devil to retard the human mind and retard our progress, by filling us with self-righteousness. The nearer we get to our heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls—to take them upon our shoulders and cast their sins behind our back. I am going to talk to all this society—if you would have God have mercy on you, have mercy on one another.”¹¹ Paul also taught the principle of agency through the law of the harvest since God is not mocked (verses 7–9). President Dallin H. Oaks added:

“Be not deceived,” the Apostle Paul taught. “God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.” In other words, if one indulges in drugs or pornography or other evils that the Apostle called sowing to the flesh, eternal law dictates that one will harvest weakness and corruption rather than strength and life eternal. That is the justice of God, and mercy cannot rob justice. If an eternal law is broken, the punishment affixed to that law must be suffered. Some of this can be satisfied by the Savior’s Atonement, but the merciful cleansing of a soiled sinner comes only after repentance which for some sins is a prolonged and painful process. Otherwise,

“he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore, only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption.”¹²

Key text: Galatians 6:9

Let's not act inappropriately while doing good, for we will not be set free by reaping in our private time. (BYUNR)

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (KJV)

The hortatory Greek verb *enakōmen* in this verse literally means “to act inappropriately while performing appropriate actions.”¹³ Paul seems to be teaching here that it is essential to do the right thing for the right reason at the right time because God knows the intents of one’s heart. Humanity is not only judged by their deeds but by the desires of their hearts (Doctrine and Covenants 137:9). In this final section of this letter, Paul boldly reminded the Galatians that God cannot be mocked because the law of the harvest applies to both spiritual things as well as physical things (Galatians 6:7–9). All will reap the blessings of righteous actions as well as the spiritually destructive results of sinful choices (Mosiah 7:30–31; Doctrine and Covenants 6:33).

Notes

1 Joseph Smith Jr., May 7, 1844, in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1969), 355.

2 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London, UK: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–1886), 3:160.

3 “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” p. 410, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/416>; capitalization silently modernized.

4 “Letter to the Church, circa March 1834,” p. 143, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-circa-march-1834/2>.

5 Acts 5:30; 10:39; 1 Peter 2:24.

6 John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2008), 352–355.

7 “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842] [addenda],” p. 8 [addenda], The Joseph

Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/543>; punctuation and capitalization silently modernized.

8 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London, UK: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–1886), 15:18.

9 Joseph Smith Jr., in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1969), 338–339

10 Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1996), s.v. “*stoicheō*.”

11 “Minutes and Discourse, 9 June 1842,” p. 62, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-and-discourse-9-june-1842/2>; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization silently modernized.

12 Dallin H. Oaks, “Be Not Deceived,” October 2004 general conference, available online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

13 Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1996), s.v. “*egkakeō*.”

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Source: *New Testament Insights: Galatians*, by Brent Schmidt