

**Submit gently**

Paul's robust defence of his ministry has a subtle undercurrent. All the time, he is urging people to be humble and not self-assertive, to be gentle with each other rather than boasting about their achievements. You see this especially in 10:12-18 where he refuses to compare himself with others. Making comparisons can either depress us (because we can't match their achievement) or make us feel proud because we think we're better than they are. What's important, he says in 10:18, is God's commendation. Our aim is to please God, not gain a human reputation. That means submitting to him and fulfilling our calling.

**Start again**

Paul's teaching about reconciliation in 5:1-6:2 is often used in evangelistic talks, but it applies equally to believers as to unbelievers. The answer to disunity in society or the church is to seek reconciliation. God is the great reconciler: through Christ's death sinful people have been brought into fellowship with a holy God, and Christians now share in his work of reconciliation. "We are ... Christ's ambassadors" (5:20). Amazing: each Christian is a valued diplomat in God's service with the special task of bringing peace where there is dissension. We can start again after a row; and so can others, with Christ's help.

*"We live by faith,  
not by sight."*

2 CORINTHIANS 5:7

**Share generously**

How we hate to part with our worldly wealth and goods! But it isn't ours, it's God's. He gives us all we have, and all we need; we won't suffer if we give some away (9:8-11). Paul's memorable phrases are easy to repeat and hard to apply: "God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7); though Jesus "was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor" (8:9) – thus giving us an example to follow. You can't be expected to give what you haven't got, Paul adds (8:12). And he challenges the attitude which applauds the accumulation of wealth at others' expense, suggesting that God's will is equality and "enough" for all (8:13-15). He is surely angry at the inequality in the world today.

**Suffer graciously**

Christianity does not bring a prosperity gospel but realism. Paul knits his persecution for the gospel with his "thorn in the flesh" into a single thought: we all suffer. His positive attitude refuses to allow his faith to be rocked by personal discomfort. It is a great example in our age that expects quick fixes for all ills. God is bigger than our pain. And yes, Paul prayed to be free of it. But when he wasn't, he accepted the verdict and carried on serving, expecting a better life in the future.



# Galatians

THE GOSPEL OF FREEDOM

**OVERVIEW**

The churches to which this letter is addressed had caved in to teachers who said that you cannot be a Christian unless you also observe the Jewish ceremonial law. Paul wrote to correct this "false gospel". He said it led to spiritual slavery, in contrast to the freedom brought by the death of Jesus Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

**SUMMARY**

Whereas most of Paul's letters begin with praise to God and thanksgiving for the readers and their faith, Galatians has only a short introduction (1:1-5) after which Paul immediately goes on the attack and states his point: what others after him have preached in Galatia is not the true Gospel (1:6-9). He takes much time to establish his credentials as an apostle, the credentials of the Gospel that he received from Jesus Christ himself (1:10-2:10). He recalls an earlier controversy over the issue of the law, an incident in Syrian Antioch which brought him head to head with his fellow apostle Peter (2:11-14), and he rounds off the first part of the letter with a statement of the Gospel (2:15-21).

A second round of polemics begins with the blunt address "you foolish Galatians" and continues to remind them of the work of the Holy Spirit among them as evidence for the truth of the Gospel as preached by Paul (3:1-5). Twice Abraham is introduced as an example of true faith (3:6-14, 15-18). Paul explains that the role of the law was to prepare the Jewish people for the Gospel (3:19-29) so that Christians by definition are not subject to it (4:1-7). A series of personal utterances of concern for the readers follows in 4:8-20, underscored once more with reference to Abraham, this time in relation to his wives Hagar and Sarah (4:21-31). 5:2-6 applies the entire argument to the specific issue of circumcision and 5:7-12 is one more

personal appeal. A discussion of the relation between the law and the freedom in the Spirit follows in 5:13-26, with 6:1-10 offering practical suggestions for mutual relations within the fellowship. A final time Paul sums up his appeal (6:11-15) before he closes with a few words of blessing (6:16, 18).

**Author and date**

This letter includes the themes and emphases that are a common feature of Paul's ministry and writings. What is less certain is to whom it was addressed and when it was written.

In Paul's time, two areas were called "Galatia", both within modern Turkey.

The most likely view is that Paul wrote to churches in the Roman administrative area called Galatia, in the south. Here were the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe which Paul visited and where he started churches (Acts 13-14). That makes Galatians the earliest of Paul's letters, probably written about AD 47-48 soon after his visit (1:6). He doesn't mention the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) which was about AD 48-49, and which he would have referred to had it happened because it strongly supported his position. Alternatively, Paul may have written to people in the north of the region at a later date (c. AD 55).

**Background**

The Jewish people had been given laws in the Old Testament, to which their leaders had added still more detailed legislation. Now

that non-Jews came to faith in the God of Israel, it was logical to assume that they too should abide by these rules. Yet God had revealed to Paul that he accepts believers in Jesus Christ without observance of the law.

This was the gospel Paul preached but his adversaries wanted to make all Christians subject to the law. They had arrived in the new churches soon after Paul had departed (1:6-9).

fulfilment of religious regulations (eg 2:15-16,20-21). No one kept all the Old Testament rules anyway so that all were under God's curse (3:10). Jesus took this curse on himself so that by trusting in his atoning death and resurrection we can be saved (3:11-14). As a result, all racial and cultural distinctions are swept aside and all believers are on an equal footing (3:26-29).

However, Old Testament people weren't misguided. The law gave them a framework for understanding and relating to God while faith was in its infancy, like a guardian protecting them until the full revelation of Christ (3:19-4:7). The law points forward to Christ and is fulfilled by him.

## OUTLINE – GALATIANS

### The Galatian problem

1:1-5 Paul's opening greetings

1:6-9 Paul's concern that the Galatians are deserting the gospel

### The authenticity of Paul's gospel

1:10-24 Paul's message came directly from Christ

2:1-10 Paul's credentials as an apostle

2:11-21 Paul's argument with Peter over the inclusion of Gentiles in the church

### An explanation of the gospel

3:1-5 Paul's appeal to the Galatians against legalism

3:6-9 Abraham's children are those who have faith

3:10-14 The way of the law and the way of faith

3:15-22 The relationship between God's promise and the law

3:23-4:7 The role of the law for God's children

4:8-20 Paul's concern for the Galatians

4:21-31 A picture of law and promise: Hagar and Sarah

### The freedom brought by the gospel

5:1-12 Paul pleads for the Galatians to avoid slavery to the law

5:13-26 The life of freedom in the Holy Spirit

6:1-10 Various instructions for Christian living

6:11-15 Warnings against Judaisers

6:16-18 Paul's final comments

without imposing Jewish regulations (2:1-10), a decision later reinforced by the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). His argument with Peter (2:11-21) is unrecorded in Acts and is ironic because it was Peter who was first convinced of God's acceptance of Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11:18). It's a complex jigsaw, but it does fit together!

### The promise of salvation

Paul stresses that God's approval and our eternal salvation is mediated only by Jesus Christ and depends on faith in Christ, not on

### The purpose of the law

By "the law" Paul means the Jewish ceremonial law, not the moral law summed up in the Ten Commandments. The rules about food, methods of worship, and certain cultural matters are no longer compulsory. He uses the shorthand "circumcision" (5:6) to mean the whole ceremonial law, because that aspect of it was a key part of the false apostles' teaching.

## RELEVANCE FOR TODAY – GALATIANS

### Avoid legalism

An important part of biblical interpretation is to look for the principles behind the teachings. In Galatians, the principle is "legalism": the insistence that every Christian should conform to certain rituals or practices.

Such practices vary hugely from culture to culture, however! For some Christians, not drinking alcohol is almost an article of faith; for others, it is a natural thing to do, provided it isn't taken to excess. The problem is that such regulations can become "primary" issues that define a Christian. The only primary issues that Scripture allows are those which Paul emphasises in Galatians: the life, death and resurrection of Christ. If our faith is firmly in those, then issues not directly associated with the moral law are "secondary" matters over which we may disagree, but should not divide.

### Argue carefully

Paul's arguments in 3:15-19 and 4:21-31 can be puzzling. Paul was a Jewish rabbi, and in

this letter was combating people from a Jewish background. Therefore he uses the allegories and accepted Jewish beliefs of his day to show that his teaching isn't contrary to God's word.

This is a good example to follow. In our discussions with people from many backgrounds, it is important to start where they are in their understanding and background knowledge. We may be able to find points of contact, as Paul did, which lead people towards a fresh and more complete understanding of the gospel. Indeed, this is the main principle of cross-cultural mission.

### Act consistently

The argument with Peter (2:11-21) illustrates a common problem. We believe we should act in a certain way, but cave in under pressure and don't act consistently. That Peter could fall this way may be some comfort; everyone is vulnerable. That is why at the end of the letter Paul stresses the need to "live by the Spirit" (5:16). The Holy Spirit can give us the courage

## KEY THEMES – GALATIANS

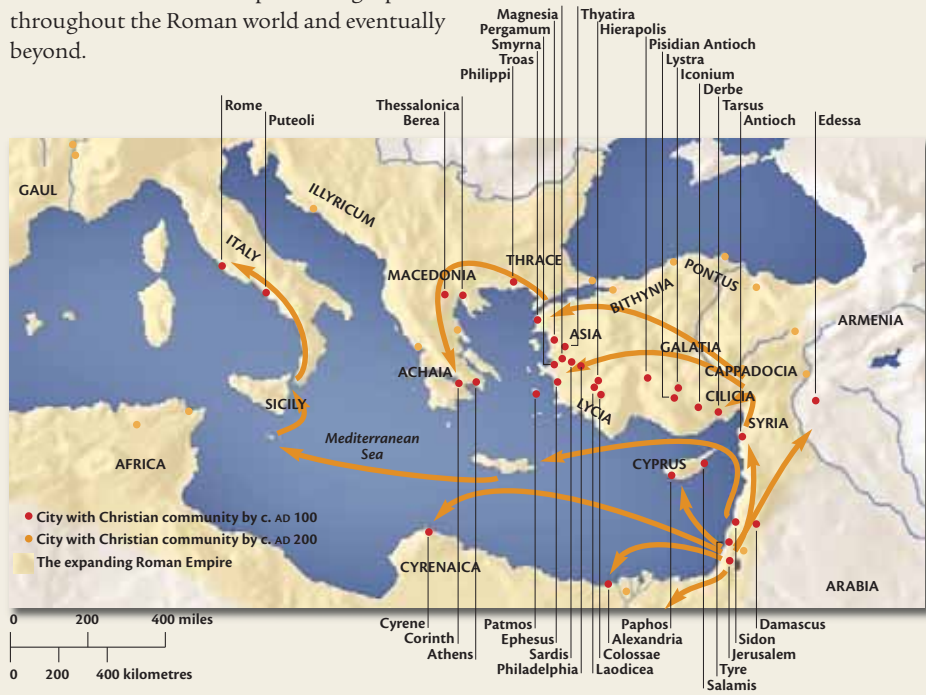
### Paul's personal experience

What we know about Paul's life from Acts 8-14 is supplemented in Galatians. He describes what happened after his conversion: his visits to Arabia and Damascus (1:14-17; Acts 9:19-25), then Jerusalem (1:18; Acts 9:26-30). His time in Syria (1:21) probably refers to Tarsus, which is where Barnabas found him and drew him into a wider ministry (Acts 11:22-26).

The visit to Jerusalem in 2:1 is probably that of Acts 11:27. There, the other apostles accepted Paul's ministry to the Gentiles

## THE GOSPEL SPREADS

One effect of persecution – driving Christians away – plus missionary work by the apostles and others combined to spread the gospel throughout the Roman world and eventually beyond.



to be consistent when our human hearts fail us.

### Apply the gospel

Christianity is a framework for living. Paul sets out the difference between “the acts of the sinful nature” (what human beings tend towards) and “the fruit of the Spirit” which is a list of virtues reflecting God’s character being formed in us (5:19-26). It’s a challenging list. Jealousy, rage and envy afflict all of us even if immorality and idolatry don’t. None of us can read Galatians 5 lightly. The world around us expects us to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit – and so does God.

*“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”*

GALATIANS 2:20



LETTERS

# Ephesians

INSPIRED BY GOD’S ETERNAL PURPOSES

## OVERVIEW

Ephesians is full of inspiring language. It describes God’s eternal purposes for the rescue of humanity from the clutches of sin and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Punctuated by prayers and praises, it urges readers to live out in practice the changed life that God has graciously given them.

## SUMMARY

Ephesians falls neatly into two equal parts: chapters 1–3 have a doctrinal content whereas chapters 4–6 are ethical. The letter includes many topics which would have been covered in an introduction to the Christian faith but at quite a high level.

After a brief introduction and greetings (1:1-2) Paul praises the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then he mentions the Holy Spirit (1:13-14). The second half of chapter 1 addresses God directly in prayer, asking for the work of the Holy Spirit and for certainty of the believers’ hope of the future. In chapter 2 attention shifts further to the position of the believers, with verses 1-10 spelling out how they were saved and verses 11-22 explaining that they belong to God’s holy people, the church which consists of believers from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Paul then discusses the contribution of his own ministry to the church (3:1-13) and prays once more for it (3:14-21).

The second half of the letter addresses the unity, growth and development of the church (4:1-16) before it moves on to the individual believer. Here Paul considers the consequences of being a Christian. Specific topics include the roles of husband and wife (5:21-33) and other groups (6:9). The letter ends with a discussion of spiritual armour (6:10-20) and the usual personal notes and blessings (6:21-24).

## Author

Ephesians is unlike any of Paul’s other letters. It contains few personal reflections or greetings, apart from identifying the author as Paul (1:1; 3:1) and the final mention of Paul’s messenger Tychicus (6:21-22). The subject matter is typically that of Paul, but the language is not. The original Greek contains over 40 words not used anywhere else in the New Testament, and a similar number of other words used in the New Testament but never in Paul’s other letters. However, the early church accepted Paul’s authorship without question. The language differences could be due to a different scribe taking Paul’s dictation, and no real alternative to Paul has ever been suggested.

## Date

The lack of personal data makes it difficult to date Ephesians, but it was clearly written while Paul was in prison (3:1,13; 4:1; 6:20). Ephesians has a number of similarities to Colossians, although the ideas are more developed in Ephesians and were therefore probably written after Colossians. But it probably wasn’t long after, as it is usually grouped with Colossians, Philippians and Philemon as the four “prison epistles” written by Paul when he was under house arrest in Rome (see Acts 28:16,30,31), about AD 60.