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# Lesson 1

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## Background of Galatians

A study of a book of the Bible is always helped by looking into the book's background. Typical questions asked here are, Who wrote the book? To whom? When? and Why? Such background study makes us feel more at home with the Bible book, taking it out of the "stranger" classification. Also, it serves as a healthy reminder to us that although the holy, infallible Scriptures originated with God, they were born out of human circumstances *involving people like ourselves*.

After we have completed this study of *setting*, we will be ready to make a general survey of the Bible book as a whole (Lesson 2). That survey then is our introduction to the main part of our study of Galatians, which involves detailed *analysis* of words, verses, paragraphs, and chapters (Lessons 3-10). This order (background, survey, analysis) is the normal procedure in the study of a book of the Bible. It is the order followed in all of the self-study guides of this series.

For all books of the Bible, some questions of background remain unanswered (e.g., Who wrote Hebrews?). We may rest assured that whatever background is necessary for an *adequate* understanding of the Bible text is supplied in that text, whether of that particular book or of another book of the Bible. All other background that is available from sources outside the Bible (such as secular history) we cherish as a bonus and use to further enhance our study.

Let us see how much can be known of the setting of Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

### I. AUTHOR

The writer is identified in the text as "Paul, an apostle" (1:1; cf. 6:11). Some interesting things are to be said about his name. *Paul*,

meaning “little,” was his Roman name. His Hebrew name was *Saul* (“asked of God”). Possibly he had both names from childhood. In his epistles the apostle always refers to himself as Paul. Consult a concordance for all the references to the two names in the New Testament. Read Acts 13:9, which is the turning point in Acts for the changeover of designation from Saul to Paul.

Important dates in the life of Paul include the following:<sup>1</sup>

4 B.C.	Birth of Paul (about the same time as Christ's birth <sup>2</sup> )
A.D. 33	Paul Saved (Acts 9)
47	First missionary journey begun (Acts 13: 1)
49	Second missionary journey begun (Acts 15:36)
52	Third missionary journey begun (Acts 18:23)
56	Paul arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27)
61	Paul's first imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28)
62	Release from prison
62-66	Period of liberty
67	Second imprisonment
67	Executed by Nero

Read Galatians 1:2, and observe that other Christians joined with Paul in greeting the Galatian churches: “all the brethren which are with me.”

## II. TO WHOM WRITTEN

The text identifies the original readers as “the churches of Galatia” (1:2; cf. 3:1). The other places in the New Testament where the reference to “Galatia” appears are these: 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Timothy 4:10; 1 Peter 1:1; Acts 16:6; 18:23. (Be sure to read all Bible references cited in this lesson.)

It is interesting to observe that this is the only Pauline epistle addressed as such to a *group* of churches. Some of Paul's epistles (e.g., Ephesians) were intended to be circulated among churches, even though one church was designated as the original recipient.

Where were these “churches of Galatia” located? Two different views are held on this: (1) the North Galatian View—churches founded on Paul's second missionary journey when he passed through the northern districts of Asia Minor; (2) the South Galatian View—churches founded on Paul's first missionary journey to such “southern” cities as Lystra and Derbe. The latter view is the

1. Dates in some cases are approximate.

2. See James Stalker, *The Life of St. Paul*, pp. 17-18. Because of this coincidence, one can quickly estimate Paul's age at any given A.D. date.

one held by most expositors today. See Appendix for brief descriptions and defenses of each of these views.

The position taken by this manual is that the “churches of Galatia” were located in the southern cities evangelized by Paul on his first missionary journey. The following suggestions for study are geared to this position:

1. Study the map showing the geography of Galatians (Chart A). Note the locations of these cities: Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Try to fix these locations in your mind in order to help you *visualize* and *feel* the real situations behind the Bible text that you will be studying. (“To visualize is to empathize.”)

2. Read Acts 13:1–14:28, which is Luke’s reporting of Paul’s first missionary journey. Study especially the ministries and events at the four Galatian cities mentioned above. These are the cities where Paul won converts and founded the churches to whom he wrote Galatians. Note: Paul’s return trip on the first missionary journey (Acts 14:21-27) might be called a second visit to the people. Observe that as of Acts 14:23, churches in the area are already being established.

3. It is generally believed that most of the Galatian believers were of Gentile background. How is this supported by the following verses in Galatians?

4:8

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5:2

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6:12

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2:5 (in its context)

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4. What do the following verses tell you about the Galatian churches and about Paul’s relationship to them?

1:6-7

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1:8, 11

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3:1-5

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**WRITINGS OF PAUL LISTED CHRONOLOGICALLY  
WITH THE OTHER NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS**

**Chart B**

BIOGRAPHY OF PAUL	BOOK	AUTHOR	PLACE WRITTEN	DATE A.D.	PERIODS		
					Personnel	Apostolic Literature	Church
	James	James	Jerusalem	45			
FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY						BEGINNINGS —about 15 years	FOUNDING
—interim—	Galatians	Paul	Antioch	48	FIRST PAULINE PERIOD		
SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY	1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians		Corinth	52			
THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY	1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Romans		Ephesus Macedonia Corinth	55 56			
	ARREST: FROM JERUSALEM TO ROME		Matthew Luke Acts	Matthew Luke			
FIRST IMPRISONMENT	Colossians Ephesians Philemon Philippians	Paul	Rome	61	CENTRAL PAULINE PERIOD	CENTRAL —about 10 years	ESTABLISHING
RELEASE	1 Timothy Titus	Paul	Rome	62	PAUL'S LEGACY		
SECOND IMPRISONMENT; THEN DEATH	2 Timothy			67			
	Hebrews Jude	? Jude					
	1 Peter 2 Peter Mark	Peter Mark		68 ?	PETER'S LEGACY		
FALL OF JERUSALEM A.D. 70						15 "silent" years	
	John 1 John 2 John 3 John Revelation	John	Ephesus   Patmos	85   96	JOHN'S LEGACY	CLOSING —about 10 years	CONTINUING

4:12-15

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4:19-20

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5:7-9

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### III. DATE

The epistle to the Galatians was Paul's first inspired writing. (See Chart B for a chronology of Paul's ministry, which places Galatians first in the list.) He wrote it after his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14) and before the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). The Jerusalem council was held in A.D. 49, so A.D. 48 may be assigned to the epistle. The epistle of James (A.D. 45) was probably the only other New Testament book antedating Galatians.

### IV. SETTING

The first opposition the Gentile Christians of Galatia encountered after their conversion was from Jewish unbelievers of their own hometowns (cf. Acts 13:45-50; 14:21-23). Apparently the Christians withstood these attacks, for Paul does not refer to such a problem in his epistle. Satan changed his tactics against the Galatians and used Jewish Christians from without (probably from Jerusalem) to cast a pall of doubt over Paul's evangelistic ministry among them. "Where the blustering storm of opposition failed the subtle influences of persuasion had met with more success."<sup>3</sup>

It all happened fast. Soon after Paul left the cities of Galatia on his first missionary journey, Judaizers arrived and told the new converts that they had not heard the *whole* gospel (1:6-7). These troublemakers taught that salvation was by (1) faith in Christ *plus* (2) observation of Jewish ceremonies (e.g., circumcision). In other words, the Gentile converts of Galatia were not saved if they had not also become Jews. Read the following verses of Galatians and record the various false doctrines taught by these opponents of Paul:

1:6-9

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3. C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 7.

2:16

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3:2-3

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4:10, 21

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5:2-4

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6:12

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Also record how each of the following verses identify these false teachers:

1:7; 5:10, 12

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3:1

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4:17

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Why do you think it was difficult for many Jews in Paul's day to accept the doctrine of *salvation through faith alone*? One writer comments on this, "Two thousand years of Jewish tradition were in their bones."<sup>4</sup> What were some of the ingredients of that tradition (e.g., forefathers, the Temple)? Read Acts 6-7 to see how one Jew, Stephen, saw the deeper significance of the sacred Jewish institutions, as they pointed to a Messiah not only on the throne of David but also on the throne of the universe.<sup>5</sup>

4. William Neil, *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians*, p.4.

5. Stephen was probably a Hellenistic Jew speaking the Greek language and adopting Greek customs. The speech of Acts 7 was delivered to an audience in Jerusalem about fifteen years before Galatians was written.

## V. PURPOSES

Some of the main purposes of Paul in writing this epistle were:

1. To expose the false teachings of the Judaizers who were undermining the faith of the new converts
2. To defend Paul's apostleship, which was being challenged by these Judaizers
3. To emphasize that salvation is through faith alone, not faith plus law
4. To exhort the Galatian Christians to live in the liberty brought by Christ (5:1), bringing forth fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23)

## VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EPISTLE

Distinguishing marks of the epistle include the following:

1. *Many contrasts.* These will be seen in our survey study of Lesson 2.

2. *Strong statements.* Paul was justifiably incensed over the destructive work of the troublemakers. Twice in the opening chapter he writes, "Let him be accursed." "The Epistle to the Galatians is spiritual dynamite, and it is therefore almost impossible to handle it without explosions."<sup>6</sup> The writer of this epistle has been described as "a man with a brilliant mind, a trenchant controversialist, a fearless fighter . . . a man whose life was 'hidden with Christ in God.'"<sup>7</sup>

3. *Clear distinction between faith and works as the condition for salvation.* The book has been used of God to bring spiritual awakening to such men as Martin Luther and John Wesley. Luther said this of Galatians: "It is my epistle; I have betrothed myself to it: it is my wife."

4. *Classic treatment of Christian liberty.* This is why the epistle has been called "The Magna Charta of spiritual emancipation."

5. *No congratulations or words of praise.* It was not that there was nothing commendable about the Galatians' spiritual lives. But the epistle was written under the strain of urgency, over a situation of emergency. Paul would have later contacts with the churches when he could inspire them through commendation.

## VII. RELATION TO OTHER NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

Refer to Chart B and review the chronological order of writing of Paul's epistles. Then study Chart C, which shows groupings of the New Testament books by *topics* (e.g., *ecclesiology*, doctrine of the church). With what topic is Galatians identified?

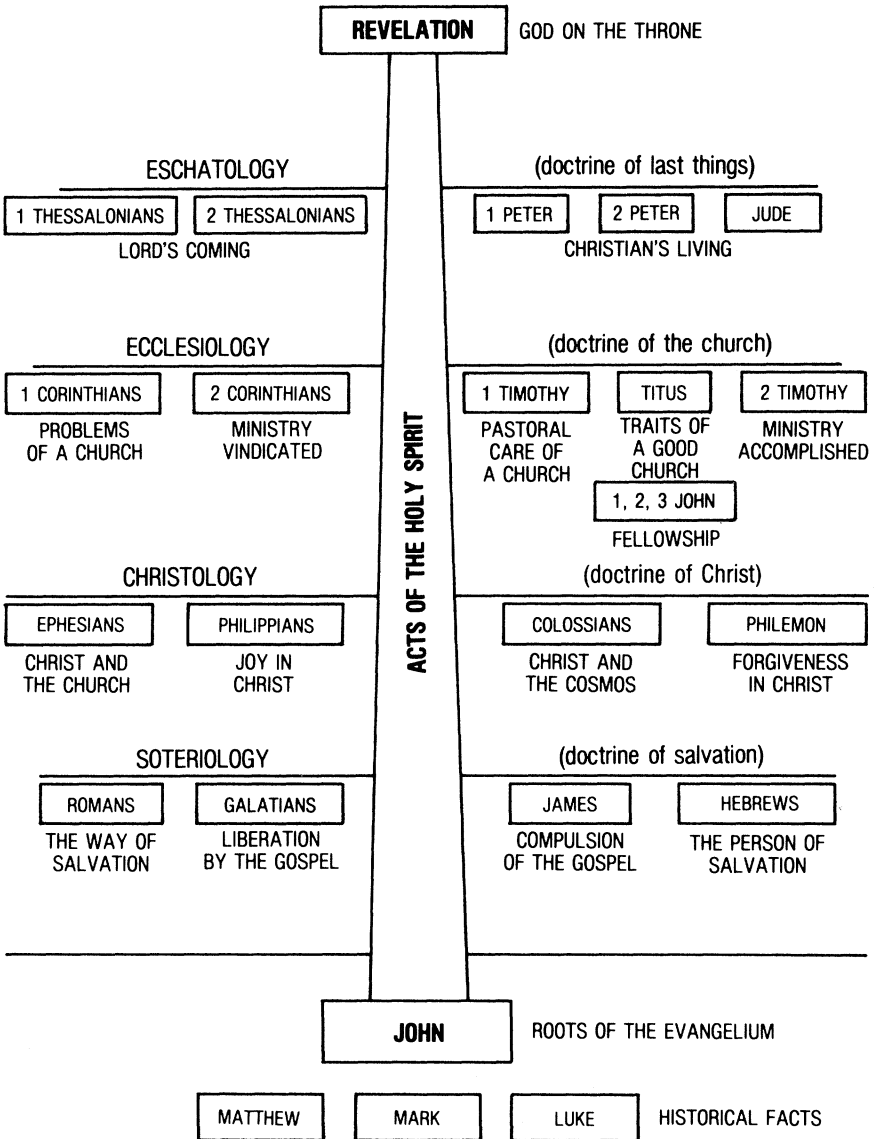
6. R. A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, p. 11.

7. Neil, p. 89



**BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT  
GROUPED ACCORDING TO TOPIC**

**Chart C**



## A. Galatians and James

It is interesting to observe that the first two New Testament books to be written (James, A.D. 45; Galatians, A.D. 48) concerned themselves with the subject of *works*. Each book stressed a different, though not contradictory, aspect of that common subject. James was addressed to the error of antinomianism (from *anti*, “against,” and *nomos*, “law”), which said that since a person is saved by grace through faith, works thereafter are not important. (Read James 2:14-26.) Galatians was addressed to the error of what might be called *Galatianism*, which said that one is *saved* through faith and *perfected* by the keeping of the law, thus salvation is by faith *plus* works. Stated another way,

Galatians teaches **liberation by the gospel**;  
James teaches **compulsion of the gospel**.

This is the comparison shown on Chart C. It is easy to see from this why a study of Galatians made in conjunction with a study of James brings out the stable, balanced New Testament teaching on the place of *works* in the doctrine of salvation.

## B. Galatians and Romans

The subject of works is also prominent in Romans, the epistle that exposes the error of legalism, which says that a person is saved by works. The subject of justification by faith appears often in both Romans and Galatians. (Read Gal. 2:16-17; 3:11, 24; 5:4; Rom. 3:20, 24, 28; 5:1, 9.) The large subject of salvation is treated more fully in Romans. It has been said that Galatians is the “rough block” of what appears in more finished form in Romans, written eight years later.

## C. Galatians and 2 Corinthians

Much of 2 Corinthians is devoted to a defense of Paul’s apostleship (e.g., 2 Cor. 10-13), because Paul’s opponents were stirring up the Corinthian believers by challenging his credentials as an apostle. In the first two chapters of Galatians, Paul defends his apostleship, which was challenged by the same kind of troublemakers. If you have already studied 2 Corinthians you will want to recall its *apologia* passages when you study Galatians 1-2.

## VIII. APPLICATIONS

As you study the text of Galatians, you will be continually making spiritual applications to your life and to the lives of others. This, after all, is the ultimate purpose of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Some of the *areas* of applications derived from Galatians are identified here:

1. *One's salvation.* What really are the conditions for salvation that a person must fulfill?

2. *One's Christian growth (sanctification).* Does this come by self-effort? What is the source of strength?

3. *One's conscience.* Where can peace be found for a troubled conscience? John Bunyan, in deep distress over his "inward pollution," found his answer in an old copy of Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians. Later he gave his testimony: "I prefer this book of Martin Luther on the Galatians (excepting the Holy Bible) before all the books that ever I have seen, as *most fit for a wounded conscience.*" (Read 5:1; cf. Heb. 9:14.)

4. *One's liberty.* What are my privileges of freedom in Christ? Is the church of Christ supposed to be uniform in custom and habit in all respects? Did Paul urge Gentile Christians to act like Jewish Christians, or Jewish Christians to act like Gentile Christians?

## SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Recall some of the high points of Paul's life. Where does the writing of Galatians fit in here?

2. Where were the churches of Galatia located?

3. When had Paul first met these Galatians? Did he have any part in the founding of the local churches in the different cities?

4. Why is it held that Paul wrote Galatians *before* the Jerusalem council of Acts 15?

5. Why did Paul write to the churches of Galatia so soon after completing his evangelistic mission to them?

6. What was the local setting that brought on this letter?

7. Name four main purposes of the epistle.

8. What are some of the distinguishing marks of the epistle?

9. Compare Galatians with James, Romans, and 2 Corinthians.

10. What are some things to look for in Galatians that you may profitably apply to your own life?