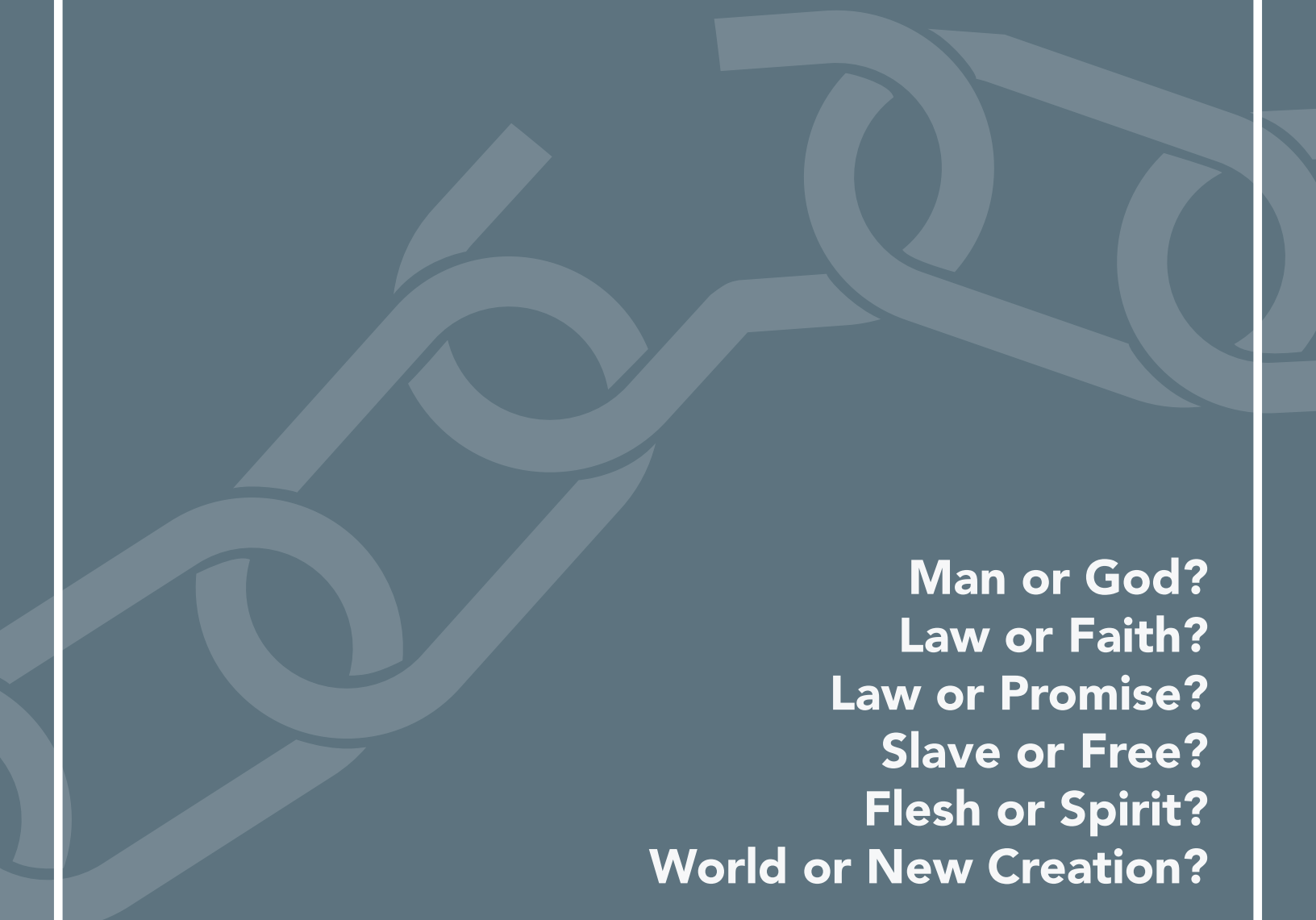


A STUDY ON THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

# CHRISTIAN FREEDOM



**Man or God?  
Law or Faith?  
Law or Promise?  
Slave or Free?  
Flesh or Spirit?  
World or New Creation?**

REV. DANIEL J. BERGE, PH.D.

## **A Study on the Letter to the Galatians, by Rev. Daniel J. Berge Ph.D.**

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## LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY **LETTER TO THE GALATIANS**

Welcome to the study of the book of Galatians.

This course will have 7 lessons, or modules. You've already started this, the first one. In this first module, we'll simply cover some introductory matters before getting into our study of Galatians. The final 6 modules will each cover 1 chapter at a time.

For each chapter, I've included some teaching and questions to guide your reading. My summaries and questions don't cover everything, but don't let that limit your discussion. I've tried to write questions that invite further questions of the text than what I'm able to cover, so plan on reading carefully and asking your own questions in each lesson.

The goal of this course is to really study the book of Galatians. Try to really get to know this book and the issues it was wrestling with.

With that in mind, let me add one final thing to this first introduction; read and re-read the book of Galatians throughout this study. Galatians is not a suspense story. Don't save the ending as some kind of a surprise that you don't want to spoil. Although we'll discuss this letter slowly—one chapter a week—this book is short enough that you should be able to read it in about 20 minutes; so read it, and re-read it again throughout this study! Reading the whole thing repeatedly will help draw your attention to what Paul was really trying to say in this book, and help uncover the unity of this great letter.

I'm really excited to welcome you to this study, and I hope and pray that getting to know Galatians better through this study will bear fruit in your life.

Rev. Daniel J. Berge, Ph.D.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

# ANCIENT LETTERS IN GENERAL

Before studying the letter of Galatians, let's consider a brief introduction to some aspects of letter writing in antiquity. Most specifically, we will address some distinctions between then and now in how letters were received, read, and collected. It should be noted that some of what we observe here will be based on examples outside of the New Testament. We don't exactly know how these things happened in respect to the New Testament, but it can be insightful to get a feel for the past by studying some general things from other ancient sources as well.

One of the first distinctions that should be observed between the time of the New Testament and today is the level of literacy. While in most of our contemporary churches we assume that most everybody is able to read and write on their own, this was not the case in New Testament times. Typical estimates suggest only 10-20% of the population could read at the time the New Testament was written. This would make for a much different approach to letter writing in general, and devotional Scriptural practices, as well.

However, although most people didn't have the personal ability to read or write, they still often had access to literature. Oral reading was much more common in antiquity than it is today. While we usually only listen to audio books by ourselves, it seemed to be a common practice for friends to enjoy listening to the reading of a book together—much like we might watch a movie together. It is likely that the letters Paul wrote were read publicly in one sitting to their recipient congregations. This would result in a much different reception than the sometimes "choppy" way we read isolated sections today.

Therefore, these letters were much more unified in their reception in antiquity, and they were often more public documents. Take for example Paul's words at the end of Colossians. In 4:16 he writes to the Colossians, "when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea." These letters were to be received and read in front of the congregation together, and then passed on to the next congregation.

This brings up the final aspect to discuss here: the collection of these letters. Based off various sources, it seems likely that each congregation would've made their own copies before sending on the letters, and it further seems likely that Paul would have retained a copy himself. There might be a reference to this in the Bible. Although we're not sure exactly what documents Paul refers to, perhaps part of the reference in 2 Timothy 4:13 would have included the collection of his own letters. Several collections of letters outside of the New Testament have survived from this period, some published by their authors. It is entirely possible that Paul might have been behind the first "book" of his own letters, as these letters have been found bound as a group in various manuscripts.

It can be helpful to keep in mind differences like these as we approach the letter to the Galatians. Hopefully this introduction has anticipated some of the questions you may have had about letter writing in antiquity, and hopefully you are a more equipped reader of the New Testament letters through this brief overview.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **HISTORICAL SETTING**

As we've mentioned before, the book of Galatians is actually a letter, written by the apostle Paul, addressed to several churches referred to as "of Galatia." [Gal 1:1-2]

There's been a lot of research over the years on who the "Galatians" actually were and when this letter was written. All agree that this was written to a group of churches in central Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), but there is some debate about whether or not it's written to the ethnic Galatians in the northern part or the provincial Galatians in the southern regions. While we have no evidence that Paul actually visited the northern regions, the Book of Acts records several visits Paul made to the southern regions. Places like Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, and Derbe are visited by Paul in Acts 13, 14, and 16. These could be the very communities to which Galatians was addressed.

While it is certainly interesting that we might have some background information from Acts on the original audience, a lot of this doesn't have a major impact on how we read it today. However, there are some background issues that could change how we understand some aspects of this letter. Perhaps the most important issue we might consider is when Galatians was written—specifically whether or not this letter was written before or after the Jerusalem Council meeting of Acts 15.

At the start of Acts 15 Paul gets into a heated argument with some other teachers about the issue of circumcision. Certain teachers were proclaiming that gentiles who converted to Christ needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses. Paul disagreed.

The apostles and elders of Jerusalem gathered together to consider the matter. [Acts 15:6] After considering the issues, they wrote a letter to gentile believers that explained they did not have to be circumcised, nor keep the entire law of Moses—you can actually read this letter in Acts 15:23-29. Paul's teaching was confirmed, and the matter was settled. They sent the letter in the hands of messengers to decide this for the churches.





## CHAPTER 1

# MAN OR GOD?

Man or God? This study on chapter 1 is titled “man or God” because that’s exactly how Paul starts off this letter to the Galatians, and—in fact—in a very general way, it summarizes the entire content of this letter. Throughout this book, we’ll want to keep this initial distinction in mind as we consider things like where the true gospel comes from, where our righteousness comes from, where our hope lies, and how we are to live. That’s a pretty broad list, I know, but in a general sense we’ll see how all these things hang together as we work through this letter.

We’ll leave plenty of those things for later sessions, but for this first session we’ll want to focus on the place Paul starts. Look at verse 1:1. “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father . . .” Paul begins this letter by stressing that he isn’t an apostle because any group of men or any single man made him an apostle. He’s not sent by any human agency—he’s on a mission that’s sourced in someone much more important. Paul is an apostle of God.

This is going to be very important as we work through this first chapter. Paul is writing to these Galatians because they’ve started to believe something that Paul calls another gospel—really a false gospel. Some other people have come and started to trouble the Galatians by telling them something different than what they had first heard from Paul [1:6-7]. So how does Paul respond? He starts at the source. His gospel, the true gospel, is from God.

There may seem to be a bit of tension here as we consider that Paul himself is actually a man. How can he get by with telling the Galatians to believe him—a man—instead of some other guys? Somewhat subtly Paul seems to recognize this potential problem. In verse 8 he actually includes himself in a general warning, “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” Paul himself isn’t the source of the gospel, and he’s not the one who can change it. If he decides to change the gospel, he lumps himself in with any other false teacher—even an angel from heaven. Paul is so firm on this that he repeats his warning in back-to-back verses [1:8-9]!

So, on what basis can Paul tell the Galatians to listen to him? Well, he answers that as he goes on. In verses 10 and 11 he returns to this opening distinction between God and man.

Paul is not seeking to please men, just God, and most importantly he says, “the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul explains he’s got a unique calling, giving by God, to proclaim the gospel God gave to him. As you study chapter one through the rest of this session, keep in mind Paul’s goal here to establish how his message is uniquely sourced in him through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

1. Reread chapter 1 and discuss anything that captures your attention.
2. List all the places you can find a contrast between man and God in Galatians chapter 1.
3. Reread the introduction (1:1-5) and consider how Paul describes God. What things does Paul stress, and what does he say about how God relates to his readers?



## CHAPTER 2

# LAW OR FAITH?

In Galatians chapter 2, we continue to read through this “historical section” Paul started in chapter 1:13. We can remember that chapter 1 focused on Paul’s unique history as one uniquely called by God to preach Jesus Christ [1:12]—so his gospel has God himself as its source. Starting in chapter 2 the historical section continues, but we have a few new themes creep in, until this history fades away into more general theology.

In fact, Paul never clearly “lands the plane” on his historical section in this chapter. In 2:14 he appears to be talking to Peter, and this appears to continue through the rest of the chapter, until suddenly at the start of chapter 3 he is directly addressing the Galatians. However, the last parts of chapter 2 seem to speak as much to the Galatians’ situation as it did to Peter’s situation—in fact, in many ways these latter verses seem to be speaking directly to us, as well. This can be important to notice, because that’s just the way Paul intended this all to work. He only retold these historical narratives to speak to the Galatians’ present situation. He’s not just telling history for the sake of facts—he’s shaping this history in a way that matters for today.

So as we study this section, it’s important to notice the themes Paul introduces in this history. He recounts two stories here—first about a visit to Jerusalem and then about a conflict in Antioch. In both accounts, he explicitly mentions situations where the question of Jewish law and gentiles was in-play.

We see this first when he mentions the extraneous details about [2:3] Titus—a gentile—not being compelled to be circumcised. If Paul was still merely recounting how he learned his gospel from God he wouldn’t need this detail. However, he’s telling this story in such a way that these Galatians might know how to think and act today. Some people have come in and preached another message that involved keeping the law to be “righteous.” Were they right? Did the Galatians need to keep the law to follow the true gospel? Did they need to get circumcised? As Paul recounts this visit to Jerusalem, he shows that even the leaders in Jerusalem didn’t compel Titus to be circumcised—instead they

gave Paul the [2:9] “right hand of fellowship.” The false preachers of the law in Galatia are just like the [2:4] false brothers in Jerusalem—but the true apostles agree with Paul.

Yet, Paul goes on to show a place where even a true apostle slipped up. Starting in 2:11, Paul begins to tell an anecdote about Peter in Antioch—a place where Peter slipped up. It’s important to note that Peter didn’t explicitly teach anything different than Paul, but Paul recognized that his actions were having unintended consequences that were [2:14] “not in step with the truth of the gospel.” And then we get into the meat of this chapter, the place where the lines get blurred the most between the past and now. In Galatians 2:15-21 we get one of the most succinct contrasts between a false gospel and the true gospel. And it comes down to this: law or faith? A false gospel bases righteousness on works of the law, but the true gospel bases righteousness on faith in Christ. Where do you look for assurance? Yourself or Christ?

Paul will expand on a lot of this later, but right here he focuses on this simple contrast: law or faith. [2:16] “By works of the law no one will be justified.” Instead, “we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ.”

And with that, we can see how sweeping this gospel claim is. Titus didn’t need to be circumcised. Peter should have had no problem eating with the gentiles. That law-based thinking is dead and gone.

As Paul says in 2:19, “I died to the law,” and in 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ.” The old way of thinking about righteousness through the law ended when Jesus Christ fulfilled its demands and united believers with him by faith. As Paul says in 2:20 “Christ lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Finally, Paul drives this point home as firmly as he can. In 2:21 he puts forward the central claim of the gospel, the death of the Christ on the cross. He asks why that would have ever happened if God only credits righteousness to people who keep the law well enough. He asserts this central truth, claiming, [2:21] “If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory—he gives us Christ’s righteousness—through faith alone. Amen.

1. Reread chapter 2 and discuss anything that captures your attention.
2. List all the places you can find a contrast between law and faith in Galatians chapter 2.
3. Re-read the first account [Gal 2:1-10] and identify the parts that Paul seems to have written to speak directly to the Galatians. What do these parts say about the gospel?

4. In other places—like Galatians 6:1—Paul speaks about correcting someone gently or quietly. Why does he rebuke Peter so publicly?

5. Reread 2:19-20 and compare it with Romans 6:1-11 and Galatians 3:27. With these texts in mind, how might we describe our relationship with Jesus?

6. In 2:20, Paul says Jesus “loved me and gave himself for me.” Compare Galatians 1:4, Ephesians 5:2, 1 Timothy 2:6, and Titus 2:14 with this statement. What things seem to be connected in Paul’s mind as he says this?

## CHAPTER 3

### **LAW OR PROMISE?**

At the end of Chapter 2, Paul began to focus our attention on the contrasts between the law and faith. In chapter 3 he develops these ideas more expansively. On one hand he tells us more about the law, its curse, and its purpose. On the other, he tells us more about faith—focusing most importantly on the word of promise that creates faith.

As chapter 3 starts, he addresses the Galatians in a somewhat shocking way. [3:1] “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” This startling language should help them see that they’re being tempted to live a life that ignores the death of Jesus on the cross. He just spoke to that death in 2:21, and he immediately returns to it here in 3:1, and more theologically in 3:13.

As he expands on this, Paul introduces a concept he hasn’t talked about before in this letter—in 3:2 he asks them about receiving the Spirit. In doing so, he introduces a contrast between Spirit and flesh that he will return to later—especially in chapter 5.

For now, I want to focus on what he says about the reception of this Spirit. Look at what he asks in 3:2, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” He is quick to restate this contrast in 3:5, and then makes a really interesting connection in 3:6. Read carefully here as he claims their reception of the Spirit by hearing with faith happens, “just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

How does this work? God made a promise, Abraham heard and believed God’s promise and God counted Abraham righteous; Paul says that is the same thing that happened when the Galatians heard the gospel—when they received the Spirit.

There’s a great uniting of concepts here that’s important to catch. Paul expands on the unity of hearing the promise—in both Abraham and the Galatians—and the reception of the promise



itself. In 3:5-6, 3:14, and 3:29 we see the uniting of various concepts. The promise, faith, the Spirit, righteousness, even inheritance are all combined somewhat interchangeably.

In uniting all these concepts, Paul is driving the Galatians to stay true to that original Gospel, the proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection on behalf of them. Even their unity in Christ's death and resurrection. This proclamation gives them everything they truly need however you might want to talk about it; righteousness, the Spirit, inheritance, faith—all these things come to us through the proclamation of Jesus Christ: the true Gospel. This Gospel comes to us as a promise.

For the contrast here, Paul develops more about the law. Just as he used the Old Testament to speak about the gospel, he now uses it to speak to the law. In 3:10-14 he quotes from Deuteronomy, Habakkuk, and Leviticus to establish the antiquity of the Gospel by faith, as well as the full demands of the law. He claims the law is not of faith [3:12] but results in a curse. And so it is that we get the startling revelation of what Christ did for us on the cross— [3:13]“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”

To think that God's own Son would take on our curse—the curse of the law—is mind-blowing. But that's just the way it is with the true gospel. God's self-sacrificial love for us in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ is the very heart of the gospel. And that gospel comes to us as a promise.

1. Reread chapter 3 and discuss anything that captures your attention.
2. List all the places you can find a contrast between law and promise in Galatians chapter 3.
3. Review 3:8 and 3:22. How does Paul talk about the Scriptures in these passages?



## CHAPTER 4

### **SLAVE OR FREE?**

Chapter 3 really developed the promise idea. As Paul developed that concept, he combined various ideas together: righteousness, the Spirit, faith, and also inheritance. Perhaps most important for chapter 4 is the way Paul developed things toward God's promised inheritance. In doing so he invokes the right of a son to be the heir who receives the promised inheritance. So, to set up chapter 4 he proclaims in 3:26-27 "you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized in Christ have put on Christ."

Believers have clothed themselves with Christ in baptism and have been given a new identity—the very identity of the son of God. If that sounds familiar, it should. Paul already spoke of being crucified with Christ and Christ living in believers in Gal 2:19-20. As he returns to this Christ identity here, he stresses the "sonship" side of it now to establish that believers are [Gal 3:29], "heirs according to promise."

Paul uses that framework to help the Galatians realize how wrong it is to think they need to do certain things for God's favor. Believers are sons, so their inheritance is guaranteed! You can't make yourself more or less of a son. It's an identity that secures the promised inheritance in and of itself.

As Paul contrasts this sonship with slavery, he makes a surprising move. As he contrasts the freedom of a son with the bondage of a slave, Paul suggests that following Jewish practices is essentially returning to a pagan view of religion. In verse 4:3 he alludes to being "enslaved to the elementary principles." He returns to that idea in 4:8-10 and develops it more. He calls these elementary principles worthless, and not really gods. He says the Galatians used to be enslaved to them, and if they listen to these "Judaizers" they are just turning back into that dead way of thinking. In that way of thinking, God—or the gods—compel people to equal exchange. It's as if God relates to people by saying, "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." But that's no gospel at all.

So Paul tells the Galatians their relationship to God is established by God's actions. God has already



3. Consider the rewording Paul does at the start of Galatians 4:9. Why might he have decided to reword his initial statement?

4. In 4:8-10, it appears that Paul is critiquing both Judaism and paganism as founded on elementary principles, specifically calling out certain traditional practices. How might we distinguish whether certain traditional practices are good or bad?

5. Consider Paul's language in 4:19. What connections seem appropriate to make between this passage and its greater context?

## CHAPTER 5

# FLESH OR SPIRIT?

In our last few sessions we noticed how intently Paul focused in on God's actions in Jesus Christ. Believers are called to a new identity in Christ, an identity that is given freely and makes them free.

Chapter 5 starts off on this same theme as Paul begins [5:1] "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." In the next few verses, Paul speaks as explicitly as ever about the Galatians' situation. He hadn't really discussed circumcision much before, but we now hear that Paul has written this whole letter to persuade them not to be circumcised.

Except, he didn't want to just tell them "don't be circumcised." He wanted to give them an entire framework for thinking about any issue like circumcision. If they truly knew what God had done for them in Christ—if they truly grasped their identity in Christ—then they should be able to figure out that they don't need to be circumcised.

However, Paul also realizes that his call to freedom might be misunderstood. In verse 13 he turns things a bit, as if he is responding to someone who might think, "I don't have to keep the law; great! I'll just do whatever I want! That's freedom, right?" Paul responds, "no."

Despite his major stress on how they are free and not slaves, Paul actually tells them in 5:13 to "serve one another"—the Greek can even be translated "be enslaved to one another." Is Paul contradicting himself?

There's no contradiction here. Paul is essentially saying that with God you are absolutely free! As his son, your inheritance is guaranteed. But, now that you're free before God, you're free to stop living for yourself, and you can now give yourself completely to other people. As some have wisely said, "God doesn't need your good works . . . but your neighbor does." To speak about this, Paul once again introduces another dichotomy. This time he pits flesh and spirit against each other.







## CHAPTER 6

# WORLD OR NEW CREATION?

The section that starts Galatians 6 shows no break in thought from the end of chapter 5. Much like chapters 3 and 4, these sections should be read as one unit. In fact, some ancient manuscripts that marked sections include no break at all between chapter 5 and 6 (even though they divide Galatians into 12 sections!). In chapter 5, Paul exhorted the Galatians to consistency. He called them to live according to the Spirit and not their fleshly desires. That theme is carried on even further here in chapter 6.

This chapter starts with very specific encouragement for what it looks like to live according to the Spirit—not just individually, but as a community of believers. Paul actually exhorts the Galatians to watch over each other and correct each other when they are caught in sin. It may sound a bit intimidating to think that we should correct other people, but that is exactly what Paul tells the Galatians to do for each other. It's in this sense that he says [6:2] "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

The Spirit and flesh dichotomy returns in 6:6-10 too, where Paul talks about sowing and reaping. Consistent with what he has said throughout this letter, the flesh leads to corruption, but the Spirit leads to eternal life. Therefore, Paul exhorts the Galatians to be a community that cares for each other, corrects each other, and does good to everybody—[6:10] "especially to those who are of the household of faith."

This household of faith is the product of the Spirit's work within us. As we have our identities reshaped by God's word—by his promises—we enter this new community, recreated as something new. As Paul gives a final exhortation, even pointing out the hypocrisy of the circumcisers [6:12-13], he introduces new language to talk about this spiritual recreation. In 6:15 he says, "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." It seems as if he is once again drawing the lines between a fleshly way of thinking, and a spiritual way of thinking. The flesh is self-serving, and self-focused. But the spiritual is new creation in Christ—and that's exactly how



4. What kind of responsibilities does Paul suggest are appropriate for a Christian community? How do these things compare to the Christian communities you are part of today?

5. How might we strike a balance between judging other believers when they fall into temptation, and gracefully viewing others in their new creation identities in Christ? What dangers might exist if we are too judgmental or too accepting?

6. How has studying this letter impacted you? What things has it affirmed? How has it challenged you?







# CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

The book of Galatians is the charter of Christian freedom. In this profound letter, Paul proclaims the reality of our liberty in Christ—freedom from the law and the power of sin, and freedom to serve our living Lord.

Join Dr. Daniel J. Berge for a 7-lesson study of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

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