

An aerial photograph of a winding asphalt road that snakes through a dense, lush green tropical forest. The road curves through the trees, with a few small cars visible on it. The forest is thick with various types of trees, including palm trees. The overall scene is vibrant and natural.

BOOKS OF THE BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

by WAYNE PALMER

G A L A T I A N S



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INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, the New Testament Church struggled with false teachers. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul combats those who teach Gentiles that they must be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses to be saved.

CONTEXT

Galatia was a region in Asia Minor comprising many cities. Paul planted the church in Galatia during his first missionary journey with Barnabas. Soon after they left, false teachers came claiming Paul's apostleship was a lower level than that of the Jerusalem apostles. They argued that Paul's message was incomplete. They convinced the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised, keep the Sabbath, and follow the Law of Moses to complete their salvation.

PURPOSE

The Gentiles in the Galatian Church had left the structured life of paganism and idol worship and were drawn to the structure and culture reflected in the Law of Moses and the Old Testament rites. Paul writes to persuade them to grow up into the freedom Jesus has won and gives in the Gospel.

More than any other epistle, Galatians forcefully asserts that we are saved by God's grace alone, without any works of our own. It stands like a fortress guarding the heart of the Gospel.

OUTLINE

Since the false apostles posed as disciples of the Apostles, Paul uses chapters 1 and 2 to remind the Galatians that he received his Gospel directly from Jesus Himself. Paul asserts that everyone must be justified through Christ alone—without their own merits and works of the Law. In chapters 3 and 4, he gives examples from Scripture to prove this. Paul shows that Christ has fulfilled and set aside the ceremonial law, though not the moral law. In chapters 5 and 6, Paul discusses the true place of the Law—the good works of love that flow from faith. This is an important balance because he does not want us to ignore the importance of exercising our faith through good works—as Jesus commanded, “Love one another.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTERS 1–2

Read Galatians 1:1–10.

Paul is genuinely astonished that the Galatians have turned from the Gospel so quickly. He even pronounces a curse upon any man or even an angel who preaches a different gospel. In Galatia, that different gospel was the idea that faith in Christ was not enough, that the Galatians needed to be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses as Jesus did.

Q 1: What are some of the “different gospels” being taught in Christian churches today?

- Faith is treated as a work we do—something we generate within ourselves—rather than the sole work and gift of the Holy Spirit. (This is often heard in the claim that we wouldn’t be sick or have money problems if we had more faith.)
- Church denominations that embrace homosexual marriage and gay clergy.

Read 1:11–2:10.

In the very first verse of this letter, Paul insists his Gospel came to him directly from God, not from any other person. In these verses, Paul traces the early days after his conversion to prove his Gospel came from Jesus rather than from those who were apostles before him. It was important for Paul to distance himself from the Jerusalem apostles because his opponents were challenging Paul’s authority and saying his Gospel was incomplete.

Q 2: How might the Lutheran insistence on grace and faith alone be considered “incomplete” by other Christians?

- Lutherans are accused of ignoring the necessity of sanctification because we preach that we are saved by faith alone. The Bible teaches that sanctification is necessary—not for our salvation—but as the natural result of the saving faith the Holy Spirit works in us.

Read 2:11–21.

The false gospel of Paul’s opponents had its tentacles deeper into the Church than most recognized. Even Peter unwittingly emboldened Paul’s opponents when he withdrew from Gentiles when the Jews arrived in Antioch. It is not

likely that Peter was trying to compromise the Gospel. More likely, he was trying to avoid offending the Jewish Christians who insisted on circumcision. But all he did was to pressure the Gentile believers into feeling like they needed to observe circumcision and the Law of Moses. Paul forcefully argued that the Jews themselves know they are not saved by their circumcision or observance of Moses' law. So why make the Gentile believers think they need to observe them?

Q 3: What are some factors to consider when we try to determine how forceful or mild to be when confronting Christians who are in error?

- Are we addressing someone who knows or should know better? Is this a topic we have discussed with them before and they just ignored us? Are others being led astray? Are they acting in open unrepentance, or do they even understand they are in error? (Consider topics like couples living together or homosexual marriage. Since our culture has widely accepted these sinful practices, many Christians are not aware that these are actually sins in God's eyes, sins that require repentance).

CHAPTER 3

Read 3:1–9.

Paul reminds the Galatians of their first experience hearing the Gospel. Paul preached Jesus' crucifixion so powerfully it seemed they were standing at the foot of the cross watching Jesus die for their sins. He asks them to remember how they received the Holy Spirit—were they foolish enough to believe that they somehow have to finish the work of salvation which the Holy Spirit began in them by faith? Then he recalls that God credited Abraham's faith as righteousness the moment Abraham believed God's promise, not after Abraham left his homeland and reached the Promised Land.

Q 4: How do our good works demonstrate the Spirit-given faith from which they flow?

- Faith first restores our relationship to God and casts out all fear. That gives us boldness, confidence, and genuine love of others so that we naturally reach out to befriend them. If our good works flowed from a sense of obligation or the need to earn God's grace, we would never do them selflessly as God desires.

Read 3:10–14.

Paul warns the Galatians there is a curse on everyone who submits to the Law but does not keep it perfectly. One single sin makes us transgressors of the

whole Law. But Jesus Christ took that curse upon Himself when He hung on the tree for our sins. Jesus' death on the cross releases us from the guilt of every transgression of God's Law.

Q 5: Imagine you are going to visit a church member in a hospital or nursing home.

- What would it look like if you were focusing on yourself, trying to do a good deed?
- What if you were focusing on Jesus and the person you were visiting?
- When we are trying to impress God or other people, our focus is on ourselves. That keeps us from genuinely connecting with the person in need and being an open channel for Christ to bring peace and comfort. But when we make that visit as a forgiven, dearly loved child of God, then we can truly listen to and connect with the person we are visiting.

Read 3:15–29.

God gave His Gospel promise directly to Abraham 430 years before He gave Israel the Law on Mt. Sinai through Moses. God gave that Law because Abraham's descendants continued in sin and transgression. It acted as a guardian until Christ came and we could be free to enjoy the inheritance He earned for us all.

Q 6: Think back to your childhood understanding of Christianity. Would you consider it to be oriented more toward Law or Gospel? How has your understanding changed since then?

- Many of us came to understand Christianity as a series of rules for how to act in God's house, what we should do and should not do. For many, the focus seemed to be on ourselves and what we have to do rather than what God has done. As we mature, we hopefully learn that Christianity is all about Christ and the forgiveness and salvation He freely gives us as a gift.

Galatians 3:28 has been used to justify a genderless Christianity that permits female clergy and acceptance of same-sex marriage and gay clergy. But Paul is addressing the Judaizers' thought that Gentiles must become Jews to be acceptable in God's sight. Paul states that in God's eyes, there is no distinction between His children—Jews have no priority over Greeks, free people have no priority over slaves, men have no priority over women. Gentiles do not need to become Jews, and women do not need to become men. But this passage does not have any connection to distinctions God made in creation that affect our family and church relationships. Other passages (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:12) clearly set boundaries that restrict the pastoral office to males alone.

CHAPTER 4

Read 4:1–11.

Children in a prominent Roman family were treated nearly the same as the slave children. The difference only came when the heirs reached the age when the father had determined them to be mature enough to receive their inheritance and use it as they saw fit.

Under the Mosaic Law, the Jews were slaves to the Law, never able to escape the reminders of their sin, never able to stop offering sacrifices for their sin. But Christ ended that by His sacrifice. So why should the Galatians want to embrace that kind of slavery? And for that matter, why would Jewish Christians want to go back there either?

Q 7: In what sense can Christians sink into a form of slavery?

- When we shift our focus from adoration of Jesus Christ and wonder at His sacrifice to looking for praise for our works, we can find ourselves begrudging worship, Bible study, prayer, offering. We can feel unappreciated by our fellow Christians, and maybe even God Himself.

Q 8: How could this focus on ourselves eventually result in falling from the faith?

- Works-righteousness is a notion that appeals to our sinful nature. If we feel secure in our own obedience and holiness, then we have no need of Christ's sacrifice—and if we thrust that aside, we will be condemned.

Read 4:12–20.

Paul gets very personal, imploring the Galatians to remember their friendship toward him, which has now been turned to suspicion by these Jewish strangers. Now they are listening to people who would bar them from being in the church because they are uncircumcised. These outsiders are seeking to be praised by the Galatians, while Paul only wants Christ to be born in them again.

Q 9: Why are some Christians drawn more to false teachers who flatter them than honest preachers who teach the truth of Christ's salvation?

- Again, works-righteousness clings to our sinful nature. We want to take credit for making ourselves right with God. True, honest preachers have to tell us that we are sinners who deserve nothing but condemnation from God. And the only way to be saved is through humbling ourselves in true confession and repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and His righteousness alone.

Read 4:21–31.

Abraham's two sons provide a comparison between the freedom of the Gospel and the slavery of the Law of Moses. Ishmael was Abraham's slave son, born naturally to Sarah's servant Hagar. Ishmael received no inheritance from Abraham; instead, he persecuted Isaac, the child of promise. In the same way, the Galatians are God's children through faith and they are being persecuted by those who would enslave them to Moses' Law. They are children of promise enjoying the freedom won by Jesus Christ. Just as Sarah drove away the son of slavery, so God will drive away those who enslave themselves to the Law.

Q 10: What are some of the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of persecution Christians suffer today?

- We are considered hypocrites, narrow-minded, judgmental, afraid of foreigners, haters, and the like. Some Christians still experience physical persecution or are martyred for their faith.

CHAPTER 5

Read 5:1–6.

If you accept circumcision and the Law of Moses that circumcision represents, you are obligated to keep the whole Law—and as a result, you will be severed from Christ. Grace and works-righteousness cannot coexist or cooperate with each other.

Q 11: What do you think is the appeal of religions like Mormonism, Islam, and Judaism that stress being right with God by our works? Why do you think some Christians throw faith in Jesus away to embrace these false religions?

- Sometimes the Christian never understood the Gospel, but saw it as works-righteousness without a direction. These other false religions provide a path to follow, and they play on our selfish pride and arrogance.

Read 5:7–12.

In the Roman culture, males were nude in the gymnasias and the public baths, which made circumcision very easy to recognize. Circumcised Gentiles were looked down upon and denied social advancements. Taking the step of getting circumcised was a huge sacrifice and commitment for a Gentile, one that Paul saw was totally useless. The offense of the cross itself and worshipping a crucified man as God would be difficult enough to face. Paul wishes those who push circumcision would not just stop with their own circumcisions, but even go all the way and emasculate themselves!

Q 12: Keeping in mind Paul's past—his passionate commitment to the Law of Moses as a Pharisee—why do you think he responds with such emotional disgust to the thought of the Galatians getting circumcised and putting themselves under obligation to the Law of Moses?

- Paul knew firsthand the addicting allure of works-righteousness. But having met Jesus, he knew it was all empty and worthless. He couldn't imagine ever going back to that life intentionally.

Read 5:13–21.

The Gospel sets us free from the compulsive slavery of the Law. But Paul warns the Galatians not to use their freedom to indulge their sinful natures, which would be just another form of slavery.

Q 13: Look at Paul's listing of the desires of the flesh in verses 19–21. Pick one desire on this list and discuss the nature of the slavery it causes.

Read 5:22–26.

Instead of being enslaved by a works-righteousness religion or overindulging the desires of our flesh, Paul sets forth the Christian life of loving service to God and one another, which the Gospel presents to us. It is a high and holy calling to serve God by loving one another. The works of the Spirit give shape and meaning to our lives, and they far surpass the kind of life and living the Law demands.

Q 14: Look through the fruits of the Spirit listed in verses 22 and 23. How do they work together to give shape and direction to our Christian living?

- Each of these fruits grows out of the one before. When the Spirit fills us with the love of God, we feel joy. Our joy fills us with peace through Jesus' forgiveness. Our peace makes us more patient. Our patience reflects itself in treating others more kindly. This kindness makes the things we do and say good rather than bad or harmful. Our goodness prompts us to be faithful, that is, to keep our promises. Faithfulness moves us to treat others more gently. Gentleness requires and builds self-control. When all of these fruits of the Spirit are working together in us, we live a kind of life that is very attractive and winsome for the people we befriend—and they make our words about Jesus ring with more integrity and sincerity.

CHAPTER 6

Read 6:1–10.

Do not grow weary in doing good—especially when we do not instantly see results from our kindness. Parents often feel this way when their children don't appreciate or reciprocate their kindness at the time. Don't give up for that reason; in time, those labors will bear fruit. Paul couches this recommendation in farming terms to remind us how the farmer has to wait weeks for the seed he has sown to peek up through the ground as a growing plant.

Q 15: Describe a time you got frustrated when doing good for someone else.

- Many times this frustration comes because our kindness is abused, taken for granted, or does not bear the fruit of faith in the other person when we wish it to. It calls for great faith in God, who works invisibly in His way and in His time as He touches the hearts of people through our love.

Read 6:11–18.

Paul's final words return us once more to those false teachers who insist on circumcision for the Galatians. He exposes their motives. They push circumcision so they will not be persecuted by nonbelieving Jews for the cross of Christ. Indeed, the greater the number of Gentiles they can convince to be circumcised, the better they will look in the eyes of these unbelieving Jews. But that shows the problem. They don't keep the Mosaic Law to which circumcision binds. They need the cross for God's forgiveness for that failing, but they don't want the scorn and persecution that comes from the cross.

But Paul boasts in the cross. It has crucified the world to Paul and Paul to the world. As he says, circumcision does not count for anything and neither does uncircumcision—only God's new creation through faith.

Q 16: Describe the freedom that comes from knowing Jesus Christ took your place and paid for all of your sins in full.

- We don't have to worry about making ourselves right in God's eyes. Heaven is already ours! The rest of our lives can be spent helping others see God's love through our kind deeds and words.