



# Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

## *Laying the Foundations*

by Tim Kelley

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As we continue to lay the foundations for a good understanding of the Paul's letter to the Galatians, it's now time to take a look at a number of contextual points that will help us in our study.

As you'll remember, we've already discussed the Acts 15 "Jerusalem Conference"<sup>1</sup> and found that the issue at hand was not whether a non-Jew must observe the Torah, nor was it whether physical circumcision was still a requirement for God's people. Instead, the issue was whether a person was required to convert to Judaism in order to have a place in the Kingdom of God. It was determined that he did not, and one reason why is that he may have already been an Israelite, though not necessarily a Jew. We will remember that the Jewish conversion process included a tradition that was referred to as *circumcision according to the custom of Moses*.

We also studied the "Mystery of the Gospel"<sup>2</sup> and found that the mystery is how God is going to fulfill His purpose for Israel, a nation called to be witnesses of God's righteousness. We found the answer to be that God can use a rebellious people (the northern tribes of Israel), give them insight into part of His plan (the Messiah), send them out to spread a somewhat adulterated version of that plan throughout the world (as Christians) and eventually join them with a people who believe they are the sole representatives of God (the Jews) who are also scattered throughout the world with an equally adulterated version of His Law, then at the end of days, bring both groups together as One Stick in His Hand.

We also just finished an extensive study of the book of Romans. Though written years after Galatians, it gives us further insight into Paul's thinking, especially in regards to non-Jewish Israel, i.e. – the northern tribes. One of the major points from that study was that when Paul refers to Gentiles, he is not necessarily talking about other ethnic groups of people, but is likely referring to the northern tribes who were scattered among and mixed in with the gentiles. Thus Paul was working with were both Jewish Israelites and non-Jewish Israelites, and it's evident that he saw a purpose for them in God's plan.

Armed with this background, let's now look at a few other points that will help us in our understanding of Galatians.

### **Paul Believed the End of Days was Near -**

As Paul saw many from the tribes returning to God, he surely contemplated that he was witnessing the fulfillment of various prophecies concerning the re-gathering of Israel in the last days. Prophecies like these probably came to mind –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Isaiah 11:11-12** In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people . . . <sup>12</sup> He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Jeremiah 23:5-6** <sup>5</sup> "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

<sup>ESV</sup> **Jeremiah 32:37-39** <sup>37</sup> Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. <sup>38</sup> And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. <sup>39</sup> I will give

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<sup>1</sup> go to <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles.html> and find "the Jerusalem Conference"

<sup>2</sup> go to <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles.html> and find "the Mystery of the Gospel"

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them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.

Thus Paul probably believed, as did many of Yeshua's disciples, that they were living in the last days. Paul made statements like this –

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Thessalonians 4:14-15** For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> For this **we** declare to you by a word from the Lord, that **we who are alive, who are** left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those **who** have fallen asleep.

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Thessalonians 2:1** Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him . . .

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 15:51-52** Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Of course, the last question to Yeshua by His disciples was if He was going to restore the kingdom at that time<sup>3</sup>, so the idea that the end of days was near was quite prevalent in mid-first century Judea.

Since Paul believed the end was near, we can understand his urgency in trying to get everyone on the same page, and his frustration when they waffled around in their beliefs.

### The Synagogue was a Place of Study –

In first century Jerusalem, the place for worship was the Temple, but the place for study was the synagogue. Every Sabbath the Jewish people would make their way to the synagogue for the purpose of hearing the wisdom of the sages. Since in that day, the Jewish people eagerly proselytized the peoples who came into the land, it was important to have a place to teach them the ways of God, thus it's reported that there were over 300 synagogues in the walled city of Jerusalem alone.

Conversion to Judaism was not a requirement for synagogue attendance, thus one might find a number of nationalities represented on any given Sabbath.

The tradition of the synagogue included the reading of that week's Torah portion and Haftara portion followed by commentary by a notable rabbi. We see an example of this in Luke's version of the gospel -

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 4:16-17** And he came **to** Nazareth, where he had been brought **up**. And as was his custom, he went **to** the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he **stood up to read**. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

The first century synagogues were "non-denominational" in many respects. Practically all religious Jews attended the synagogues, and within the synagogue you would find both Pharisees and Sadducees, believers and non-believers. They all studied together, thus James' admonition that –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 15:21** For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

The synagogue was one of the major places Paul did his work -

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 18:1-4** After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. . . . <sup>4</sup> And he reasoned in the **synagogue** every **Sabbath**, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Because it was a place for study – a *beit midrash* of sorts, there was obviously – a whole lot of studying going on. Oftentimes, the study would be in the form of what we would call today – a sermon. Thus, it would be quite easy to for those who are new to the God of Israel to be tossed around in regards to what they were being taught. This is, of course, was the problem Paul was facing in Galatians.

### Circumcision -

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:6

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We discussed this somewhat in our study of Acts 15, but I want to refresh a few points in that regards – God said that He does not change; otherwise Israel would be consumed –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Malachi 3:6** <sup>6</sup> "For I the LORD do **not change**; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are **not** consumed.

Let's now couple that statement with another statement God made to Abraham –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Genesis 17:10-11** This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be **circumcised**. <sup>11</sup> You shall be **circumcised** in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

And with those two, let's throw in Paul's statement –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Galatians 3:29** And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Need we say more?

Let's now take a look at a couple of phrases Paul used a few times – phrases that many Christian denominations use in an attempt to prove that the Torah is no longer valid. The first is –

### Under the Law -

This passage is used 10 times by Paul to contrast being “under the law” vs. being “under grace”; five of those times is in Galatians. Thus it's important to understand what it means. A number of Hebrew Roots teachers (including myself) have tried to show that the *law* being spoken of here is something other than God's law, the Torah. That's understandable since from the surface it appears that being *under the law* is not a good thing, but of course, we know that the Torah is a good thing. So - we believe - instead of being under the Torah, Paul must be referring to some other code of law. Two notable examples are 1) the oral Torah, and 2) the MMT<sup>4</sup>, a code of law that was part of the Essene community. Though it's certainly possible that Paul was referring to these, I don't believe it's that complicated. I believe Paul is referring to the Torah. So to begin, let's go back to the foundation.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Malachi 3:6** <sup>6</sup> "For I the LORD do **not change**; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are **not** consumed.

I just love that verse. It's sort of a rock, a boulder that cannot be moved. If we tie ourselves to it, we cannot fall. So let's couple it with what the Torah says about . . . the Torah!

<sup>ESV</sup> **Deuteronomy 10:12-13** "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>13</sup> and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?

If God's law, the Torah, was good in the Tnakh, would it not also be good in the New Testament? Yes it would! . . . unless of course, God changed His view on His own law. What about Paul – does he believe the law is good? Yes indeed!

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 7:12** So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

So we've just eliminated one explanation for *under the law*, that being that the law is harsh and needed to be replaced with grace. Never-the-less, Paul did contrast *being under the law* with *being under grace*, so what did he mean?

The answer lies in the term “under”. What does it mean to be “under” something that we have determined is good and how can that be a bad thing?

The first time we see the phrase “under the law” is in Romans –

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<sup>4</sup> MMT or 4QMMT (Miqsat Ma'ase ha-Torah or literally “Some Precepts of the Law”

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<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 3:19** Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

The context of this verse is the value of being part of the “circumcision”, i.e. – the Jewish people. Paul shows that simply being a Jew really is of no value when you sin. God does not excuse sin simply because you’re a Jew. Paul goes on to say that sin brings death, and the Torah convicts the sinner, but the problem is not with the Torah, the problem is SIN.

Paul then explains that the Torah’s purpose is to reveal sin, not to justify (render righteous) the sinner. In other words, any amount of Torah observance will not negate the penalty of breaking the Torah, and those who believe that it does – i.e. those who are under the Torah – have no recourse but to observe the Torah perfectly. On the other hand (as Paul continues to show) those who seek righteousness by faith and belief – the same way Abraham did – are under grace.

It’s really quite simple if we look at the salvation process laid out in the Torah . . .

Back in Genesis, God made a promise to Abraham that his descendants would become as numerous as the sand in the sea, but at the time God promised it, Abraham had no children. Never-the-less . . .

<sup>ESV</sup> **Genesis 15:6** And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

God set a standard here . . . *righteousness is based on a person’s belief in the word of God*. If we don’t trust God, all of our good works, all of our Torah observance, is meaningless. It will certainly cause us to have a better life, but it cannot be considered righteousness.

According to Messiah Yeshua, our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees – a people who were very meticulous when it came to following the Torah.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 5:20** For I tell you, unless your **righteousness exceeds** that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Notice that Yeshua didn’t say that your Torah observance must exceed that of the Pharisees. Instead, He said your righteousness must exceed. Thus righteousness, which comes by way of belief, is just as important – or even more so - than Torah observance.

Roughly 400 years after Abraham was declared righteous because of his belief, his descendants were crying out to Abraham’s god for deliverance from slavery. Apparently, they believed in the promise God had given to Abraham. They believed it enough that they killed a lamb and smeared its blood on the doorpost of their houses in hopes that they’d gain freedom from their oppression. Because of the actions, which were based on their belief, they were indeed delivered from slavery.

Later they were told to enter a sea that had walls of water on each side. They entered the sea in faith, and once they had crossed it, according to the scriptures, they were saved –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 14:30** Thus the LORD **saved** Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

Thus, Israel’s salvation came as a result of faith – not through Torah observance . . . they were not given the Torah for another 40 or so days. They didn’t look to the law for their salvation, they depended on God.

It really boils down to a relationship. YHVH wants to have a relationship with His people. This is one of the hallmarks of our God. It sets Him apart from the pagan gods . . . gods that were far off, who had no concern for their subjects, who had to be constantly appeased. YHVH is not like any of those false gods.

Instead, He’s a god who wants to dwell with His people. He wants them to be able to see Him, see what He does for them, and see how He cares for them. He wants His people to know that when they fall short, He is there to lift them up if they will simply come to Him, for He is full of mercy and grace. And to help maintain that relationship, He gave the Torah – a code of instructions that define what pleases Him. Thus, the relationship is based on faith and obedience.

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A person who is under grace is one who seeks God's grace when he falls short in respect to the Torah whereas a person who is under Torah is one who thinks he can repair the damage of sin by more Torah observance. We'll get into this a little deeper as we continue in our Galatians study.

### Works of the Law -

This is the last area I want to touch on today. Continuing with what we saw in regards to being "under the law", we see that Paul is still talking about the same thing. The law being spoken of here is the Torah, not some other law, though Paul may have been referring to what the Jews considered the entire law – written and oral law. Again, the problem is not the Torah, the problem is what a person is trying to do with the Torah.

As with "under the law", Paul contrasts faith and grace with *works of the law*.<sup>5</sup> Can a person be justified, i.e. – made righteous – by works, or does it require faith? Paul shows repeatedly that justification is by faith, not works. That doesn't mean that *works of the law* is bad, in fact James shows that a person must have works to show his faith<sup>6</sup>. The problem is when you believe you can gain salvation by your works.

So this concludes the preliminary studies leading up to our getting into the book of Galatians. The next time we'll begin in chapter one and make our way through verse by verse.

Shalom Aleichem

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<sup>5</sup> Galatians 3:2

<sup>6</sup> James 2:18