

Summary of Galatians

(Chuck Swindoll)

The basic message of Galatians can be summed up in three sentences: Paul had heard that the Galatian Christians were in danger of falling away from the true gospel of grace by turning to a legalistic approach to salvation and the Christian life. His passion for the truth compelled him to call them back to the freedom of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. In doing so, he argued that not only is the sinner saved by grace, but the saved sinner also *lives* by grace.

This simple but profound message can be expressed in a single line:

Grace is the way to life and the way of life.

Paul supports this basic truth in each of the three sections of his letter. Let's walk through them.

Confirming the Truth of the Gospel (1:1-2:21). After a brief greeting, Paul hits the ground running, declaring that any message from any source that does not agree with the gospel he had preached to the Galatians is false gospel (1:1-10). Paul expected that some would ask, "What's so special about Paul? Why is his message any better than somebody else's?" To answer them, Paul tells the story of his own radical conversion from Judaism to faith in Christ and his call as an apostle (1:11-24). Although Peter and the apostles to the Jews had affirmed their agreement with the gospel of salvation by grace through faith (2:1-10), Paul recounts a run-in he had with Peter himself over the respected leader's failure to live in conformity with the truth of the gospel (2:11-16). In this encounter with Peter, Paul made it clear that the believer is no longer bound by the Law and has been freed to live a new life of faith through Christ (2:17-21).

Defending the Superiority of the Gospel (3:1-4:31). Having established that his gospel is God's gospel, Paul turns again to the Galatians' defection and draws a sharp distinction between law and grace. How can people saved by grace expect to grow by slipping into legalism? Having begun by faith, how could the Galatians now depend on their own works? Even Abraham, the father of the Jews, "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (3:6). The Law, rather than saving us, explains God's standards and exposes sin (3:19). That is, it served as a "tutor" to bring us to faith in Christ (3:24). Christ's grace, not the Law, made the Galatians part of the family of faith, where neither race, nor gender, nor social status provides an advantage. We are all fellow heirs of the grace of God in Christ Jesus (3:28). Understandably, then, the Galatians' backsliding dumbfounded Paul, who found it incredible that they would "turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things" (4:9). Paul crowns his doctrinal section with an Old Testament illustration, contrasting children of slavery with children of freedom (4:21-31).

Living the Freedom of the Gospel (5:1-6:18). Having defended both his apostolic authority and the doctrine of justification by faith, Paul finally turns his attention to a defense of the life of Christian freedom. This answers the Judaizers' objection that living by grace promotes immorality. Having been set free in Christ, the Galatians are to "keep standing firm and ... not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). The Judaizers' teaching—which says that circumcision and other rituals save us—is not of God (5:8). Like leaven (5:9), this heresy permeates the church and nullifies the doctrine of grace. In some of his strongest language, Paul even wishes the pro-circumcision crowd would fall victim to their own practices and mutilate themselves (5:12). No, the Galatians were not set free to fall back under the Law. Neither, however, were they liberated to live immoral lives. They were set free to love and serve one another (5:13-14) and to display true Christlike character (5:22-23). In this way, they would truly fulfill the deeper intention behind the written laws. Unlike the false teachers who wanted to boast in circumcision instead of the Cross (6:12-13), Paul desires to boast only "in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14).

In short, Christ has set us free! We are free from the shackles of legalism. We are free to love and live for Him. We are free to love and serve others. Are you ready to immerse yourself in the study of this liberating letter? I certainly am!

