

# Dr. Tim Gombis, Galatians, Session 1, Introduction to Galatians

© 2024 Tim Gombis and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Tim Gombes in his teaching on the book of Galatians. This is session 1, Introduction to Galatians.

Welcome to the study of Galatians. My name is Tim Gombis. I teach New Testament at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, and this is a study of Paul's letter to the Galatians. I've been with Galatians for just under 20 years or so.

What originally got me into the study of Galatians was early in my Christian experience. I started reading scripture about 17 or 18 years ago, but it's actually 27 or 28 years ago—time kind of flies on me. When I started on my Christian journey, I read the Old Testament constantly.

I read Deuteronomy over and over and over, read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy constantly, read the Psalms and Proverbs, and got into the Prophets to some extent, but I really camped out in what we call the law, the first five books of the Old Testament. Over the period of a couple of years, I also began reading New Testament letters, and those were really the parts of scripture that I focused on most, and I loved the law. I loved the first five books of Moses.

About four or five years after my Christian journey began, I went to seminary and got involved in a Bible study with a bunch of great people, but I started hearing a different interpretive angle of approach that I hadn't encountered to that point. One that read Paul, especially in Romans and Galatians, as talking about the wonders of the gospel set over against the dark backdrop of the law. The law was given to sort of beat people down.

The law was given to show people's shortcomings and to point out people's sins; this angle of approach sort of taught. The gospel showed up and had all this good news of how it is that you don't need to sort of try to meet God's standards anymore, but that Christ has done that on our behalf. Now, so many parts of that gospel made good sense to me, but the part that I could never get my head around was why is it that Paul sees the Old Testament, and especially the Mosaic law, as such a bad thing when the law itself expresses how it's the good gift of a loving God to his people.

In fact, Deuteronomy says, what people have been so blessed as we have been that God has given to them the law? No one has been blessed as Israel has been by virtue of God giving the law to them. So how could it be? And then, of course, Psalm 19 and Psalm 119 are Psalms I loved, big portions of which I memorized, and I never could get my head around. Why is it that the law in the Old Testament says great things

about the law, but Paul says such negative things about the law? Well, we're going to talk quite a bit about that over these next lectures, and that will come up a number of times because Paul does say some negative things about the law.

He says in Galatians 3 that the law is not of faith, and he opposes the law in the gospel to some extent. Why does he do that? What is he saying when he says that? Again, those were mystifying questions to me and ones that just drove me nuts from a biblical theological perspective, but ones that drove me to study deeply and to be probing for a satisfactory way of reading Galatians that made God's word consistent. So, when I was in seminary, I wrote a thesis on Galatians 3, which is an absolutely tangled mess of Pauline argumentation.

It was a great comfort to come across statements by Pauline scholars saying that Galatians 3 is probably the toughest terrain in Paul's letters. I found that to be so. And then for a THM later, three years after that, I wrote a second thesis on Galatians 3, 10 to 14, that curse of the law passage that we'll talk about as well.

So, throughout the 90s, I just really saturated my mind in Galatians and loved it, and I've always gone back to Galatians and returned back again and again, and I've come to love it. And I found that especially in our day today, I'm speaking in the dawn of 2018, in a very divided culture, Galatians has loads of import, especially for the Christian church in the midst of a very convulsed and convoluted, confused, and conflicted culture. Galatians is a gospel word on target that is absolutely relevant today.

One way that you can get the most out of this study is, I think, just to read Galatians over and over and over again. In fact, if you would like to get in contact with me, you're very welcome to. One of the things I like to do is take the biblical text, capture it from somewhere online or from an electronic format, and put it into a Word document, and I like to use the New American Standard Bible.

I put it into a Word document, take out all those awful intrusions, those headings that Bible translators put in there, and make one running text. Get rid of paragraph breaks and everything like that, and make one running constant text, which is the most organic to how Paul would have presented that letter so that you engage the text yourself. I've got copies of that, and I've got my own version of Galatians that I've worked with as I've worked through the Greek text.

You're welcome to contact me, and I'll send that to you, happily so. But I find it very helpful to just read scripture constantly, read the text, make observations, write down questions and margins, and not be satisfied until you come up with satisfactory answers to some of those interpretive questions. Some basic comments of introduction to our study of Galatians, things that we'll see, and a couple of things that I want to just make note of as we start our study.

First of all, Galatians is a very strange document, and unfortunately, one of the things about Paul that I've found, at least in my Christian experience in the Evangelical Church, one of the things about Paul that strikes me is that many of us have the sense that we get Paul, that parts of the Bible may be unclear, but one of the parts of scripture that is the clearest are Paul's letters. We get those. He talks about the Christian life.

He talks about the Christian experience and the struggle of faith, and we know that. That resonates with our own experience, and so Paul is sort of one of us. In fact, if he showed up to contemporary America, he'd find his way into one of our Evangelical churches, and he would say something like, finally, my people.

There are a lot of interpreters throughout the history of the Christian Church that have felt much the same. In fact, I'm not sure you could see this all that clearly in the picture on your screen, but this is a portrait of Rembrandt's Paul the Apostle. I have a copy of this in my office.

Rembrandt also did a painting of himself. He did a self-portrait as Paul the Apostle, which you can find if you just search somewhere online, but he did a self-portrait as Paul the Apostle because Rembrandt saw himself as the inheritor of a great artistic tradition as somebody who was pushing beyond that tradition and taking the tradition into uncharted territory. The assumption is in the West that Paul is the inheritor of a great tradition, the scriptural tradition, and of Judaism.

He makes this break with tradition. He's pushing out into something new and different, leaving the old behind, forging something radically new, which is part of why we often imagine that Paul has something against the Old Testament, against the law, and maybe even against Judaism. Just to say that Rembrandt is one instance of somebody who felt that he understood Paul because he was reading Paul through his own experience.

This is actually quite common. Here are a couple of quotes, some of my favorite quotes about the study of Paul. This first one is a quote from Ernst Kasemann, a great German interpreter of Paul.

He says that the history of Pauline interpretation is the account of the Church's domestication of the Apostle, the domestication of the Apostle. That is to say, Kasemann is recognizing already that interpreters tend, and the Church tends, to make Paul one of our own. There's something wonderful about resonating with Paul's letters, resonating with Galatians.

What can sort of unintentionally take place, however, is that we begin to read Paul's letters through the lenses and through our own experiences and through our own

lives. We're going to see that that's not going to be very helpful. Another person that recognized this is Morta Hooker, the great Cambridge scholar.

She's still alive but of a previous generation. She said that the problem with Paul is that we know him too well, or perhaps we think we do. This statement is the one she would begin her yearly lectures at Cambridge University on Paul with.

Just to say, there's always the danger of domesticating Paul, and there's the danger of thinking that we know what is going on here in Galatians. What I have found helpful is to tell students to make Galatians strange. It is a document that is very distant from us.

There are statements in this letter that make very good sense of my personal Christian experience. Then, we read three or four verses later, and these statements are absolutely mystifying. What is Paul saying? Then we just kind of dispense with those and keep reading for the verses that kind of give us a devotional buzz or sort of give us a devotional hit.

Realize that even the statements that sound familiar are embedded within stretches of arguments that are from a different world. Paul is absolutely saturated in a scriptural world, in the world rendered by scripture. He is a thoroughgoing Jew, and in Galatians 3 and 4 especially, he is arguing with fellow Pharisaic-minded Jews.

He is a world-class Old Testament scholar arguing on Old Testament grounds with other Old Testament scholars. That's why some of this stuff doesn't make sense to those of us who don't have minds and hearts shaped by scripture the way that he did. It takes some study.

It takes some time to hack through some of this intense stuff. Just to say, one of the promising ways forward is to let Galatians be strange. Recognize its distance from us here, wherever you are watching this from or studying Galatians from, but in my setting in 21st century America, I am a child of America.

I'm a child of the West. I'm a child of cultural revolutions that have taken place over the last 2,000 years, so this text is actually more distant from me than I think, and that's the first step toward regarding it, honestly. Another challenge to our understanding of Galatians, another sort of comment by way of introduction, is to just recognize that we have a challenge because we often think of Christianity and Judaism as two separate religions and one of the things that we can often imagine is going on when we study Galatians is that this is a text that is pro-Christianity and anti-Judaism.

Paul is forging a new religion called Christianity and is dispensing with Judaism. That is historically anachronistic. That's not historically accurate.

That's not a really fruitful and helpful way of seeing things. Galatians is written by a Jew who is a Christian, written to Gentiles who are being influenced by other Jews who are Christians who have an argument with Paul. In many ways, Paul is writing from within the larger canopy of Judaism, but he's a Jesus-following Jew, and he's trying to forge these communities that are somehow connected to the Jewish communities, but different, but also connected to the Scriptures of Israel as followers of Jesus, and that relationship was not necessarily clearly worked out.

So, we're not talking about two different religions, Judaism and Christianity. So, we need to set that distinction aside for now. Don't think about Paul writing negative statements about the Mosaic Law, trying to attack Judaism, or something like that.

The Judaism that Paul mentions in Galatians 1 is not necessarily the same as the modern religion that we know as Judaism. We'll get to that in due course, but that's just another way that Galatians is strange to us. It's a document from the first century written in a very different cultural setting where there was not necessarily yet a clear line of demarcation between Christianity and Judaism.

A third comment by way of introduction is just to say that we are badly in need of this, and I may bring this up again and again, of a proper understanding of the Old Testament. One of the unfortunate translational realities that we have in our English Bibles is we talk about the Old Testament law, the Old Testament law, and right when I say that, you can't really say law without sounding negative, your voice drops, your eyebrows fall because very few people have a positive conception of the law. But of course, God did not give Israel the law.

God gave Israel Torah. Watch, my face changes. Torah.

It's a life-giving reality. He snatched Israel out of enslavement to Egypt and then brought them into the land, surrounded them with His love, and then, because He loved them, gave them instruction on how they could remain in His love. So, Torah is instruction.

It's a gift. Here's light on the way. Here's how you can remain in my love.

Here's how you can have a life characterized by blessing. So, just to say, the Old Testament and the law are God's word. We call it in English the law, but that's because Greeks translated Torah into *nomos*, Latin speakers translated that into *lex*, and we have translated that into law.

By virtue of the translation, you can see how these linguistic shifts and cultural shifts have forced us to see God's word in potentially negative ways. That has dramatically affected how we've read Galatians, and as we make our way through, we'll be

making some comments about how we can clarify that relationship a little bit between Paul and the law, Paul and the Old Testament, in ways that hopefully are more life-giving and scripturally consistent. A further thing that we need to keep in mind is that this is dramatic across all of scripture, but certainly every text in the New Testament, and we need to separate. We just need to recognize that we in the West, as modern readers of biblical texts, are doing something unnatural, in a sense, when we think about the audiences of Galatians or any New Testament text.

I'm holding a library, a collection of texts. No interpreter in the first century ever said, no pastor ever said, turn in your Bibles too, because everybody in the first century, 93% of people in the first century were illiterate. So, this is a letter that is being delivered to the churches in Galatia that Paul wants someone to read to them.

So, Galatians is being read to audiences. Now, think about what that does for the conception of being a Christian disciple. They are hearing this, and they are thinking in terms of this is a message to us.

Paul's writing to us as far as how we carry out discipleship to Jesus. So, being Christian inherently is corporate. Being Christian inherently has to do with relationships and community, where people need to think about how they treat one another, and how they regard one another.

So, when I read Galatians, I think, how do I respond to Galatians? That's not unimportant. That's crucial. But we also need to do the second step of recognizing that Christianity and being Christian, Christian discipleship, is all wrapped up in how I participate in a community of Jesus' followers.

It's not something I do on my own. So, keep that in mind as you think about Galatians. This is heard by an audience, and Paul knows it's a mixed audience.

That is to say, the audience is Gentile. The Galatians are all Gentiles. But in those communities are the Jewish Christian agitators, we can call them, or the teachers or the missionaries that are Paul's opponents.

So, Paul's got these dual audiences, and he knows that some of the things that he says are going to cause a reaction from one of those groups. And what he says might even make them point their fingers at each other or may even cause dissension between them or among them. So, Paul knows all that.

So, this is a highly charged corporate rhetorical situation. It's not a letter to an individual Christian. So, keep that in mind.

Individual and corporate understandings of being Christian have affected how we read New Testament texts. And, of course, that's affected how we think about

Galatians. The last broad introductory comment I want to make has to do with the fact that when we read Galatians, keep in mind that we are not reading a work of systematic theology.

Not to say anything negative about systematic theology. It's a necessary academic discipline that exists in seminaries and colleges. But this is not a work of systematic theology.

That is to say, Galatians is not written in a purely academic context where Paul is talking about timeless truths of the Christian life that would be true in any place at any time. This is a hot rhetorical letter where Paul says some things to the churches in Galatia that he would not say to other churches. Paul says what he says to the Philippian church in Philippians because that's what they need to hear.

Paul says what he says to the Corinthian churches in his two letters that we have. And we probably had some others that were lost to us. But he says what he says to them in those letters.

He says what he says to the Galatians in this letter, which we call Galatians. And this is a word on target to them. But it may not be what he would have said to other churches, given different kinds of circumstances.

We'll see what I mean by that as we make our way through. But there are some inflammatory things said here that you could actually creatively translate in other ways that would make, I think, the impact Paul wanted it to make. Paul wanted his words to generate the effect he wanted.

He meant this to be an inflammatory document. He meant this to be a provocative document. He meant to push his opponents back on their heels.

And he meant to go after the Gentiles, who he regarded as defecting from the gospel that he had sent to them. And some of the things that Paul says in Galatians 6 are a little bit off color. Paul says some things here in the first chapter that I think if you translated more accurately, you probably would be spoken to after a church service, depending on how things would be received.

And it's funny because Paul says something very, very provocative in chapter 1, verse 8. And in chapter 1, verse 9, he says, oh, by the way, did you not hear me? I'll say it again. And he repeats the provocative statement that he makes. So, here's my point.

This is a very heated text. And it's a rhetorically charged text. So, circling back to something that I've mentioned a couple different times, when Paul says what he says about the Mosaic law especially, he is arguing with fellow Pharisaic-minded Jews.

He is a world-class Old Testament scholar arguing on Old Testament grounds with other Old Testament scholars. That's why some of this stuff doesn't make sense to those of us who don't have minds and hearts shaped by scripture the way that he did. So, it takes some study.

It takes some time to hack through some of this intense stuff. Just to say, one of the promising ways forward is to let Galatians be strange. Recognize its distance from us here, wherever you are watching this from, or wherever you're studying Galatians from.

But in my setting, in 21st-century America, I am a child of America. I'm a child of the West. I'm a child of cultural revolutions that have taken place over the last 2,000 years so this text is actually more distant from me than I think.

And that's the first step toward regarding it, honestly. Another challenge to our understanding of Galatians, another sort of comment by way of introduction, is just to recognize that we have a challenge because we often think of Christianity and Judaism as two separate religions. And one of the things that we can often imagine is going on when we study Galatians is that this is a text that is pro-Christianity and anti-Judaism.

Paul is forging a new religion called Christianity and is dispensing with Judaism. That is historically anachronistic. That's not historically accurate.

That's not a really fruitful and helpful way of seeing things. Galatians is written by a Jew who is a Christian, written to Gentiles who are being influenced by other Jews who are Christians who have an argument with Paul. So, in many ways, Paul is writing from within the larger canopy of Judaism, but he's a Jesus-following Jew and he's trying to forge these communities that are somehow connected to the Jewish communities, but different, but also connected to the scriptures of Israel as followers of Jesus.

And that relationship was not necessarily clearly worked out. So, we're not talking about two different religions, Judaism and Christianity. So, we need to set that distinction aside for now.

Don't think about Paul writing negative statements about the Mosaic Law, trying to attack Judaism or something like that. The Judaism that Paul mentions in Galatians 1 is not necessarily the same as the modern religion that we know as Judaism. We'll get to that in due course.

But that's just another way that Galatians is strange to us. It's a document from the first century written in a very different cultural setting where there were not necessarily yet a clear line of demarcation between Christianity and Judaism. A third



comment by way of introduction is just to say that we are badly in need of this, and I may bring this up again and again, of a proper understanding of the Old Testament.

One of the unfortunate translational realities that we have in our English Bibles is we talk about the Old Testament law. The Old Testament law. And right when I say that you can't really say law without sounding negative.

Your voice drops. Your eyebrows fall. Because very few people have a positive conception of the law.

But, of course, God did not give Israel the law. God gave Israel Torah. Watch what's my face changes.

Torah. Light. It's a life-giving reality.

He snatched Israel out of enslavement to Egypt and then brought them into the land, surrounded them with his love, and then, because he loved them, gave them instruction in how they can remain in his love. So, Torah is instruction. It's a gift.

Here's light on the way. Here's how you can remain in my love. Here's how you can have a life characterized by blessing.

So, just to say, the Old Testament and the law is God's word. We call it the law in English, but that's because Greeks translated the Torah into *nomos*. Latin speakers translated that into *lex*, and we have translated that into law.

By virtue of the translation, you can see how these linguistic shifts and cultural shifts have forced us to see God's word in potentially negative ways. That has dramatically affected how we've read Galatians, and as we make our way through, we'll be making some comments about how we can clarify that relationship a little bit between Paul and the law, Paul and the Old Testament in ways that hopefully are more life-giving and scripturally consistent. A further thing that we need to keep in mind is, and this is dramatic across all of Scripture, but certainly every text in the New Testament, is that we need to separate. We just need to recognize that we in the West, as modern readers of biblical texts, we are doing something unnatural, in a sense, when we think about the first audiences of Galatians or any New Testament text.

I'm holding a library, a collection of texts. No interpreter in the first century ever said, no pastor ever said, turn in your Bibles too, because everybody in the first century, 93% of people in the first century are illiterate. So, this is a letter that is being delivered to the churches in Galatia that Paul wants someone to read to them.

So, Galatians is being read to audiences. Now, think about what that does for the conception of being a Christian disciple. They are hearing this, and they are thinking in terms of, this is a message to us.

Paul is writing to us about how we carry out discipleship to Jesus. So, being Christian inherently is corporate. Being Christian inherently has to do with relationships and community, where people need to think about how they treat one another and how they regard one another.

So, when I read Galatians, I think, how do I respond to Galatians? That's not unimportant. That's crucial. But we also need to do the second step of recognizing that Christianity and being Christian, Christian discipleship, is all wrapped up in how I participate in a community of Jesus' followers.

It's not something I do on my own. So, keep that in mind as you think about Galatians. This is heard by an audience, and Paul knows it's a mixed audience.

That is to say, the audience is Gentile. The Galatians are all Gentiles. But in those communities are the Jewish Christian agitators, we can call them, or the teachers or the missionaries that are Paul's opponents.

So, Paul's got these dual audiences, and he knows that some of the things that he says are going to cause a reaction from one of those groups. And what he says might even make them point their fingers at each other or may even cause dissension between them or among them. So, Paul knows all that.

So, this is a highly charged corporate rhetorical situation. It's not a letter to an individual Christian. So, keep that in mind.

Individual and corporate understandings of being Christian have affected how we read New Testament texts, and of course, that's affected how we think about Galatians. The last broad sort of introductory comment I want to make has to do with the fact that when we read Galatians, keep in mind we are not reading a work of systematic theology. Not to say anything negative about systematic theology.

It's a necessary discipline, academic discipline, that exists in seminaries and colleges. But this is not a work of systematic theology. That is to say, Galatians is not written in a purely academic context where Paul is talking about the kind of timeless truths of the Christian life that would be true in any place at any time.

This is a hot rhetorical letter where Paul says some things to the churches in Galatia that he would not say to other churches. Paul says what he says to the Philippian church in Philippians because that's what they need to hear. Paul says what he says

to the Corinthian churches in his two letters that we have, and we probably had some others that are lost to us, but he says what he says to them in those letters.

He says what he says to the Galatians in this letter, which we call Galatians, and this is a word that is targeted at them. But it may not be what he would have said to other churches, given different kinds of circumstances. We'll see what I mean by that as we make our way through, but there are some inflammatory things said here that you could actually creatively translate in other ways that would make, I think, the impact Paul wanted it to make, to generate the effect Paul wanted his words to generate.

He meant this to be an inflammatory document. He meant this to be a provocative document. He meant to push his opponents back on their heels, and he meant to go after the Gentiles, who he regarded as defecting from the gospel that he had sent to them.

Some of the things that Paul says in Galatians 6 are a little bit off-color. Paul says some things here in the first chapter that I think, if you translated more accurately, you probably would be spoken to after church service, depending on how things would be received. It's funny because Paul says something very, very provocative in chapter 1, verse 8, and in chapter 1, verse 9, he says, oh, by the way, did you not hear me? I'll say it again, and he repeats the provocative statement that he makes.

So, here's my point. This is a very heated text, and it's a rhetorically charged text. So, circling back to something that I have done a couple of different times when Paul says what he says about the Mosaic Law especially, we have to recognize that he says those things in this letter for a purpose, and he would not necessarily say those things.

In fact, he wouldn't say those things if he were giving an abstract lecture, a timeless lecture on my thoughts about the Mosaic Law. You wouldn't get those statements. They wouldn't show up because Paul would have wonderful things to say about the Mosaic Law because for him, that was his Bible.

That was scripture. One of the important things to say about New Testament letters and Galatians is that New Testament letters are occasional literature. That is, the Gospels are written for a broad range of audiences to be read in many different places, many different times, and to be regarded as how God wants his people to think about the identity of Jesus, the identity of God, and the mission of the Church.

Letters are occasional literature. That is, they are written to address an occasion, and if we don't keep that in mind, we will get ourselves off track. So, not a work of systematic theology, but read properly, an absolutely glorious, rich source for all kinds of theology.

But we have to understand the situation that it's addressing. Well, I'm going to make some more strategic comments about sort of narrowing our study of Galatians. Galatians obviously has had a massive influence on the history of interpretation.

It was probably an equal, maybe a greater shaping influence than the Romans, even on Luther and the Reformation. Martin Luther called it my Kate, sort of referring to his wife. It was as precious to him as his wife.

I love Galatians, I have to be honest. I don't call it my Sarah. Maybe my steak burrito, something that I would love just as much.

But Galatians is not as dear to me as my wife, I must say. However, many of the things that it has opened up for me, as far as how to have fruitful relational dynamics that are life-giving, how to draw upon the death of Christ to think about relationships, how to think about the death of Christ in reference to Christian identity, and to even go where Paul does, thinking about the relationship of the death of Christ to relationships between ethnicities and races. I mean, this is such a massive part of what is going on in our world today, and that is exactly what Paul gets at.

So, talk about relevance. So, for these reasons, it's very dear, and maybe that's why Luther regarded it so warmly. It's been called the Magna Carta of Christian freedom because it details the Christian's freedom in Christ, but we'll need to think about that very carefully and examine that notion closely.

Certainly, many Christian people have loved Galatians who may have been raised in legalistic contexts or contexts where there were high social expectations for behavior. And insofar as anybody has read Galatians and has really experienced the freedom and the wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is awesome. Praise the Lord for that.

But at times, this dynamic, when it comes to Galatians, is sometimes expressed, as I've said before, to the downgrading of the Old Testament or the downgrading of crucial terms like obedience. Sometimes obedience or obey are looked at as dirty words in some Christian circles because that's smacks of law or that's smacks of expectations, or we're delivered from that. The Christian is free from those kinds of things or even notions of command.

We talk about religion versus a relationship, or maybe this is another one I heard the other day; I've heard this in the past, but Paul's more interested in being than doing. These contrasts, I think, miss the point because, in Scripture, obedience is always a light reality. It's always a life-giving reality.

It's never heavy. The command is always life-giving because to walk in the commands of the Lord and to obey the Lord is the most freeing, life-giving, wide-space-generating reality, whereas disobedience is to be walking it in a precarious place. So, when Paul talks about freedom, he's talking about something very strategic.

I think that, again, many of the worldview shifts that we've gone through in the cultural shifts that we've gone through the last 2,000 years, countless ones, have made us maybe misunderstand what freedom means because it's a very different kind of thing than just American freedom. It's a very different kind of reality than even just Western freedom or liberality or something like that. Paul's getting at something very different.

So, how we speak about the freedom of the Christian needs to be disciplined by the rest of Scripture and by Galatians. In fact, I want to say it this way. How we think about the freedom of being Christian because I don't want to limit the scope of reference that Paul has in mind to the Christian.

He's not talking about the Christian. He's thinking about the Christian community, individuals in the community who enjoy the presence of God together in Christ and by the Spirit. Galatians has been especially powerful in conceiving certain spiritual aspects of the Christian life.

I was raised in a Bible home. Grandfather. Every time I saw him, he was well into his 90s, but he would always rattle off Galatians 2:20. I've been crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live and yet no longer I, but Christ who lives in me and the rest of the remainder of my life.

I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. As I say that, there are certain King James phrases that come right from my grandfather. But Galatians 2.20 is a powerful, powerful depiction of being Christian and that's been powerful for so many people.

But what exactly is it saying? What's Paul doing there? How is that statement embedded within his larger argument and how does it make sense of what Paul is actually saying? Many people have found Paul's exhortation in Galatians 5 to walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh to be a powerful notion in battling against personal sin. But what does Paul mean by that, and how does that actually fit within the kinds of exhortations that Paul would be giving to communities? We'll get at all that, and I'm looking forward to exploring those questions and more. But for today, what I want to do in this lecture is to talk a little bit about the backdrop of what's happening in Galatia, what in the world was happening in these churches in Galatia that gave rise to this letter.

Let's think, first of all, a little bit about Paul's life. This is a map that you can find, and if I can point to a website, it's from Mark Allen Powell's website, [introducingnt.com](http://introducingnt.com), which is a companion website to his textbook, and he's got brilliant maps, a lot of great resources there on that website. But Paul, as you know, was born in Tarsus, raised there, and sent down by his parents to Jerusalem to be trained as a Pharisee.

He was raised as a Pharisee, which has a number of important implications, actually, for Paul. Pharisees would have had a knowledge of Scripture that would have surpassed anybody else. They just had minds and hearts embedded in Scriptural texts, having massive tracts of Scripture memorized by the letter.

I mean, Scripture memory and Scriptural recitation were just there. That was what learning was all about. A couple of texts in the New Testament talk about how the Pharisees, as opposed to the Sadducees, believed in the resurrection or held to the resurrection.

A few times, when Paul's on trial at the end of Acts, he talks about how he is on trial for the hope of the promises given to the fathers and for the hope of the resurrection. So, resurrection was key for Pharisees. The resurrection for Pharisees was not merely, you know, point five in a document that was in a desk somewhere at Pharisee headquarters and part of their doctrinal statement.

For Pharisees, the resurrection was the central reality they thought about day and night. This is what they prayed for day and night. This is what they thought about and were working towards.

It oriented everything for a Pharisee. And the resurrection for a Pharisee, for the Pharisees, went beyond merely thinking that at the day of the Lord, the future day of the Lord, when the God of Israel would come to judge the wicked and save the righteous, that is Israel, in their minds. The Pharisees did not merely think, at that day, I will be raised from the dead.

That was a part of it. But for the Pharisees, the resurrection was a larger program of God where God would call to a halt the reign of the present evil age, where he would pour out his resurrection life on Israel, would vindicate Israel, would save Israel, would drive God's enemies, the Romans, Israel's enemies, the Romans, would drive them off the land, get them off of God's own land, and would raise up Israel to once again be the light to the nations and be the footstool from which God reigned. God was going to retake his home there in Israel.

And so, the Pharisees were people who were hungry for the glory of God. They were passionate for God's name to be vindicated. Because with the presence of all these pagan Romans in Israel, especially there in Jerusalem and in the Temple Mount, the Roman fortress there, for the Pharisees, this is a blight on God's name.

This is preventing God from being glorified. And so, the Pharisees want the larger program of resurrection to come about. Basically, resurrection stood in for salvation.

God saved his people, poured out his own life on the land, redeemed Israel, and drove out the wicked nations. Now, the Pharisees were working toward this and praying toward this day and night. And what this led them to was a personal and communal mission of leading lives of holiness and purity.

Because what they assumed was that if they led lives of temple purity and they got the larger population of Israel to live lives of the kind of holiness that God wanted, then God would be moved to pull the lever of salvation and send resurrection and drive out God's enemies and liberate God's people. So, the Pharisees were on a personal mission of holiness and embarked on a mission of cajoling and coercing and exhorting and preaching and teaching Israel, Jews, to actually imitate the same kind of holiness that they were embodying. So, they basically saw the obstacles to God's saving as the Roman presence there, which was defiling the land and sinners among God's people.

Because sinners from among God's people were preventing God from saving Israel, from saving the righteous, and from getting rid of the Romans and pouring out resurrection. Now, it may have been the case that Paul, being as eschatologically attentive as he was, that is to say, was always on the lookout for God's move that he was going to make to liberate Israel. It may have been the case that he was one of the Pharisees, and this is pure speculation, but a number of New Testament scholars recently have taken this notion up and kind of played with it.

Stanley Porter is one of them. It may have been the case that Paul was among one of those Pharisees, one of these Jerusalem Pharisees who went out to check out Jesus during his earthly ministry. He may have been one of those that went out to just, Jesus, what are your credentials? Where are you from? Who's your family? They checked out his background.

Could this be the one who is going to be the agent of God's saving Israel? We don't know if Paul actually ever did that, and we don't know what exactly he thought about Jesus and his claims during his earthly ministry, but we can say with a far greater degree of certainty what Paul thought when Jesus died on the cross. In fact, a clue comes here in Galatians. In Galatians 3.13, Paul cites Deuteronomy 21, and of course, Paul had a Scripture-saturated mind, a Scripture-shaped mind, having a nimble mind that was always ranging throughout the Scripture that was in his mind, as soon as he would have heard that this figure, Jesus, was crucified by being hung on a tree, Deuteronomy 21 would have come up in his mind right away, where it says that cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.

So, while Paul may have wondered about Jesus during his life, maybe kept an eye on him and wondered about what exactly he was all about when Jesus was killed by being hung on a tree, Paul knew exactly what he thought about Jesus, and Paul knew exactly what God thought about Jesus. What was God's opinion about Jesus? Cursed! Not the one! Sort of another to be dispensed on the ash heap of history in Paul's mind. An interesting thing happens. However, within a number of weeks and months, this movement springs up around this character, Jesus.

This Christian movement that is proclaiming that Jesus actually has been raised from the dead, and there are communities that are springing up based on this person. And for Paul, as a Pharisee, think about what I have just said about the Pharisees. For Paul, this movement has got to be stamped out. This movement, which is gaining in popularity, is going to be preventing God from saving Israel.

We know what God thinks about Jesus. He is cursed! I mean, he's not just a sinner in the land. He's cursed by God. And now all these people are proclaiming him to be the Messiah, the risen and exalted Christ.

We've got to stop this because all of these people are standing in the way of God pouring out resurrection on Israel, liberating Israel from her enemies, driving out the Romans, and saving his people. So, this is the reason why Paul embarks on this mission of persecuting Christians and trying to stamp this movement out. It is standing in the way of God, saving.

Well, that is Paul's mindset as he makes his way to Damascus, which you can see here just to the north of Jerusalem. Paul has letters from the leadership in Jerusalem, and he is going to be finding some more of these Jews who are Christians and hopefully arrest them and throw them in jail. Just again, part of stamping out this new movement.

This is in 33 A.D. or C.E., and this is recorded in Acts 9. Paul is arrested by Jesus in his efforts to make it to Damascus to stamp out this movement. He's blinded. I mean, he has that Damascus Road conversion where the exalted Lord Jesus says, why are you persecuting me, Saul? He directs Saul to go and to see Ananias, and the whole thing unfolds at that point.

Paul or the record is calling him Saul at that point, gets a dramatic new mission at that point where he is now going to be the exponent of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the wider world, to the Gentile world that is the non-Jewish world. That happens, as I said, in about 33 C.E. Saul, or Paul, then spends about three years there. As we're going to see in Galatians, he says that he spent three years in Arabia.



There's a reason, I think, why he calls it Arabia, but this is, I think, he does not go into the desert. This is an area that would be called Arabia. He's there in Damascus, very likely preaching Christ.

What's he doing? We don't really know exactly, but he's likely hanging out with Christian groups and learning about Jesus, learning more about him, arguing that Jesus is the Christ, probably revisiting all the biblical texts that are in his mind and thinking through the reality of how all of this fits together with this new, not information, but this new experience, this new glimpse of reality that Jesus, this figure Jesus, actually has been exalted, resurrected and exalted as God's Messiah. Well, just to kind of give some details about Paul's life leading up to the writing of Galatians, Paul, three years later, goes back to Jerusalem to visit and to try to get to know the disciples. That does not go well.

It's a difficult visit, although finally, Barnabas intervenes and brings Paul into the circle of disciples. After that, so that's three years after, he goes back to Jerusalem because Saul's just a troublemaker. I mean, wherever he is, things just kind of blow up.

He goes home, and this is in about 36 A.D. or C.E., and he's there in Tarsus, in his hometown of Tarsus, for about eight or nine years, and those are called the silent years, Paul's silent years, eight or nine years of the apostle's life. We just don't know what he was doing. What was he doing? He studied, fellowshiped with other Christian groups if he could find them, proclaiming Christ, and arguing with people about how Jesus fits with the scriptures.

But don't imagine that Paul, this radical persecutor of the church, all of a sudden gets converted and then just goes on mission trips. It's been a while. There are things that take place, and I also think I want to caution anyone against trying to import some kind of Christian principles in there.

Don't think Paul had some training to undergo. This is just kind of how it unfolded. We've got eight or nine, quote-unquote, silent years where Paul is in Tarsus.

About 44 or 45 C.E., Barnabas, a major, major early figure in the Jerusalem church, there's a Christian group that springs up here in Antioch, the church in Antioch, and the Jerusalem church says, let's send Barnabas down there and look after that church. So, they send Barnabas down there. This is recorded in Acts 11.

And Barnabas, who is sort of everybody's favorite uncle in the pages of Acts. He just loves everybody. He's got his arms around Peter.

He's got his arms around Paul. He brings people together who may not be natural best friends. But Barnabas is going to be the pastor here in Antioch, and he remembers, hey, there's this kind of, you know, nerdy Old Testament scholar.

That's not exactly what he would have said, but hey, there's this kind of nerdy Old Testament scholar over there in Tarsus. Saul, what's he doing? So he calls for Saul to come join him there in Antioch, and Saul joins the ministry there in Antioch. And it's kind of interesting.

There's a pastoral staff in the church in Antioch. That's a little bit of an anachronistic sort of thing. It's not necessarily a staff.

But you could see this in Acts 13.1, where Luke sort of summarizes what's happening there in the Antioch church. He says, now there were at Antioch in the church that was there prophets and teachers, Barnabas, the biggie, executive, senior pastor, Barnabas, and Simeon, who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Mana'an, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. Just interesting because this is about 12 years after Saul's conversion.

So, 12 years after Saul's conversion, again, it's not that he was converted and then became like the guy in our imaginations. That's kind of how we see Paul. But he's one of a number of prophets and teachers serving the church in Antioch, and he's the one that was mentioned last.

So, at any rate, Saul is there, Paul is there in Antioch with Barnabas. Also, here's another point I want to make. This is 12 years or so on so far, as far as how I'm telling the story of Saul's conversion, which took place, remember, in Damascus.

Three years after that, he makes a brief visit to Jerusalem. That doesn't go well. He does not go back to Jerusalem.

Let me see my timeline here. Does not go back to Jerusalem for about a further eight or nine years. Sorry, probably until 10 years later.

This is a visit to Jerusalem that he makes at the end of Acts 11, and that he also reports there in Galatians 2. It's a second visit to Jerusalem that he makes with Barnabas, and it's called a famine relief visit, where money had been collected to send to Jerusalem for the relief of people who were suffering there. But what we're going to see, or what's important to remember, is that the Jerusalem church was not ever very familiar with Paul. He has a small number of visits there throughout his ministry, and he's kind of like the distant missionary that the Jerusalem church knows they are connected to and pray for, but they never see him.

He's gone for a decade or so, and he just makes brief visits, and he's kind of withdrawn and not very loud, and Barnabas is the one who does all the talking. So don't imagine that he's a major figure, and to the Jerusalem church, he's not well known. That's actually important for how things are going to unfold in Galatians, because the opponents, the people that actually follow Paul's travels and were teaching those in Galatia, the Gentiles in Galatia, that they needed to become Jews, you can imagine that there would be these kinds of groups in the Jerusalem church that would spring up, thinking that they need to kind of correct the mission work that Paul has undertaken because there was a lack of familiarity, a lack of trust between Paul and the Jerusalem church.

So, there would be some suspicion that could fill that gap, and you can imagine how something like the Galatian situation would have developed. In Acts 13-14, Luke records Paul's first mission, and this took place in about 47, 48 AD or CE. what's interesting is that this is really Barnabas's mission because the Holy Spirit says to the church, set apart from me Barnabas and Saul. So, Saul's still not the major player that we kind of make him out to be.

He's not even the main actor in Luke's narrative to this point. He goes along on Barnabas's journey, but it's on this journey that he changes his name from Saul to Paul, or he starts calling himself Paul, no longer Saul. It's also on this journey that Luke changes in his narrative.

He starts calling the group Paul and Barnabas, and Paul now sort of overtakes and becomes the main figure, and there's another crucial event that happens for the story as it unfolds in Galatians. That is when, oh, let me go to another slide here. Sorry. This is sort of a map of Paul's first journey from Mark Allen Powell's website.

When Paul and Barnabas are there in Lystra, after speaking, Paul is dragged from the city, and he is stoned by a mob. and Luke says that the group, being pretty sure that Paul was dead, just left him, and then Luke kind of just leaves this kind of cryptic white space and doesn't say exactly what happened but just talks about how his friends got up with his friends and went back into the city, and then they moved on. But it's pretty. These churches, or these cities, sorry, that Paul visited, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium. This is in the region of Galatia, so it's very likely that the churches are perhaps a collection of churches, maybe in Lystra or Derbe. We don't know exactly.

There may have been churches in these cities, but there's a collection of churches somewhere in this area that Galatians is sent to, and in my opinion, it's stoning is crucial for how things unfold in Galatians, and here's why I say that. First of all, in my opinion, Luke is reporting a miraculous event. That is to say, when they think that Paul is dead from being stoned, Luke means to record that Paul died and is miraculously resuscitated.

The reason I say that is because very often in Luke-Acts, you'll get a miracle report that Luke will have, and there are a lot of details about how the angels broke the shackles off of Peter's and John's legs, but then there are some miracle reports that Luke gives that he gives no details, because he's a master narrator, knowing that your imagination will fill these details in. Like in Luke 4, when the crowd brings Jesus to the brow of the hill, they're going to throw him off, and he passes through them and goes on his way. You're like, Luke, fill this in! What happened? Well, Luke knows that the less information narrators give, the more readers and hearers' imaginations go to work.

So, in this instance, when Luke narrates Paul being stoned and gives the detail that they think he's dead, that's an indication that he died, and this is a miracle report. This is a miraculous resuscitation and the reason I say that is because stoning in the ancient world is not like golf ball-sized rocks that people throw at each other or even pelt somebody with. Stoning in the ancient world would have happened where they would either push somebody down or maybe throw someone off a ledge so that they would land awkwardly and then begin to rain down boulders on that person.

When I grew up in Chicago, we played 16-inch softball, not the wimpy 12-inch. You'd get these 16-inch boulders and throw them down, or maybe larger chunks, and just drop them down on a person. Then, after some legs have been broken or ribs have been shattered or something like that, you would want to make sure because you're in a fit of rage as a mob, you would make sure that the person died.

That is to say, you'd go over and drop a big one on their skull or just mash their skull in some way. This is grisly, I know. This is pretty gross, but the reason I'm saying that is to say that when they were sure that Paul was dead, they were sure that he was dead.

There are a couple of details in Galatians that actually indicate the kind of reception that Paul had when he was on the original visit. In Galatians 4, Paul says this in Galatians 4, he's passionately calling out to them, I beg of you brothers, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You've done me no wrong, but you know that it was because of a bodily condition, or maybe a bodily illness, that I preached the gospel to you the first time.

Paul was in some kind of condition, which is the reason why he had to stop there, which I think makes really good sense if you line that up with the stoning in Lystra, that he had had legs shattered, had his skull bashed in, who knows what kind of sores he's suffering from. So, when Paul talks about this bodily condition, what I think he's talking about is the awful condition that he is in after being stoned to death. Think about it, broken ribs, shattered hands, anything that, if not a badly misshapen skull, Paul is basically saying that his appearance put them to the test.

In verse 14, that which was a trial to you, my appearance tested you. So just to say, this visit to Lystra was the occasion of his need to stop and then be cared for, his initial preaching of the gospel, and the founding of a church. So that's the founding of the church.

Upon their return, Barnabas' and Paul's return to Antioch, Peter makes a visit at some point, and this is not one that we're told about, but Peter makes a visit to Antioch. This is the confrontation between Paul and Peter that Paul talks about in Galatians 2. We'll talk about that episode more when we get to it, but this is where Paul has an opportunity to articulate the gospel, especially as it has to do with Jew and Gentile relationships, that first confrontation of Peter in Antioch that led to eventually to the Jerusalem Council. When we get to Acts 15, this was sometime around 49 or so, the year 49.

Acts 15 records what happened when some teachers, let me get to a slide here that has Jerusalem in it, up in Antioch, some teachers from Jerusalem had come up to Antioch, probably some Pharisaic-minded Jews just like Paul, the way that he was raised, people who are passionate for the glory of God, people who are passionate for Scripture and who are passionate for God to save Israel and were confident that faithfulness and loyalty to Torah would bring that about. They hear that there are some Gentiles, non-Jews, who become Jesus followers up there in Antioch, and these passionate Pharisaic-minded Jews who have now become Christian and have not yet sort of gotten to that conclusion that God is saving people beyond the boundaries of Jewishness, they visit Antioch and it's there that they are teaching that in order for those Gentiles to enjoy salvation from the God of Israel, the Gentiles need to be circumcised and become Jewish, so that conversion to being Christ followers is conversion to becoming Jewish. Barnabas and Paul object to that, and there's a bit of dissension there in Antioch, so everyone decides that what they need to do is make a journey down to Jerusalem and have the Jerusalem leadership think through this, pray through this, read Scripture and come to an appropriate conclusion.

My opinion is that right about the time that Paul is on his way to Jerusalem or maybe when he arrives in Jerusalem, but I think it's before the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 because Paul never appeals to the Jerusalem Council in his argument of Galatians, but sometime around then Paul hears about what's happened in Galatia, that some Jewish Christian missionaries have arrived in Galatia and are teaching the Gentiles, the non-Jewish Christians there in Galatia, the very same thing that these Jewish Christian teachers when they went up to Antioch, the very same thing that they were teaching them, that all Gentiles, in order to enjoy salvation from the God of Israel in Christ, need to become Jewish. And what Paul understands from the communication is that these churches in Galatia are thrown off by this. They're upset, and we don't know the configuration. Perhaps some people want to defect, but other people aren't so sure.

I mean, some people want to become circumcised and become Jewish, but other people aren't sure. This is causing internal dissension and Paul makes reference to the fact that the Galatian churches are in an agitated state. And so sometime around then, after Paul has been fired up by the visit of the teachers from Jerusalem and Antioch, he hears that a similar situation is unfolding in Galatia, and I think that's probably why this letter is so hot with its rhetoric and its grammar is just kind of all over the place and Paul starts sentences but doesn't finish them and then doesn't start a sentence but finishes it because he writes in this kind of worked up state to bring peace to the churches that he loves so much.

Well, I won't go on to rehearse the rest of Paul's life, second mission, third mission, etc., but just to set the backdrop for what led to this early letter in Paul's ministry, his apostolic ministry, I think this letter is written in about 49 A.D. or C.E., and it's written at the same time as he and Barnabas are thinking through this larger issue with the whole Jerusalem church. Keep in mind the record of Acts shows, and Paul's letters indicate this as well; the issue of how to include non-Jews in the faith of Israel, in the salvation of the God of Israel in Jesus, that issue was the most significant issue that the church faced in the first century. It convulsed the church, and it led to Paul being arrested in Acts 21, leading eventually to his death, but that was not an easy thing.

I think looking back in hindsight, we think it's just a matter of kind of, you know, some particularities about the gospel being articulated rightly. This is a very complicated issue, and let's give them the benefit of the doubt and not dismiss any of these people in the various parties trying to wrestle through that. Just a couple of conclusions from thinking about Paul's life before he wrote this letter.

First of all, I realized that Paul's relationship with the Jerusalem leaders was complicated. He wasn't around there very much, and there were groups in the Jerusalem church that were not happy with what he was doing way out there on the mission frontier. In fact, word had reached back; James tells Paul in Acts 20 that Paul is actually going to Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world, telling Jewish families to stop teaching their kids the law and to stop circumcising their children.

That was a rumor that was not true; that was slander. Paul does not even go to Jewish communities on his mission trips, aside from some early visits to Jewish communities to preach the gospel, but he is telling non-Jewish communities that they can be saved in Christ without being circumcised and without following the law of Moses as a Jew. But just to say, there was a misunderstanding in the Jerusalem church about what Paul was doing.

Paul was the apostle, the singular apostle, actually; although he was part of a mission team, he was the singular apostle called to bring the gospel to the non-Jewish world. Other apostolic leaders were serving Jewish communities. But the stage is set in this

way, in that there were Jewish communities from Jerusalem that were not authorized by the Jerusalem leadership that were tracking Paul and following closely behind him, basically in their mind correcting the gospel that Paul was preaching to these communities.

Paul calls them people who are agitating. I'm not sure that that's what they would have thought about themselves. They would have thought about themselves as missionaries or teachers or people who were correcting the mistakes that Paul made while on a mission.

It does seem that they are probably Jewish Christians from the same groups that are causing unrest and other situations, as I mentioned there in Acts 15. Luke mentions that many, among those who were zealous for the law, came into the church. So don't imagine that the group that we call the Pharisees are sort of like the unending enemies of the church.

Many Pharisees became Christians there in Jerusalem after the birth of the church, and some of them, because they were so committed to the purity of Israel before their entrance into the church, when they became Christian they take that same concern for the purity of Israel with them into their Christian faith and that causes some trouble. Cultural commitments and cultural prejudices that we sort of bring in from outside of our Christian discipleship can often affect how we see being Christian. That's one of the massive lessons that Galatians teaches us.

Were they necessarily hostile to Paul? We talk about these people as opponents of Paul. I'm not sure that they were necessarily hostile to Paul, but they likely saw themselves as correcting mistakes that Paul had made. We'll see how Paul addresses the Galatians themselves and these Jewish teachers as we make our way through Galatians together.