



Scenesetting (open with map)

Last week, Steve took us through some questions to ask when we approach a book or a passage. So if we're going to take a close look at Galatians let's see what answers we can come up with to those questions.

Where: Galatia was a Roman province in the highlands of central Anatolia. Originally Hittite, it was inhabited by Gallic Celts in the 3rd century BC (hence the name "Gallia of the East"). Don't know if you saw Michael Palin's new Europe last weekend but he ended his journey in Cappadocia which was the southern border of the province. The other southern border was Lyconia. North was Bithynia and Paphlagonia, to the east Phrygia. These days it's all part of Turkey.

Firmly in Gentile territory, while there are Jews from the diaspora in the region, the mind set is strongly Greco-Roman. Loyal to Rome politically, inhabitants spoke Greek and a version of a Celtic tongue right up to the 5thC AD

Who: Paul (author) writing to the churches in Galatia. We'll take a closer look at Paul later.

Galatians has to be read in light of Acts 13-16. Chapters 13-14 of Luke's writings chart the first journey of Paul and Barnabas to spread the gospel westward. Based in Syrian Antioch they're commissioned at the beginning of chapter 13 for the 'work to which [God] has called them.' Around 55AD. In Pisidia, when the Jews reject the message of Christ, Paul articulates their calling using a verse from Isaiah 49 "I have set you to be a light to the gentiles. So that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

When: 50AD.

A few years later things have gone awry. Acts 15 tells us "Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." We're told Paul and Barnabas had "no small dissension and debate" with these brothers.

We often think it's just Paul being dogmatic but Acts tells us there were a number of missionaries who were angered by what they saw as an unnecessary burden being placed on male Gentile believers. It became so fraught a whole group of them went 'up to Jerusalem' to thrash it out with the elders and apostles.

The outcome of that council changed the face of the church forever, so these are no small decisions being made.

What: Gospel Letter.

It's into the tense situation prior to the council in Jerusalem that Paul writes. He and Barnabas have told the Galatians the gospel of Jesus Christ and the church had been flourishing. But now the believers are under threat. Not from Jews who didn't believe that Jesus is the Christ but from ones who did!

Why: Christians don't need to be circumcised.

Acts 15:5 tells us that "Some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said "It is necessary for them [male, Gentile believers] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

To the Hebrew trained mind this is a logical, rational thing to require. It's a central part of the Jewish psyche.

Circumcision distinguishes the Jews as men of Yhwh. From the time of the Abrahamic covenant way back in Genesis 17:10 every Jewish male had been circumcised.

Why should that stop just because the Messiah had come?

The Messiah was Jewish.

The Messiah had been circumcised as customary when he was 8 days old.

To not require circumcision was tantamount to denying Yhwh, a rejection of the very promises of God that the Messiah came to fulfil.

They could not see that if the promises had been fulfilled there was no need for the symbolic action that had characterised generations of the people of God. Far from being a repudiation of Yhwh, they could now embrace relationship with God in all its fullness.

But, I get ahead of myself

Who +: Paul, Judaizers & the churches of Galatia.

So we have these poor Christians in rural Galatia, trying to live out a faith that was to set them free and being argued over. By the people who had converted them and then these later messengers who were telling them they didn't have it quite right. They were missing a required step to be in relationship with God.

Now, if you're a new believer you're enthusiastic. You're anxious to get things right. You want to check and double check how you're doing. And if someone tells you you've missed a step, you're likely to believe them, because you don't know enough to be able to refute them.

If you're a new Christian and I tell you that all believers eat fish on Fridays and don't dance, swear, smoke or attend university because that's against our religion, you're probably going to believe me.

Not because I can back it up, but because I'm a more experienced Christian. I must know what I'm talking about. And just because the person who gave you the message didn't tell you that, well, he was an evangelist, just there to convert you. I'm here to tell what to do when the rubber hits the road and you're trying to live this thing out.

That is what the letter to the Galatians is about. If you're saved, are there things you have to do to stay saved?

Quick look at the bigger picture of the theology of Galatians in relation to the rest of the New Testament.

Habakkuk 2: 4b

the just shall live by faith

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Galatians is linked closely with Romans. Both probably written from Corinth. There are similar expressions used in both and the together with Hebrews (regardless of who you think wrote that letter) one of the grounding scripture passages for the letter is Habakkuk 2:4b, the just shall live by faith. But each of the letters emphasises a different part of that short verse.

Romans – asks the question How shall we be just with God. emphasis on 1st 2 words

The just shall live by faith.

In Romans the gospel, the good news, is about the grace of God.

Galatians – asks the question If we've been justified by grace, how are we maintained in that place before God

The just **shall live** by faith

In Galatians, the gospel message about the grace of God is defended against those who seek to substitute law, or legality, for grace.

Hebrews – asks the question, What is the power by which we're made just and by which we live?

The just shall live **by faith**

In Hebrews the use of the Habakkuk passage is part of the call to persevere. "We are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." To persevere is to live by faith, in the hope of what God has promised. The connections between the use of this verse in the 3 letters might be explored more fully when we look at chapter 3.

But the 3 questions

How shall we be just with God?

If we've been justified by grace, how are we maintained in that place before God?

What is the power by which we're made just and by which we live?

3 Qns are at the heart of the debate between Paul and the Judaizers. Paul believed that Jesus was the total fulfilment of everything that had been set out in Torah, whereas the Judaizers believed he was only a partial fulfilment.

Why couldn't the, Jews who'd come out from Jerusalem, claiming to have the authority of the elders in Jerusalem, be a case of the nurturers following the converters? Paul and Barnabas had been sent out with the authority of the church in Antioch. It was perfectly reasonable to think the mission team from Jerusalem was a well credentialed follow up team to the guys who'd originally evangelised them. In the eyes of the Jerusalem team, what gave Paul the right to declare thousands of years of practice to be non-essential? He wasn't just throwing out the baby with the bath-water, he was tossing the whole tub!

What made Paul think he had authority to speak as he did in bringing the gospel to Gentiles and turning generations of tradition and practice on its head?

Read Galatians 1: 10-24

Hold on to that thought. We're going to explore Paul's background a bit more. See if what he says about himself is reflected in what others say about him.

Saul – Acts 7:54-8:3, 9:1-2

- Heard the gospel from Stephen (reaction?)
- Coat check at Stephen's stoning
- Approved the killing of Stephen
- Ravaged the church (indiscriminate imprisonment)
- Breathing threats and murder
- Vigilante persecution
- Followed the spread of the gospel

Activity 1 – find out as much as you can about Paul (then Saul) from Acts 7: 54-8:3 and 9:1-2 (3 min)

This was not a nice man. He strongly disagreed with the Jesus movement and he wanted it to stop. He was happy to use any measure to achieve it's end – violence, destruction, persecution. He was known among the Jerusalem Christians for his

ruthlessness and his thuggery. Think the SS, the KGB, the Stasi and countless other examples, many happening today. Today we would regard his actions as perpetuating state sponsored abuse of human rights.

Paul – Acts 9: 3-23

- Paul plots to kill Christians
- Encounters Jesus
- Blind and hungry
- Ananias (a reluctant call)
- Blind but now I see (Holy Spirit)
- Proclaims Jesus
- Jews plot to kill Paul

Activity 2 – sequence of events in Acts 9: 3-23 (3 min)

Phenomenal turn around. His life has completely changed direction since encountering Jesus. God wanted this man who had given himself to destroy Christianity to become

one of the main people he would use to spread the message about Jesus. It's a powerful witness to the extravagant grace of God. The Man Least Likely, becomes the Man Most Likely.

This is not a new tactic from God. The prince of Egypt delivers God's people from Egypt. The shepherd boy becomes king. The carpenter's illegitimate kid is the son of God. Here, the destroyer becomes the builder.

By his own experience Paul truly understands the expansive grace offered by God to those who will encounter and believe in Jesus. He understands there is no substitute. No action a person can take to make themselves right with God. No set of rules that will achieve living in the presence of God. No place, no permit or licence, no 12 step plan.

Paul's credentials are authoritative. He's not coming from 2nd or 3rd hand learning. Paul might have been a Jew, but he wasn't taught by the apostles in Jerusalem.

He didn't hear, mark and inwardly digest the gospel when Stephen declared it. He hunted down and imprisoned followers of the Way, he didn't learn from them.

Paul learned about Jesus **from Jesus**.

There was no benefit for Paul in becoming a follower of Christ. If he wanted to please people, he wouldn't have become a servant of Christ. What did serving Christ bring him? Years on the road, bashings, stonings, imprisonment, shipwreck. Who would choose that?

No, he says, the gospel that was proclaimed to me is not of human origin; I didn't receive it from a human source (such as these Judaizers), I wasn't taught it, I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. And when it was revealed to me, I didn't confer with any human being (Acts says he immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues saying "He is the son of God"). I didn't, he says, go off to Jerusalem [to learn about the gospel].

Well, strictly speaking he did go to Jerusalem after he'd been preaching in Damascus, but he didn't confer with anyone because they wouldn't believe he was a disciple, they thought it was a trick – an attempt to go undercover and expose them. But Paul didn't have to be taught the gospel by them, instead, Acts tells us, he went 'in and out among them, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord'.

Imagine, someone you're wary of. Someone who always seems to get you into hot water. Someone who has a knack for making you look bad. You just have a feeling they're out to get you. They think they're better than you, smarter than you, on a faster track than you.

Now imagine that person has met Jesus and wants to come to church with you? How would you react? Would you welcome them? Would you be suspicious? How comfortable would you be with them coming in to 'our group', our small community?

And if they suddenly seemed to know their bible better? To pray more fervently. To be given spiritual gifts that you don't have.

What if they stated authoritatively that we do things at St Michael's that aren't necessary to knowing Christ (and by the way I'm sure we do, but that's a different discussion.) If they were adamant that those things were taking us away from the gospel message we were given and in which we had been doing so well. If they insisted that those things were no longer necessary and must be excised from our practice. How would you feel about that? Welcoming? Threatened? How would vestry feel about it? Who would we go to as the deciding body? The archbishop? The synod perhaps?

I have empathy with the Judaizers. While their doggedness that holy days must be observed and the law of Moses kept, was perhaps more with an eye to tradition than gospel, the practice of circumcision was a racial and religious identifier. Integral to being a Jew since the time of Abraham. This wasn't like replacing the organ with a guitar. It was like the move from transubstantiation (the bread is the real flesh and the wine is the real blood of Christ) to anamnesis (do this in remembrance of me).

This was a shift in understanding at the very heart of what it meant to be a follower of Christ. The Judaizer's believed there was no salvation outside of cultic and legal practice. **Paul is saying, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**

Maybe Paul had heard something of what Stephen had said at his trial, because Paul was the one who instituted the massive changes that Stephen was charged with. The charges against Stephen in Acts 6 were "This man never stops saying things against the temple and the law; for we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and the customs that Moses handed on to us."

Paul was educated in the Scriptures and he understood that to require non Jewish Christians to become circumcised would make them Jews, not followers of Christ. Circumcision was an action from the time of the calling out of the Hebrews as the chosen people. It had no purpose in light of the fulfilment of Scriptural promises in Christ.

The sign of a life lived for God had always been a life of faith.

That's why Abraham was called out in the first place, because he heard and followed faithfully. It was a custom, not essential to knowing Jesus. Not a prerequisite for being filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is rather sad that Paul had to defend his credentials in the gospel to the Galatians. He had converted them in the first place and they'd been doing so well. Now they're questioning the message. Was it authentic? Had he lied? Misrepresented the extent of the gospel? Paul had never said he was from Jerusalem. That he was endorsed by the mother church. Surely these others, who have been commissioned for their work by the apostles who knew Jesus, surely these must have the right message on how to be right with God.

It turns out, in Acts 15 that the Judaizers had not been sent by the elders and apostles in Jerusalem but had gone off on their own recognisance. In doing so, they

precipitated a crisis, a necessary crisis, that changed the actions of the followers of Christ forever.

But right now, at the start of this impassioned letter, we're in the thick of the brangle. It remains unresolved. A church that Paul and Barnabas and other Gentile missionaries saw had been doing so well. Had been true to the message they had received, was now in serious trouble. And if Paul's plea to the Galatians fails then the church in Galatia will simply be the synagogue in Galatia.

We need for them to ignore the false teaching that is dragging them back to Jewish ways and ultimately away from hope in Christ. If Paul's plea fails, it will be as if Christ died on the cross in vain. If the law, given in the time of death and separation, is elevated over the Son, then the Son's defeat of death, his resurrection and ascension is pointless.

So Paul, loudly, dogmatically, stridently, insists that it is not Christ who is without purpose. Christ can turn a life on its head. Christ liberates, he doesn't cage. He reveals. He fulfils. It is that Christ who Paul proclaims, because it is that Christ, who stops us in our tracks, turns us around and says. "Will you follow? Will you go?"

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for revealing yourself to Paul so clearly. Thankyou that you reveal yourself to us and have called us to both follow and to go. We praise you, that in your saving work on the cross there is nothing that you require of us but a broken and contrite heart, open to hear you and receive your love. Give us the courage and the perseverance to hold on to the hope we have in you that we, made right in you, will live, by faith. Amen.