

# BIBLE CHALLENGE

## A 6 day study of the books of 1 Thessalonians and Galatians

The story so far: We're pausing part way through the Book of Acts to look at some of the letters Paul wrote at about this time. Though we don't know exactly when Galatians was written, we know that Paul had already been through the area, likely on his second missionary journey (15:39-16:7). Galatia is located in the northwestern part of what is modern Turkey.

After Paul left Galatia there were apparently some other evangelists that entered the territory bringing with them a message that was divergent from Paul's. When Paul heard about what they were teaching, it provided the occasion for his writing this letter.

Monday:

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

What to look for:

- Not long after Paul's time in Athens, he becomes concerned about his friends back in Thessalonica, so he writes them a letter. This is the oldest letter of Paul that we have in existence, coming around 50 AD.
- Note the pattern in this first chapter, which reflects the style of letter writing that was common in Paul's day, and which he mostly uses in the other New Testament letters he writes. Paul begins with a salutation, identifying who the letter is from and to whom it is addressed (vs. 1). He follows with words of thanks and praise, and, although this too was common in his day, Paul regularly uses this section to introduce the main themes he will take up in the remaining body of his letter. For instance, in vs. 5 he speaks of how the gospel came to them, which he will address further in chapter two when he speaks about the integrity of his preaching. He will follow up the theme of vs. 6a in chapter 3, and the return of Christ which he mentions in vs. 9-10 will become his main point in the last half of chapter 4 and chapter 5.

Tuesday:

Read: 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-10, 17-3:10, 4:13-14, 5:16-28

What to look for:

- Paul begins by defending the integrity of his ministry. IN the face of repeated challenges that he is proclaiming something subversive which threatens the social order, or that he is simply in it for personal gain, he points out what he was willing to go through for the gospel, because God is the one to whom he looks, not to human approval.

- Paul then praises their faith which has stood the test of persecution.
- At least one of Paul's reasons for writing can be found in chapter 4 beginning at vs. 13. He is writing to answer a question they had having to do with what happened when a person died *before* Jesus returned. Remember, all the believers at this time, including Paul, believed that Jesus return was immanent. They were waiting for his return, so what happened if someone died before the Lord came back? Would they miss out on all the blessings of the new kingdom? Paul's response is to apply the teaching about Jesus' death and resurrection to their own situation: Jesus died and rose, so those who are in Jesus and die will also rise. Death does not mean that you are separated from Jesus, for even in death you still have the hope of the resurrection. What happened to Jesus will happen to us.

Wednesday:

Read: Galatians 1:1-17, 2:1-5

What to look for:

- Note what Paul is doing in the opening verses. If last week, as we read the beginning verses of 1 Thessalonians, we noted some of the common elements in the opening section of Paul's letters, it will be helpful to identify how these first few verses in Galatians differ. You'll notice, for instance, that there is a harder edge to his tone; Paul is clearly upset. Also, there are no words of thanksgiving. Instead Paul indicates how astonished he is at how quickly the Galatians have turned from his teaching. The tone of Paul's opening sentences is much more as if he was saying, "Hi. This is Paul. What's the matter with you?"
- What's the problem? Apparently Paul's authority is being called into question, and with it the authority of his message. So Paul begins right away in 1:1 to indicate this his authority is not from "headquarters" but from God. In addition, Paul's gospel message is being diluted by people bringing a new message. (1:6).
- Paul goes on to speak of his background, pointing out how zealous he was for the law (1:13ff). There wasn't anybody more committed to the law or more determined to follow it than Paul; it even set him against Jesus and led him to persecute Jesus' followers. Paul provides this background to set up his argument in the chapters to come.
- In 2:3-5 Paul hints at what the issue is: Apparently what is being taught in Paul's absence is the idea that faith in God is not enough. Circumcision has always been the mark of God's people, so if, as a gentile, you refuse to be circumcised you are really not a part of God's people at all. This notion that something is required beyond Christ's action and our faith is what Paul will so strenuously object to. (Recall the decisions that were made in council in last Monday's reading from Acts 15)

Thursday:

Read: Galatians 2:15-3:9, 23-29

What to look for:

- Note how often Paul uses the word “justified” in 2:15-21. Circle each time he uses it in your Bible. 2:15 is the heart of his argument: we are “justified”, i.e. put right with God by faith, and not by observing the law. Often when we use the word *justify* we are thinking in terms of making an excuse for something, as in “The person tried to justify himself by explaining why he did it.” That, however, doesn’t change the situation, it just provides a good excuse. When Paul uses the word *justify* he is speaking of a power that changes the situation, like when you justify the ragged margin on the right of a Word document. You don’t make an excuse for the way in which the text refuses to line up; you push the “justify” key and it all gets straightened out and made right and everything now lines up. When Paul talks about being justified in our relationship with God he’s talking about straightening out that relationship and making it right. We are straightened out in our relationship with God, not by anything we do, but only by faith in Christ. The opposite of sin is not god behavior or following the law or being circumcised, the opposite of sin is faith. If sin is the relationship with God bent out of shape, faith is the relationship with God straightened out.
- In 3:1-2 Paul points out that the Galatians came to faith in Christ crucified *before* they were circumcised. So if God has already given you the gift of his Spirit, circumcision isn’t going to improve your relationship. (3:5)
- In 3:8 Paul presses his case home by referring to Abraham. God promised to bless all people through Abraham, not as a result of their becoming Jewish. Gentiles are by definition uncircumcised, yet God promised to bless them.
- Faith and baptism are the way we come into the community (3:26-29). The old distinctions are gone and a new reality has come.

Friday:

Read: Galatians 5:1-6, 13-14

What to look for:

- Paul now takes up the practical issue of how we should live our life. He has argued that we enter into a right relationship with God through faith. We therefore should not continue to live as if our relationship with God was based on following the law.
- In Christ we are free from following the law. But that does not mean we should turn our freedom into the license to do as we please. In 5:13 Paul points out that we are free to become servants to other people. Freedom isn’t freedom for sin, it’s freedom to love. The love of Christ is the means by which we

came to faith and so that is also the way we are to love out our lives, by living out the love of Christ in our relationship with others.

**Monday:**

**Read *Galatians* 6:1-5, 11-18**

**What to look for:**

- We're called to be servants as a way of living. We are now free to submit, not to a law code, but to a person, Jesus.
- Paul's boast (vs. 14) in the cross, that which is a sign of curse to the rest of the world. Paul considers himself dead to the influence of the world; the crucifixion of Jesus is the pattern on which his life is now based.
- The old mark of circumcision has been replaced by the new mark of Christ. Paul views his suffering as marking him out as a servant of Christ.