

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Galatians to Colossians

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: God on the Inside

I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you.

(Galatians 4:12)

If Paul hadn't written letters to the churches which he planted, we would have to assume he was like a superhuman movie hero: brilliant to admire from a distance but not a person we can copy.

Paul's ministry results were deeply impressive. When he and his friend Barnabas visited Galatia in 48 AD, they planted four churches in almost as many months. They were so effective in spreading the Christian faith that the Galatians afforded them godlike status. Paul needed to rebuke them in Acts 14:15: "*Why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you.*"

When Paul moved on to Philippi in 50 AD, he speeded up instead of slowing down. We are told in Acts 16:12 that he planted a vibrant church in the city because he "*stayed there several days.*" Modern-day church planters can spend decades in a city and only leave behind a fragile work, but not Paul. It only took him a few days to establish a church in Philippi that was strong enough to transform an entire region.

Paul made a much longer visit to Ephesus. He found a dozen confused believers in the city in 53 AD and he turned them into a megachurch of tens of thousands of radical disciples by the end of 55 AD.¹ He was so successful in his preaching that "*all the Jews and*

¹ We can tell the size of the church from the cost of the items burnt by the Ephesians in Acts 19:19. The haul was worth 100,000 days' wages for an

Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” and his enemies complained that “*this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia.*”² The church which Paul planted at Ephesus was so strong that it went on to plant many more churches across the entire region. Paul was able to write to Colossae, a city 120 miles east of Ephesus, and tell his readers that he was praying “*for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.*”³ Judged on results alone, Paul jumps out from the pages of Church history like a superhuman titan.

That’s why I am so grateful that we have copies of the letters which Paul wrote to the churches which he planted. Without them, we would feel like we were watching the efforts of an unreal movie hero. There is a scene at the beginning of *Terminator 2* where Arnold Schwarzenegger saves the life of a young boy.⁴ He hugs the boy close to his chest and turns his back on the would-be assassin, receiving bullet after bullet in his back to protect the boy. After enduring enough firepower to kill an elephant, he walks away unscathed because, we discover later, his body isn’t at all like yours or mine. He is a robot from another world with a titanium endoskeleton. He is a fictional hero we can admire, not a real person we can copy. He is like the apostle Paul would be if we didn’t have his letters. We might put him on a pedestal, we might name churches after him, but we wouldn’t believe it is God’s will for us to be like him. We would preserve his memory in

unskilled labourer. It is quite feasible that a church could number tens of thousands of people in a city of 250,000 freemen and women and 400,000 slaves, although they would have needed to meet at multiple times and in multiple locations.

² Acts 19:10, 26.

³ Colossians 2:1. Revelation 2–3 lists five churches in the region of Asia beyond those at Colossae and Laodicea. The church at Ephesus evidently went on to plant a great many other churches.

⁴ *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (TriStar Pictures, 1991).

the history books of a distant apostolic age, but we wouldn't drag him into the present and expect to be as fruitful as he was.

Paul's letters to his churches stop us from making this error. They reveal that Paul was a flesh-and-blood believer like us. Far from presenting himself as a unique exception, Paul pleads with the Galatians to *"become like me, for I became like you."* Paul makes it clear that his superhuman strength does not come from any virtue of his own. He tells the Colossians that *"I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me,"* and he tells the Philippians that *"I can do all this through him who gives me strength."*⁵ Paul tore his clothes in grief when the Galatians tried to worship him as a superhuman hero in Acts 14:15, and he would tear his clothes in far greater grief today to see the hero worship which is bestowed on him by Christians who should know better because of his letters. Paul wrote these letters to teach us how to follow his example. He wrote them to show us what it means for us to have God on the inside.

Paul taught the people in the churches he planted that God had saved them in order to come and live inside them through his Holy Spirit. He didn't treat this as an add-on to the message of Christianity. He taught in Galatians 3:14 that God *"redeemed us in order that... by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."* He taught that following Jesus means having God on the inside – being strengthened by the same Holy Spirit who made Paul fruitful in the early days of Church history.

In 49 AD, Paul wrote his letter to the **Galatians** to teach them how the Holy Spirit makes people **free on the inside**. In 60 AD, he wrote to the **Ephesians** to explain how the Holy Spirit makes people **new on the inside**, and to the **Colossians** to teach them how the Spirit makes people **strong on the inside** too. In 61 AD, he wrote to the **Philippians** to teach them how the Holy Spirit makes people **joyful on the inside**.⁶ He wrote each of these

⁵ Galatians 4:12; Philippians 4:13; Colossians 1:29.

⁶ Paul also wrote other letters, but these have been covered separately in *Straight to the Heart of Romans, Straight to the Heart of 1 and 2 Corinthians*

four letters to stop people from placing him on a pedestal as a superhuman hero. He wrote to teach us that, if we have God on the inside, then we can be every bit as fruitful as he was.

The posters for one of the *Terminator* movies proclaimed: “Same make. Same model. New mission.” That’s a pretty good summary of what God wants to speak over your own life as you read these four letters. In a world where 60 per cent of people groups are still considered unreached or only nominally reached with the Gospel, and where some of these people groups are over 50 million people strong, it is vital that we take Paul’s message seriously. In a world where 2.7 billion individuals have no indigenous church which can tell them the good news about Jesus, we can’t afford to honour Paul by putting him high upon a pedestal. We can only honour him by reading the letters which he wrote to equip us to continue his work long after he was gone.⁷

So get ready to respond to the message which Paul wrote to these four churches. Get ready to believe that God can use people like you and me. Get ready to understand what the Bible means when it promises that we can have God on the inside.

and *Straight to the Heart of 1 Thessalonians to Titus*.

⁷ This data was taken from the website of the Joshua Project in 2013.

Part One – Galatians:

Free on the Inside

One Staple (1:1–9)

If we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!

(Galatians 1:8)

David Nowitz had tried very hard. The Society for Family Health in Johannesburg had never had such a conscientious marketing manager. He had managed to secure government funding for a mass distribution of pamphlets throughout the city to warn people of the dangers of sexually transmitted infections. He had the pamphlets translated into Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and Afrikaans. He had paid a distribution company to deliver the pamphlets throughout the city along with a free condom to help people to respond to his warnings. It was only when he visited a home and saw one of his pamphlets that he realized with horror what had happened: the distribution company had stapled the condom to the pamphlet, putting two holes in every single condom.

David Nowitz admitted to reporters that *"We made a deal with a low-budget distribution company."* He had entrusted his message to people who thought a single staple wouldn't make any difference, when in reality those two tiny pinpricks undermined everything. His safe-sex campaign actually increased the danger of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies across Johannesburg.¹ If you can imagine how David Nowitz felt when he saw his stapled pamphlet for the first time, then you

¹ This happened in February 1999, recounted by Stephen Pile in *The Ultimate Book of Heroic Failures* (2011).

can imagine the horror that stirred Paul to write his letter to the Galatians at the start of 49 AD.

Paul had spent part of 48 AD planting churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe – the cities of Galatia, which is now in southern Turkey.² We are told in Acts 14:3 that he went as God’s missionary to preach “*the message of his grace,*” explaining that Jesus lived the perfect life which the Galatians had failed to live and that he had died the brutal death which the Galatians deserved to die. Paul’s announcement that human sin provokes God’s judgment wasn’t news to the people of Galatia (the Jews and pagans were agreed on that), but what was news was Paul’s announcement that religious rituals and good behaviour were not enough to atone for human sin. The Galatians tried to stone him to death for preaching that “*Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.*”³ The essence of Paul’s message to the Galatians was grace, which is why Acts 13:43 tells us that he “*urged them to continue in the grace of God.*” Grace offers us **God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense**. If they forgot this, the Galatians were as foolish as a Johannesburg pamphlet distribution company.

Paul was very agitated when he wrote his first New Testament letter.⁴ Since he does not mention the decisions that the apostles made in Jerusalem towards the end of 49 AD in Acts 15, he must have written to the Galatians earlier that same

² See Acts 13–14. *Galatia* had originally referred to the Celtic settlements to the north of these four cities, but by Paul’s day the Roman province of Galatia stretched much further south.

³ Acts 13:38–39. Tom Wright and other writers from the “new perspective” school point out that Paul’s message was about more than individual salvation. Yes, but it wasn’t about *less* than individual salvation.

⁴ Paul’s first letter was probably the second earliest letter in the New Testament, since James wrote his letter in about 48 AD. This early dating is not just based on Paul’s failure to mention the pivotal rulings recorded in Acts 15, but also on the way he chides the Galatians in 1:6 for abandoning the Gospel “*so quickly.*”

year while he was staying in Syrian Antioch.⁵ We are told in Acts 15:1 that “*Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’*”⁶ Evidently these same false teachers were making inroads into the churches which Paul had planted in Galatia, for he writes in 5:12, “*As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*” Circumcision, obedience to the Jewish Law and reliance on a few good works might seem like tiny pinpricks in the Gospel, but Paul could see that it undermined absolutely everything. He warns the Galatians not to be “*fools.*” If Jesus’ work of salvation is perfect, then adding anything to it obscures its saving power.

This background helps us understand the opening verses of Galatians. It’s why Paul begins this letter with the phrase “*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” He doesn’t use this phrase out of habit to open all of his letters, but because the Gospel is about God’s grace from start to finish. It tells us that Jesus has done everything to free us from God’s judgment because we are powerless to free ourselves. We don’t need God’s reward for our best efforts. We need God’s mercy (not punishing us as we deserve) and we need God’s grace (blessing us even though we don’t deserve it). We can never earn these things from God ourselves. We can only receive them as gifts because we believe in the perfect life that Jesus has already lived for us.

Paul wrote to the Galatians in their native Greek, and he uses three Greek words to show them just how serious these pinpricks of self-reliance are. The first word is *metatithēmi*, a

⁵ Acts 14:26–28. Instead of appealing to decisions made in Jerusalem, Paul writes in 1:2 that his letter is endorsed by “*the brothers who are with me*” – the Antioch church, which sent him to Galatia the previous year.

⁶ James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, is at pains to clarify in Acts 15:24 that these teachers came out of the church he led but they in no way spoke for him.

word which was normally used for soldiers who switched sides before a battle (1:6). Paul tells the Galatians that switching to self-reliance instead of continuing in God's grace makes them turncoats who have sided with the people who attacked him. The second word is *heteros* (1:6). The Greeks had two words for *another*: the word *allos* meant *another of the same type* (Jesus uses this word to describe the Holy Spirit as *another* helper like himself in John 14:16), and the word *heteros* meant *another of a different type* (this is the root of the English word *heterosexual*). By describing the new message that was being preached in the Galatian churches as a *heteros* gospel, Paul emphasizes that Christian self-help is very different from the real Christian Gospel. Since the Gospel is perfect, adding to it is just as fatal as subtracting from it. These tiny pinpricks of self-reliance couldn't be more serious.

The third word that Paul uses is *anathema* (1:8 and 1:9). This is the word used throughout the Greek Old Testament to translate the Hebrew word *hērem*, or *handed over to the Lord for destruction*. It was the strongest curse which a first-century Jew could place on anyone, so Paul utters it twice in order to convey to his readers the seriousness of their situation.⁷ By smuggling human works into the finished work of Jesus these false teachers had committed the same sin as Achan in the time of Joshua.⁸ They must be cut off from God's People or the Galatians would be cut off with them.⁹

That's why Paul's letter to the Galatians is the Magna Carta

⁷ The word *anathema* is also used in the solemn oaths in Mark 14:71, Acts 23:12, 14 and 1 Corinthians 16:22.

⁸ The words *hērem* and *anathema* are used repeatedly in the Hebrew and Greek texts of Joshua 6:17–18 and 7:11–13. The Galatians understood Paul to be effectively saying "To hell with them!"

⁹ Paul probably refers to an *angel from heaven* because the Galatians originally mistook him for Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods (Acts 14:12), but it is also significant that Mormons and Muslims claim that their alternative gospels were given by angels to Joseph Smith and to Muhammad. See 2 Corinthians 11:14.

of the New Testament, the proclamation of God's freedom as a gift to sinful people who believe in Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Paul tells us that this message of freedom cannot be earned. It is all about what Jesus has done for us and not about what we can do for him in return. Reliance on religious rituals or on our own good works isn't a different emphasis. It is an entirely different gospel.

¹⁰ When Paul tells us in 1:2 that Jesus is *Christ* (the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*) and *Lord* (the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Yahweh*), he identifies Jesus both as Saviour and as God.

Good Ideas and God's Idea (1:10–2:14)

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin.

(Galatians 1:11)

Paul's message was deeply unpopular in Galatia. We tend to miss this because he was so successful in planting churches there. We tend to forget that the Jews forcibly expelled him from two cities because they hated his message that only Jesus' death on the cross could free them from God's judgment. We tend to forget that he fled from another city having almost been lynched for trying to persuade the pagans there that they needed to turn from the hero gods of Mount Olympus to the crucified God of Mount Zion.¹ Unless we grasp the full scandal of Paul's message in Galatia, we will fail to understand why the churches he planted there modified it very shortly after he sailed back to Syria.

We will also fail to understand why the first two chapters of this letter read like Paul's autobiography. He feels he needs to persuade the Galatians that the Gospel he preached in their cities wasn't just his own good idea but God's idea. It's why he begins the letter by stating that he is an apostle "*sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father,*" and it's why he spends much of these first two chapters listing his credentials as a Gospel preacher.

First, he tells the Galatians in 1:10–24 that they need to

¹ Paul explicitly links the unpopularity of his message to the cross of Jesus in 5:11 and 6:12. The idea that Jesus had to be punished in our place because of our sins is still deeply unpopular today.

take his Gospel seriously because *he received it directly from God*. They must not believe the propaganda of his critics, which he refers to in 1:10, that he is merely the lackey of influential Greek Christians in Syria.² He is more Jewish than any of the false teachers in Galatia, and he was once more tangled up than they are in Jewish traditions. But God freed him through the message of his grace. Jesus appeared to him personally on the road to Damascus and commissioned him to be a preacher of the very Gospel that he sought to destroy.³ The good ideas preached by the false teachers might sound convincing, but they were no match for God's idea which he had entrusted to Paul. If the Galatians modified his message, they were rejecting the very words of Jesus.

Second, Paul tells the Galatians in 2:1-10 that they need to take his Gospel seriously because *it has been endorsed by all of the apostles*. Fourteen years after his conversion, in 47 AD, he responded to the words of the prophet Agabus in Acts 11:27-30 by going down to Jerusalem with a financial gift for the Christians in Judea. He took advantage of this opportunity to set out before the apostles the Gospel that he was preaching about "*the freedom we have in Christ Jesus*." These apostles – men like James, Peter and John⁴ – fully endorsed Paul's Gospel message and "*recognised the grace given to me*." Paul ups the ante for the Galatian churches when he tells them that, if they modify his message, they are rejecting the collective teaching of Jesus' apostles.

Third, he tells the Galatians in 2:11-14 that they need

² Paul's refusal to seek human approval does not mean that he was careless or deliberately offensive. It means that he sought to please people only when it was also pleasing to God (1 Corinthians 10:32-33).

³ The Greek word for church is *ekklesiá*, a word used throughout the Greek Old Testament for the *assembly* of Israel. As a voting member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (Acts 26:10), Paul had led the attack on this new assembly.

⁴ Paul describes a very relaxed system of government during the first 20 years of Church history. He talks about "*those who seemed to be leaders*" and clearly views James and himself as apostles equal to the Twelve.

to take his Gospel seriously because it has been vindicated when challenged in the past. He tells them that he had a public confrontation with Peter, the leading apostle,⁵ over the very same issue that was troubling the churches in Galatia – whether Gentiles needed to convert to Christ alone or convert to all the trappings of Judaism as well.⁶ Historians refer to the false teachers in Galatia as “Judaizers” because they tried to force Greek converts to embrace these Jewish trappings, but Paul simply calls them “the circumcision group” in 2:13 because this was their most obvious demand. If the apostles had not forced Titus the Greek to be circumcised (2:3), and if Peter had backed down when Paul opposed him (2:11–14), then Paul warns the Galatians they are flying in the face of the past two decades of theological discussion if they believe the subtle lies of the Judaizers.

We live in an age that is full of good ideas, so these two chapters are far more than a lesson in Church history. They teach us how to respond to good ideas that promise us greater freedom if we adapt the Gospel to fit our culture. Paul warns us in 2:4 that such compromise always traps us into greater slavery instead.

These two chapters teach us to walk humbly whenever we discuss the Gospel. If even Peter and Barnabas could be led astray by false teaching, we must not be so proud as to imagine that we are immune to this danger ourselves.⁷ It is far easier to point out flaws in the thinking of others than it is to admit that we may have succumbed to false teaching ourselves. If

⁵ Paul refers to him by his Aramaic name *Cephas* in 1:18 and 2:9, 11 and 14. He refers to him by his Greek name *Peter* in 2:7 and 2:8. Both names mean *Rock* and he was evidently known by both names in Galatia.

⁶ The Greek word *Ioudaïsmos*, or *Judaism*, only occurs in the New Testament here in 1:13 and 14. Whereas Acts stresses the continuity between Judaism and Christianity, Galatians stresses the discontinuity.

⁷ These verses warn us not to treat the words of popes or denominational leaders as infallible. If even Peter made mistakes, no pope or church leader is completely free from error.

even Paul thought it was important to receive *“the right hand of fellowship”* from the other apostles, we ought to be accountable to other trusted Christians and willing to allow them to correct us.⁸

These two chapters also teach us to honour the conclusions of previous generations of believers. When Rob Bell was interviewed about his controversial statements about the nature of hell and about same-sex marriage, he was asked, *“Isn’t the humility of orthodoxy to say, ‘I’ll stay where the church is unless I’m sure that the church has always been wrong about this?’”* His response was that *“This is why so many people don’t want to be part of the church.”* When he was challenged further – *“You’re saying the world’s moved on, God’s going to get left behind... because it looks boring and retrograde and backward and intolerant”* – he simply replied, *“That’s well said.”*⁹ Whatever you think about his conclusions, you should sense from these two chapters that his reasoning is very dangerous. Paul warns the Galatians that, whenever we compromise the Gospel to accommodate our culture, we do not sweeten the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross (5:11 and 6:12). We deny it.

God calls us to challenge the good ideas of men and women to their faces (2:11), and to do so publicly for the sake of others (2:14). He calls us to do so lovingly (1:11) but firmly (1:9) in order to save them from the Devil’s trap. Good ideas always sound good, by definition, but they are no substitute for God’s idea as he revealed it to the apostle Paul.

⁸ We can tell from ancient Greek art that Paul’s contemporaries shook hands with each other using their right hands – the hand in which they might hold a weapon – as a gesture of peace, trust and fellowship.

⁹ Rob Bell, author of *Love Wins* (2011), took part in this interview on London’s Premier Radio on 20th April 2013. His interviewer was Andrew Wilson, author of *If God, Then What?* (2012).