

New Testament Survey – Corinthians and Galatians

Preface

This is the third volume in the *Serving Today* series of Bible study booklets in which we plan to cover the whole of the New Testament. The letters Paul wrote to these churches give us important instruction on what Christian believers should believe and how we should live in the light of what we believe. In addition Paul deals with a number of problems which were troubling these early churches. These can be summarised under two headings:

- i. Doctrinal error is exposed and corrected
- ii. Disobedient behaviour is exposed and corrected

In so doing Paul gives us help as pastors and church leaders in how to deal with similar issues which we may have to face in our churches today, including the need at times to exercise church discipline on those who refuse to repent of their errors either in doctrine or in conduct. Indeed, we are given a glimpse the great pastoral heart which Paul had for his brethren and sisters in Christ, and that is something we should be profoundly thankful for to the Lord and which we should seek to imitate.

Again I am indebted to Roger Prime who has contributed the talks on these three New Testament books in the

Serving Today radio programme and which form the basis for this volume you are now reading.

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Part 1 – The Corinthian Letters

Chapter 1: Background To The Church at Corinth

The two letters written to this Church which are in our Bibles are particularly important for a number of reasons. Paul's first letter gives us an insight into an early church wrestling with the difficulties of working out their faith in an ungodly and hostile environment. So there are valuable lessons for us to learn still today about the way we live out our faith as believers in a world that is still hostile to the Christian faith. On the other hand the second letter gives us an insight into the heart of the apostle Paul as we see some of the struggles he faced in serving the Lord. Here we see doctrine and personal experience side by side and there is encouragement for us still today in serving the Lord. This is useful as we learn from Paul how to face the struggles and disappointments in serving the Lord.

Life in the city.

Corinth was a very strategic city for trade in the first century. It was located at the crossroads between the northern and southern parts of Greece, and also at a crossing point between the Aegean Sea on its eastern side

and the Adriatic to the west. As an important city for commerce, Corinth was very prosperous, like many large cities in the world today. The city was dominated by two great temples. One of these was dedicated to the worship of Aphrodite, the Roman goddess of love. This was a very immoral religion with 1000 priestesses attached to the temple who were nothing more than sacred prostitutes. There was also the temple of Apollo who was worshipped as the god of culture expressed in music, song and poetry. He was supposed to be the ideal of male beauty and was worshipped in displays of homosexual practice, particularly with the young boys of the city. So we can only conclude that the Corinth of the first Century AD was corrupt, particularly in terms of immorality, and sadly there are many parallels with the ungodly influences in our world today.

The planting of the church

The church at Corinth came into being as a result of Paul's ministry. We read at the beginning of Acts 18 that Paul arrived in Corinth on his second missionary journey. After hearing the Lord's call to cross over from modern day Turkey into Europe, Paul preached the good news of Jesus first at Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. He then travelled alone to Athens while Silas and Timothy joined him from Macedonia to encourage the churches there. After preaching in Athens, Paul travelled south to Corinth and arrived there alone. He was encouraged by meeting Aquila and his wife Priscilla there – they were believers who also made tents, as Paul did, and they worked together in this

trade as Paul supported himself and preached in the Jewish synagogue. After a little while Silas and Timothy joined him, probably bringing financial support from the churches in that area, so Paul was able to devote himself entirely to preaching the gospel. Sadly, after only a short period the Jews rejected Paul's message and threw him out of the synagogue. This did not stop him sharing the gospel as he used a room in the house next door to the synagogue to continue his preaching. A number of Jews were converted, including the ruler of the synagogue, as well as many Gentiles in the city. Paul spent another eighteen months preaching in Corinth, having been encouraged by a vision from the Lord that there were many people the Lord had chosen in that city to be saved.

The reasons for 1 Corinthians

A few years after the church had been formed, Paul travelled on his third missionary journey to Ephesus, where he spent around three years preaching the gospel. Ephesus was an important city for trade also and there would be frequent visitors crossing the Aegean sea between Corinth and Ephesus. It is likely that Paul wrote an earlier letter than 1 Corinthians to the church as he refers to this in 1 Corinthians 5:9 of which we have no record. He may also have made a visit to the church not recorded in Acts which he refers to in 2 Corinthians 2:1 as a '*painful visit*'. He also sent Timothy from Ephesus to visit the church around the same time that he wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus.

There were two particular matters that caused Paul to write his first letter. We read in chapter 1 verse 11 that Paul had received a report from the household of Chloe about divisions in the church at Corinth, and the first part of the letter is taken up with dealing with this problem. We know no more about Chloe and her household. The likelihood is that this was probably a wealthy Christian family living either in Ephesus or Corinth, who traded between the two cities and brought news of the problems to Paul. There is also a reference at the beginning of chapter 5 to a report that had come to Paul about sexual immorality in the church. This may also have come from Chloe's household, although we cannot be certain of this. The second reason for this first letter is found in the beginning of chapter 7 where Paul wrote in the first verse, *'Now concerning the matters you wrote about'*. It would appear that the church at Corinth had written a letter to the Apostle asking for his advice on a number of issues. From this point on in the letter Paul often introduces a new subject with the words *'Now concerning'* and this indicates he is writing about another issue the church has raised with him. It is likely that this letter was brought by a group of three men who visited Paul from Corinth who are mentioned in chapter 16:17. Paul wrote, *"I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, for they have refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such men."* These appear to have been trusted men in the church at Corinth, who brought the letter dealing with genuine difficulties the believers there were wrestling with and seeking the

apostle's advice on these things. The likelihood is that Paul sent his reply in the form of 1 Corinthians back with these men.

Chapter 2: The Difficulties Facing The Church

The first letter to the church at Corinth indicates it faced many problems and was also affected by a number of failures. The way Paul dealt with these difficult situations is very instructive, as we shall see. After his initial greeting in the opening verse of chapter 1, he gave thanks to God for the evidence he saw of God's grace at work in the lives of these believers. He also expressed his appreciation for the way God had equipped them to serve him, so that they were not lacking in any spiritual gift. He wrote of his confidence in the faithfulness of God that he would make these believers strong and keep them faithful to him. We might consider that those were quite remarkable words under the circumstances. However, they do help us when we have to handle difficult situations in church life to look first for the evidences of the grace of God and thank him for them, and to remember that God is faithful. Like Paul with the Corinthians we can look to him with confidence to continue and complete his work in the lives of the true children of God.

Divisions

Having expressed his appreciation for the Lord's work in the hearts of the Corinthian believers, he then turns to the difficulties. We see in chapter 1 that Paul had received a

report from the household of Chloe about divisions in the church. These divisions revolved around personalities. Some of the believers favoured Paul, others Apollos, some Cephas or Peter and some appear to have been taking a superior attitude and adding to the divisions by proclaiming their allegiance was to Christ. This was clearly a dangerous situation that risked splitting the church in many fragments. Why these personalities were followed we are not told, but we might guess that some were attracted to Apollos because he was a powerful speaker. Perhaps others were attracted to Paul as he was a deep and thoughtful Bible teacher. While those who favoured Jewish traditionalism may have identified with Peter. Whatever the reasons, these divisions were very much based around personalities.

Paul had no option but to deal with these divisions. He showed in his letter that such attitudes reflect a worldly wisdom, yet the message of the cross is a demonstration of God's wisdom, taking that which is foolish in the eyes of the world to accomplish his saving purposes. Paul used the example of his own preaching at Corinth, in chapter 2, to show that he came in weakness and preached not with worldly wisdom but in the Spirit's power, so that their faith might rest, not in his ability as a preacher, but in the work of God's Spirit. Only the Spirit of God can open the sinner's mind and heart to bring them to faith in Christ. In chapter 3 Paul declared that the mature attitude was to recognise the differing gifts given to each of the Lord's servants, and to accept that they all had a part to play in the

work of the gospel. Yet ultimately it is only God who can give increase to the work. He showed how the faithful labourer will build on the foundation of Christ and will work with a concern to give of their best, using the Word of God and prayer in doing the work, and building for the glory of God. In chapter 4 Paul showed that the right attitude to have in doing the work of God is not one of pride and self advancement, but rather one of humble service. We do not serve God to be judged and applauded by men, but faithfully to serve God who is the ultimate judge of all we do.

Immorality and the courts

Paul deals with two further problems that had come to his notice. The first was a matter of immoral behaviour that was being tolerated in the church and Paul shows how this was to be dealt with as a matter of church discipline. At the end of chapter 6 he comes back to this issue of immorality in the life of the believer and indicates how contrary such behaviour is to the believer's profession of being indwelt by the Spirit of God. The other issue Paul tackles is the problem of believers taking each other to court. Christian believers should deal with their differences in the church, not take them before the ungodly to judge.

Questions answered

In chapter 7 Paul turns to deal with the issues the church at Corinth had written to him about. They had firstly raised with Paul a number of questions relating to marriage. Was

it right for a person to marry? What were their obligations within the marriage relationship? What should a believer do if they found themselves married to an unbelieving husband or wife after being converted? Should a person engaged to be married or widowed remain single or should they marry? Those clearly are pastoral issues that we may face still today and Paul's advice is still very relevant.

The next section is rather more lengthy and starts off with a question about whether it is right to eat food that may have been offered in sacrifice to an idol or whether this should be avoided. This clearly was a real issue in a society where idol worship was a common occurrence. Also there were those idol temples in Corinth which we mentioned in the previous chapter. While Paul shows that an idol does not really exist and there is only one God, there may be believers with a sensitive conscience who feel that to eat food offered to an idol is sin. Paul therefore advised those who had no conscience over eating such food to be careful that they did not wound the conscience of another believer by their actions. They should forgo their freedom to eat this food for the sake of not causing offence to a fellow believer. Paul then goes on in chapters 9 and 10 to illustrate the way in which he has not always exercised his freedom as an apostle for the sake of not causing offence to a fellow believer. In fact, at the end of chapter 9, Paul shows that he willingly made himself a servant to both Jew and Gentile alike in order that he might win them for Christ. Then in chapter 10 he uses examples from the history of Israel in the Old Testament to warn against the dangers of

falling into the temptations that come from idolatry. He then goes on to show the important principle that should govern all our lives as believers, that in the whole of life, everything should be done for the glory of God.

Headship in the church and the Lord's supper

In chapter 11 Paul addresses the problem of some women at Corinth who were rejecting the headship of men in the church by removing their veils, particularly when they came to worship. Paul deals with this issue by showing that the headship of man is a God given order and is to be respected by the women in the church. It is important to realise that the wearing of a head covering was an expression of submission to their husbands and the issue in these verses is not so much whether women should have a head covering today when they gather for worship, but whether they gather in a spirit of submission to the God given order of male headship.

Again in chapter 11 Paul also addresses the problem of the way the Lord's Supper had become a cause of disunity in the church, highlighting the divisions between the rich and poor. Paul reminded them that this service is not only a remembrance of Christ, it is also to be an expression of their unity as the body of Christ. Therefore they must examine their hearts as they come to participate so that they do not take part with a wrong attitude.

Rivalry over spiritual gifts

When we come to chapter 12 we see another problem that was causing disunity in the church at Corinth. There appeared to have been some rivalry over different spiritual gifts. Paul deals with this by showing that all spiritual gifts are sovereignly given by God through the one Spirit. He then uses the picture of a body to illustrate the church. It is made up of many different parts, all with their own gifts and role to play in the life of the church. Our differences are not to be a cause of division but are essential to the proper function of the whole church as the body of Christ. In diversity there is to be unity and that diversity should not be allowed to create divisions.

Chapter 13 is a lovely passage showing how love is far more important than any of the gifts and that these become empty and meaningless unless we have a spirit of love. It is really a commentary on what Paul had said in chapter 12.

In chapter 14 Paul deals with the way in which the gift of speaking in tongues had become so important in the church at Corinth. He shows that when they gathered for worship, the speaking forth of God's Word in an intelligible way to strengthen, encourage and comfort the believers, was much more beneficial than unintelligible speaking in tongues. This rivalry over tongues had created a spirit of disorder, but Paul was concerned to show them the orderly way to conduct their worship.

The resurrection

Paul closes his letter with a glorious theme, the resurrection of Jesus. Sadly, even views about this had been a problem in the Corinthian church. It would appear there were those in the church who were denying the possibility of the believer's body being raised from the dead. Paul sees an inseparable link between the resurrection of Christ and that of the believer. To deny the believer's resurrection was to deny that Christ was raised from the dead. The result of that would mean the gospel was robbed of its truth and the believer is still lost in his sins. Paul then asserts the certainty of Christ's resurrection and triumph over death. He illustrates the nature of the believer's resurrection body with examples from the natural world and Scripture and ends the chapter with the glorious assertion that death has been defeated for the believer and our bodies will be raised and transformed to be like Christ.

Closing comments

In the final chapter Paul writes about some practical arrangements for an offering he was collecting to support poor believers in Jerusalem. Then he writes about his future plans for ministry as well as those of Timothy and Apollos before his final words of greeting.

Chapter 3: 2 Corinthians

The reason for the letter

It would appear that after Paul wrote his first letter to Corinth he had sent Titus to visit the church, possibly

taking a further letter of which we have no record, in an attempt to resolve the problems in the church. Meanwhile Paul left Ephesus and travelled to Troas, where he hoped to meet Titus with comforting news of the response of the Corinthians to Paul's letter. We read in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 what happened there. *“Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace in my mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.”* Paul was clearly anxious in his mind to hear news from Titus of the church at Corinth. We discover in reading 2 Corinthians 7 that Paul has arrived in Macedonia where Titus met up with him, bringing good news of the repentance of the Corinthian Church. They had taken to heart the things Paul had said about the sins in the church and there was a deep longing in their hearts to see him again. That meeting with Titus must have been a source of great comfort to Paul when he heard such reassuring news about the church at Corinth. It was at this point that Paul writes 2 Corinthians, while still in Macedonia, to express his joy at the news Titus brought and to prepare for his own visit to them. One of the purposes of that visit would be to collect the offering they had made for the poor believers in Jerusalem and take that on with him when he visited that city. Titus was sent back to Corinth to take this letter and to make sure the believers there had made the offering they had promised and that it would be ready for Paul when he arrived. The details of these journeys is found in Acts 20v1-6, where Paul leaves Ephesus because of the riot and sets out for

Macedonia and then on to Greece – which would be his trip to Corinth – before leaving that area on his way back to Jerusalem.

Problems needing to be resolved

There were still some issues Paul had to deal with among some of the believers at Corinth and he tackles these in this letter. He starts in chapter 1 by recording the comfort he had received from God at the end of his time in Ephesus. This would be the riot in the city stirred up by the silversmiths that Luke records in Acts 19. We see, however, that in his opening chapter Paul also had to defend himself against an accusation of being unreliable. It appears that at some point Paul had changed his plans to visit the church at Corinth. He had done so to spare them a painful visit from himself (see 2:1). Sadly, there were those in the church who accused him of being unreliable. Paul takes the heat out of the situation by taking the focus off himself as he reminds them of the faithfulness of God. He tells them that all God's promises find their true fulfilment in Jesus Christ. That is a wonderful thought for us still today, that God can be relied upon to keep his Word and all his promises in the Bible find their true fulfilment in Christ.

False teachers

When we get into chapter 3 of the letter Paul has to defend himself again. The reason for this was that the church at Corinth was troubled by false teachers. They seem to be Jews who were promoting the old covenant and the law

that had been given by Moses. They were clearly opposed to the gospel of salvation by grace that Paul was preaching. In chapter 3 we see Paul contrasting the ministry of the old covenant with the work of the Spirit under the new covenant . He shows the superiority of the gospel of Christ.

Paul continues to write about his own ministry in the chapters that follow. It would seem that these false teachers were taking a rather superior attitude towards Paul. Because he faced opposition, persecution and trials in his ministry they claimed he was an inferior apostle. On the other hand, they did not face any of these struggles and opposition to their teaching. Therefore they concluded they were superior to Paul. Indeed, later in 2 Corinthians he describes these false teachers as ‘super-apostles’ (see 12:11.). Knowing their attitude towards Paul helps us to understand why he wrote about his ministry in this way in these earlier chapters. Paul begins chapter 4 by saying that because he has a superior ministry in the gospel of Christ, he does not lose heart in the face of the difficulties he experiences. He sees the real enemy he faces is Satan himself, who blinds the minds of unbelievers to the truth of Christ. Paul’s confidence in preaching is in God, who shines the light of his gospel into the hearts and minds of sinners bringing them to repentance and faith in Jesus.

The power of God seen in Paul’s weakness

In the rest of chapter 4 Paul also writes about all the struggles and difficulties he faced in his ministry. He sees

that God allowed his weakness to be seen so that God’s power was displayed through his weakness to accomplish God’s purposes. He likens himself to a clay jar in which is placed a priceless treasure so that it might be seen that everything achieved is done by God’s power and not from the ability of Paul. That is an important lesson for us all to remember as we serve the Lord. God takes us in our weakness and allows us to face difficulties and disappointments so that he might display his power through us.

We see in chapter 5 that Paul sees beyond all his sufferings and even beyond death itself to Christ as the one who will ultimately judge his work. He shows his motivation in his ministry is the love of Christ and in chapters 6 and 7 reveals his service for the Lord is characterised by a lack of offence and a deep spiritual concern for those to whom he ministered.

Caring for the poor

The theme of Paul’s writing changes when we get into chapters 8 and 9. You may remember that at the end of 1 Corinthians Paul had given instructions about an offering to support the poor believers in Jerusalem. Titus appears to have reported back to Paul that this still had not been organised, so Paul wrote about this again in these two chapters and gives some very practical teaching on the attitudes we should have as believers in our giving. Titus will return to them with this letter and encourage the church to fulfil their commitment to make this offering.

Defending again

In chapter 10 Paul returns to defending his ministry. It is clear that the false teachers who opposed Paul had been accusing him of being bold when he wrote letters but timid when he met people face to face. Paul appealed to the gentleness of Christ as his example, but assured them that he would be bold when he came if they did not repent of their sinful attitudes. Paul will not lower himself to the attitudes of the false teachers who boast about their achievements, he will only boast about Christ. Clearly Paul is having to work hard to oppose the men who were disturbing the church at Corinth. We see in chapters 11 and 12, that Paul displays his genuine concern for these believers, exposes the false apostles as nothing more than agents of Satan and boasts, not about his success, but about his sufferings. He did this to show that through his weakness and trials he had proved the grace and strength of Christ to enable him to fulfil his ministry. Paul then closes his letter by looking forward to his forthcoming visit to the church and urging those who still oppose him to repent of their sin and examine their hearts to make sure they are trusting in Christ.

Chapter 4: Preaching from 1 & 2 Corinthians

The thought of attempting preaching a series right through 1 or 2 Corinthians understandably might seem a bit daunting. In this chapter we are therefore going to suggest some ideas for shorter series and also highlight some

important truths and practical issues you might consider preaching on.

1 Corinthians

The opening nine verses of chapter 1 give excellent material for a series of sermons on the faithfulness of God in saving, equipping and keeping the believers at Corinth. This could be spread over several preaching opportunities, such as your regular ministry either on the Lord's Day or at your regular Bible studies.

One of the major problems facing the Church at Corinth was the problem of divisions among its members. This is a problem that it is all too easy to fall into today. Therefore, a short series could be based on the passage starting from chapter 1:10 to the end of chapter 4. These verses highlight both the causes of such divisions and the teaching Paul gives there about right attitudes we should display in our own ministries and in our relationships with others in the church.

Another series of messages on issues facing Christians today could be based around chapters 5 to 8. This would touch on matters of immorality, resolving disputes among believers, important teaching concerning marriage and also our attitudes in dealing with issues such as food sacrificed to idols. There are other areas in which the principles involved in dealing with food sacrificed to idols can be applied. For example, we may come across a number of areas in living out our faith in which no specific teaching is

given in the Bible and Christians may differ in their own conscience as to how they should deal with these things. Some believers may feel it is right not to drink alcohol, whilst others may feel this is acceptable in moderation. Some people may feel that some social activities are acceptable whilst others may want to avoid them. The important principle Paul sets before us is that we are careful not to offend the conscience of a fellow believer in our actions.

The teaching in chapters 9 and 10 would make a good series of messages on the attitude we have towards our freedom as believers. We can learn from the example of Paul who did not exercise his rights but made himself the servant of others for the sake of the gospel.

From chapter 11 onwards there are some issues which relate more specifically to our life together as believers in the church. We may like to do a series on living together in the body of Christ. This would deal with issues such as the place of women in the life of the church, right attitudes in celebrating the Lord's Supper and our attitudes towards spiritual gifts. In fact chapters 12 to 14 could almost make a series on their own, following through Paul's teaching on the different kinds of gifts and the importance of recognising that Paul teaches there is both variety in the gifts yet there is to be unity in the church as the body of Christ. Chapter 13 shows how even the most outstanding gifts are empty and meaningless without love. This is followed by Paul's teaching on the importance of using

gifts that teach and build up the church and that there is proper order in worship.

Chapter 15 is a wonderful passage on the theme of the resurrection of both Christ and the believer. We could make a short series on the resurrection by preaching through the teaching of Paul here. This would make a series you might preach through from Easter Sunday onwards to encourage the Lord's people in their faith in the wonder of Christ's resurrection and the certain hope we have in him.

You could also preach a series of sermons on the theme of our attitude as Christians to giving. This series could start with the teaching given in 1 Corinthians 16v1-4 and then follow on with teaching from 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9.

2 Corinthians

In many ways this is not quite such an easy book to preach through in a series because much of Paul's writing concerns his attitudes and motives in ministry as he seeks to defend himself against the false accusations of the false teachers. We could pick out some of the passages to show the way God uses the trials and difficulties we face in living for Christ and serving him. For example, in chapter 1 God uses trials to comfort Paul so that he in turn can comfort others in the sufferings they are passing through. In chapter 4 Paul sees how his trials are being used to bring the message of life to others, and in chapters 11 and 12

Paul shows how through his sufferings he proves the grace of God to strengthen him in his weakness.

Other themes that could be handled as short series are the faithfulness of God to his promises from chapter 1, the glory of the new covenant from chapter 3, in chapter 5 we can preach on the wonderful hope we have as believers in the face of death and also, from the end of that chapter, consider those things that should motivate us in reaching out to the lost with the message of Christ. There is also some relevant teaching in chapter 6v14-7v1 on the importance of not being united together with unbelievers. We could also preach from chapter 7 on the nature of true repentance.

An example of a sermon outline

Paul's teaching on the church as the body of Christ from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 12 to 31. There are three main points.

1) Recognise our diversity

We start by looking at verses 12 to 14 under the heading *recognise our diversity*. We see that Paul makes two important points here. There is one body, created by the Spirit of God, through whom we are all baptised or joined into the one body of Christ, the church. Yet, whilst there is one body, there are many parts. Just as a human body is one yet is made up of

many different parts, so it is with the church. This diversity within the human body is not a threat to its unity. In fact the very variety in the human body is what makes it a whole body. So in the church we are to recognise our diversity and not see it as a threat to our unity.

2) Recognise our unity.

From verses 15 to 26 we are to *Recognise our unity*. Paul makes two very important points in these verses. Firstly, that we depend on each other. Just as a foot cannot say it does not belong to the body because it is different from the hand, or the ear feel it does not belong because it is not like the eye, so no believer can say they do not belong, nor can the rest of the body say that it is not needed. The whole point of the picture Paul gives us here is that every part of the body belongs and we depend on each other. The second point in recognising our unity is that we are to care for one another. Just as our whole body feels the pain when a part of it suffers, so it should be in the church and we are to care for each other, especially valuing those who seem weaker or whose work may be hidden. So often their ministry is indispensable.

3) Recognise your ministry

As we look at verses 27-31 Paul lists certain gifts here that the various members of the Church may be given. The list is not exhaustive and there are other

gifts we could add from the rest of the New Testament. Some of the gifts had a specific role to fulfil in the days of the early church, before the New Testament Scriptures were brought together. In recognising our ministry we must accept that there are differing gifts and we will not all serve the Lord in the same way. We must also recognise that while the Spirit is sovereign in giving gifts to men, we should earnestly desire the greater gifts. This raises the question, ‘What are the greater gifts?’ If you look at chapter 14 verses 1 and 12, you will see that Paul considers gifts of word ministry that build up the church are the greater gifts. These are the gifts we should desire and that the church should long to have being exercised by its leaders.

Part 2: The Letter To The Galatian Churches

Chapter 5: The Background

This book was considered by Martin Luther to be the best of all the books of the Bible because of the clear teaching Paul gives there of the important truth that we are justified in God’s sight through faith in Jesus and not by our works. Unlike the earlier letters of Paul we have been looking at, which were written to the believers in one place, for example to the church in Rome or the church in Corinth, this letter is addressed in 1:2 to *‘the churches in Galatia’*. This suggests it was written to a group of churches in a particular area.

The location of these churches

We cannot be absolutely certain precisely where these churches were situated, since the area known as Galatia covered a large part of modern day Turkey. However, we do know that there were churches established in the south of Galatia and it was probably to these Churches that Paul wrote. It is clear from chapter 1v11 and chapter 4v13 that it was through the preaching of Paul that the gospel had come to this area and we know that Paul visited the southern part of Galatia on his first missionary journey when he established churches in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. These events are recorded for us in Acts chapters 13 and 14.

The purpose of the letter

In chapter 1:6-7 Paul writes, *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all.”* We see there that fairly quickly after believing in the Lord Jesus these Christians were being deceived into believing a different message, which was contrary to the Good News of Jesus. We know that Paul visited these churches again on his second missionary journey, but it is likely that between his first and second journeys he heard how these believers had been deceived by false teachers and wrote this letter to them.

Paul seems to have been particularly hurt by these events. It is clear from chapter 4:13-14 that Paul was suffering

some kind of illness when he first visited them to preach the gospel and he had been received with great warmth and kindness by these people as they welcomed him and the message he preached. However, it would now appear that false teachers were troubling these churches and, in order to gain acceptance for their message, they were denying Paul's position as an apostle and turning the hearts of these believers against him.

Chapter 6: Dealing with error

The nature of the error

It would appear that these false teachers were Jews who were telling the Galatian believers that they could not be justified before God by faith in Christ alone. They claimed that they needed also to observe the Old Testament law in order to be accepted by God. We see in 4:10 that they had already persuaded these Christians to observe special days and months and seasons and years the Jews had been required to keep. It is also clear from Chapter 5 that they were trying to persuade the believers to be circumcised, as the Old Testament law required, in order to be right with God. Paul therefore was compelled to deal with this.

Paul's defence of the gospel

In the first two chapters Paul defends his apostleship and the truth of the gospel he preached to them. In the very first verse of his letter Paul states that his apostleship was not a man made thing. He had been sent to preach the gospel by Jesus Christ and God the Father. This answered the claim

of these false teachers who were opposing Paul's message by denying his true apostleship. He also reminded his readers of the truth which lies at the heart of his message in 1v3-4. *"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father."*

Having reminded them of what Christ has done to save the sinner, Paul expressed his astonishment that these believers had so quickly turned away from the message he had preached to them. He warns them that the message of the false teachers was no gospel at all. It is a perversion of the gospel of Christ. Paul issued a solemn warning that if he or even an angel from heaven should preach a gospel that was different from the message they had already received, such a person would be eternally condemned. This strong condemnation would not endear him to the false teachers, but Paul makes the point that he is not concerned about winning the approval of men. He is the servant of Christ and his desire is to please the Lord. He then states that the gospel he preached was not taught to him by men, but was received by direct revelation from God. He records his former way of life as a Jew, his great zeal for the traditions of his Jewish faith and his persecution of the early church because as a Jew he opposed their message. He then tells the story of his meeting with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and his conversion to faith in Christ. Those events had a most dramatic impact on Paul's life. He goes on to record that he spent three years in Arabia before

returning to Damascus and then going to Jerusalem to meet with the apostle Peter and James, the Lord's brother, who was leading the church at Jerusalem. It was probably during those three years he received from the Lord and understood the message of salvation through faith in Christ alone. Paul's point in giving these details is to make it clear that his apostleship and message were given directly from God and not through any human intervention.

It is interesting to note that Luke does not record details of these three years which Paul spent in Arabia in his record in the book of Acts. Having said that, it is probably implied by Luke when he records in Acts 9v23 there was a long gap between Paul's initial conversion and the opposition, which forced him to leave Damascus. It is quite significant that, before his conversion, Paul would have been zealous for the Jewish law and traditions these false teachers were now promoting and, like them, opposing the Christian message. However, Paul ends chapter 1 by making the point that the churches in Judea rejoiced when they heard that Paul was preaching the very message of Jesus he had once tried to destroy. These are very strong arguments defending both Paul's apostleship and the gospel he preached and they show clearly the error of the false teachers.

Chapter 7: Justification is by faith alone in Christ

In chapter 2 Paul shows that his apostleship was accepted by the other apostles in Jerusalem and also that the

message he preached of salvation through faith in Christ alone was not added to by the other apostles. Rather they recognised Paul's call by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and expressed their support in this ministry. This happy relationship between Paul and the other apostles did experience difficulty on one occasion. When Peter was visiting Paul and the church in Antioch he would eat with the Gentile believers. This would have been contrary to Jewish traditions. However, when some Jewish believers arrived, who were advocating adherence to the Old Testament laws, Peter withdrew from fellowship with the Gentiles because he was afraid of offending them. Other Jewish believers and even Barnabas were influenced by Peter's action. That was a serious situation because Peter was acting inconsistently. By withdrawing from the Gentiles he was implying he could not have fellowship with them because they did not observe Jewish customs. So Paul challenged Peter over his behaviour, showing how wrong it was to require Gentile believers to observe the Old Testament laws in order to be saved. Paul's words in chapter 2:15-16 show the heart of this problem in Galatia. He wrote, "*We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified.*" We see there the heart of the gospel that salvation is through Christ alone. Yet the false teachers were trying to add observing the Old

Testament Laws to faith in order for a person to be justified. This was the false message Paul is opposing.

The example of Abraham

Paul continues to defend the true gospel in chapters 3 and 4. He shows from the experiences of life and from the Old Testament Scriptures that the gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone is true. At the beginning of chapter 3 he argues that they received the Spirit by faith in Christ, not by observing the Law. How foolish then to go back to human effort in their Christian lives. Paul quotes some words from Genesis 15:6, which show that Abraham was accepted as righteous because he believed God. Since Abraham was justified by his faith in God, so the true children of Abraham are those who believe and are justified. Paul also quotes God's promise to Abraham that people of all nations would be blessed through him, so that even Gentiles who believe are justified by faith along with Abraham.

The Law's inability to save

Paul shows that the Law does not bring about the fulfilment of God's promise of blessing through Abraham. The Law exposes our sin and condemns us as guilty in God's sight. Paul then shows how Jesus died to bear the curse of sin so he could bring salvation to all who believed in him. The Law was given through Moses after the time of Abraham, but it did not destroy the promise God gave to Abraham. Rather, the Law shows us our sin and, like a school teacher, points us to our need of Christ.

The gospel's superiority

Paul demonstrates that the gospel is superior to the Old Testament Law. He does it in two ways at the end of chapter 3 and in chapter 4. Firstly Paul shows that those who believe in Jesus are the true sons of God. In Old Testament days those who struggled to keep the Law were like slaves in a household. Now that Jesus has come, those who believe in him are no longer slaves but sons of God, having all the blessings of a new relationship with God. Then Paul reminds them of Abraham's two sons. Ishmael was born as the son of a slave woman, Hagar, whereas Isaac was born as the son of Sarah his wife, a free woman, in fulfilment of the promise of God. Ishmael and Hagar represent the Old Testament Law and, just as Abraham was commanded to get rid of Hagar because her son would never share in the inheritance, so those who live by the law will not receive God's inheritance. In contrast Sarah and her son Isaac are representative of the heavenly Jerusalem. Isaac was the child given in fulfilment of God's promise and those who believe the promises of God, trusting in Jesus, will receive God's inheritance.

True godliness

Paul has argued very strongly that as Christians we do not have to keep the Law to be justified with God, and there is a danger in this which Paul now warns about. In chapter 5 Paul encourages the believers to stand firm in their Christian liberty in not being burdened with the demands of the Law. Yet he also warns of the danger of lapsing into

sinful behaviour in the Christian life. The law is still relevant to the believer in showing the standards by which we should live our lives. Paul teaches here that the acts of the sinful nature are to be put to death and that the believer is to live his life in step with the Spirit so that the fruit of the Spirit will be produced. In the closing chapter Paul again shows the marks of a truly spiritual person. This is one who is living to please God and not their sinful nature. He then ends with a warning against the influence of the false teachers wanting to impose circumcision on the believers.

Chapter 8: Themes On Which To preach

Suggestions for short series of messages

A lot of what Paul has to say in chapter 1 can be used to oppose those who preach false gospels still today. There is also still the danger of those who want to add works and human effort to faith and a series from the end of chapter 2 and from chapters 3 and 4 would help to correct this error. Chapter 5 can be preached from to show how standing firm on the truth of justification by faith must not be allowed to lead to a life of sin and lawlessness. You could also preach a very helpful series on the fruit of the Spirit from chapter 5.

An example of a sermon outline

This is based on the passage from chapter 5v26 to chapter 6v10. The last verse of chapter 5 is included because it

acts as the link between what Paul has been saying in the previous verses and what he now says in chapter 6. The title for the sermon is **'Sowing and reaping'** and introduction could be based on the thought of v7 "*A man reaps what he sows*". Examples from nature could be used to illustrate the point. There are two main points to the sermon and these can be developed to suit your own congregation.

1) A God given principle.

We could show from verses 7 and 8 the God given principle which we see in the natural world, but which also applies in the spiritual realm. The God who has given this principle will not be mocked. We will need to show what it means to sow to please the sinful nature by referring back to the acts of the sinful nature in chapter 5v19-21 and warn of the consequences of such behaviour. We would also need to show how sowing to please the Spirit involves walking in step with the Spirit and allowing his fruit to be produced in our lives. We can do this by referring back to 5:22-23.

2) A God honouring application

The rest of this passage shows what sowing to please the Spirit looks like in everyday situations. There are 5 simple principles here.

- i. Respect one another (5v26)
- ii. Restore the wayward (6v1)

- iii. Support the burdened (6v2-5)
- iv. Value the ministry (6v6)
- v. Do good to all (6v9-10)

All of this shows us how as believers in the Lord Jesus we sow to please the Spirit and we can expect to reap the harvest of eternal life.

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