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Josh Buice, *senior pastor of Pray's Mill Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia and president of G3 Ministries*

“While thorough exegetical commentaries are helpful and necessary, I have often longed for more pastoral commentaries that just get to the point. This is exactly what Chip Thornton has given us in the *Point-to-Point Biblical Commentaries* series. I am so thankful for his labors, and I am confident that this commentary will be quite useful to many pastors who desire to preach the text of Scripture.”

Scott Aniol, *executive vice president and editor-in-chief of G3 Ministries and professor of pastoral theology at Grace Bible Theological Seminary*

“Chip Thornton serves pastors well by providing a readable, engaging, clear, and concise commentary on Galatians. Complete with sound exegesis, fresh illustrations, and striking applications, this resource offers a treasure trove of useful information. I will visit this volume every time I teach from this epistle.”

Chris King, *senior pastor of Bayou View Baptist Church,
Gulfport, Mississippi*

“This commentary offers readers the unique combination of conciseness, yet thorough exegesis. In this work Chip Thornton utilizes his own theological training and includes insights from some of the greatest theological minds, providing readers an expositional gold mine for preachers and students of Scripture. For any preacher seeking to preach through the book of Galatians, this is a necessary resource.

Kevin Blackwell, *assistant to the president for church relations
and executive director of the Ministry Training Institute at
Samford University*

CHIPLEY MCQUEEN THORNTON

GALATIANS

POINT-*to*-POINT
BIBLE COMMENTARIES





Galatians: Justification by Faith
Point-to-Point Biblical Commentaries

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INTRODUCTION

John Calvin famously wrote, “The chief excellency of an expounder consists in *lucid brevity*.”¹ Commentators often quote this advice and try to follow it, but four hundred pages later, readers are left wondering what happened. I will try not to follow their example. I am more interested in Calvin’s next sentence: “And, indeed, since it is almost his [the expositor’s] only work to lay open the mind of the writer whom he undertakes to explain, the degree in which he leads away his readers from it, in that degree he goes astray from his purpose, and in a manner wanders from his own boundaries.”² My task is simple: (1) to protect and preserve Paul’s single meaning in each paragraph and (2) to do it with “lucid brevity.” I will try. Many things will be left unsaid. I will try not to gloss over difficult verses. Forgive my brevity if I leave you unsatisfied.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), xxiii, italics original.

² Calvin, *Romans*, xxiii.

Main Sources Consulted

- (1) Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*³
- (2) John Calvin, *The Epistle to the Galatians*⁴
- (3) Douglas Moo, *Galatians*⁵
- (4) John MacArthur, *MacArthur Study Bible*⁶
- (5) *ESV Study Bible*.⁷

Author

Galatians 1:1 identifies the Apostle Paul as the author. It was one of the first of his letters—if not the very first—which we have in Scripture.

Recipients

Paul writes to the **churches of Galatia (1:2)**. Galatia is in the vicinity of modern-day Turkey. Paul

³ Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. Theodore Graebner (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1949). Available online at <https://ccel.org/ccel/luther/galatians/>.

⁴ In John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

⁶ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

⁷ Wayne Grudem, ed., *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

planted churches in cities in southern Galatia on his first missionary journey (**Acts 13**). These congregations likely are his intended audience since he mentions he **preached the gospel to you at first (4:13)** (i.e., earlier). Paul probably wrote within a year of his first missionary journey.⁸

Situation

The first Christians struggled with serious questions we often take for granted:

1. Is a Jewish-Christian still required to follow the OT law? Must he still offer temple sacrifices (which were still in effect) to keep his salvation?
2. What about non-Jews (Gentiles)? They do not know the OT law. Must they conform to it? Must they be circumcised to be saved?

False teachers crept in to seize upon their confusion. They sought to undermine Paul and his gospel. For Paul, all such questions could be reduced to one: *How is a man made right (justified) with God?* His clear response: By faith in Christ, not our own works.

⁸ Moo, *Galatians*, 76.

Purpose

MacArthur states the letter's purpose precisely: "Paul wrote Galatians to counter Judaizing false teachers who were undermining the central NT doctrine of justification by faith."⁹

Order of Salvation (*ordo salutis*)

Critical to understanding Galatians is Paul's *order of salvation*. Salvation is both a one-time event (justification) and a process (sanctification, perseverance). It began in eternity past with God's salvation plan. It continues in the present with the sinner's conversion and Christian walk. It ultimately finds completion at death when we receive our sinless, glorified bodies. Below is the classic (Pauline) *order of salvation*.

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. Election | God's sovereign choice of a people for himself |
| 2. Gospel Call | The Holy Spirit's internal summons to conversion |
| 3. Regeneration | The Holy Spirit's resurrecting a dead soul to life |
| 4. Conversion | The sinner's repentance and faith in Christ's merits |
| 5. Justification | God's declaration of right legal standing |

⁹ MacArthur, *MacArthur Study Bible*, 1786.

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 6. Adoption | God's formal acceptance of believers into his family |
| 7. Sanctification | The Holy Spirit's conforming believers into Christ's image |
| 8. Perseverance | The believer's ongoing obedience |
| 9. Death | The perishing of the mortal body |
| 10. Glorification | The receiving of the immortal body |

Paul's chief concern in Galatians centers on #5: *justification* (explained below). This part of the salvation process was under attack. False teachers were making sanctification (#7) a prerequisite for justification (#5). Paul rightly discerned this rearrangement as a **different gospel (1:6)**.

Contextual Points

Several points are important to keep in mind.

1. **Judaizers.** These are religious fanatics whom Paul characterizes in several ways:
 - a. They **distort the gospel (1:7)**
 - b. They claim a sinner is **justified before God by the law (3:11)**
 - c. They demand observance of OT **days and months and seasons and years** for salvation (**4:10**)
 - d. They teach that **circumcision** is required for salvation (**5:2-12**).

2. **Justification by Faith.** Paul considers the above requirements to be an assault on the gospel. The law's purpose is not to save us from sin, but to awaken us to our sin. Once awakened, the sinner must throw himself upon the mercies of Christ, who kept the law perfectly for us. Paul spells it out in these terms:
- a. The OT law cannot justify a sinner (**2:16**).
 - b. Abraham was justified (by faith) *before* the law ever existed (**3:6**).
 - c. The law's purpose was to *reveal* sin and *restrain* sin (**3:19-26**).
 - d. God sent Jesus to fulfill the law for us (**4:4-5**).

To be justified by faith (Gal 2:16; 3:24), then, means:

- a. We have broken God's law.
 - b. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law(s) we broke.
 - c. Jesus died and rose again to satisfy God's wrath for our law-breaking.
 - d. The righteousness of Jesus is imputed to all who believe (**3:6**).
3. **Righteousness.** Imputed righteousness is the heart of justification by faith. To stand righteous before God, at least three things must occur: (1) the person must be free from "original" (or "inherited") sin; (2) the person must be free from "actual" transgressions; and, (3) the person must fulfill God's intent and design in the law. That is,

he/she must fulfill God's law perfectly, as Tyndale says, "from the ground of his heart:" meaning, with pure motives from the depths (or, "low bottom") of the heart-intentions.¹⁰ This is impossible for human creatures born in sin. Therefore, we need the righteousness of Another. God freely offers to "credit" (impute) Christ's righteousness (his sinless nature and his sinless life) unto anyone who will accept it by faith. The sinner's faith is counted as righteousness. Theologians refer to this reckoning of righteousness as "imputed righteousness." The corollary doctrine to "imputed righteousness" is that God "credits" (imputes) their sins unto Christ, nailing their record of debt to the cross. Paul ferrets-out this "doctrine of imputation" in more detail in his subsequent letters (1 Cor 5:21; Rom 4:1-8; 5:12-21; Col 2:13-14), but it clearly stands as the driving force behind, this, his first letter. A person's sin-debt must be taken away. Then, he/she must be declared righteous purely by faith in Christ. Abraham's experience, centuries before the law was even given, is a wonderful illustration of simple, saving faith: **Abraham "believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness" (3:6).**

¹⁰ William Tyndale, "A Prologue to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans," in *Tyndale's New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 207. Tyndale was the first to translate the NT into English from the Greek manuscripts. His prologue, largely, translates Martin Luther's prologue to Romans.

4. **Negative View of Law?** Some believe Paul's sharply negative portrayal of the law in Galatians implies we should disassociate from the law altogether. Not so. Paul speaks positively of the law in Romans. In Galatians, he corrects abuses of the law.

Preaching Galatians

Preaching through Galatians is tricky. We can preach through it so slowly that we lose the thrust of the author's thought-flow. We can preach through it so quickly that we accomplish nothing more than a fly-through of its glorious truths. Calvin preached forty-three sermons from Galatians. As manly as that sounds, keep in mind that Calvin preached nearly every day (on alternate weeks). At this pace, it likely took him slightly over two months. For the modern pastor to preach forty-three sermons through Galatians would take about a year. This is probably too much. Today's listeners are more restless and distracted. What follows is a middle-ground approach that honors the thought-flow of Paul without getting bogged down in details not germane to his intention in this letter.

GALATIANS 1:1-9

HOW COULD YOU?

Paul writes to churches he planted in the region of Galatia. Members were struggling with this issue: Fanatics had crept in and asserted that members must keep the OT law to be saved. Paul greets the Galatians with a defense of his credentials, and then asks, “How could you turn away from the gospel I brought to you?”

Galatians 1:1-5. I Love You. Evident in Paul’s greeting is a defense of his heavenly credentials. He accents an otherwise customary Greek greeting with several unique seedlings he later will develop: (1) the *origin* of his apostleship, (2) the *commission* of his apostleship, and (3) the *confirmation* of his apostleship. The *origin* of his apostleship is from **God the Father**, not **man**. The fanatics could not claim that. The *commission* of his apostleship was **through** the risen **Jesus Christ**. In **Acts 9:15**, Jesus told Ananias: **Go, for he [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel**. This commission was spoken by the One who had been **raised from the dead**. The fanatics could not claim that either.

The *confirmation* of his apostleship was attested by **all the brothers who are with me**. That is, Paul's letter is affirmed by a wider Christian audience. Who are these brothers? We don't know. Yet, his impression is strong: Can the fanatics claim a wider Christian audience? Paul's emphasis is clear: My message is God's message. Theirs is not.

He writes to **the churches of Galatia** that he founded about a year prior. He greets them with two words: **grace** and **peace**. The Apostle is saying, "May God's favor (grace) and quiet calm (peace) rest upon you." This grace and peace come from the **Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins**. This is an important phrase. It thunders down like a sledgehammer to crack the foundation of the fanatics' theology: If Christ gave himself for our sins, then no more sacrifice is necessary. Paul could have ended the letter here and won the argument. But he went further. Christ died **to deliver us**. The term *deliver*—nowhere else used by Paul—means to rescue from dire circumstances. Christ rescued us from this **present evil age**: namely, the kingdom of the devil. Christ's atoning work originated in the perfect **will of our God and Father**. That is, God knew that no man could fulfill the law. It was **according to the will of our God**—his passion, his burning desire—that he sent his Son to **deliver** us from the law's slavery.

Finally, Paul comes to the chief design of the gospel: The glory of God. **Galatians 1:5: To whom be the glory forever and ever**. The gospel exists not primarily for our therapeutic self-aggrandizement or to lift our self-esteem. The gospel exists to glorify (not us and who

we are, but) God and who he is. It started in his will and it cost him his Son. It is stunning how well-intentioned souls make the gospel emphasis about *man* and *his* glory rather than *God* and *his* glory. That is precisely where the fanatics in Galatia were aiming: glorifying man and his works rather than God and God's works. The Apostle rightly discerns the motive of the gospel as the glory of God. Paul's (fairly typical) greeting makes two subtle, yet vital, points: (1) his calling is a heavenly one and (2) salvation is *in* Christ and *for* God's glory.

Galatians 1:6-9. I'm Disappointed in You! Each of us likely has different ways of confronting sin. There are times when it is best to be casual and relaxed (over a meal, perhaps). This was not one of them. At this point in Paul's letters, we typically find words of encouragement or thanksgiving. Not here. The shift is stark: **I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!** I am stunned! I couldn't believe my ears! The Apostle narrows his brow and says to his spiritual children, "Let's cut to the chase."

Moo captures it: "He cannot thank God for them when their spiritual status is so uncertain."¹¹ You are so quickly deserting God. *How could you?* The word *deserting* is important. It means to change allegiance. Some liken those described by it to "spiritual turncoats."¹² Calvin

¹¹ Moo, *Galatians*, 75.

¹² Timothy George, *Galatians*, NAC 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 91.

speaks of their defection as turning to an “imaginary Christ” which is no Christ at all.¹³ We can almost feel the Apostle’s angst when we recognize the verb is in the present tense. That is: You are in the *act* of deserting, but you haven’t deserted yet! There’s still time! Do not advance another step! We can fix this!¹⁴ It almost has the feel of a marriage which is on the rocks, yet still may be saved.

They are turning to a different gospel. Luther is right: “Heretics do not advertise their errors.”¹⁵ Paul’s gospel is this: Christ plus anything else (baptism, works, circumcision, papal edicts, etc.) is a different gospel. These fanatics **distort** (pervert) the true gospel. Calvin says their teaching “darkens the clearness of the gospel by ancient shadows.”¹⁶ They lead people away from God, and if away from God, then straight to hell.

To crush any objection, the Apostle appeals to angels (1:8): **But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one preached to you, let him be accursed.** Of course, the notion that an angel would proclaim another gospel is preposterous. That is precisely Paul’s point. Angels are the emissaries of God (see 3:19). Angels will in no way contradict that which has already been promised. Should someone come as an angel from heaven with a different gospel ... Reject him! He is accursed: excommunicated, to be avoided, damned!

¹³ Calvin, *Galatians*, 29.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Galatians*, 30.

¹⁵ Luther, *Galatians*, 26.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Galatians*, 19.

The Apostle proceeds (1:9): **If anyone is preaching a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.** He speaks here in terms stronger than any of his other letters. He presents perversion of the gospel as if it is the greatest crime ever invented, and it is. Calvin calls it an “enormous crime.” “When the glory of justification is ascribed to another,” he says, “the doctrine of the gospel is ruined.”¹⁷ To preach a contrary gospel is to commit a spiritual felony. It robs Almighty God of his glory and invests it in depraved men! A contrary gospel slings mud on the cross! It is tantamount to committing spiritual high treason! No wonder the Apostle reserves his strongest language for such wicked fanatics. Spiritually, they are corrupting those whom Paul considers his children in the faith. Jesus pronounces a figurative death penalty on such deceitful workmen: **“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt 18:6).** Such men *should* be damned. Moo captures the moment, “What the agitators are teaching is not an interesting and inconsequential option ... they are teaching something that will, literally, lead themselves to hell.”¹⁸ Paul puts all on guard: This is not freedom of expression or an interpretational difference or a quirky view. This is demonic.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Galatians*, 31.

¹⁸ Moo, *Galatians*, 80.

Galatians 1:10. I Care Enough to Offend You.

Galatians 1:10 functions as swing verse to close one thought and transition to another. That is, he closes his sharp rebuke (of **1:6-9**), and then launches into a fiery defense of his ministry (**1:11ff**, as the connecting conjunction “**for**” indicates).

The Apostle was undeterred by the motives of man: **For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God (1:10)?** Some situations are so urgent that man’s approval doesn’t matter. For instance, I once saved someone’s life. An attorney and I were crossing a city street. He was on the phone, distracted. I saw a huge bus steamrolling toward him. I grabbed him and jerked him back. He was offended initially, but I didn’t care. I was not seeking his approval. I cared for his physical life. Spiritually, Paul conveys the same sentiment. He appeals to the “testimony of a good conscience.”¹⁹ He esteems the service of Christ greater than the approval of man. He cares for them enough to offend them.

Sermon Summary

The preaching text is **Galatians 1:1-9** (although **1:10** should be included). We must resist the urge to get bogged down in the greeting. There are a lot of good points that *could* be made, but it is still a greeting meant to say, “I love you in the Lord.” The meaty doctrines will follow. Wait until then to dig into them. Two points in the

¹⁹ Calvin, *Galatians*, 36.

greeting should be brought to light: (1) Paul's apostleship has been sanctioned by God and (2) **Jesus gave himself for our sins**. The latter sets the tone for the rest of the letter. That phrase should be given the most attention: If the **Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins** ... then his work cannot be added to or improved upon. Again, brevity is best here. State it and move on; the Apostle will expound this principle in detail later. For now, give it the same amount of weight in the sermon as Paul does in the letter: a passing jab to set up the knockout blow.

The bulk of the sermon should center on **1:6-9: I Am Disappointed in You**. The shift in tone tells us that this is the emphasis. Paul means business. He considers them his spiritual children—he being their father in the faith—and they are being seduced by spiritual evildoers. It must be stopped. Critical terms to expound include **deserting** (present tense; they are not gone yet), **distort** (pervert), and **accursed** (excommunicated, damned). Paul doesn't specifically define the true **gospel** here, although he did set its foundation earlier (**the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins**). Establish the gospel Paul taught when he founded these churches (he assumes they know it already). Jesus Christ alone: Not Jesus *plus* ANYTHING. Not Jesus *plus* circumcision (Judaizers); not Jesus *plus* church tradition (Catholics); not Jesus *plus* communion (Catholics); not Jesus *plus* baptism (Catholics, church of Christ, etc.); not Jesus *plus* works (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses); etc. Any additions distort (pervert) the true gospel.

A brief closing comment should mention **Galatians 1:10: I Care Enough to Offend You**. Paul sees a

train about to collide with his children. He cares enough to forcefully shove them off the tracks since they are unaware of the impending doom. We shouldn't be surprised if someone leaves offended by the exclusivity of Paul's gospel. The fanatics also were offended. No matter. When you take away man's glory and rightly replace it with God alone, the heathen will rage. Let them rage. We please **God**, not **man**.