



Saved by Faith

Birth of the Church

About the Story

Today we start studying the Book of Galatians, otherwise known as Paul's Letter to the Galatians. (See Bible Nuts & Bolts about the genre of letters.) This letter is written by the Apostle Paul, whom we first met as Saul, one of the participants in the stoning of Stephen. After persecuting Christians, Saul had a dramatic encounter with Jesus—who at that point had ascended into heaven—and became not only a Christian, but one of the first Christian missionaries to the Gentiles (non-Jews). In his travels and ministry, he began using his Greek name, Paul, rather than his Hebrew name, Saul.

This letter is written to the people of Galatia, who happen to be one of Paul's early mission churches (see *Who Are the Galatians?*). From the tone of the letter, Paul has visited the Galatian believers and experienced great hospitality from them. Since that initial visit, Paul has heard that some other preachers have come to Galatia and have spread messages contrary to his message. So now Paul writes to the Galatian people in an attempt to clarify their understanding of the gospel.

In today's reading from Paul's letter, Paul first reintroduces himself to his Galatian readers—not necessarily to present his "resume" but more to explain his own encounter with Jesus. His preaching, he is saying, comes from his own experience of the gospel—and he wants to share that experience with them. After this introduction, Paul begins his argument against the other teachings the Galatians have heard.

The Point:

God loves us no matter what. While faith practices and rituals can help enrich our faith lives, they are not required for God to love us. God loves us through the gift of Jesus!

Who Are the Galatians?

Scholars do not quite agree on the exact meaning of "Galatians" in Paul's letter. The term originally referenced a Celtic group that had migrated to central Asia Minor (now Turkey). Galatia can also refer to a Roman province, and this Roman setting is mentioned in Acts 14:1-23 as the site of missionary churches founded by Paul and Barnabas.

The main point of this argument is to emphasize that faith in Jesus, which is a gift from God, is the only requirement for a life with God. No religious practices or rules are required, just this gift. For Jewish people, following the practices such as Sabbath, festivals, circumcision, and food laws from the Torah were of utmost importance in the life of faith. Paul is not saying that people should no longer follow these practices, but that they are not required to be loved by God.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, we read about the Jerusalem council. Many scholars believe this is the meeting described in Galatians 2:1-10, which happens right before the second part of today's reading. Today's passage continues the same conversation about the requirement (or not) of circumcision. Next week, we will continue reading Paul's Letter to the Galatians and where Paul writes about the role of the Spirit in our faith.

Opening Prayer

God, thank you for showing us the gift of your love through Jesus. Open our eyes today to see the ways you love us. Amen.

Into the Story

As pairs or the full group, discuss rituals you have practiced in your faith or in your family's faith—going to worship, reading the Bible, confirmation, etc. How have these rituals been important to you? What have they taught you about God? On the other hand, are there any limits to these rituals in experiencing God's love?

Learning the Story

In today's story, the Apostle Paul reintroduces himself to the Galatian people. He also seeks to set the record straight on the Galatians' beliefs about God: as Paul says, no practice or rule is required for receiving God's love. Faith in Jesus—which God offers as a gift—is how we receive God's great love for us.

Read Galatians 1:13-17 – Paul's Introduction

- ❓ This is essentially Paul's "call story." What stands out to you the most in his story?
- ❓ How might you would respond to a preacher introducing themselves with this sort of story?
- ❓ Why do you think "call stories" are important for church leaders to share?

Read Galatians 2:11-14 – Paul's Disagreement with Peter

- ❓ Paul has a disagreement with Cephas, whom we know as Peter, about how to live as a follower of Jesus in relation to others. How can you relate with this theological disagreement between friends or colleagues?
- ❓ The question here is about eating with people who practice their faith differently than you. What similar questions do you see for yourself and your community?
- ❓ By saying Cephas has tried to "compel the Gentiles to live like Jews," what is Paul implying?

Bible Connections

- ✚ God promised Abram (Abraham) that he would be the father of many peoples (Genesis 15:1-6).
- ✚ The sign of this promise to Abram was circumcision (Genesis 17).
- ✚ Paul believes that Jesus—through the crucifixion—has freed God's people from the false belief that it is through doing rituals and practices that we are loved by God (Luke 23:32-47).

Read Galatians 2:15-21 – Jews and Gentiles Receive God’s Love through Christ

- ❓ Some would say that verse 16 is the core of Paul’s understanding of God. How would you state this understanding in your own words?
- ❓ What “works of the law” do you see at play in Christian practice today? What are the dangers of over-valuing these “works?”
- ❓ What does it look like to have “Christ live in me” (verse 19)? What does it feel like?

Supplies

- ✚ Pens or pencils
- ✚ Paper
- ✚ Envelope
- ✚ Stamp

Living the Story: Fellowship

As a group, write a letter to another faith community using the format of Paul’s letter—except write in support, not argument! First, decide which faith community you will write—perhaps another church in your neighborhood or a community of a different religion—seeking to create or build a relationship with its members. Begin with a greeting and introduction of yourselves, your reason for writing, and a goal for working or worshipping

together in the near future. Close with a blessing to the faith community. For ideas, check out Paul’s other letters in the New Testament. Send the letter and see what happens!

Closing Prayer

Close your time by praying for the faith community that will receive your letter. Check out their website—look at what they have going on and pray for their activities and efforts. You may offer individual prayers for this community or have someone read this prayer:

God, we pray for the people of (faith community’s name). Be present in their midst. Strengthen the bonds among them and around them. Open our eyes to see your grace in new ways through them. Help us to be good neighbors to them. In your name we pray. Amen.

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Letters (Genre)

A genre is a set style of writing with rules and conventions. Examples of modern genres of writing include mystery, historical fiction, and fantasy. When picking up a fantasy novel, a reader has certain expectations. Likewise, all of the writings in Scripture belong to one or more ancient genres. In reading and interpreting Scripture, it is important to understand as much as possible the expectations and conventions of the genre(s) of that book or passage.

Most of the Apostle Paul’s letters follow a consistent format: greeting, introduction with a message of giving thanks, summary of the occasion for writing, and a final blessing. The occasion for writing relates directly to the audience to which Paul writes—in this case, the Galatians. As such, the content of these letters is intended directly for this time and place, and the modern reader should keep that purpose in mind when reading them.

At Home

- ✚ One misconception of today's story is that Judaism is a religion full of laws. Search online or on a local Jewish organization's website to learn about the practices many Jews follow, opening yourself to the ways those practices assist in bringing them closer to God. How can you allow your learning to enrich your own faith life?
- ✚ Initiate a conversation about faith with someone who expresses theirs differently than you do. Ask the person what faith rituals are important to them, seeking to respect and understand these rituals.
- ✚ Do an online search to learn about modern-day Galatia. How can your learning help you connect the biblical story to modern-day life?

Daily Readings**Sunday – Read Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21**

Paul introduces himself and gives his purpose for writing the letter to the Galatians. Commit to one faith practice this week (i.e., prayer, devotion) to understand the importance of rituals.

Monday – Read Galatians 1:1-12

Paul opens his letter to the Galatians. Write a letter to a loved one using Paul's format: greeting, thanksgiving, update.

Tuesday – Read Galatians 1:18-24

Paul says that the cross reverses the notions of wisdom and foolishness. Make or give a cross to someone today to remind them "God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Wednesday – Read Acts 11:1-18

Peter shares a story with the Jerusalem church. Write down a major moment in your faith story when you gained a better understanding of God's love.

Thursday – Read Romans 3:21-31

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, he emphasizes God's grace in being "made right" with God (that is, loved and forgiven). Write "grace" on a note and leave it near a mirror or a prominent place in your home, reminding you of this gift.

Friday – Read 2 Peter 3:14-16

Peter closes his second letter with an allusion to the wisdom given to Paul. In the spirit of the "patience of our Lord" as Peter says, spend five minutes taking deep breaths and receiving the peace of God.

Saturday – Read Acts 28:23-28

People both agree and disagree with the message Paul preaches in Rome. Read the call of Isaiah in Isaiah 6, which Paul quotes. Think about the ways you deny God's call today, and open yourself to saying, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)