

Introduction to KYB study *Galatians: grace and freedom*

Welcome to Galatians.

I hope you are as excited as I am about getting stuck into Galatians! Why? Because I think this is such a great book for helping us get stronger in our faith. This little letter points us to Jesus and helps us realise just how much he has done for us and how dearly he loves us.

It's one of Paul's very first letters, written between his 1st and 2nd missionary journey...

Somewhere between the end of Acts 14 and the end of Acts 15.

It's written to Christians in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey and they are in grave danger. False teachers are trying to trick them into thinking that it's great to have faith in Jesus but they also need to follow the OT law.

This letter has a lot of great stuff in it -

A lot of it is the fundamentals to Christianity,
which might sound like it's going to be a bit dull or not very relevant.

So before we dig into this overview together, let me ask you a question.

Have you ever struggled or do you struggle with Christianity? You might have been a Christian all your life, or not be a Christian at all, or anything in between. Are there things you struggle with as you think about being a Christian?

So, you're there with your friends and the subject comes up about Christians and maybe you hear this:

"It's OK for people to believe whatever they like. It's the idea that Christians think their religion is the only one that I can't stand!"

Or

"It doesn't matter what someone believes, it's how sincere they are, how much integrity they have, that is what matters"

Have you ever been in a conversation like that? Has that ever happened to you? It's happened to me. I've been a Christian for ages and I still find conversations like that really hard.

Sometimes we want to speak up and feel that we can't. Or we might speak up and it grows into a terrific conversation or falls flat. But what about those times when you wish maybe that Jesus wasn't the only way to God. Maybe it'd be so much easier if there was another way.

Or wouldn't it be nice if all religions led to God, or all people were saved. Why does it have to be that you can only come to God through Jesus on his terms?

Have you ever had those thoughts? Have you ever had those conversations? This is what is so great about Galatians. Galatians takes us right back to the beginning and shows us who

Jesus is, what faith in him looks like and helps us realise that he is the only one, the only way to God. Why is this so good?

This will help us have those conversations. We might still not know what to say, but we'll hang in there, listening, asking questions, praying silently, doing some more listening maybe, and trying to say that Jesus is the only way to God and he is good

and he loves us - he died to save us, to bring us to God.

Galatians will help us to treasure our Saviour so that even if we never really understand why God doesn't just save everyone,

we'll want to hold tight to Jesus,
we'll be sure of what he has done for us.
we'll be sure of his **love**.

Galatians is going to help us grow, grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus. It's going to stretch our understanding of who he is and what he has done and how he calls us to walk in his footsteps, to live a life of love, like he did.

We're going to think together now about Galatians in four key areas.

We're going to think about -

First, the gospel: what it is and why it is so important.

Second, adoption: what does it mean and why does it matter.

Third, how does the gospel, revealed through Jesus Christ in about 30 AD relate to the Old Testament and all the things that God was doing before Jesus came.

Fourth, what does the gospel mean for us now? If we are free from the law, what does that mean for how I live my life and my choices today?

These are four key themes that are important for Galatians. There are other themes in there that will emerge as you dig into the book, but these themes will help us to have a bit of an overview of what is going on and what we can expect. Along the way, we'll find out more about Paul, who wrote the letter, about the people he was writing to and we'll finish with two very practical applications for our lives today.

So, Gospel, what is it? Second adoption, what is going on with that? Third, how does this fit with the OT? And finally, what does it mean for us in the 21st Century?

First, what is the gospel and why is it so important?

Paul starts this letter and he's grumpy. He's cross. He's cranky because the people he's writing to have started to shift away from the gospel. They're moving away. It's like they've heard that there's a fire in the building and started to jump out of the windows to the waiting nets being held for them below, but instead of jumping out of the burning building, they hesitate on the ledge and start climbing back into the building.

It's madness! It's a really bad choice, and you feel that with Paul as he starts off in verse six, not with his normally cuddly prayer for them but saying, "I'm astonished". He's shocked – what are they doing? And he goes on in verses 8-9:

But even 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! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

These are really strong words. Paul is angry, not because of his ego or his following or anything like that but because they are deserting the gospel of God. Even if we or an angel, he says –

if anyone, even me, even a shiny sparkling angel –

that would impress me, if an angel came and started to talk to me, but Paul says even if an angel... comes to us and tells us to trust someone other than Jesus or to add to what Jesus has done –

if anyone at all comes to you with a different gospel. Let them be cursed.

And then, in case they missed it, he repeats it in verse 9. It's a strong thing to say. A hard thing maybe for us to hear. Why can't he be nicer?

The answer to that is that there is only one gospel. If you miss it, if I miss it, if the Galatians were to miss it, turn away from it, there is no other way. This is really serious. It's offensive to people in our time and place.

We want to believe that if people just try hard,

live decent lives,

do their best,

that will somehow be good enough, regardless of what goes on in their heads. That's what helps me so much, because that's how I sometimes feel.

But Paul gets angry and emotional because that is not true. If we turn away from Jesus, it's like going back into the burning building. There is no other way of escape.

There is no other gospel. Just one: the message of Jesus.

So what is this gospel, what is this good news message of Jesus? Galatians is full of this, but there are three things we will look at quickly.

First, it's about justification.

Second, it's personal.

Third, it's about the cross of Jesus.

First, justification. It's a long word, but it's worth stopping for a moment and thinking about it, because when Paul talks about being saved, this is one of the key words he uses. In chapter 2:16 he explains something of what he means:

⁶know that a person is not justified by the works of 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 the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

Here, Paul has a bit of a contrast going. The law on the one hand, and faith on the other hand. He's answering the question, how can a person be justified. Justified means being right with God. How can you be friends with God? How can you stop God being angry with you? How can you be safe from God's anger? How can you make yourself right in God's eyes?

Paul's answer is you can't. You can't. But Jesus can. His death was for your sins, my sins.

This was my experience when I was 8 years old. I tried everything to become a Christian. I tried not to fight with my brothers for a whole day: it was really hard, but at the end of the day, I still wasn't a Christian. I thought I'd go into the spare room, with my mother's Bible and read Isaiah 53 on my knees beside the bed, but that still didn't make me a Christian. And then I realised that Jesus had done everything I needed. I didn't need to do anything more, just trust that he had done it all for me. Trust Jesus – that is what Paul is teaching.

Jesus' death and resurrection were done for us, to justify us.

Jesus died in our place, to take the righteous anger of God against people who don't love each other properly, who don't love God properly.

Paul says, don't try and do it yourself. Don't do fancy things like get circumcised if you are a guy or try and keep the OT law. You can't justify yourself. You and I can't make ourselves right with God. We need to be justified, we need to be made right with God and the only way is to trust that Jesus has done it for us.

When we rely on him to justify us, to make us right with God,
 When we say to God, yes, I need Jesus death for me,
 When we believe that Jesus death is all I need to make me right with God,
 friends with God, justified,
 Then I am justified.

We need justification – we need to be right with God – and we are only right with God through relying on God, trusting God to rescue us because of Jesus' death for us. And Galatians makes our faith stronger by reminding us and teaching us that.

So, first: Justification. We need it. We have it by faith in Jesus.

Second, this is not an academic exercise, it's personal. It's not a fancy theological system, it's personal. Listen to this from chapter 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul is very comfortable using big words like 'justification' because they catch important ideas. But he's not a dry professor type. He's a real person. Inspired by God, he models for us how to think about this gospel. Jesus died and rose again, not as an abstract ideal, not as an

event in history, although it certainly happened, but as a personal thing. Jesus, the Son of God, loved me, loved you, loved Paul

And gave himself for me, for you, for Paul

Jesus is truly man and truly God, the Son of God. He died a real death for us, giving himself for us.

He loved us.

That is why he died: not duty, not duress. Love.

He loved us and still loves us more than anyone ever has.

No-one has ever done what he has done for us.

Jesus' love for us isn't theoretical or abstract, it's real. He bled for us. He died for us and rose again and that's where we see he loves us. Being justified isn't dry and boring

- It's amazing.
- It's being loved truly and properly
- It's Jesus, the Son of God giving himself for you, for me.

So, salvation is real and personal. It affects our souls, our deepest selves and it comes from the love of God for us in Christ.

Third, salvation is about the cross of Jesus.

In Galatians 5:11, Paul mentions that he preaches the cross of Christ and that it is an offense. And we can see why it is such an offense as we read through the book of Galatians. Paul is writing to people who think the Jewish way might be the way to go after all.

And Paul is saying, 'no!' it's obsolete! Don't go back there!

The cross of Christ, the death of Christ for us is an offense – it cuts against our natural human tendency to want to earn our way.

When we accept that Jesus died for us, we stop trying to earn our way.

In fact, we say, we can't earn our way. There is no possibility that we can earn our way! We have to rely on Jesus for everything. And that hurts our human pride. We like to make our way.

That sense of having made it, done it.

We love that.

And sometimes it's a good thing – that sense of accomplishment, when we do something amazing, make something beautiful – and say thank you to God for giving us the time and energy and skill to do something.

But when it comes to saving ourselves, it's offensive to God.

Just trusting the death of Jesus can cut us to the quick.

We want to do something for God!
 We want to make God like us!

And the cross can offend us – it can push down hard on our pride.

And even when we are Christians we can feel that. We want to impress God with our amazing Quiet Times or our good works. But no. And that cuts deep sometimes. The great kindness of God is that he knew we would find that offensive and he sent Jesus to save us anyway.

Yes, the gospel is all about the cross – and that is offensive to human beings.

So salvation – it's all about Jesus death for us, he really saves us, justifies us, he does it for us – he knows all of us, carries all our sins before we are even born: it's personal; and it's offensive to our pride. There's more in Galatians, but those are some of the broad brushstrokes. Salvation: reminding us of it makes us strong.

Second, adoption: what does it mean and why does it matter

Adoption doesn't sound all that exciting, unless you don't belong anywhere.

If you have no-where to go
 No-one to belong to
 No-one looking out for you, adoption suddenly becomes very interesting.

Salvation is more than a machine that means that God ticks the box to say that we can come to heaven when we die. It's more than a get-out-of-jail-free card. Salvation is knowing God - as we've seen, it's personal.

Salvation is belonging to God.
 Belonging with God.
 Not being held at arm's length, like something the cat dragged in,
 but treasured, cherished, loved.

Here's what Paul says in Galatians 4:6-7:

Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "*Abba*,^[c] Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.

So, when we trust in the Lord Jesus, relying on him to make us righteous, relying on his death for us, God the Father sends the Spirit of his Son, Jesus into our hearts. And what does his Holy Spirit do?

The rest of verse 6 tells us: He calls out 'Abba Father'.

So, the Spirit of God comes to us, the Spirit of his Son, and calls out Abba Father, or as Romans puts it - teaches us to call God Father, intimately, properly, close up – Abba, dear Father, the

word a child uses who knows that their father loves them and cares for them. And it's because of this connection we have to Jesus and his Spirit – Jesus the Son - that we are adopted. So the Spirit of the Son comes to us, teaches us to call God Father.

A true father – all earthly fathers are just copies (good or bad) of God the true Father.

And we are adopted in Christ. That is, we have our standing with God as his own children in God's Son. We belong with God because of Jesus.

If you can disconnect us from Jesus,
 If you can make his Spirit go away from us,
 If you can separate us from him,

Then you can say we aren't God's children. And who will say that to Jesus?

As long as Jesus remains who he is, and he never changes, that's how solidly we are connected into God's family.

Adoption isn't just a nice idea to make us feel that we belong. Adoption is all about genuinely belonging,

Connected to the Lord Jesus by his Spirit.
 Calling God our own Father.
 Never being sent away from God.
 Always being able to go in to God; to belong there.

That's why adoption is so important. It shows that there aren't two classes of Christian, there's no Jew or Gentile with one better than the other, there's no slave or free, men aren't better than women; women aren't better than men...

There's nothing that you or I can bring to the table that will make God love us more than he does already.
 Justification means we can't impress God.
 Adoption means we don't need to.

God accepts us in Christ, we belong to him in Christ.

We belong. We are adopted.

This brings us to the third thing. How does this all fit with the Old Testament?

It brings us to this point because this is so much more than the Israelites had in the OT. They as a nation could call God 'Father' but not individually.

Jesus rewrote the believer's prayer in his radical Lord's Prayer when he tells us to pray 'Our Father who is in heaven'. OT believers couldn't pray that. But in Christ, we can. So does that mean we just write off the OT?

Did God just change his mind? How do we know he won't change his mind again?

Most of Galatians is spent looking at the OT move to the NT. There are a lot of OT references, a lot of references to the law, the promises to Abraham, the different children that Abraham had, the old covenant – reading through Galatians is going to do wonders for reminding you or showing you the big ideas of the OT.

We won't go into the details here, but suffice it to say that Galatians is a book that shows some of the big picture of the whole Bible. Here we'll see something of a glimpse of God working throughout all of human history. Nothing in the OT is a mistake. God didn't go to plan B with Jesus. He didn't try out the idea of having a holy nation and then, disappointed that it just didn't work out, come up with the idea that maybe he could send his Son...

No.

God isn't surprised by human sin.

He gave the law in the OT to demonstrate human sin,
to show us just how badly we mess things up.
We don't measure up.
The law is like a huge floodlight that shows up things
we don't want to see about ourselves.

And this leads us to Christ. Listen to 3:24:

²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

The law was given to get people ready for Jesus.

God didn't give the law with any expectation that people would keep it and earn their way to heaven. God knew our hearts. And to show us our hearts, he gave us the law

So that we would look at ourselves and despair,
And look at his Son and find rescue.

The OT isn't plan A, with Jesus as a kind of Plan B when it didn't work out. No, the OT is written so that we understand ourselves as God see us and we can realise that we need rescue. And that rescue, that justification we need is in Christ alone.

So what is the Law all about? Jesus. It points to Jesus.

And that is really important for the Galatian believers because they are getting tricked into thinking that they need to keep the law – especially that they need to get circumcised. In fact, the early chapters show us that even Peter the Apostle seems to be going along with this to some extent – and Paul says 'no!' You can't rely on the law to save you – even a little bit. If you start to do the law, it's like going back into the burning building. You can't do that! It's not safe to try and do your own righteousness.

You'll never get enough.

Once you buy into circumcision, you might as well do everything, and then you've moved away from Christ alone. And if you move away from asking Jesus to save you and relying just on him to save – then you've moved back into the burning building, so to speak. You're trying to save yourself.

And the law is all about Jesus. It's pointing us to Jesus, so that we don't rely on ourselves but only rely on him.

Just trust Jesus. Don't do the law.

You can't.

And the whole point of the law is to show you that you can't.

Trust Jesus.

There is so much more we could say about the OT and Galatians. It is really helpful to understand some of the key ideas in the OT, and as you pick apart the different ways Paul explains the OT you will find that there is so much more to the OT than you might have expected. But at the centre of the entire OT is Christ Jesus. He is what the OT is really all about, and we'll find that over and over again in Galatians.

And that's what Galatians is all about. We've seen that, haven't we –

What is salvation all about? Jesus, his death for us, he justifies us.

How are we adopted? In Jesus by his Spirit, we belong to God because of who he is.

And what is the OT about? It's all about Jesus. It points us to him.

So what does this mean for us? Well, two things. You'll meet more as you go through Galatians, but two things.

The first thing is to keep going with Jesus. Don't switch tracks.

Paul opens his letter with a long explanation of how he knows that this is the true Gospel. It's a problem. Paul used to be a guy called Saul. He hated Jesus. He persecuted as many of Jesus' followers as he could get his hands on. He was on his way to imprisoning more when Jesus stopped him and converted him.

Saul became Paul, an apostle.

And an apostle was a big deal. In the early church, how did you know the important things about Jesus? His life, the details of his ministry, his miracles, his teaching and importantly, his death and its meaning and his resurrection – especially that it had really happened – how did you know all of these things?

They came to the church by Jesus' apostles.

Specially chosen, eye witnesses

Who had heard, seen, touched, and knew first hand that Jesus was fully man and truly God.

That he had died for sins.

That he has risen properly from the dead.
That trusting him for something as important as forgiveness of sins is valid
and is in fact a command from God himself.

So who is Paul? How can God just make him an apostle? And so Paul explains how it all came about,

How he tested out the gospel he had from Jesus
How he went and verified it with the other apostles.

It's amazing to read this with the account of Paul's conversion in Acts and see how much is left out of Acts that Galatians fills in. But the reason he says all this isn't because he wants to share his memoirs, it's because he's so concerned that the Galatians know that the gospel he's been telling them about is valid.

He didn't make it up
He isn't in control of it
It's not his thoughts
It's God.

It's the good news God has for all people.
It's Jesus' gospel.

So his word to the Galatians is don't go back. Don't go back inside the burning building, so to speak. And this is relevant to us as well. Do you feel uncomfortable in those conversations? That's OK. The cross is offensive. The gospel is confronting. But Jesus is enough. What he has done for you and for me is all we need.

Jesus brings us to God. He brings us into his family and we belong there. Treasure Jesus. Dig into your Bible, keep reading Galatians, find out more and more of what Jesus has done,
Who he is.
How much he loves you.

And in those conversations, in those moments: ask God to help you to stay strong. Ask him to stay with you, give you courage to obey his command and trust in his Son. Stick with Jesus.

Lastly, love. That is what Galatians tells us to do. Listen to this from Galatians 5:13-14:

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh^[a]; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

We're free from the law – not to have awesome, fun lives – but to love, to fulfil the law's command to love -

Serve in love, humbly.
Love our neighbour as ourselves.

In other words, Jesus sets us free from the law, so that we can use the time and energy and fear we'd put into following the law – instead of that, we are free to love.

And the commands that cluster around the end of the book have love as their basis over and over again –

The fruits of the Spirit,

The command to carry each other's burdens, and so on and so forth.

You'll look at these particularly as you finish the book but time and again they all come from love. That is the heart of the law – it points us to Jesus – and it calls us to love. Paul says, do you really want to do the law – then love. That's what it's really all about. But do it with freedom – Jesus' given freedom. To love properly and humbly.

And this is an extraordinary thing about the good news of God's rescue in Jesus – it does such good to us and changes us into people who learn how to love and are good for the people God has put in our world. Finally we can stop thinking about ourselves and our own performance

And just get on with loving the people that God has put around us.

Even if we don't like them, we can love them.

Finally, we can take our eyes off ourselves and say with Paul: The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Its freedom, but not for me.

To live for Jesus

And to love people.

So Galatians. I pray you are blessed by it, that you grow as you read it and think about it, that God works in your hearts by his Spirit and cuts you open and comforts you and shows you his precious Son.

And I pray as you treasure Jesus and know his great love for you, your trust in him grows and grows. And by his Spirit you are transformed into someone who is learning more and more of how to love properly and deeply the people that God has put in your world for Jesus' sake.

Let's pray.