

## The New Testament, Book 9

### The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians

This book is a letter to the churches of the Roman province of Galatia, which occupied the central portion of Asia Minor, the vast peninsula that, today, we call Turkey. The Romans called the people of this region “Galli,” from which we derive the English words “Gaul” and “Gaelic”; these were the Gauls, the fierce Celtic tribes with whom Julius Caesar’s legions had fought in his campaigns in Europe and Britain. The Galatians of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century were descended primarily from one stream of the conquering flood of barbarians that flowed into Greece from the north in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC. Having been stopped by the Greeks at the cliffs of Delphi in 278 BC, they crossed over into Asia Minor with their arms and devastation. They soon occupied most of Asia Minor, exacting tribute from cities and minor kings, and hiring themselves out as mercenary soldiers. Galatia was the eastern limit of the conquests of the Gauls. Having little religion of their own, they readily adopted the superstitions and mythology of the Greeks.

Under Augustus Caesar, the region became the Roman province of Galatia in 25 BC. About 48 AD, the apostle Paul took the Christian gospel there on his first missionary Journey; he also visited (and re-visited) the churches of Galatia on his two subsequent missionary journeys.

The Book of Galatians has been called “the Magna Charta of Christian liberty,” and the “Gibraltar of grace”; both names are justified.

Unlike Paul’s other letters to the churches he had founded, this epistle is strictly business; and it is extremely serious business in which he is engaging, because the concept of grace, the very foundation of the Gospel, was threatened in Galatia. This epistle contains no words of commendation, thanksgiving or praise; there is no request for prayer, and no one who was with him is mentioned by name. As Dr. J. Vernon McGee has expressed it, “This is [Paul’s] fighting epistle--he has on his war paint.” It has been observed that Romans was written from the mind of Paul, but Galatians was written from his heart; however, it might be more accurate to say that it was written from his gut. When we read, “Oh, foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?” we can almost hear him crying out to them, with anguished voice and clenched fists.

After a rather restrained, and business-like, salutation of five verses, he immediately gets down to business; like Mark’s Gospel, we might say that the epistle to the Galatians “hits the ground running.” He states, with great clarity and force, the **uniqueness** and **sufficiency** of the gospel of Jesus the Christ. In a stunning statement to the Galatian churches he warns them that adopting Old

Covenant legalism will forfeit the benefits of the New Covenant. He cries out to them, “If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing...Christ is become of no effect unto you...ye are fallen from grace!” What, we must ask ourselves, could possibly be more serious than this?

*NOTE: The Galatians Paul knew and ministered to were not all pure Gauls. They had undoubtedly brought with them Greek captives from their conquests in Greece, and intermarried with them; and, for this reason, some writers call the Galatians “Gallo-Grecians.” Some of the original inhabitants (those inhabiting the area when the Gauls first arrived) no doubt also survived; but the people Paul knew and ministered to were primarily Gauls. Their descendants are the Turks of today and they have retained the warlike ferocity of their Gallic ancestors. During the Korean War they were feared by the Chinese, and were decidedly unfriendly to everyone else. They usually looked angry, and never smiled; just being around them made me uncomfortable, and they were on **our** side!*

**A. Author.** Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, is the human author of Galatians; he says so, in 1:1 and 5:2. His authorship has been widely accepted from the beginning--since the time in which the epistle was written.

**B. Place and Date.** The Scriptures don't say where, or when, this letter was written, and opinions vary. It may have been written as early as 48 AD; however, the consensus opinion is that the letter was written from Ephesus ca 52 AD, “on the road,” near the end of his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey.

**C. Occasion.** In response to the preaching and teaching of Paul, the Galatians had accepted the gospel enthusiastically, and the churches had grown rapidly. However, the Judaizers had come behind Paul and struck the Galatian churches. These were the Jewish Christians who followed Paul, telling the churches he had founded that, in order to be Christians, in addition to receiving the gospel of Jesus as Messiah, they must be circumcised and observe the Jewish law. Apparently, the Galatians had embraced this legalistic heresy with the same enthusiasm as when they had first heard the gospel and come to the Lord. This epistle is his attempt to correct the error that they had embraced.

Since the letter is addressed to “the churches [plural] of Galatia” (verse 2), it was obviously intended to be circulated and read in all of the churches there. It was undoubtedly circulated and read also in churches that he had founded elsewhere; this was the custom of the day. And, after all, isn't that what we are doing right now?

**D. Theme.** The theme of Galatians is the uniqueness of Jesus and the sufficiency of the gospel. There are other things--wonderful things--in this book, such as the importance of helping one another, and a warning about pride; but the uniqueness and sufficiency of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the central message.

**E. Highlights.** Highlights in Galatians include the following:

1. There Is Only One Gospel. (1:6-10)

In Paul's opening shot he tells the Galatians plainly that he is amazed that they have so quickly allowed themselves to be deceived into abandoning the simple gospel, and accepting a legalistic heresy. And then he gives them (and, of course, us) a simple rule to keep before them. He says that anyone--and he means **anyone**--who brings them a plan of salvation that is in any way different from the simple gospel he had proclaimed, even if the new preacher or teacher appears to be an angel from Heaven, he will be false--in fact, accursed<sup>1</sup>! And, he says, he had warned them about this before he left them the last time. Also, he tells them, he does not preach to please men; if he did he would not be a true servant of Christ.

*NOTE: In vv 6 and 7 Paul uses the word "another" twice. In v 6 he uses it of the false gospel the Galatians had embraced; and in v 7 he uses it to refer to the true gospel that he has preached to them. Here, the underlying Greek is the key to what otherwise could be confusing. In English we have only one word for "another"; but in Greek there are two: "allos," meaning another of the same kind; and "heteros," meaning another of a different kind (from this latter word we derive our English word, "heterosexual"). In v 6, speaking of the heresy the Galatians have embraced, the word is "heteros"; and in verse 7, he uses "allos," meaning the very same gospel that he always preaches.*

*We saw an example of the importance of this distinction in the use of the Greek word "allos" in Jn 14:16. There, Jesus comforted his disciples by saying that He will send them "another Comforter;" and the use of allos (for "another") tells us that He was actually saying, "I will send you another Comforter, and He will be just like Me."*

2. Paul Received the Gospel from Jesus--Not from Men. (1:11-20)

Defending his authority as an apostle, Paul declares that he received his apostolic commission and authority directly from Jesus--not from any man. And, speaking of legalistic Judaism, he reminds them of his pre-Christian history--how he had excelled in knowledge and zeal concerning the law. And, he goes on to say, after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, he did not go immediately up to Jerusalem to be instructed by those who were apostles before him; rather, he says, he went into Arabia and afterward returned to Damascus, only going to visit the elders in Jerusalem after three years. And, when finally going to Jerusalem, of the other apostles he met only two: Simon Peter, and James, the brother of Jesus, the presiding elder; and he was there for only 15 days. In this passage he is going to some lengths to establish his independence and apostolic authority.

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<sup>1</sup> II Corinthians 11:1-4.

***NOTE:** Here in these verses we find the only record of the first three years of Paul's Christian life; in Acts 9 there is no mention of this sojourn in Arabia and Damascus, and the delay in visiting the other apostles.*

3. Clarifying the Ministry to the Gentiles. (2:1-10)

Still reciting his apostolic history, Paul says that, after his brief first visit with the elders at Jerusalem, he ministered in Syria and Cilicia<sup>2</sup>. After 14 years he again went up to Jerusalem, accompanied by Barnabas and Titus, and conferred with Peter, John, and James, the ruling elder at Jerusalem (and half-brother of Jesus). In meeting with the elders in Jerusalem, Paul is confirmed in what he has been doing for the last 14 years, and a plan of evangelism is clarified: Paul (with Barnabas) will be the primary apostle to the Gentiles, and Peter (along with James and John) will be the primary apostle to the Jews.

***NOTE:** Fourteen years is a long time for Paul to minister before going to Jerusalem to be sure that he is doing it correctly; if he had been wrong for 14 years, much damage would have been done. It is likely that letters were exchanged during those years, however; and Paul received much direct revelation from the Lord. Nevertheless, it is still a very long time, and this is a further indication of Paul's independence and confidence in his calling and doctrinal correctness. Humility was definitely not Paul's strong suit.*

4. Paul Rebukes Peter for Dishonesty. (2:11-21)

Following Paul's conference in Jerusalem with Peter, John, and James, Peter visits the church at Antioch, where no difference is made between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. During his stay there, Peter has been eating with the Gentile believers as well as the Jewish believers. However, when certain Jewish Christians come from Jerusalem a problem arises. These legalistic Jews still believe that it is unlawful to sit and eat at the same table with Gentiles; and Peter, fearing their disapproval, eats only with Jews during their visit. His bad example has caused other Jewish believers, including even Barnabas, to separate themselves from the Gentile Christians, joining Peter in his dishonesty. Paul rebukes Peter publicly for this, and preaches a brief and brilliant summary of the gospel of grace.

**NOTES:**

*a. In v 12, the statement that the visiting Jewish believers "came from James" indicates that James, half-brother of Jesus, is still the ruling elder at Jerusalem.*

*b. Verse 20 is a classic, often memorized; and, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was a favorite verse to sing.*

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<sup>2</sup> Cilicia, on the Mediterranean coast, was the southeastern-most province of Asia Minor (Roman Asia). Cicero, the great Roman philosopher and statesman, was once proconsul (governor) there. The capital of Cilicia was Tarsus, Saul's birthplace, a thing of which he was proud; the church at Antioch, Paul's home church, was also in Cilicia.

5. Oh Foolish Galatians! (3:1-14)

Paul is amazed that the Galatians have so readily embraced the Old Covenant law! In what seems to be sarcasm, he asks who has bewitched them. Then he explains the difference between exercising faith and obeying the law, reminding them that it was he who had introduced them to Jesus, and that they had found Him by exercising faith--not by obeying the religious law. He tells them that living under the law is a curse, and that Jesus has delivered them from the curse of the law. He asks, rhetorically, if the miracles performed by him were accomplished because of the law and, of course, they were not; the miracles they had seen and experienced were performed by the Holy Spirit, and were made possible by faith. He then cites Abraham, who lived long before the law was given, as the example of achieving righteousness by faith; and he quotes the prophet Habakkuk, "the just shall live by faith<sup>3</sup>."

6. The Law as Our Schoolmaster. (3:15-27)

Here Paul explains the purpose of the law; it was given to Moses to demonstrate the absolute holiness and purity of God, as opposed to the sinfulness of man<sup>4</sup>. In this way he says that the law was the schoolmaster of man, revealing our sinfulness and our need of a savior. The law, then, could not bring salvation; rather, its value was to point us to Christ, where we can receive salvation. The Galatians, he says, are already the children of God, reconciled to Him; and they were not reconciled to him by the law, but by faith in Christ Jesus.

7. We Are Abraham's Children and His Heirs. (3:28-29)

The great claim of the legalistic Jews in the First Century was that they were the children of Abraham and his spiritual heirs. Jesus had dealt with this very bluntly in his exchange with the Pharisees in the Temple, following the incident with the woman taken in adultery<sup>5</sup>. In the following three verses Paul summarizes the entire matter. If we are believers (who have accepted redemption by faith in Christ Jesus) we are God's children. If we have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ we have taken on his nature for our own<sup>6</sup>. And there is no differentiating among us as to classes, genders, nationalities or ranks, for we are all one and the same in the eyes of God. And, if we belong to Christ the Messiah, then we have become the spiritual children of Abraham, and we are heirs according to the promise of God.

8. Not Just "Father," but "Abba Father." (4:1-7)

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<sup>3</sup> Habakkuk 2:4. Paul also quoted this verse in Rom 1:17, and we shall see it quoted again in Hebr 10:38.

<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the law in showing us our sinfulness is also found in Romans 7.

<sup>5</sup> John 8:12-59.

<sup>6</sup> See in this regard I Corinthians 12:13.

In Chapter 4 Paul continues to hammer home the concept that, as spiritual children of God, which the Galatian Christians are, it is foolish for them to voluntarily adopt the religious bondage of the Judaizers. Pressing on with his point, he tells them that, for them, God is not just a distant Deity, One Who may be approached only with physical sacrifices, and by obeying burdensome religious rules. Rather, for them, now that the Holy Spirit has come into their hearts, God is not just their Father, but He is their “Abba” Father. “Abba” is the familiar form, whereas “Father,” alone is the more formal term. Servants and slaves in a household could address their master as “Father”; but only his children (adopted or natural) could address him as “Abba<sup>7</sup>.” This distinction, it seems, should be enough to clarify the matter of the foolishness of their trying to “earn” God’s acceptance, when they are already his precious children; but they did not have the advantage of having grown up in the Hebrew traditions.

9. Observing Days, Months and Years. (4:8-11)

Paul goes on, rebuking the Galatians for the Old Covenant ritualism that they have adopted. He asks them how it could be that, now that they have come to know God as their Heavenly Father, and are personally known, recognized and accepted by Him, they want to put themselves in legalistic bondage. The legalism that he speaks of here is the observance of what must be done on certain days, months, years, and at certain times of the day; and he calls this powerless and worthless. He says, to emphasize his point, that he fears that his former ministry to them has been wasted and in vain.

*NOTE: When he speaks of religiously observing certain times, days and years in this passage, it is possible that his reference is to the pagan practice of astrology. However, because the theme of this entire epistle is freedom from legalistic Judaism, it is decidedly unlikely that his reference is to astrology.*

10. The Analogy of Ishmael and Isaac. (4:21-31)

Paul devotes the rest of Chapter four to a metaphor concerning freedom and bondage. He refers the Galatians to the example of the two sons of Abraham--one natural, the result of human endeavor, and the other supernatural--the result of the miracle-working power of God. Hagar, he says, was a slave in Abraham’s household; and with her, by purely human effort and resources, he produced Ishmael, who was not free. On the other hand, God gave to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, a supernaturally produced son, who was free--the heir to all that his parents owned. The Galatians, he says, are not children of bondage; rather, they are

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller treatment of the significance of “Abba Father” see the study guide to Romans 8:10-15 with the explanatory *NOTE b*.

children of freedom--the recipients of the gift of righteousness. They are free from the bondage of the law, and heirs to all of the blessings of the Father<sup>8</sup>.

11. Warning: They Can't Have It Both Ways. (5:1-4)

Chapter 5 opens with a statement containing the word "therefore." At risk of being tiresome, I will remind you that we must always remember that, whenever we see this word, we must look above it to see what it is "there for." This is a rule that, I believe, has no exceptions. Here it means that what Paul is about to say is based upon what he has just said above: that they have inherited spiritual freedom, and that they are living in the gracious gift of righteousness<sup>9</sup>.

The first four verses of Chapter 5 are clear, concise, unequivocal, and profoundly important. They declare, in straightforward terms, that the Galatians must stand securely in the freedom given to them by Christ, and reject the bondage of the law, or they will forfeit their freedom--their gift of righteousness<sup>10</sup>. And, he plainly states, if they willingly embrace the yoke of the law, Christ and his perfect sacrifice for them will "profit [them] nothing"--will be of no benefit to them. They will have forfeited the benefits of grace. What could be more serious? Nothing--absolutely nothing! And why will this be so? Because, if we embrace any part of the law as a necessity for salvation, we must then obey the entire law, which cannot be done; by the works of the law, no one is justified; and he has already said this twice in this very letter. Put in mathematical terms, with "x" meaning legalistic requirements for redemption, we might express it this way: Jesus + 0 = redemption; Jesus + x = 0.

**Notes:**

*a. When Paul speaks of circumcision in this letter, he uses the word figuratively, to symbolize all of the Old Covenant's legal requirements; circumcision was considered the act of initiation into Judaism for males, and was its fundamental symbol. When David referred to Goliath as "this uncircumcised Philistine" he was calling him a pagan, an uninitiated foreigner, outside the people of God<sup>11</sup>.*

*b. Those who believe that it is impossible to lose salvation interpret this passage (and similar ones, such as Hebr 6:4-6 and Rev 3:5) on the basis of their belief in eternal security. They interpret such passages as referring to the loss of a believer's benefits in this life--but not forfeiture of salvation. Those who believe*

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:15-17.

<sup>9</sup> It is wise, when studying any chapter, to begin with the last few verses of the previous chapter. The chapter divisions, although enormously helpful, were not in the original manuscripts and are not inspired; they were added by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury (1155-1228 AD) and, occasionally, they are in the wrong place. A classic example is the break between John 13 and John 14.

<sup>10</sup> See also in this regard Hebrews 6:4-6.

<sup>11</sup> And yet Michelangelo, when creating his masterpiece sculpture of David, holding the sling with which he killed Goliath, he sculpted David un-circumcised. This seems to have been a medieval example of "political correctness."

*that salvation can be deliberately abandoned, as an act of the free will, interpret the passage to mean that if a believer turns his back on the perfect sacrifice of Christ and embraces the law, he forfeits his redemption.*

*These two conflicting opinions will probably never be reconciled, until Jesus returns and straightens the matter out. And I am definitely not trying to make a doctrinal statement here; I am simply dealing with the passage as it was written by Paul.*

12. Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law. (5:13-15)

We have freedom in our relationship with Jesus--freedom from the law of sin and death--Paul says; we are free to enjoy life without the burden of the “taste not, touch not, handle not” legalistic requirements of the law. However, Paul says, we are not to abuse that freedom by using it as an excuse to indulge our fleshly appetites. Rather, he says, we are to serve one another with the love of God. In fact, he says, all of the law is fulfilled--it will all be taken care of and satisfied--if we love our neighbors as we love ourselves<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, he says, if we attack one another in strife, there is danger that we may destroy one another.

13. Walking in the Spirit: An Important (and Wonderful) Promise. (5:16-18)

There is an ongoing conflict between our fleshly (human) nature and the Holy Spirit--the nature and will of God. These two are naturally antagonistic toward each other and, to some degree, these two motivations are in ongoing conflict. But God is so gracious that, with this rather dismal fact of life, He has given us an encouraging promise concerning it: if we walk in the Spirit, led and motivated by the Holy Spirit, we will not give in to the temptations and gratify those fleshly, human desires. We will be tempted; but, if we walk in the Spirit, we will not **fulfill** those temptations.

**NOTES:**

*a. The word “then” in v 16 ties it to vv 14 and 15 above it, about the necessity for loving our neighbors. Verses 17 and 18 then explain why it is necessary to walk in the Spirit; the conflict is unavoidable.*

*b. The promise in v 16 refers to “lust” (singular), speaking in the overall sense of the natural tendencies of man. It is not speaking of any particular kind of lust; if it were, v 17 would make no sense.*

*c. At risk of being tiresome and redundant, it is important that we note carefully that this promise is not that, if we walk in the Spirit, we will no longer be tempted to satisfy sinful, ungodly desires. We **will** be tempted; but, if we walk in the Spirit, we **will not give in** to the temptations.*

14. The Fruit of the Spirit vs the Works of the Flesh. (5:19-26)

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<sup>12</sup> See also in this regard Leviticus 19:18, Matt 22:37-40, and Jas 2:8.

The rest of Chapter 5 is devoted to comparative lists of the traits that flow naturally from our sinful, fleshly nature, and those that flow naturally from the Holy Spirit within us. Those things that are the natural result of our sinful, fleshly nature are easily recognized; and they are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance (jealous divisions), emulations (unhealthy competition), wrath, strife, seditions (ungodly rebellion against church leaders), heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings and similar bad behavior. Those who do such things, allowing them to become habitual--a way of life--shall not, we are warned, inherit the kingdom of God<sup>13</sup>.

The workings of the flesh are followed, in this passage, by the opposing fruits of the Holy Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. And, he says, there is no law against these traits and practices (for they are all attributes of God). And so, Paul concludes, since we are children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, quickened (brought alive) by the Spirit, we should walk, living each day in the Spirit, not desiring personal glory, and not envying, irritating, and jealously competing against one another.

**NOTES:**

*a. In most modern translations the listed works of the flesh are different from those in the AV (KJV). For example, you may not find “adultery” or “fornication” there; they are usually replaced with “immorality.” This, it seems to me, is regrettable, for “immorality” is so vague and easy to misinterpret. The Greek word rendered “adultery” here is “moicheia” and it literally means adultery, i.e. sexual intercourse with someone other than one’s spouse. Likewise, the word rendered “fornication” is “porneia” and its literal meaning is “fornication,” i.e. any other sexual intercourse outside of marriage. We are dealing here in this passage with two very specific and important forms of sexual sin; and, while adultery and fornication are definitely immoral, there are many other forms of immorality, such as lying, stealing, slander and betrayal.*

*And, in the case of works of the flesh that are also included in the modern versions, some are translated with different words. One example is “emulations.” The underlying Greek word is “zelos,” whose primary meaning is “zeal”; however, it can also mean jealousy, which is the word usually found in the modern versions. Today, “emulate” has positive connotations, and we are encouraged to emulate (follow the example of) the behavior of godly people and heroes of the*

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<sup>13</sup> In v 21 the Greek verb rendered “do” is *prasso*, meaning an ongoing practice, or a chosen way of life, as opposed to the Greek verb *poieo*, meaning a single or occasional act. This distinction is extremely important in understanding the passage. Another example of this is seen in the closing verses of Rom 1 and the early verses of Rom 2.

*faith; in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, however, it was thought of as a negative term, meaning jealousy, envy or indignation.*

*Well, we could lose ourselves in this, but let's not; let us, instead, take note of it and press on.*

*b. It is important to note that in Greek there are four different words for our one English word, "love." Eros, the Greek word for sexual love, does not appear in the Bible, but the other three do; and the word, here rendered "love," is "agape," the selfless, unconditional, love of God. It is the signature characteristic of the Holy Spirit, and can only be manifested in redeemed believers; the unredeemed have no agape love to give, for the Holy spirit does not indwell them<sup>14</sup>.*

15. Restore Such a One--a Lesson in Living. (6:1)

Chapter 6 opens with one super-saturated verse that is loaded with meaning for the way we should relate to one-another as Christians. Here we are told that if one of us stumbles in his walk with Jesus and enters into sin, those of us who are (for the moment) not entrapped in sin, are to show him the error of his ways, and help him to rectify his behavior. However, we are warned, we are to correct and help him in a spirit of meekness and humility, remembering that we are capable of stumbling and falling into sin ourselves. This warning, in today's language, could be paraphrased as, "But be gentle and gracious in dealing with him, for the next time it might be you who needs correction." I also see great meaning in the word "restore" here. The underlying Greek word is interesting; it is *katartizo*, meaning to mend, for in sinning there is almost always damage done, and there may need to be repairs. The tense is the continuous present, suggesting that some mending will take time, and will require patience.

Repentance (when sincere) and forgiveness can be accomplished in a moment or two. And, when we repent and are forgiven, it is (spiritually) as if we had not sinned. Rather than drawing a line through that sin, entered in the heavenly log book, to negate the sin, the Lord gets out the holy ink eradicator (or "white-out") and removes the entry, as if it had never been there. We are given a fresh start.

Restoration, on the other hand, may take time. In some Christian groups, certain sins, even though forgiven, disqualify the forgiven sinner for certain positions in the Church. We must exercise caution with this however, taking care that we not hang a scarlet letter, permanently, around a brother's or sister's neck. And just think--all this is in a single verse!

16. We Need Each Other. (6:2-5)

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<sup>14</sup> For more on this see the study guide to I Jn 4:7-8, and "The Four Loves" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

In the next four verses of Chapter 6 there is one of the greatest lessons of this life: this lesson is that we need each other. God never intended for us to go through life as isolated individuals; this is clearly seen, in both the Old and the New Testaments. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, where we are told that two are better than one, is an example of this, for when trouble comes one can help the other; and a three-fold cord is even stronger. Chapters 12-14 of I Corinthians tell us that the Church is a body with many parts. Each part has a different function, but each is part of the body--not an isolated eye, ear or finger, trying to function alone. And here, in this great passage, we are told that as we go through life we are to bear one another's burdens, i.e. to help one another. And, in living this way, we "fulfill the law of Christ."

The meaning of the passage is, I think, simple and clear; and yet verse 2 and verse 5 seem to be contradictory. Verse 2 tells us to bear one another's burdens; and yet, verse 5 tells us that each of us must bear his own burden. What do we make of this? We have seen before that, at times, the meaning of the underlying Greek words can be the key to the understanding of a passage, and this passage is a classic example. There are two different Greek words here, rendered "burden(s)." In verse 2 the underlying word is *baros*, meaning a heavy load--one which presses down on us. In such a situation, we should get under the load of the over-loaded brother (or sister) and help him (or her) to get through the time of difficulty. In verse 5, on the other hand, the underlying word is *phortion*, meaning that which is required of us as individuals, in our daily walk with Jesus. God, it has been wisely observed, has no grandchildren--only children; and each of us must come to Him, as an individual, for redemption. And, once redeemed, each of us must serve Him daily. This is the burden spoken of in verse 5. It is not only a load that won't crush us; it is that healthy load that causes us to grow and mature spiritually. To fail to carry this individual burden, responsibly serving the Lord daily as we should, would be self-destructive. And, so, there is no contradiction.

Long before I became aware of the difference between *boros* and *phortion*, I saw the apparent contradiction and concluded that the meaning must be as explained here. It isn't necessary to consult the Greek to understand this passage; but, oh, how clear it can all become when we do<sup>15</sup>!

**NOTES:**

*a. In Matt 11:28-30, a passage familiar and dear to most of us, Jesus invites the weary and overloaded to come to Him for relief. When He describes his burden as "light" the underlying word is "phortion" (as in v 5). He is saying that there*

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<sup>15</sup> For another example of the adequacy of logic in such passages, but the clarity of the underlying Greek, see the study guide to I Jn 3:4-8.

*will be things required of us as we go through life, but nothing that we can't handle.*

*b. We should wonder what is meant by “the law of Christ” in v 2, for Paul doesn't explain it. There is a clue in Jas 2:8, where we are told that “the royal law” is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Since the royal law is the law of the king, and Christ is King of the Church, v 2 seems to refer to the law of which James wrote. And, the basis for this statement of James is solid, for Jesus said that the summation and corner stone of “all the law and the prophets” consists of loving God with all our being, and loving our neighbors as ourselves<sup>16</sup>. And finally, Paul has written in this same epistle that “all the Law is fulfilled” if we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This seems to be what Paul meant by “the royal law.”*

17. The Law of Sowing and Reaping. (6:6-9)

There is a law of nature which is that, other things being equal, we reap what we sow. If we sow wheat we cannot reap barley; and if we sow only half the seeds needed, we cannot expect to gather in a full crop. In spiritual matters, the same law applies. It is expressed in the Old Testament, in Job 4:8 and Proverbs 22:8-9; in the New Testament Paul is the only writer who deals with this law<sup>17</sup>. He speaks briefly of the responsibility of those who are taught to support their teacher; then he declares the law forcefully, applying it to our behavior--righteous or sinful. If we live selfishly and sinfully, which he calls here “sowing to the flesh,” we shall reap corruption (decay, ruin, destruction). However, if we walk in the Spirit, which he calls here “sowing to the Spirit,” we will reap the reward of everlasting life. He concludes this passage by saying that we must not be weary in well-doing, or give in to discouragement; for if we are faithful, if we don't give up and quit, we will, in the end, reap the rewards.

18. A One-Verse Summation. (6:10)

In verse 10, using the word “therefore” to point our thinking back to the principles he has expressed in the passages above, Paul sums up by urging us always to help those in need, especially our brothers and sisters in the Church who are in need (those “who are of the household of faith”).

19. Circumcision Is Not the Key. (6:11-18)

He ends this epistle with a parting shot at the judaizers, who are teaching the Gentiles that they must be circumcised. These false teachers can't satisfy the law themselves, he says, yet they would impose this heretical legalism on the new Christians. Neither circumcision nor un-circumcision, he says, can get us to

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-27.

<sup>17</sup> He speaks of it in II Corinthians 9:6; and here, in Gal 6. See also Ps 34:21.

Heaven or keep us out of Heaven. Our eternal destiny, he says, is determined by whether or not we are new creatures in Christ Jesus. The evidence of his faithfulness to the gospel, he says, consists of the scars on his body--case closed.

And, with a brief closing benediction, he signs off.

**NOTE:** *In v 11 Paul speaks of “how large a letter” he has written with his own hand. This almost certainly refers to the length of the epistle, and not to the size of the individual letters (characters) in each word. Paul normally dictated to a scribe, one of his assistants, who did the actual writing of a document. Contrary to his usual custom, it seems that Paul wrote this entire epistle himself. Note that “letter” in the verse is singular--not “letters.”*

*Some believe that this verse is “proof” that Paul was nearly blind, and that this was his “thorn in the flesh”<sup>18</sup>. The very wording of the document argues against this; it would mean that he wrote only one letter--not even one complete word. In addition to this, most documents in that time were written in “uncials,” i.e. in what we call upper case, or capital, letters. The characters (letters) were about an inch high; if his vision was so bad that he could not see one-inch-high letters, he would not have been able to see enough to write at all. Also to be considered is the fact that, in II Cor 11:23-28, where Paul lists the difficulties he has had to overcome in carrying out his ministry, he makes no mention of poor vision, nor of any other physical handicap.*

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the identity of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” see the study guide to II Corinthians 12:5-11, and the explanatory **NOTE** following.