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Lecture number one: This is a series surveying the second half of the New Testament, specifically the Epistles, both those of Paul and other New Testament writers, and the Book of Revelation. We will proceed in chronological order, first looking at the letters of Paul in the sequence as best as we can determine in which they were written; then turning to the so called “general epistles” and the book of Hebrews and again arranging them roughly in chronological order, although there is greater uncertainty with those letters exactly as to their sequence, and then closing, finally, with both the last book of the canon of the New Testament and most likely the last book written of the New Testament literature, John’s Apocalypse, better known as the Book of Revelation

This course is designed to be used in conjunction with one of several possible standard New Testament introductions—textbooks which largely focus on the circumstances in which a given book was written, the date, the place, the author, and other items of historical background. We will summarize very briefly for each letter some of the most standard evangelical conclusions about these introductory matters, but we will not be going into any detail. The bulk of the lectures, therefore, will comprise a survey of the contents of each of these New Testament writers, trying to understand their outline; trying to understand the main points in order that each writer was making, focusing particularly on the most theologically significant passages and the most exegetically controversial passages; suggesting some of the main options as well as our own conclusions along the way; and then closing our comments on each book with a few suggestions about contemporary application.

This taped series is also designed to be used in conjunction with other supplementary reading. We are recommending, particularly, short works that survey first, on the one hand,

the life and ministry of Paul, to give, again, broader historical cultural background for his epistles—setting them in the context of his own spiritual pilgrimage—and the information that can be gleaned, for example, from the book of Acts. It is also helpful if the student has at least a short supplementary text on the Book of Revelation, by far the most opaque and controversial and puzzling of the writings that we will survey, because we will have only a short period of time in this series of taped lectures to examine it in any detail.

We want to begin then with a few comments, by way of introduction, to epistles, ancient Greco-Roman letters, in general. The epistle was a fairly standard, or conventional, way of writing in an ancient world without the electronic or audio-media that we have today. It was the main form of communication between people or groups who were not physically present with each other. And young boys, as they went through the educational process in the centuries leading up to the time of the New Testament in the Greek and Roman world, were taught a fairly standard and typical way of producing a letter. We may think of it in terms of five parts. First, there was a salutation. This, in turn, had three sub-parts to it: (a) the writer introduced himself, (b) he said to whom he was writing, the recipients or addressees were named; (c) and then a brief word of greetings was given. In the Jewish world, the typical word of greeting was shalom, “peace.” In the Gentile world, it was charis, “grace.” And Paul, in particular, follows this conventional form of greeting very closely, often using both grace and peace, and then Christianizing them with a reference “to God and Jesus Christ.”

[Secondly], following this opening salutation, it was extremely appropriate for a Greco-Roman letter writer to include a brief word of thanksgiving, often couched in the form of a prayer to God or the gods for the well-being or gratefulness, if that individual had news of the recipients, gratefulness, or the well-being of the addressees. This did not have to be detailed or, for that matter, terribly sincere anymore than we sometimes are all that sincere when we sign our letters yours sincerely, but it was the conventional and expected form.

Thirdly, a letter typically had its longest part, what we would call the body of the letter, in which the main information was conveyed that the writer wished to communicate. This was followed by, [fourth] a section of requests, if the writer had any,

or in the case of religious writing, often exhortations, even commands: what the writer wanted his audience to do. That fourth section, following the main items of information, can be thought of as also part of the body, or some prefer to treat it as a separate section. But then, certainly, a fifth and final closing section was considered highly appropriate, final greetings, wishes, and prayers for those being addressed from the writer and any companions who might be accompanying him.

This introduction helps us set the stage for all of the New Testament epistles, and particularly the writings of Paul, which tend to follow this five-part outline very closely. There are, however, exceptions to the practice. And the exceptions become particularly significant because the chances are that they were done deliberately and for a purpose to call attention to something the writer specifically wanted to emphasize. We will see this with the very first letter, which we wish to survey, probably the first written in chronological sequence of the letters of Paul, and that is the Epistle to the Galatians.

There is considerable debate about the circumstances of the writing of Galatians, in fact, perhaps more than with any of the other seven or eight of Paul's earliest writings. That debate centers on two particular issues. First, was Paul writing to the group of Galatians which were ethnically from that part of what today we would call central Turkey, identifying themselves as Galatian, or were they from a larger part of the ancient world, reorganized under the Roman provincial system of governmental administration that included people from as far south as the territories of Pisidia and surrounding regions who would not have ethnically called themselves Galatians but would have been considered as such under the Roman territorial organization? The general consensus among evangelicals is that it is the latter larger territory of Galatia that is in view, sometimes called South Galatia. So we can turn to the book of Acts 13–14 and read from Paul's first missionary journey of how he evangelized cities such as Pisidian-Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and recognize that these are the cities and the Christians that he has in view when he pens this epistle to the Galatians.

The second most debated question of introduction has to do with whether Paul writes this epistle just before or somewhat after the so-called Apostolic or Jerusalem Council that we read about in Acts 15. There are some striking parallels between Acts

2:1-10 where Paul describes a trip he had to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles there and talk, among other things, about the legitimacy of the preaching ministry he was performing. There are some striking parallels, I say, between that account and the council that is described in Acts 15. But again, there is a fair consensus among evangelical interpreters that this is a separate, earlier visit that, in fact, is to match with Acts 11:27-30. If one assumes that Paul in chapters 1–2 of Galatians is deliberately recounting each time he has visited the apostles in Jerusalem, then we have to match up Acts and Galatians in such a fashion. Paul, in Galatians 1:18-24 describes his first visit to Jerusalem, which has to correspond to the account of his stay there following an indefinite period of time in Acts 9.

The second trip, corresponding to Galatians 2:1-10 then has to match with Acts 11:27-30, as we have already said, when Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to bring offerings for the poor there as a result of a famine that had come and hit the empire, but particularly had hit Judea hard. That would mean, then, that the third visit to Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, has not yet happened when Paul writes Galatians. And in fact, it is likely that Paul is in route to Jerusalem, or just on the verge of leaving Syrian-Antioch for Jerusalem when he pens this letter to the Galatians. If this hypothesis is followed, and it seems likely that it should be, because Paul is defending his independence from the apostles and his right to preach the gospel as he has been in the book of Galatians, it would damage his case considerably if he left out any accounts of his discussions with the apostles in Jerusalem. So it seems likely that he is giving a comprehensive list of those discussions up to the point at which he is writing. And, therefore, he must be writing just before his third visit according to the sequence of the book of Acts. And, therefore, he is writing between verses 1-2 of Acts 15, or between verses 1-2 and 15:3.

Chapter 15:1-2 of the book of Acts reads that: “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved,’ and this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.” In Galatians, we do not read anything about circumcision as the cause of the debate between Paul and Peter in Galatians 2:11-14. But we do get hints as the letter unfolds, particularly in chapters 4-5, that circumcision is one of the issues of these so-called “Judaizers” —a term Paul apparently coins to refer to those so-called Jewish

Christians who were telling Gentile Christians that they had to take on the entire Law of Moses in order to be saved. It makes sense that circumcision would be one of the real sticking points, because there was a large number of “God-fearers” in the ancient Gentile world, people who had come to believe in the God Yahweh of Israel, who had come to, in many instances, obey many, perhaps most, of the laws of Judaism, but particularly for men, understandably, were unprepared to take the final step of complete obedience to the Law, namely to undergo the rite of circumcision in a world that did not have the sophisticated forms of anesthesia that we have today.

Putting all that together then, it seems probable that the Letter to the Galatians was written after Paul’s first missionary journey; after he had evangelized the cities of South Galatia that we read about in Acts 13-14; after he had come into sharp controversy with Peter and the so-called Judaizers in Syrian-Antioch. And presumably then, he hears that the same type of Judaizing controversy has been afflicting the young Christians in Galatia. He hears about this, knowing that very soon he is to be in Jerusalem to hopefully solve this problem with representatives of the other major factions of the early Christian church. But he writes with passion; he writes fresh from “the heat of the battle in Antioch,” if you like. And he hastily, perhaps, jots down, with the help of his amanuensis or scribe, what we know as the Epistle to the Galatians. It is filled with emotion; it is filled, at times, with strong language. If it is just before the Apostolic Council, it probably should be dated to the years 48 or 49, less than 20 years after the crucifixion of Christ and the experience of Pentecost and the establishment of the Christian church there.

What then does Paul say? How does he try to rectify this problem? The Epistle to the Galatians has been called an apologetic letter, that is to say, a letter of defense of the Christian faith. We can think of it in terms of three parts, each contributing to this apologetic function.

First, in 1:1–2:14, Paul defends his apostolic authority emphasizing its divine, rather than human, origin. In other words, he reminds the Galatians of the way he came to faith, the way he came to understand the Christian message. He did not get it derivatively from some humans to whom he is now subordinate. He got it in that dramatic conversion experience, the encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. And

although he learned many of the details from fellow Christians later, all of the key components of his understanding of the gospel of Christ, freed from the Law of Moses, were there in a nutshell on the Damascus road. And the corollaries that he believed, followed from his encounter with Christ.

Secondly, in 2:15–4:31, Paul defines justification as by faith rather than by the Law. In other words, having reminded the Galatians of his right to tell it straight, he now tells it straight. He reminds them of the nature of the gospel that he preached that they originally believed, and calls them back to faithfulness to that message.

Thirdly and finally, in 5:1–6:10, Paul describes this freedom in Christ as living through the Spirit. It is not an antinomian—that is, lifestyle against the Law—nor is it immoral or lawless. There are moral demands of the Christian, very clearly, but they are different than simply obeying in detail the 613 commandments of the Law of Moses in the Old Testament, as if the coming of Christ had changed nothing. Finally, Paul concludes with the appropriate greetings in 6:11-18.

If we think of this outline in terms of the five-part outline of Greco-Roman letters, more generally, we are incorporating the introduction (the opening salutation) into the first main section that we have listed. But we are noting that Paul does not give a thanksgiving in this letter. This is the only letter that Paul writes in the New Testament in which he omits a thanksgiving. It would have seemed discourteous, if not downright rude to his original audience, but Paul undoubtedly does so deliberately to bring his readers up short and to make them aware of the seriousness with which Paul views their defection from his original message. Then from 1:6 and following, we have the body of the letter, the main information Paul wishes to communicate, and 5:1 and following can be seen as the exhortational section with the concluding greetings as we have already listed.

Let's now go back through that brief outline and unpack it in some greater detail, commenting on how Paul develops each of his main points, and some of the exegetical highlights that we encounter en route. In the first section then, 1:1–2:14, as we have already noted, Paul begins with the traditional introduction, “Paul, to the Galatians, grace and peace,” but, in fact, he gives a much more detailed introduction in those first five verses than was typical and what we might call a

theologically loaded introduction. He already begins to insert some of the main themes that he wants to stress throughout this letter. First, that he is an apostle, that he derived his authority not from any merely human source, and he also stresses how the present age is evil, that we need to be rescued from it (no doubt thinking, not only the non-Christian world around him, but also these Judaizers who become his primary opponents or antagonists throughout the letter).

Secondly, as we have already mentioned, he strikingly omits any word of thanksgiving to stress the seriousness of the problem that he believes some of the Galatians are falling for. Then, as he begins the body of the letter, thirdly, beginning in 1:6, he expresses astonishment, in very strong language, that they have deserted the one who called them by the grace of Christ. He refers to the message of Judaizers as “a different gospel,” which, in fact, is “no gospel at all,” and says that “anyone who preaches such should be eternally condemned.”

These strike the modern reader as extremely harsh words. Part of it can be explained by the conventions of the day. It was very common in both Jewish and Greco-Roman circles for people to call down curses upon themselves if what they said turned out not to be true, and to return the favor for their opponents. On the other hand, part of this language stands out as strong, even by the standards of Paul’s day. And undoubtedly again, that is deliberate. He wants to call his readers to attention; he wants to bring them up short. It’s probably important to stress that he does not speak these words directly to the Judaizers. This would undoubtedly be counter-productive if he was trying to rescue them. But he is speaking to spiritual sons and daughters that he has personally birthed, that he believes very strongly in, and warning them against those who are infecting their circles.

Be that as it may, he then continues in the rest of this opening section from [Galatians] 1:11–2:14 to give a brief spiritual autobiography. Perhaps this is not new, it may be reminding his readers what they already knew and learned from when Paul was there before. We can think of this section in five parts. In 1:11-14, he describes his conversion, his experience of Christ on that road to Damascus that is also described in Acts 9. It’s interesting to see how he compares his life previous to that experience with his encounter with Christ. He writes in [Galatians 1] verse 13-14, “You have heard my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

There has been a popular interpretation of the conversion of Paul, at least since the days of Martin Luther, that, in fact, these verses contradict. Luther, the great and first Protestant reformer, was heavily indebted to the Epistle of Galatians and also to the Book of Romans for his conversion from Medieval Roman Catholicism. His own experience as a devout Catholic monk was one of increasing frustration as he tried desperately hard to please God through obeying the Catholic practices of that religious order—to obey the principles of Scripture as he understood them—only to discover increasingly how poorly he measured up, as indeed any of us would discover if we were honest. This, then, in a sense, psychologically prepared him for his spiritual breakthrough, as he read again Galatians and Romans from the original Greek and not the Latin of the Medieval Catholic Church, to understand justification by faith and not by the works of the Law. For that rediscovery, Protestants ever since, and evangelicals in particular, are heavily indebted. But Luther also went one step further, which most scholars today would recognize was a mistake. He believed that Paul had had the same experience as he did in terms of being increasingly frustrated with the Law.

Paul says exactly the opposite in these verses here. He believed he was on the right track. He believed he was following God faithfully. He believed that persecuting the Christians, these people who had rejected the laws of Judaism, was exactly what God expected him to do. In fact, in a later epistle, in the letter to the Philippians, he will put it even more strongly. In 3:6 of Philippians, he says, “As for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness [the Greek more literally reads as for the works of the Law], faultless.” This does not mean absolute moral perfection, but it means what he says in Galatians 1, by any reasonable standard that could be expected of a Jew, he was extremely obedient and passionate for the Law. That perhaps accounts for why he needed such a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ in order to have his life turned around.

There are those who think, from time to time in Christian circles, that all true believers need as dramatic a conversion. Paul never says that nor does the New Testament support that as a whole variety of conversion experiences are narrated. But perhaps those who have been most antagonistic to the faith, most

convinced they were right in opposing it, do need something as dramatic as Paul experienced. At any rate, Paul's point is that it was that type of experience, not some human encounter with fellow Jews and other Christian disciples, that brought him to the Lord.

And then the rest of chapters 1–2:14 continues in this same vein. He describes in 1:15-17 that he did not immediately consult the apostles in Jerusalem but began an independent time of three years, perhaps for ministry or meditation or some combination therein, in and around Damascus and that part of Arabia there close to it. In 1:18-24, he plays down his first contact with the apostles when three years later, he did go to Jerusalem and for a brief period of time, had a short visit with a few of them. In 2:1-10, he describes that at a more extended visit 14 years later, the apostles with whom he met simply confirmed his ministry, his law-free gospel. They encouraged him to continue to preach to Gentiles. All they asked, as verse 10 of chapter 2 says, perhaps suggesting a requirement of some kind in addition to what Paul himself had volunteered, was that “we should continue to remember the poor.” But Paul immediately adds, “this was the very thing I was eager to do,” and if this is, as we have suggested, the famine relief visit of Acts 11:27, then that detail fits a conversation that was, in part, originally stimulated by bringing money for helping the poor Christians in Judea.

That brings us then to [Galatians] 2:11-14, in which Peter comes to Syrian-Antioch, where Paul has returned after his first missionary journey, and engages in what Paul calls, in verse 13, “hypocritical behavior.” Even his trusted companion, Barnabas, is led astray to withdraw from eating with the Gentile Christians because of some men from James (verse 12). We are told later they came without his authorization, but they are claiming to be spokesmen for the more conservative Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem, apparently still trying to enforce the dietary laws of Judaism, what we know as the kosher laws, in essence telling the Gentile Christians who are with Paul that they must obey all of the laws of Judaism, even these ritual laws, in order for them to truly be right be right with God. Paul describes that encounter in strong language. He says that he rebuked Peter to his face. There is no indication of Peter's response. Presumably, if he had admitted he was in the wrong on the spot, Paul would have recorded it because it would have bolstered his argument. But at least by the time the Apostolic Council hashes things out in Acts 15, we read particularly in verses 10-11 there that Peter has

come to full agreement with the Apostle Paul.

Verses 15-21 of [Galatians] 2 can be taken in two different ways. As the marginal footnote in the NIV explains in the end of verse 21, some interpreters end the quotation of Paul after verse 14. There, of course, were no quotation marks in the ancient languages. These are all interpretations of modern translators and editors of Scripture. From verses 15 on in chapter 2, Paul does not ever again directly address Peter. It is perhaps likely, therefore, that these verses are not a continuation of Paul's words to Peter in Antioch, though there is no reason that they could not be. But rather, his own theological reflection and summary of the significance of that encounter, as he now resumes directly addressing the Galatians in his letter. Whichever way we take it—as the end of chapters 1-2, or the beginning of chapters 3-4—this seven-verse segment forms the thesis of the entire epistle. Here is the theological heart and core of Paul's message. If we wanted to understand the letter without reading anything but seven verses, this would be the paragraph, or set of verses, to read to gain Paul's message in this letter in a nutshell.

If we wanted to boil it down even more briefly, it would be to say that justification, being made right with God, is by faith, faith in Christ Jesus and not by the works of the Mosaic Law. Justification is a crucial term for understanding Paul's thought in this letter and elsewhere. And it's a term that is not widely understood in modern English, because we tend to use the word to mean "one who defends oneself against an attack." Or in the age of word processors, we speak about left, right, and full justification of a page of print. In the ancient world, however, justification, the Greek noun *dikaiosis* and its cognate verb *dikaioo*, came from the legal arena. These were forensic terms; they had to do with a declaration of acquittal in a court of law.

The illustration that perhaps brings it home in our modern age is that of a judge who sits at his bench with a defendant who has been fined an enormous sum of money that he is unable to pay. The judge therefore takes off his robes, gets down from his bench, and comes and stands next to the defendant, takes out his, we might say, "fat legal wallet," and puts down the cash necessary to pay the man's fine. He then turns around, resumes his seat, puts on his robe, and accepts the money as if the man himself had paid it, [then] tells the court recorder, "Paid in full," and gives the man his freedom to leave. That type of

illustration reflects a long cherished Protestant understanding of justification in Paul's writings.

There is, however a second element present, particularly in Galatians 2:15-21. In verse 20, Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." There is not merely a legal declaration of being righteous or acquitted in God's eyes, but there is the beginning of an interpersonal relationship with Christ, made possible by Him coming through His Spirit and indwelling those who believe in Him.

It would be as if we continued the analogy and imagined the defendant now acquitted, about to leave the courtroom, when the judge interrupts and says, "Do you have a place to stay tonight? Do you have a home to go to?" And perhaps we imagine a young man the age of one of the judge's sons saying, "No, I don't." And the judge says, "Would you like to come and live in my house?" Paul will later speak of Christians as those who have become "adopted sons of God" and we must bring that imagery to bear in understanding Paul's thought here as well. This then enables the young man to begin a relationship of friendship in which he begins to improve his behavior. He loses some of the criminal element that led to whatever the massive fine or misdemeanor previously had been. Here is an element, which the Roman Catholic tradition has, perhaps more effectively emphasized from time to time throughout its history.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, there was a huge debate between Luther and the Roman Catholics as to whether justification meant being "made righteous" (the Catholics' stress) or simply being "declared righteous" (the Protestants' stress). Increasingly today, ecumenical discussions between Catholics and Lutherans, and even more recently between some Catholics and evangelicals, have come to the conclusion that, in some respects, this was a false dichotomy. We need to affirm both. There is the legal declaration (that we cherish), but there is at least the beginning of a process of moral transformation. James Montgomery Boice, the famous Evangelical Presbyterian pastor, radio-preacher, and writer, describes it as not a legal fiction but "a real transformation that is begun by justification." That is the heart of Paul's gospel.

Chapters 3–4, then proceed to defend this understanding of coming to faith in Christ, supporting arguments for Paul’s thesis that justification is by faith and not works of the Law. In verses 1-18 of chapter 3, Paul gives four such supporting arguments. The first comes in verses 1-5 as he appeals to the Galatians’ personal experience. He reminds them that they came to faith through his preaching of the gospel and, therefore, through faith alone and not by trying to merit God’s favor by obeying the works of the Jewish Law.

Secondly, in verses 6-9, he appeals to a historical argument. Abraham, the man to whom all the Jews looked as the founder of their nation, so to speak, the first person God called out from among the ancient peoples, through whom the line of promise would come. Abraham, Paul stresses, was “justified by faith.” Now the Judaizers, like many Jews that we know about in New Testament times, undoubtedly were appealing to Abraham to support their understanding of salvation. For them, the most significant thing Abraham ever did was to be prepared to offer his son, Isaac, until God spared him that horrible task at the last minute (a story narrated in Genesis 22). Abraham then, for many Jews and undoubtedly for the Judaizers, was a paradigm of obedience to God’s commands. But Paul stresses that we need to read the earlier part of the story, and backs us up to Genesis 15, where we read the words, “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Thirdly, in [Galatians 3] verses 10-14, Paul appeals to the Law’s inability to bring eternal life apart from being appropriated through faith. In the Old Testament itself, and Paul quotes it many times in these verses, there is a right way and a wrong way to use the Law. The wrong way is illustrated in verse 10, when Paul quotes Deuteronomy, that “cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the Law.” No one can obey the Law perfectly; everyone therefore is under some condemnation. In the Old Testament times, of course, this was temporarily taken away by means of animal sacrifices. But even in Old Testament times, the obedience to the Law was to be seen as an outgrowth of faith in God and in His promises. That’s why, for example, at the Exodus, God saves. He rescues his people Israel from Egypt first, and then gives them the Law afterwards as their appropriate way to respond.

Paul quotes, as well, the book of Habakkuk, in verse 11, as he will again in Romans 1, “The righteous will live by faith.” The appropriate way, even before the coming of Christ, to use the Law, was not as a means of self-justification as these Judaizers apparently were arguing, but as a response to faith in God and His promises. But now with the coming of Christ, who, as this paragraph continues, has redeemed us from the curse of the Law, the appropriate way to believe in the promises of God is by believing in Christ and not by attempting to follow all of the Jewish laws.

Fourthly and finally, in verses 15-18, there is the appeal to the nature of a covenant. It is not annulled by the subsequent Law. Paul stresses that the covenant, the promises of Abraham, came more than 400 years before the introduction of the Law and that that later law does not supersede the principle of justification by faith introduced with Abraham. Paul will continue his list of supporting arguments for his thesis in 4:8-31. But before he does, he anticipates what undoubtedly would have been a major objection in the minds of any of his Galatian readers who had bought significantly into the perspectives of these Judaizers who had come to town. The potential objection is precisely the rhetorical question which he states in 3:19, “What then, was the purpose of the Law?” If the Law was never intended to bring people to salvation, if it was supposed to be the response of God’s people to the salvation already accomplished for them, and if these principles carry over even more clearly into the Christian era, then what was the purpose of the Law?

Paul will give three answers to this question. Two of them will come in the section that runs from 3:19–4:7, and the third will come in the closing third of his epistle, in chapters 5–6. The first of these Paul deals with very briefly,