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# THE HOLY BIBLE **NKJV** REFERENCE GUIDE

**NEW TESTAMENT**

**BOOK 48**

**GALATIANS**



**The Conversion Of St. Paul by Caravaggio**

## SUMMARY

The occasion for this letter was a controversy that developed among the churches in Galatia, and especially the one in Antioch, concerning the matter of requiring Gentile Christians to obey the Mosaic Law.

One law very much in question concerned circumcision, a religious rite that meant for Jews much the same thing as baptism came to mean for Christians of a later period. The Christians whose background had been in Judaism could see no reason why this rite should not be required of all Christians, as it was for Jews.

As they understood it, the laws given by God through Moses were binding for all time and could never be set aside by human beings or by any set of circumstances that might arise.

When people with a Gentile background became followers of Jesus and sought admission to the Christian churches, they saw no particular value in the observance of the rite of circumcision and wanted to be excused from it.

Paul, invited to work with the Gentile element in the church, was sympathetic to their position. The experiences that he encountered with the Mosaic Law prior to his conversion convinced him that no one could ever be saved by mere obedience to a set of external laws.

His own conversion to the Christian faith was brought about by the conviction that the spirit manifested in the life of Jesus took possession of the hearts and minds of individuals and enabled them to be saved.

Accordingly, if Gentile Christians were possessed by this spirit, which for Paul was the true meaning of faith, it made little or no difference at all whether they conformed to the letter of the Mosaic Law.

So long as Paul remained with these churches, the Jewish and Gentile elements seemed to get along without any serious trouble, each group following the dictates of its individual conscience.

But after Paul left on one of his missionary tours, trouble began when prominent officials of the church in Jerusalem visited the newly established churches in Galatia.

These church visitors insisted that the law concerning circumcision, as well as the other requirements of the Mosaic Law, was binding on all Christians, including those coming from a Gentile background.

Furthermore, they launched a vicious attack on Paul because of his attitude about this matter. They even went so far as to charge that he was an impostor and was guilty of misleading the membership of the churches.

In response to these charges, Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians. At the beginning of the letter, Paul expresses astonishment at what has taken place during his absence from the Galatians.

## SUMMARY Continued

Surprised at the attitude taken by the so-called leaders of the Jerusalem church, he is deeply disappointed when the people among whom he labored are persuaded by these visiting brethren to turn from the message that he proclaimed and accept as obligatory the requirements characteristic of Jewish legalism.

Replying to the accusation that he is not a qualified leader of the Christian community, Paul defends his apostleship by declaring that Jesus Christ called him to that office.

In support of this claim, he reviews the experiences that led to his conversion and the circumstances under which he carried on his work among the churches. He describes his relationship with the so-called pillars of the church at Jerusalem, explaining both the purpose and the outcome of his conferences with them.

Although he did not receive from them any directive concerning the content of the message he was to proclaim, they were fully informed about the work he was doing and gave their approval to it, specifying in particular that he should devote his main efforts toward working with people entering the church from a Gentile background.

Following this introduction, Paul proceeds to the main point of the letter: to explain and clarify his position concerning the Law, which he does by detailing both its uses and its limitations as a means of obtaining salvation.

The Law, he maintains, lays bare the defects in a person's character. In this respect, its function is like that of a looking-glass, which reveals blemishes but does not remove them.

He writes, So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. When this goal has been reached, the Law is no longer necessary: Clearly no one is justified before God by the law. Only by faith in Christ are people justified.

By faith, Paul means something more than a mere intellectual assent to a number of facts in connection with the earthly life of Jesus. He means a commitment on the part of an individual to the way of life exemplified in the person of Jesus.

A person possessed by the same spirit present in Jesus will be saved from sin and the spiritual death that sin brings. That person's desires and whole nature will be so transformed that he will do what is right because he wants to act that way rather than because he thinks it is a duty to be performed in order to obtain a reward.

Paul presents a series of arguments in support of his position regarding the Law. For example, he refers to Abraham as the father of the faithful and insists that Abraham's righteousness could not have been obtained by obedience to Mosaic laws because those laws were not given until centuries after Abraham died.

Hence, Abraham must have obtained righteousness by faith. But if Abraham's righteousness was achieved by faith, the same must be true for all of his spiritual descendants.

## SUMMARY Continued

When God made his great promise to Abraham, all of Abraham's descendants were included. Christians are, according to Paul, of Abraham's seed, for it is said, If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

This same point is elaborated somewhat further in the allegory of Abraham's two sons. One son, Ishmael, was born of a slave woman, but the other son, Isaac, was born of a free woman.

Ishmael represents people who are under bondage to the Law, and Isaac represents people who are free in Christ: It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

The Epistle to the Galatians concludes with a description of the kind of life that a person will live who is filled with the Spirit of God, a life that sharply contrasts to the kind of life a person will live who has carnal desires.

The quality of living is determined by whether or not an individual is possessed by the Spirit of Christ. Galatians is important for several reasons. First of all, it is among the earliest, if not the earliest, of all the writings in the New Testament.

The letter gives us an insight into the problems that arose in the Christian churches of the first century after Jesus' physical death, and most important of all, it reveals one of the most essential elements in Paul's conception of Christianity.

The letter has sometimes been called Paul's declaration of independence, a designation that means freedom from bondage to laws of any kind, whether human laws or divine laws.

On this particular point, Paul made a definite break not only with Judaism but with those Christians of Jewish descent who thought of the new religion in terms of obedience both to the Mosaic Law and the laws enunciated by Jesus.

These two competing conceptions of Christianity generally were held respectively by the Jewish and the Gentile elements in the membership of the Christian church. Those with a Jewish background held what may be called a legalistic conception of religion; the Gentile element under the leadership of Paul believed in a mystical conception.

According to the latter view, salvation can never be achieved by trying to obey the requirements of the Law. Human nature is so constituted that a person necessarily follows the desires of the heart, and so long as these desires are contrary to the requirements of the Law, the result will be disobedience and a sense of guilt.

When Paul speaks of salvation by faith, he means the situation in which desires have been changed so that what one wants to do will coincide with what one ought to do, a transformation that humanity cannot bring about by itself alone but that can take place only when the Spirit of God in Christ takes possession of hearts and minds.

Salvation, the very essence of Christian mysticism, means a union, or oneness, of the individual and God. In other words, God dwells within the life of the individual, whose nature is thereby changed from that which is prone to do evil to that prone to do good.

## SUMMARY Continued

The earthly career of Jesus is significant because it illustrates what can happen to any human being who allows the Spirit of God to take full possession of him, an idea clearly expressed by Paul when he says, I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

Paul's argument did not convince all members of the Christian community. Many members, especially those of a Jewish background and understanding, still held to the legalistic view.

The conflict between the legalistic and the mystical interpretations of religion can be traced through all of the successive periods of Christian history and is still one of the vital issues in contemporary theology.

## NKJV SELECTED SCRIPTURE

- 1:3** Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ,  
**1:4** who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,  
**1:5** to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.  
**2:16** knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.  
**2:19** For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God.  
**2:20** I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.  
**3:14** 14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.  
**3:22** But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.  
**3:23** But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.  
**3:24** Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.  
**3:25** But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.  
**3:29** And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.  
**4:6** And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, Abba, Father!  
**4:7** Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.  
**5:4** You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.  
**5:5** For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.  
**5:6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.  
**5:16** I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

## NKJV SCRIPTURE Continued

- 5:17** For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.
- 5:18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.
- 5:19** Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness,
- 5:20** idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies,
- 5:21** envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.
- 5:22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
- 5:23** gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.
- 5:24** And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
- 5:25** If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.
- 5:26** Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.
- 6:9** And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.
- 6:15** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.
- 6:16** And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.
- 6:17** From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.
- 6:18** Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

## BIBLE TIMELINE

54 AD

Paul Writes to the Galatians

Galatians 1 - 6

## CHARACTER Definitions

**GALATIANS** - The Gauls were an aristocracy in a land which they had conquered. They clung stubbornly to their own Celtic religion long after the time of Paul, even though they also acknowledged the power of the old goddess of the country.

They spoke their own Celtic tongue. They were proud, even boastful, and independent. They kept their native law under the Empire.

The "Galatians" to whom Paul wrote had Changed very quickly to a new form of religion, not from fickleness, but from a certain proneness to a more oriental form of religion which exacted of them more sacrifice of a ritual type.

They needed to be called to freedom; they were submissive rather than arrogant. They spoke Greek. They were accustomed to the Greco-Asiatic law: the law of adoption and inheritance which Paul mentions in his letter is not Roman, but Greco-Asiatic.

## MAP REFERENCES

