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Martin Luther and Galatians

The Protestant world is getting ready to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther—guided by the Holy Spirit—brought to millions crucial biblical truths that were long hidden under centuries of superstition and tradition. One could argue that out of the pages of Galatians (along with Romans) Protestantism itself was born half a millennium ago! It was while reading Galatians that Luther first was touched with the glorious good news of righteousness by faith, the great truth that spawned the Protestant Reformation, which in turn freed millions from centuries of theological and ecclesiastical error. What he read in this book changed Luther, and the world has never been the same again.

Seventh-day Adventists, many centuries after Luther, also are indebted to Galatians. Through the study of Galatians, E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones helped the Adventist Church in the 1880s and 1890s to rediscover the truth of righteousness by faith.

What is it about Galatians that has made it such a backbone of the Protestant Reformation? Why has it been able to touch the hearts of so many, such as Luther? In a manner unlike any other book in the Bible, Galatians addresses a number of themes crucial to the Christian soul. It is in Galatians that Paul tackles issues such as freedom, the role of the law in salvation, our condition in Christ, and the nature of the Spirit-led life, as well as the age-old question: How can sinful humans be made right before a holy and just God? It was this question, perhaps more than any other,

that spurred Luther on the track he started and from which he never turned back.

Of course, other books, such as Romans, address some of these same questions, but Galatians is different. Not only is it more succinct, but its rich themes are written in a powerfully personal and impassioned pastoral tone that, even today, can't help but touch hearts open to the Spirit of God.

Although Paul's letter speaks to us personally, our understanding can be strengthened if we are aware of the original historical situation that Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was addressing.

Many scholars believe that Galatians may be the earliest of Paul's letters, perhaps written in A.D. 49, after the famous Jerusalem Council (*Acts 15*). The book, therefore, may be the oldest Christian document known. As Acts and Galatians make clear, the early church found itself in a fierce battle over the nature of salvation, especially in the case of Gentiles.

According to a group of Jewish believers, known as Judaizers, belief in Jesus *alone* was not good enough for Gentiles. Gentiles also must be circumcised and follow the laws of Moses (*Acts 15:1*). It is no surprise, then, that when Paul founded a church of Gentiles in Galatia, some of these Judaizers traveled there to "straighten things out."

When word of this problem reached Paul, he reacted fervently. Recognizing that this false gospel of salvation by faith *and* works threatened to undermine the work of Christ, Paul wrote the Galatians an impassioned defense of the gospel. In the strongest of words, he identified this false teaching for what it really was—legalism, pure and simple.

This quarter's Bible study guide invites us to journey with the apostle Paul as he pleads with the Galatians to remain true to Jesus. At the same time, it gives us a chance to reflect on our own understanding of the truths that opened the way for Luther's inevitable break with Rome and the restoration of the biblical gospel.

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