



Faithful GOD
COVENANT People
a Good Soil series for small group study

#17: Paul: Life under the New Covenant

Bible Reading: Galatians 3:1-29

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PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

St Paul's understanding of the new covenant is hugely important in our Christian thinking today. However, this understanding often comes through difficult and densely-packed arguments in his letters – emerging out of the context in First Century Christianity. Many are put off by Paul before they begin to scratch the surface! Leading this session, it may be useful to refresh your understanding of some of Paul's letters. Perhaps you could find some helpful commentaries online, or ask a minister or local preacher to lend you some books on the subject. Before you start, **pray for God's help in understanding!**

In this session we will focus on **Paul's letter to the Galatians**, one of his earliest letters. It is a heated, fast-paced, and strongly-worded epistle to a church being confused about the truly important aspects of their 'gospel' and their religious practices. It may be useful to **read the whole letter** in preparation, but **please read the notes below and overleaf first**. (I would suggest that the gist is more important than the details.)

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS (before the session)

We will be considering a difficult passage from **Paul's letter to the Galatians**, when Paul was writing to a church that was confused about what they believed and why. The **church in Galatia** was largely made up of new believers from a non-Jewish (Gentile) background, BUT was being influenced by those who wanted to **divide and segregate** the members, to force a particular way of being – more based on the **old practices of the Jewish law**. Paul was certain that those who had been welcomed or 'adopted' from *outside* the Jewish faith were just as much valid and worthy **children of God** as those who had been brought up under the 'Old Covenant'. So, he wrote his letter with fire and passion – saying that what God was now doing through his Holy Spirit was so much more important than the previous ways of identifying as God's people. In quiet reflection, think about: **Have you ever felt excluded or not-quite-accepted in a group, gathering, or religious setting? What were others doing or saying that made you feel like that? Did they change to accommodate you? Or did you feel you would have to change to be accepted? What did you do?**

STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
We pray that you may give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know you,
so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know the hope to which we have been called,
the riches of the glorious inheritance you give us, and the immeasurable greatness of your power
for us who believe, according to the working of your great power and love, through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(Based on Paul's prayer in **Ephesians 1:17-19**)

FINDING OUR ROOTS – some questions to explore in small groups

*What do you think of St Paul? Do you have any concerns or reservations as we come to study this together? Which passages or letters of Paul mean the most to you and why? What bits can you remember or quote? Can you share **any examples of feeling excluded**, or any reflections from the 'PREPARATION' section?*

READING THE SCRIPTURES with background information

Galatians is famous for **the fruit of the Spirit**, which comes towards the end (**Galatians 5:16-26**), contrasting the old way of the ‘flesh’ with the new way of the Holy Spirit. From the start (**Gal 1:1-9**), we sense Paul’s anger and exasperation, that there is a corrupting and dividing influence in the church: trying to insist on old teachings and customs (‘the Law’), which he believes have been superseded by the Spirit’s new work in inviting and welcoming ‘all nations’. **In chapters 1 and 2**, Paul outlines his own credentials, tells his conversion story, and recounts the conviction of Peter (‘Cephas’) that **all should be welcomed into the family of faith** without unnecessary barriers being put up. (See also **Acts chapters 9-11**.) But he also recalls, with sadness, how Peter at times wavered in this conviction, and how he rebuked Peter when there was a hint of ‘us and them’ – with Gentiles being treated in some way as ‘second class’ Christians.

Paul writes about ‘**justification**’, which is way of speaking about our relationship with God, and our inclusion in God’s covenant family. In **Gal 2:15-21**, he says that we enter this saving relationship **by faith** (belief, trust) in Christ, and that is the same entry requirement **for ALL**. Not by our own merit, background, rule-keeping, or religious observance. When Jesus died, he took onto himself all the requirements of God’s law and died with it. So now, salvation comes through accepting God’s grace, and trusting in Christ.

Throughout this letter, **Paul is wrestling with his own faith** and the religion he once so deeply held to. The Jewish faith is rich with good commandments, rituals and customs, and these are NOT worthless (indeed, they are expressing their covenant, and responding to God’s grace), but they do not bring us into a saving relationship with Jesus; they are not part of the ‘gospel’, and are not necessary for those outside Judaism.

There is a **tension** between what is seen as the ‘Old Covenant’ (the Law) and the New Covenant (in Christ), but Paul argues that, actually, the **New Covenant** is a fulfilment of an **Even Older Covenant** – the promise to **Abraham!** Paul hopes this is something they can all agree on: God’s ancient purposes in calling a people to be his own, in order that the whole world might be blessed. (See **Genesis 12:3**, **Genesis 26:4**.)

Read together the Bible passage: Galatians chapter 3

DIGGING DEEPER – some questions for you to consider in your group:

This is a dense and complicated passage with many ideas and arguments squashed tightly together. *What questions or issues does it raise for you? Was there anything you didn’t understand? (You’re not alone!)*

Paul suggests that the law was given to help God’s people live God’s way until Christ came (the law was like a babysitter!). *How hard is it to live up to a religion that works purely by rules? Which commands were cultural or ‘belonging’ rules? And what biblical laws or commandments are still actually very important?*

Paul puts a lot of emphasis on the Holy Spirit in this letter. He says that the work of the Spirit is evidence that they have been accepted by God, even without following of Jewish customs. *How is this encouraging and reassuring? And when can it be dangerous to rely on ‘the Spirit’ without rules or accountability?*

There are many things we do in church which are not essential, but are nevertheless traditions which we find helpful or meaningful. *How can we make sure that these things are respected but not idolised? And how can we enable newcomers to understand and partake, without feeling alien or patronised?*

Verse 28 is Paul’s most inclusive verse, smashing the old distinctions, where Jews were seen as better than Greeks/Gentiles, men were of higher status than women, and free people were worth more than slaves. Paul says: All are one in Christ! All are equal. *What steps can we take to ensure that no one feels excluded in our church or group? What groups or people might still feel excluded, and are noticeable by their absence? How can we work to ensure that the Gospel is for all, and not only for those who ‘fit in’ with us?*

PRAYING TOGETHER

Bring to God any prayers or concerns you have for your church, community, or the world. Sing or read together: **‘In Christ there is no east or west’** (*Singing the Faith*, 685). And include **The Lord’s Prayer**.

COVENANT LIVING: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE (to think about afterwards)

Think about **the fruit of the Spirit** (**Galatians 5:22-23**). Every day in your prayers, ask God to help you grow in the life of the New Covenant, praying for an increase in one of the NINE ‘fruit’.

Junior Good Soil, issue #17

Paul: Finding a new way of life

Written by Andy Murphy.

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Junior Good Soil is for children's and young people's groups in churches.

It can be easily adapted and you can add your own ideas!



PLANTING THE SEED – what are we thinking about today?

Today, we will be thinking about **Saint Paul**, who was a very important leader in the early Christian church, who helped to spread the news about Jesus into Europe and parts of Asia. Paul wasn't one of Jesus' original disciples, but he became a follower later, after meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul (then called **Saul**) was actually going to Damascus to try to stop Christians from telling others about Jesus (to persecute them), but instead he saw a bright light, heard the voice of Jesus, and **completely changed his ways**. He went from being an enemy of Jesus to being one of his most important followers ever! He was called an **Apostle**, because that means someone who is 'sent' by God. Paul was certainly sent into the world, far and wide! He went on many journeys and wrote many letters to encourage the churches.

QUIET TIME – a prayer (for use near the start or end of the session)

Dear God, We thank you for your great love for us.

We thank you that you love us even when we turn away from you, or when we don't recognise your voice.

We thank you too for the chance to turn our lives around, just like Paul.

You want all people to follow you, and you long to be able to forgive them and help them start afresh.

Help us never to write people off, even if they seem bad at times. Help us to trust in your unfailing love.

In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

TELLING THE STORY – reading the Bible... Acts chapter 9

Read the story from a Bible of your choice, or from the **Easy-to-Read Bible: Acts 9:1-20**

Or, for younger children, read the story in a suitable **Children's Bible**.

WATERING AND GERMINATING – what can we learn? / what does it tell us?

In Paul's old life (when he was known as Saul), he still had faith in God, but he believed that God was to be found only through following the strict rules known as the Torah (what we know as the books of Moses, the first 5 books of the Bible). When Jesus came, he said that he was '*The Way, and the Truth and the Life*' (**John 14:6**) and his followers would know God through him. After Jesus went up to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit, the Christians started to tell everyone that Jesus was alive and was the Lord of the world. Saul could not accept this and was very mean to Christians, until he met Jesus for himself. Then, Ananias helped him to understand the faith, and baptized him. (We all need help to understand the ways of God!) Sometimes we meet people who don't know God, or who can't accept Jesus. But God loves them too, and one day they might meet Jesus – *even in us!* In our words, our prayers, our actions, our kindness, our worship, people can meet Jesus, and he can change them. So, don't give up on people. You never know what God can do!

LETTING IT GROW – ideas for activities and discussion

Using coloured acetate sheets (or coloured paper tissue), and cutting out a black paper frame, make a **stained glass window** of a scene from the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus!

Or, make a **poster** for your church with a **positive message** from the story, like: 'Everyone matters to God'.

Or, some of the more lyrical young people might like to **write a song or poem** about Paul's conversion!

PRAISE AND WORSHIP – ideas for hymns and songs (can be used whenever you wish)

When I was lost... (by Kate & Miles Simmonds) www.youtube.com/watch?v=73JuxCgFEgk

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord (by Paul Baloche) www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jfz5CSBGyqU

(Singing the Faith – numbers **367** and **451**)