

GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION

MAY–AUGUST 2024

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The end of the world

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Creation care

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Edited by **Rachel Tranter** and **Olivia Warburton**

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Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Ministries prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

Andrew Boakye is lecturer in religions and theology at the University of Manchester and co-chair of the Paul Seminar of the British New Testament Society. He is the author of *Death and Life: Resurrection, restoration and rectification in Paul's letter to the Galatians* (Pickwick, 2017).

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Bill Goodman encourages and enables lifelong learning among clergy and other church leaders in the Anglican diocese of Sheffield, UK. *Yearning for You* is the published version of his Sheffield PhD: a conversation between the Psalms, Song of Songs and contemporary songs, about desire for intimacy.

John Rackley is a Baptist minister who writes for both BRF *Guidelines* and *Bible Reflections for Older People*. He is in ministry with the Christchurch Methodist-Baptist LEP in Leicester and also acts as a consultant and supervisor for various spiritual direction networks. He is currently working on the relationship between narrative and theology.

Helen Paynter is a Baptist minister and tutor in biblical studies at Bristol Baptist College. She is also the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence (csbvbristol.org.uk).

Stephanie Addenbrooke Bean is a graduate of Yale University (BA) and Yale Divinity School (MDiv). She was a finalist in the 2022 Theology Slam.

Walter Moberly is emeritus professor of theology and biblical interpretation at Durham University. He has recently written *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age: The enduring possibility of Christian faith* and *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the divine in Christian scripture* (both Baker Academic).

Ian Paul is a theologian, biblical scholar and local church leader in the Church of England. After a decade in pastoral ministry and another in theological education, he now writes and teaches freelance, publishing at the widely read blog psephizo.com.

Ruth M. Bancewicz is church engagement director at The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, Cambridge. The other contributors to her notes are members of The Faraday Institute or related organisations.

The editors write...



Every new issue of *Guidelines* brings us something new to appreciate. I hope you're looking forward to the notes that are to come. Here is a small taster.

Bill Goodman continues his deep dive into the Psalms, this time guiding us through Book IV (Psalms 90—106). Walter Moberly also finishes off his series on 1 Samuel to take us to the end of the book.

Some new series will also begin in this issue. New writer Andrew Boakye starts his two-part series on Galatians. We also return to our regularly scheduled series on the gospels, with Rosalee Velloso Ewell kicking us off with three weeks on the gospel of Luke. These three-part series, running throughout the year, will now have a different writer for each issue to give us different perspectives and voices.

Rounding off our Old Testament notes, Helen Paynter, former *Guidelines* editor, brings a new perspective on 1 and 2 Kings by looking at these books through the lens of humour. Humour is a truth-seeking device, so what can we learn from it?

We have a further two new writers in this issue. Stephanie Addenbrooke Bean guides us through thinking about work and rest, using Matthew's gospel. She suggests that rest in Jesus is possible, even necessary, as we work (whatever that may look like). I (Rachel) make my writing debut for *Guidelines* looking at the topic of physical disability in the Bible. I aim to challenge ableist interpretations and show how the Bible can be liberating both for those with disabilities and for those who are (currently) able-bodied.

We round off the issue with three more theme-based reflections. Ruth Bancewicz brings a new team of writers to *Guidelines* with challenging and topical notes on creation care. Ian Paul looks at the often-neglected subject of eschatology, telling us to be 'pleasantly surprised' by what we might find! Finally, John Rackley offers a fascinating series on mountains of God, looking at encounters and epiphanies on mountaintops and showing how they act as images of our faith journey with the God of the 'high place'.

We hope these notes will nourish and sustain you as you continue to study scripture with the aim of drawing closer to God.

Rachel

Olivia

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*Faithful God,
thank you for growing BRF
from small beginnings
into the worldwide family of BRF Ministries.
We rejoice as young and old
discover you through your word
and grow daily in faith and love.
Keep us humble in your service,
ambitious for your glory
and open to new opportunities.
For your name's sake.
Amen.*

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Galatians (part I)



Andrew Boakye

Greek philosophy was consumed with the question 'How do I live a good life?' In the 21st-century west, a more pressing question seems to be 'Who am I?' Remarkably, both questions intricately converge in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Whether the 'Galatians' were ethnic Gauls or a multi-ethnic group living in Roman Galatia, we know that Paul happened upon some Gentile or pagan 'Galatians' (Galatians 4:8–9) as he evangelised Asia Minor. He made a pitstop due to an illness and shared the good news of Jesus the Messiah (Galatians 4:13).

After Paul's departure, unknown believing Jewish missionaries infiltrated the Galatian house churches insisting that Gentiles be circumcised to qualify as the covenant people of God (Genesis 17:10–14). Being circumcised, however, meant embracing the entire Torah (Galatians 5:3; compare James 2:10; 4 Maccabees 5:20–21). The infiltrators also questioned Paul's apostolic credentials. In Galatians, we have Paul's rebuttals.

Paul was commissioned directly by the risen Messiah and reasoned that trusting the risen Messiah was the sole requirement for membership in God's family. This was confirmed by the charismatic activity of the Spirit in the community (Galatians 3:5). Trusting the Messiah was the basis of an experience with God's Spirit, by which a person was re-enlivened with the life of the new age (that is, justified) apart from the works of the Torah.

The apostle thus raises two questions. The first question is the one thing Paul wanted to learn from his audience – did they receive the Spirit by observing the Torah or by responding to the gospel with trust (3:2)? The second question emerges inevitably from Paul's argument – 'Why the Law then?' (Galatians 3:19). These questions intertwine to open a window on the twinned philosophical speculations – *who am I and how do I live a good life?*

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NASB.

1 This present evil age

Galatians 1:1–10

Any time we read Paul, our appraisal of his writings operates at (at least) two levels. Initially, there are the specific ‘on the ground’ issues which occasioned the writing. The second level is the methods and motifs by which the remedy for those issues connect to the broader narrative of God repairing a broken world, climaxing in the Christ event. In the uncharacteristically abrupt and uncongenial opening of Galatians, we are given preliminary hints of both.

On the ground, a quasi-gospel has appeared, to which some in the community are turning, at the behest of some unidentified harassers (vv. 7–8). These outsiders have most likely accused Paul of peddling a soft gospel to curry favour with the Galatian Gentiles (v. 10). In his determination to show he has not been influenced by anyone, Paul opens the letter with a firm stress on the divine origins of the gospel he disseminated among the Galatians (v. 1). However, at the second level, not only was Paul divinely commissioned (v. 1), but the Messiah he proclaimed ‘gave himself... so that he might rescue us from this present evil age’ (v. 4) – and what more profound image could there be for this rescue than God raising the Messiah from death to new life?

When Paul digresses from standard Greco-Roman epistolary conventions, there are important literary-theological reasons for doing so. The three major deviations from his usual letter openings all impact how the argument of Galatians unfolds. First, rather than ‘sender – recipient’, Galatians begins ‘sender – those who did not send me’! It seems the origins and substance of Paul’s gospel were under scrutiny. Second, the identification of God as the one ‘who raised [Jesus] from the dead’ is central to Galatians, as the apostle will at key moments in the letter define God’s work in terms of crucifixion and new life (Galatians 2:19–21; 5:24–25; 6:14–15) and depicts the limitation of the Torah as its inability to generate new life (3:21). The third excursion is the apocalyptic representation of the Christ event in Galatians 1:4. Elsewhere, Paul narrates Jesus’ death as ‘for our sins’ (1 Corinthians 15:3), but in verse 4, the crucifixion is part of a cosmic rescue mission, whereby those trusting the Messiah enter the new age of God’s redemptive calling. God delivered Jesus from death to life; now, through Jesus, God delivers believing humanity from deadness to newness.

2 The apocalypse of the Messiah

Galatians 1:11–18

The Pharisees get a raw deal in Christian circles, largely because of their conflicts with Jesus in the canonical gospels (although, as Hyam Maccoby rightly observed, Jesus' Judaism was probably closest to the Pharisees). As a party, Pharisees were committed to their ancestral traditions, especially for interpreting the Torah. Paul considered himself an exemplary Pharisee, 'zealous' in guarding his ancestral traditions (Galatians 1:14).

By the first century AD, 'zeal' was effectively a technical term for the passionate defence of the Torah against socio-religious compromise. It is likely Paul's haranguing of the Jesus movement stemmed from his belief that they were Torah compromisers. The paradigm for this 'zeal' was Phinehas, who murdered an Israelite and his Midianite lover for engaging in an outlawed tryst and was praised for his 'zeal' (Numbers 25:1–13). When, in the mid-second century BC, the Maccabean family resisted the enforced Hellenisation of King Antiochus IV, one of their leaders, Mattathias, also violently defended the Torah. One of the king's officers was indoctrinating an Israelite to make a pagan sacrifice on the altar of a temple in Modien, Judea, and Mattathias killed both the Israelite and the officer. Mattathias is said to have 'burned with zeal for the law, just as Phinehas did' (1 Maccabees 2:26, NRSV).

Unsurprisingly then, the Jerusalem rumour mill went into overdrive – the man who ruthlessly bullied us is now preaching our message (1:23)! According to Luke, Paul had a frosty welcome in Jerusalem – only Barnabas assumed that Paul had laudable motives (Acts 9:26–27).

Whatever happened on the Damascus Road was the turning point of Paul's existence. Did he receive a divine call to service like one of Israel's prophets (Galatians 1:15; compare Jeremiah 1:5)? We most likely do not have the precise language to fully capture what occurred, but we do know that a great unveiling ensued. It was revealed to Paul that the crucified leader of the Nazarene sect was alive in a new way, raised from death to life by the same God Paul believed he served his entire life. Paul accepted that Jesus the Nazarene was Israel's Messiah; consequently, nothing could ever be the same again!

3 The truth of the gospel (1)

Galatians 2:1–10

The proximity and precision with which Paul uses the phrase ‘the truth of the gospel’ in Galatians 2 demonstrate that it is more than religious shorthand for the authenticity of the gospel message. In verses 5 and 14, Paul labours to ensure that the truth of the gospel is neither violated nor compromised. In both cases, certain parties are guilty of marginalising Gentile Christ believers, and this cuts to the heart of Galatians. The letter addresses the inconsistency between ethnic marginalisation and the good news of Jesus. In the situations reflected in verses 1–5 and 11–14, were Paul not to resist the marginalisation, it would be potentially catastrophic for the community. He unapologetically registers his indifference towards rank in the Jerusalem leadership administration and even suggests that God shares his indifference! He asserts in verse 6 that God shows no partiality, using a Greek phrase that literally means ‘God does not receive the face of a man’. The implication is that no one can persuade or impress God by showing him their faultless face.

In verses 1–5, Paul recounts the trip to Jerusalem whereupon he outlined the substance of the gospel he preached among non-Jews. At this meeting, some ‘pseudo-brethren’ attempted to coerce Paul’s Greek co-missionary Titus into being circumcised. Paul did not concede an inch to their demands (v. 6), so ‘the truth of the gospel’ remained intact.

The resonances between this episode and the following one in Antioch are unmistakable. Both follow on the heels of Paul’s account of his own marginalisation of the nascent Jesus community, whom he harassed and marginalised. These three episodes form the critical backdrop for the thesis statement of Galatians – the basis for justification before God – and this ought to give us pause to think through our understanding of what justification means. If Paul’s initial mention of ‘justification by faith’ is contextualised by his attempt to maintain the truth of the gospel by resisting ethnic marginalisation, then any reading of justification as ‘how to get saved by a gracious God’ (à la Martin Luther) must be read against this background.

4 The truth of the gospel (2)

Galatians 2:11–14

My father described the strangeness of acclimatising to 1960s London having left West Africa. It was variously hostile, welcoming and awkward when he misread local customs – but it was always *strange*. From our removed vantage points, the strange dynamics involved in assimilating Gentiles into a Jewish messianic movement are easily missed, but they must be recovered.

The major scandal for Gentiles entering the covenant was surrendering allegiance to idols (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 1:9). From domestic idols in one's kitchen, to the Greco-Roman pantheon itself, to the worship demanded by some emperors (the 'cultus'), idolatry was woven into the fabric of imperial life. Citizens generally held that natural disaster, political instability or personal failure meant that the gods needed placating. Pouring libations to household deities and attending public festivals devoted to the gods both prospered and protected the land.

Nonetheless, Rome's typically shrewd political leaders knew they might one day need support from its sizeable Jewish population, for whom idol worship was anathema. So, they compromised – Jews were exempt from worshipping the gods but needed to pray to Yahweh *for* the empire. Furthermore, Rome did not distinguish between Jewish sects. When the Nazarene sect appeared, it was one more Jewish splinter group, entitled to the same exemptions as the other Jews.

However, Gentiles, who were *not* exempt from the cultus or the festivals, started joining the Jesus movement through Paul's ministry, claiming that Jesus embodied Yahweh and expecting the same privileges as the Jews. This was certainly not on the menu! Imagine a Gentile Christ-believer living in a predominantly Gentile housing complex and abstaining from the local festivals. The neighbourhood would question their loyalty and patriotism – why would they not come and worship Artemis or Apollo? Didn't they want to see the city prosper?

Thus, Jewish believers faced pressure from Rome not to encourage Gentiles to abandon the gods *and* from the synagogue not to fraternise with Gentiles, risking Rome revoking Jewish exemptions. When Peter withdrew from the mixed table at Antioch 'fearing those from the circumcision' (v. 12), his fears were legitimate. Evidence suggests that Jewish vigilantes even violently resisted Jewish believers consorting with Gentiles. Paul was unflinching in his judgement that these Jewish believers had erred – but was he right?

5 The truth of the gospel (3)

Galatians 2:1–14

When Martin Luther nailed his ‘Disputation on the power and efficacy of indulgences’ to the gates of Wittenberg Castle Church in 1517, he was challenging the notion that salvation could emerge from human striving. He saw in Romans and Galatians ideal analogues for what he understood to be the chief quandary within papal salvation ideology. Luther’s first two theses read as follows:

- 1 When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
- 2 This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.

The great reformer connected the sacrament of penance to what Paul called ‘works of the law’ – both were human-driven attempts to circumvent the guilt of sin – and Galatians had the remedy. Faith, and not works, acquitted a sinner in the divine law court; repentant faith, and not a pardon purchased from a priest, was how sinners found grace from God. This was how Luther understood the phrase ‘we are justified by faith and not by the works of the law’ (see 2:16). As revolutionary as this appears, it remains to ask whether Paul’s objectives and questions were the same as Luther’s.

We ended the previous reflection asking if Paul’s attack on Peter and the other Antiochene Jewish believers was reasonable. Paul had himself harassed and marginalised Christ-believers in Jerusalem and was stopped in his tracks by the risen Christ himself. He then saw his Greek colleague Titus being marginalised by pseudo-brothers in Jerusalem; the Pauline entourage resisted their demands lest the truth of the gospel be compromised. Gentile believers at Antioch were marginalised by the Jewish believing contingent and Paul blew his top, for, again, the truth of the gospel was in jeopardy. If social marginalisation really betrayed gospel truth, then Paul was right. For now, we may acknowledge the following.

In the verses after the Antioch incident, Paul first introduces the key terminology. Contextually, Pauline assertions about justification by faith in Christ apart from works of the law did not emerge from debates about sinners finding a gracious God, but over whether ethnic marginalisation compromises the truth of the gospel. Once we consider this, we can ask whether Luther’s central concerns were the same as Paul’s.

6 Trusting the Messiah

Galatians 2:15–16

Scholars broadly accept that Galatians 2:15–21 is one cohesive unit that flows naturally from v. 14 as a theoretical rebuke of Peter. One must imagine the unit as what Paul would have said to Peter at Antioch, adapted for the Galatian Gentiles.

The ‘we’ (v. 15) refers to Peter and Paul; a paraphrase of the challenge would say: ‘You and I, Peter, are Jews raised on the Torah, not godless heathen living morally dissolute lives. Yet even as law-observant Jews, we know that a person is not ‘justified’ by the ‘works of law’ but by ‘*Pistēōs Christou*’.

The three terms in inverted commas are hotly contested. Only limited analysis is possible here, but readers may consult longer treatments from the reading list.

The origins of the word ‘justified’ are less ambiguous in Greek than English. The Greek noun *dikaïosunē* is normally translated ‘righteousness’; the adjective *dikaïos* is usually rendered ‘righteous’. The Greek verb *dikaioō* is clearly related to the noun and adjective. However, the English verb in most New Testament translations is ‘justify’ and is not semantically connected to ‘righteousness’ or ‘righteous’. In older English, the noun, adjective and verb might be rendered ‘justice’, ‘just’ and ‘justify’. As English developed, these terms tended to refer to law-court settings. There are places where Pauline justification language sounds like law-court language, but justification ought to reflect a ‘putting right’ – it could be a declaration of righteousness, a consideration of righteousness or a transformation into righteousness. We may interpret ‘justify’ as ‘put right in the eyes of God’.

The debates over ‘works of the law’ (Greek, *erga nomou*) ask if it implies all human striving, all the demands of the Torah, or only those demands forming boundary markers between Jew and Gentile. Again, we will not attempt to settle the question. Nothing in Galatians points directly to all human striving. Even if all the works of the Torah are implied, in Galatians, specific focus is on circumcision, dietary restrictions and sabbath observance, which all uniquely codify Jewish ethnicity.

Pistēōs Christou can legitimately be translated to reflect the believers’ trust in Christ or *Christ’s faithfulness directed towards God*. Here we will opt for a somewhat central path – the term should be understood as the believers’ trust in Christ’s own faithfulness, which we will simply call ‘Christ-faith’. The believers’ trust in the Messiah’s faithfulness puts them in the right before God.

Guidelines

Paul has described three occasions of minority marginalisation. Having recounted his own harassment of the nascent Jesus community in Jerusalem (1:13–14), he goes on to narrate the attempt of some false brothers to intimidate his Greek co-missionary Titus into being circumcised (2:1–5). He relates one last marginalisation drama in 2:11–14, where the arrival of some conservative Jewish colleagues of James the brother of Jesus causes Peter, Barnabas and other Christian Jews to hold themselves aloof from a mixed meal table in Syrian Antioch. It is this final incident which forms the immediate literary context for the thesis statement of Galatians: no one is justified by observing the works of the Torah – one is only justified by trusting in the Messiah (2:16).

- Though Paul's apostolic credentials were being questioned, he utterly maintained a refusal to people-please or place leaders on pedestals (1:10; 2:6). How might such an approach promote healthy relationships within Christian community?
- Justification language arises because of the incongruity between exclusivist marginalisation and the gospel; indeed, such marginalisation violates the truth of the gospel (2:5, 14). Where have you experienced marginalisation within Christian community based on ethnicity, gender or social class? How, if at all, was it addressed and did it yield reconciliation?
- Reflect on how Galatians might inform an ethic of social unity which both encourages intra-community harmony and challenges racial and gender-based discrimination.



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'Our thanks for making us think things through.'

'I feel I must write to say how much help, support and encouragement we have felt from the recent contributors. Many thanks to all concerned.'



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