

## Why Bother with Background?

You may be a fan of the Left Behind series written by Jerry Jenkins. Often I hear people talk about those books, how powerful they have been and how impressed they are with the work of the authors Jerry Jenkins and Tim LeHaye. Many people believe this is Jerry's first work. However, they are surprised to learn it is his first hugely successful work. Prior to the Left Behind series, Jerry had written upwards of 120 books that never reached the acclaim of Left Behind. Knowing that little piece of background, offers a new perspective on both the author and the work itself. It did not just happen.

When we study scripture, background is often the one piece that gets short-sheeted. However, proper background preparation adds tremendous perspective on both the author and the text itself. It did not just happen. The Gospels, the Pauline epistles, and the other biblical records did not just happen. Each has a definite purpose. Agreed, when studying these books, we may take the time to cover the basics such as author, date, and theme. However, there is more to background than those elements - much more.

Complete background provides competent context and serves as the backdrop for concise understanding of the text. All too often, we read scripture as though it only applies to our culture and us. But there is more to it than that. Armed with a thorough knowledge of background the text springs to life and allows us to apply it appropriately as we see it *lived* in the time of its original writing. A classic example is the book of Galatians.

Many believe Galatians to be Paul's first letter to a specific church or group of churches. In that letter, he begins to lay out the extreme tension between grace and the Law. Something that cannot be ignored. The recipients and those who are the primary focus of the letter, understand that Paul's words create a huge chasm in both their culture and the practice of their faith. It is no little matter that Paul puts the Law in the background and the grace of God in the foreground. Circumcising the act of circumcision from a culture heavily influenced by Judaism fans a flame that will influence not only the Galatian churches, but churches around the region. This tension never goes away. And, at times, stands in stark contrast to what Jesus said about every "jot and tittle."

Looking further, knowing that this may be Paul's first letter, we see themes that are not fully developed, skeletons that take on flesh in subsequent Pauline letters. In addition, understanding the uncertainty whether this letter was written before the Jerusalem council, as outlined in Acts 15, or under the influence of the council's decision, plays a significant role in understanding Paul's heavy words. (Note: Acts 15:23 mentions Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, but no mention of Galatia or other regions further north.)

In addition, our understanding that Paul's defense of his apostolic office stems from the criteria for apostleship and weight to his words, not only here, but also in the Corinthian letters, for example. Those criteria were actually being with Christ, sharing in the resurrection, and having a face-to-face relationship. Paul puts a new perspective on those qualifications, which is important to his vehement defense. This attack on true authority is crucial to Paul's preaching

and defense of the gospel, his gospel. It brings a tone to the text that we might otherwise miss. Furthermore, “gospel” means more than just what we think of as the “Roman Road to Salvation.” The gospel Paul talks about is good news precisely because it does what the Law could not do if left faith-less relying simply on form.

All of these issues come to play when understanding the text. They show, for example, how each word in the introduction (1:1-5) is pregnant with meaning and serves to set the stage for Paul’s entire argument. To miss this is to miss the power of the epistle from word one.

Understanding background is tedious work. It requires an open mind and a willingness to see new things when warranted. Nevertheless, the payoff for doing such preliminary work is far greater than one might imagine. It is what brings passion to teaching. It allows a teacher to draw from a well brimming with information and insight. It draws learners into the Word in ways they may not have experienced before.

Why bother with background? Because background is worth the bother.