

One of the keys to effective Bible study is to give attention to the overall flow of a book. Some books concentrate on a single topic, and learning how the author pursues that topic is crucial to understanding specific verses or passages.

For example, the main theme of Galatians is the influence of Judaistic teachers who are advocating circumcision of Gentiles. In developing this topic, Paul sternly warns against accepting a different gospel (1:6-9), defends the validity of his apostleship (1:10-24), cites historical precedent (2:1-6), claims apostolic unity (2:7-10) and relates a personal anecdote pertaining to the issue (2:11-14).

Paul then turns to an academic discussion of justification by law versus justification by faith and quotes Old Testament passages and concepts in defense of faith in Christ (2:15-4:7). He then issues a personal rebuke to the Galatians for their instability (4:8-20) and adds an illustration of covenantal change from the Old Testament (4:21-31).

Galatians 5:1-6:10 contains a variety of personal exhortations concerning the Galatians' doctrinal outlook, character traits and treatment of one another. The book closes with a final word of warning to the Judaistic teachers (6:11-18).

To gain a fuller appreciation of a particular verse, it is helpful to ask, "Why did he say that to them?" Paul says, for example, "*if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me*" (Gal 4:15). This verse has fueled endless speculation as to whether Paul's thorn in the flesh was a vision problem (cf. 2 Cor 12:7). This, however, is not Paul's point. Contextually, it is clear that the Galatians' confidence in Paul's apostleship has been shaken. This is why Paul affirms his divine commission as an apostle in the very first verse of the book and why he gives a chronological account of his life after his conversion (i.e., he had no opportunity to be "deputized" by the twelve).

Paul further reminds them that the Spirit works miracles among them through the word of faith that he had preached (3:5). He recalls his first visit when "*you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus*" (4:14). But things have changed. He now he wonders "*have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth*" (4:16)?

Though time-consuming, we must get the "whole picture" of a book and then analyze each passage according to its place in the overall scheme.