

LESSON TWELVE

TITLE Boasting in the Cross

SCRIPTURE Galatians 6:11–18

MEMORY VERSE

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

MAIN IDEA OF TEXT

We boast in Christ because the cross has made us a new creation.

BEGIN this time in prayer, confessing any sins you know of, thanking the Lord for the gift of his Word, and asking the Holy Spirit to guide your study.

1 GRAB THEIR ATTENTION

TEACHER TIP

Start your lesson by telling a story that relates to the main idea of the lesson to grab the attention of your participants. In this section, we have provided you with two options, but feel free to develop your own.

OPTION 1: “FOR THE GOOD OF OUR COMMUNITY”

In the movie *Toy Story 3*, Buzz and his friends must endure the raucous toddler room while Lotso and his friends are played with in the gentile bigger kid room. When Buzz confronts Lotso, Lotso explains it is the duty of the new toys to suffer in the toddler room, but in reality, Lotso has developed a scheme to protect him and his friends from suffering at the hands of the crazy toddlers. (play clip)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxynB4egyqQ>

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

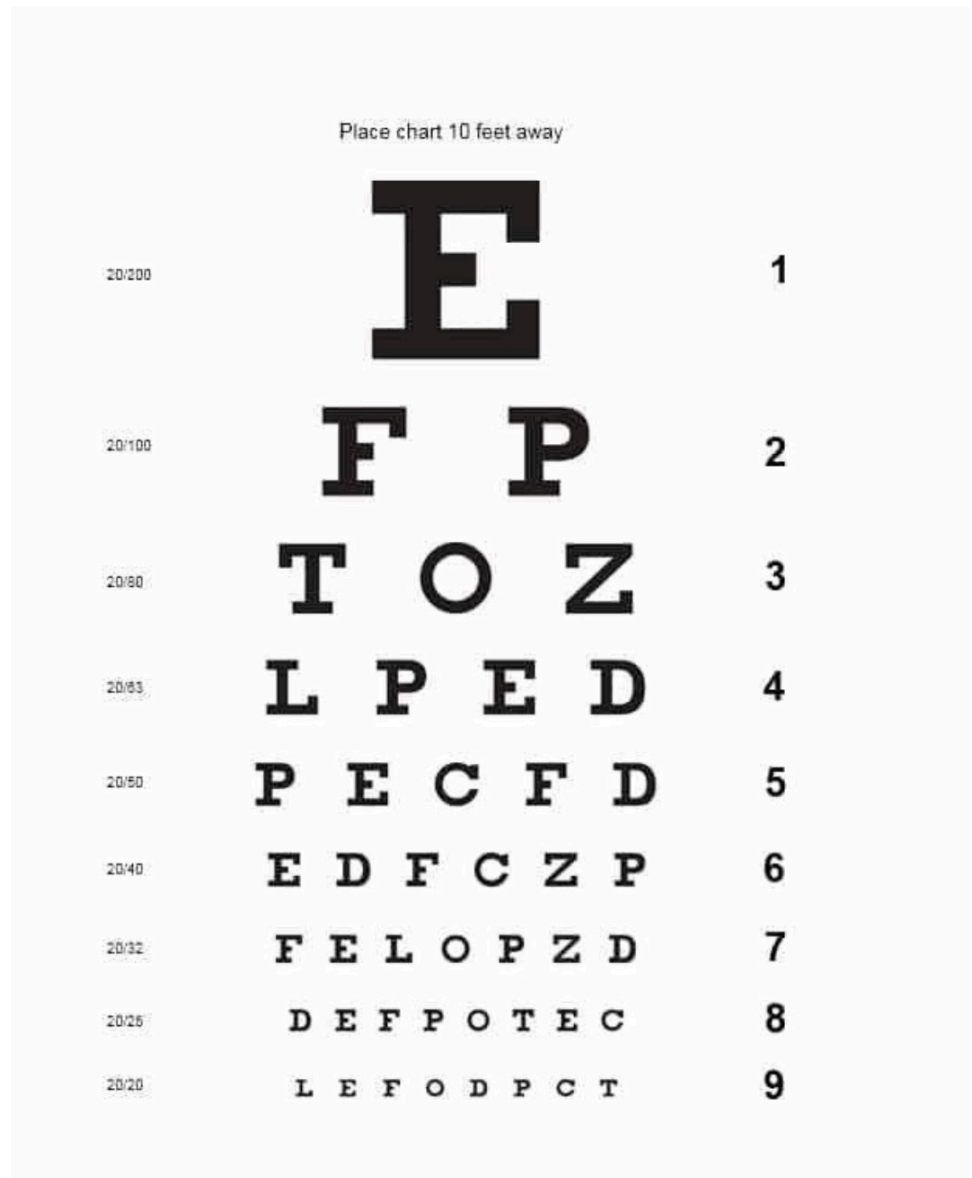
1. *Why does Buzz at first accept Lotso’s explanation?*
2. *What makes Lotso’s explanation illegitimate?*
3. *In the movie, for the toys to be played with means they are fulfilling their purpose. How are Buzz and his friends still enslaved even though they are being played with?*

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: Lotso says the new toys must bear the burden of the toddler room for the older toys, but he is really sacrificing the new toys for his own gain. At the conclusion of Galatians, Paul says his opponents are doing something similar. They are teaching circumcision and obedience to the law is necessary for salvation, but they don’t really care about the church in Galatia. Their real motive is to avoid persecution, and they are willing to enslave the Galatians to the law in order to do so.

OPTION 2: PAUL’S EYESIGHT

Eye exam charts are common instruments found in doctor offices. If you had good eyesight when you were younger, you probably wondered what the large letters were for. As you have gotten older, you may have figured it out. If you have time, see how well some of the group members can see using the chart below or one similar.

(see image on next page)



POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *Why does Paul describe his large letters?*
2. *What does this comment show us about Paul and the Galatians?*
3. *How would Paul's eyesight make his ministry more difficult?*

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: Paul's remark about his large letters is not the most spiritually laden statement in the book, but it confirms he was a real person and Galatians was written to real people experiencing real problems. We can also admire Paul's commitment to his ministry. He may have been writing letters the size of the "E" above, but nothing would keep him from confronting the Galatians concerning the gospel. Nearly 2000 years later, we are still benefiting from his perseverance.

2

SET THE STAGE

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find the historical, cultural, and literary context you need to properly interpret and apply the text.

OUTLINE

1. Paul's personal greeting (6:11)
2. Boasting in Christ (6:12–16)
3. Final remarks (6:17–18)

CONTEXT

At the beginning of Galatians 6, Paul urges them to do good to others in response to the goodness God had shown to them in Christ. Their willingness to do good reflects what the Holy Spirit has accomplished in their lives.

FALLEN CONDITION FOCUS

The fall makes us boast in who we are and what we can do.

GOSPEL RESPONSE

Those who are saved and free in Christ, boast in him.

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find exercises you can use to lead your class through the process of Observation, Interpretation, and Application. As the teacher, work through all the exercises below to ensure you gain a good understanding of the text.

Paul frequently used an amanuensis to write down his letters. This was a common practice during the first century, and authors would often write the final paragraph of their letters themselves to authenticate the letter. Galatians 6:11–18 was written in Paul's own hand to authenticate his letter. Since Paul is writing himself, he takes one last opportunity to address the crisis in Galatia. He has just encouraged the Galatians to do good to others as a demonstration of what the Holy Spirit has done for them. Now he points to the opponents' self-serving motives.

11 See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

12 Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. 14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. 16 Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.

17 From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

OBSERVATION: WHAT DOES IT SAY?**OBSERVATION EXERCISE 1: HIGHLIGHT REPEATED WORDS**

Paul's authentication of the amanuensis' work causes a shift in subject matter. Highlight the significant repeated words in this chapter to help you see the change in emphasis.

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 2: IDENTIFY CROSS-REFERENCES

In these verses, Paul briefly refers to several themes that appear elsewhere in his letters. Use your knowledge of Scripture, a concordance, and commentaries to list the connections of our passage to other passages of Scripture.

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 3: GREETINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Compare the greeting in Galatians with the conclusion. How are they alike? How are they different?

INTERPRETATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 1: TRACING THEMES

In Observation Exercise 1, you highlighted repeated words. One word you likely highlighted was “circumcision.” Paul is returning to this subject because it has been a significant theme in this letter. Take some time to trace Paul’s discussion of circumcision throughout Galatians. Using a concordance may save you some time, but keep in mind that circumcision may be in the background of a discussion even if it is not mentioned specifically.

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 2: CROSS-REFERENCING EXERCISE

Answer the following questions from cross references to Galatians 6:11–18:

1. How does Paul’s commitment to boast in his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9) support his commitment to “never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14)?
2. Paul says we are saved by grace through faith and therefore, no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8–9). How does this explain Paul’s remarks about boasting in Galatians 6:14?
3. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes “if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” How is Paul’s remark here similar to his message in Galatians 6:15?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 3: COMPARE TRANSLATIONS

Our study material uses the New International Version (NIV). It can often be helpful to compare how different translations word a passage or story. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) is a word-to-word translation that is more direct translation of each word in the original Greek. The Christian Standard Bible (CSB) attempts to find a middle ground between word-to-word and idea-to-idea translating. The New Living Translation (NLT) chooses readability and can help bring the main idea of a passage to our time. biblegateway.com is a helpful tool to look up the different translations.

APPLICATION: HOW DO I RESPOND?

QUESTION 1: How should we view ministry even if physical capabilities are limited?

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find questions to choose from that will help your group consider how God is calling them to respond to the text. Help your group set measurable action steps.

QUESTION 2: What are some ways we avoid being persecuted for Christ? How is avoiding persecution a denial of Christ?

QUESTION 3: What are some things that we try to boast in other than Christ? How does boasting in Christ give us more than accomplishments in this life?

QUESTION 4: What evidence of the new creation do you see in your life?

QUESTION 5: Paul pleads with the Galatians to not cause him trouble. What in your life would cause Paul to be trouble?

4

CHALLENGE

TEACHER TIP

End your time of study with one final challenge and prayer. Your final challenge should pull together everything you covered in this lesson and call your participants to action.

Writing his own conclusion by his own hand, Paul explains the real motivation of his opponents in Galatia. They want everyone to be circumcised so they can avoid persecution. They think if Christians will just become circumcised, they will be enough like Jews to avoid being persecuted by the Romans, who were restrictive of new religions, and Jews, who were hostile towards the followers of Christ. In their desire to avoid persecution, however, they were compromising the very faith they were saying they were part of by boasting in something besides Christ.

Today, Christians still live in two worlds. Our commitment to Christ demands we seek the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of the world, but sometimes Christians want to maintain a worldly life with their faith in God. We want what our neighbors have. We compromise on matters of faith we think are no “big deal” in order to free ourselves to live at peace with the world.

Paul reminds us we cannot follow Christ half-heartedly. If we are heirs with Christ, we look forward to our inheritance with him. We will not seek to maintain our standing in the world or grow our worldly fortune. In Christ, we have something far greater than the world could ever give us.

LET'S PRAY

COMMENTARY

GALATIANS 6:11-16

The way Paul concludes this letter is instructive for understanding his purpose in writing. Timothy George shows Paul does this partly in what he does not say:

We come now to the subscription or final paragraph of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Just as the introduction of this epistle differed from the usual Pauline pattern in that it contained no thanksgiving section and began with an immediate polemical punch, so too this concluding subscription varies p 429 from Paul's usual epistolary practice in several ways. For one thing, it is longer than most, containing a summary recapitulation of the main themes Paul had pursued throughout the letter. There are no expressed greetings from Paul or anyone else; not even the unnamed "brothers with me" of 1:2 reappear in these final words of farewell. Nor did Paul offer a doxological confession of praise, nor reiterate his desire to see the Galatians soon, nor request their prayers on his behalf.

Many commentators attribute this lack of a personal touch to the strained relations and distant feelings between Paul and the Galatians that characterize the tone of the letter throughout.¹⁵⁰ This point, however, should not be pressed too far. The closing word of the letter, before the final "Amen," is the vocative adelphoi, "brothers," Paul's favorite word of address to his readers throughout the body of the letter. Likewise, the "peace benediction" of v. 16 and the more typical "grace benediction" of v. 18 should not be read as mere stylistic devices at the close of a letter. They express the heart and soul of the apostle Paul summarizing in two majestic words the essence of the gospel he labored so valiantly to set forth in this brief but powerful letter.

Thus, despite the lack of personal greetings and intimate disclosures, Paul did not lose sight of his primary reason in writing this letter to the Galatians: to win them back from the brink of apostasy to a full-orbed faith in the one and only gospel of Jesus Christ, his Lord and theirs. To this end he reviewed in what Lightfoot called "terse eager disjointed sentences" the principal themes of the letter.

Paul is addressing the same subjects he has throughout the letter but he frames it with the concept of "boasting". Timothy George, in *Galatians*, writes:

Paul's entire theology of justification is reflected in the way he used the word "boast" in this context (vv. 13-14). On this side of forgiveness and new p life, the only boasting permitted is that of the justified sinner who has surrendered the autonomy of the self to the lordship of Christ, the hymnic boast of redemption: "In my hands no price I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling." In the body of the letter history and theology led with an irresistible and evangelical logic to the theme of ethics, an ethics of freedom and obligation rooted in a life filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit. The "new creation" of v. 15 and the "rule" of v. 16 recall the ethical exhortations, the imperatives based on indicatives, which occupied Paul's attention in Gal 5:6. Erasmus once remarked that in this closing paragraph Paul talked "pure flame." In the light of that incandescent flame we see again the message of grace and truth, freedom and faith pressed home to the "brothers" who share with Paul a participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Timothy Keller also links this final discussion of "boasting" to the concerns covered previously. In

Galatians for You, he writes:

The cross is by nature offensive! And we can only grasp its sweetness if we first grapple with its offense. If someone understands the cross, it is either the greatest thing in their life, or it is repugnant to them. If it is neither of those two things, they haven't understood it.

The false savior the Judaizers are worshiping is approval. That's what is going on under their legalistic teaching. "The only reason they [teach what they do] is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ" (v 12). They want to "boast" (v 13). They have gotten into religion for the fame, prestige and honor it can bring them in the world. Their ministry, as we saw in 4:17-18, is a form of self-salvation. As a result of this concern for appearances and acceptance by the world, the false teachers are offering a religion that mainly focuses on externals and behavior (circumcision and the ceremonial law), rather than internal change of heart, motives and character. The gospel is inside-out: an inner change of heart leads to a new motivation for and conduct of behavior. They are outside-out: focusing on behavior, never dealing with the heart, and always remaining superficial.

Paul again makes the most telling critique of this way of religion: "Not even those who are circumcised obey the law" (v 13). On its own terms, biblical legalism cannot work. If we really read the law and see what it commands (eg: "Love your neighbor as yourself", 5:13-14), we will see that we cannot possibly save ourselves by obeying it. A religion based on externals and behavior as a way of salvation may prompt pride and bring popularity, but it cannot deliver the eternal life it promises.

In *Galatians for You*, Timothy Keller continues to describe boasting and concludes with a short definition: Ultimately, Paul says, the heart of your religion is what you boast in. What, at bottom, is the reason that you think you are in a right relationship with God?

If the cross is just a help, but you have to complete your salvation with good works, it is really your works which make the difference between your being headed for heaven or not headed for heaven. Therefore, you "boast about your flesh" (v 13), your own efforts. What an attractive-sounding message: to be able to pat yourself on the back for having reserved a place for yourself in heaven!

But if you understand the gospel, you "boast" exclusively and only in the cross. Our identity, our self-image, is based on what gives us a sense of dignity and significance—what we boast in. Religion leads us to boast in something about us. The gospel leads us to boast in the cross of Jesus. That means our identity in Jesus is confident and secure—we do "boast"!—yet humbly, based on a profound sense of our flaws and neediness.

So the gospel can be well summarized in one remarkable sentence: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (v 14).

I am saved solely and wholly because of Christ's work, not mine. He has reserved a place in heaven for me, given freely to me by Him. I "never boast"—I take no credit for my standing with God—"except in the cross"; what Christ has done is now something I "boast" in. To boast is to joyously EXULT, and to have high confidence, in something. To know you are saved by Christ's work alone brings a joyous "boasting" confidence; not a self-confidence, but Christ-confidence.

And if I truly boast in Christ alone, there is a stunning turnaround in my life. The world is dead to me.

Fesko also notes two motivating factors for the false teachers. He writes in *Galatians*:

Paul states two of the chief motivating factors for the false teachers: "It is those who want to make a

good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh” (Gal. 6:12–13). Paul points out that the first motivating factor behind the false teachers was the desire to avoid persecution.

The majority of first-century Jews saw Christianity as an aberration, a sect of Judaism. Like the pre-converted Paul, they persecuted the church for worshipping what they thought was a false Messiah and encouraging Gentiles who “converted” to forsake Israel’s law, specifically circumcision. The false teachers, therefore, were encouraging the Gentiles to be circumcised, not only because they believed it was still necessary, but because they thought this would also spare them from persecution. They could point to the Gentile converts and say, “See! They are keeping the law. They submit to circumcision.”

Second, they were prone to boasting, perhaps much like many pastors in our own day. Some pastors will boast, not in Christ, but in how big their churches are and how many people attend. We foster this type of mentality because we take far too many of our cues from the world rather than from Scripture. How does the world measure success? Bigger is always better, more is better than less, and some is better than none. Hence, a megachurch pastor that preaches to thousands each Sunday is better than the minister who preaches to mere hundreds. But what many fail to see is that the Scriptures do not measure success in terms of numbers but in terms of fidelity to God’s call to preach the gospel. This is Paul’s point in his criticism of the false teachers. In Paul’s day, the false teachers were boasting in their success with Gentile converts. They wanted people to see how many Gentiles they had been able to convince to submit to circumcision. Paul has identified and established these points in his epistle. But like a prizefighter that has pummeled his opponent, but saves enough energy for a series of knockout blows, Paul hits the false teachers with a powerful combination of punches to show how they have not been faithful to the gospel of Christ.

Timothy Keller draws special attention to Galatians 6:16. He writes:

If verses 14–15 sum up chapter 5, verse 16 (which, following such an emotional and stunning sentence, is easy to miss!) encapsulates what Paul was saying in chapter 3. Here, he calls living by the gospel a “rule” (v 16)—it is a way of life, a foundation of everything. Anyone who sets the gospel of Christ as their “rule”, he says, will find “peace and mercy”. And they will be members of “the Israel of God”. Christians are all Abraham’s children, heirs to God’s promises to him.

GALATIANS 6:17–18

The “marks of Jesus” do not refer to Jesus’s crucifixion but to the persecution Paul has suffered. Timothy George ties these remarks to the theological discussion Paul has just written:

Why did Paul mention the brand marks here at the very end of his letter, as a kind of climactic conclusion to all that he had written? He did so for two reasons at least. First, Paul’s readers immediately would have identified the branding of the flesh with slavery, for slaves in the ancient world frequently were marked with the insignia of their master as a badge of identification. In addition, certain devotees of the mystery religions also tattooed themselves as a way of showing their devotion and loyalty to a particular cult or deity. So, in effect, Paul would have been saying: Look, I too have been branded! I am a slave of my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. If you care to look for yourselves, here is his insignia imprinted in my very flesh. I am no fair-weather Christian but one who has come to know his Lord in the fellowship of his sufferings as well as the power of his resurrection.

Paul's reference to the brand marks also recalls his bitter opposition to the false teachers and their penchant for "boasting" in the flesh. Paul already had said that he would boast only in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 14). The Judaizers, on the other hand, had their own distinctive brand mark of which they boasted and bragged—the mark of circumcision. Their entire theological program was tied up not only with their own physical circumcision but also with their ability to persuade Gentile believers to accept this religious rite, a means of salvation and identification with the true people of God. Paul blew the whistle on this kind of "theology of glory" by pointing to the "theology of the cross" and its outworking in his own sufferings as a Christian. "Let no one cause me trouble," Paul said to the Galatians; that is, stop harassing me and trying to undermine my ministry because my apostolic labor has already been validated by Christ—not only on the Damascus Road but also in my suffering and affliction, the signs of which are evident for all to see. In this sense the brand marks are a seal and sure evidence of true doctrine and faith.

Timothy Keller concurs and writes:

Paul concludes by pointing to the fact that "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (v 17). What are these? Probably he is referring to the literal scars he had from the torture, imprisonments and beatings he had received for the sake of Christ. The teachers of the false, popular, self-salvation gospel had none of these, because the world loved to hear their message. But Paul is a true minister, a true apostle, as he argued in chapters 1 and 2. Do not doubt me, he says: I have the real marks of apostolic authority—not greatness and riches, but signs of suffering and weakness.

J. V. Fesko, Galatians, also contrasts the marks on Paul's body, which are true marks of Christ, with circumcision, which is a false mark:

To see Paul's first punch we must note the contrast he has established. The false teachers wanted to have the Gentiles circumcised. As a result, they were also marked by boasting—boasting in their own accomplishments. By contrast, Paul had unique marks of his own: "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). Paul was undoubtedly a scarred man—marked by scars from his 138 lashes, his near-fatal stoning, and his multiple shipwrecks (2 Cor. 11:16–29). Paul calls these scars the marks of Jesus. They were the marks that he bore as a result of being united to Christ—they were the shared sufferings of Christ. These were the marks by which Paul wanted to be associated and known, not circumcision. He did not want to be marked by the abrogated ceremonial law, but by Christ.

This is why Paul writes in verse 15: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but new creation" (Gal. 6:15*). Paul explains that circumcision matters not, but only "new creation." Paul does not say one must be a new creature; he does not imply that Christianity is a "fresh start." No, he invokes the ancient promises about the new heavens and earth from the prophet Isaiah: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind" (Isa. 65:17). Indeed, in Christ, God had begun to create the new heavens and earth. Paul says, in effect: "You false teachers and your followers are marked by the old creation. I, Paul, on the other hand, only want to be marked by Christ. Mine are the marks of the new creation. Self-congratulatory boasting marks you; I only want to boast in the cross of Christ. Only Christ brings the promises of the new heavens and earth through his cross of reconciliation, through his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and the outpouring of the power of the age to come, the Holy Spirit."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Butler, Brand, Draper, and England, eds., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*.
R. Alan Cole, *Galatians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)

J. V. Fesko, *Galatians* (The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the NT)
Timothy George, *Galatians* (The New American Commentary)
Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You* (God's Word for You)
David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Galatians* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)
Charles Swindoll, *Insights on Galatians, Ephesians* (Living Insights Commentary)
John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*
Warren Wiersbe, *Galatians* (The Bible Exposition Commentary)