

Studies in Galatians

Chapter One

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There are two major thrusts of this letter. The first focus is that Paul must defend his apostleship and the second focus of this letter concerns the problem regarding whether or not people had to convert to Judaism before becoming a Christian. We might think that this topic was well covered at the Jerusalem Council as we studied it in Acts but the problem kept coming up. The defense of Paul as an apostle has nothing to do with his ego but rather his authority. An apostle was someone commissioned to speak for someone else or some group. The Pharisees had appointed apostles and Paul originally was one of these. But Paul now is an apostle of Jesus Christ meaning that he is commissioned to speak on behalf of Him. If Paul were just a person then we could disagree with his writings but if he was an apostle of Jesus Christ then his writings are from God. Since he was an apostle his writings are indeed sacred and we cannot argue with them. This point is critical to us today when many people reject some of his writings.

It is not known for sure when this letter was written, the location of the writing, or the people to whom it was written. I have included it in this time period because it is the most probable. We also would certainly think it was written to the churches in Galatia but actually there are two different regions in Galatia that are possible recipients. One theory was that the letter was written to churches in northern Asia Minor where the Celts and the Gauls lived. The theory most followed today is that he wrote to the churches in southern Asia Minor where he actually planted churches. Cities there included Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe and we remember from our study of Acts that Paul traveled through these cities (Acts 13:1- 14:28).



It seems likely that he wrote the letter in Ephesus in about 52 A.D. The serious student wanting a more lengthy and complete analysis of possibilities concerning the writing of this letter is referred to of the excellent references listed.

**Gal 1:1 “Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),
Gal 1:2 and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia:
Gal 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ,
Gal 1:4 who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,
Gal 1:5 to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.”**

Paul immediately makes it clear that he is one of the commissioned apostles of Jesus Christ. There were only 12 original apostles and then after Judas showed his true character the apostles chose one more and then Jesus chose Paul. See my writing on the first chapter of Acts for my thoughts on whether there were really 12 or 13 apostles. Regardless of whether there were 12 or 13 apostles, there were only these and no more. There were no successors to those original apostles so the writings from these men are all that we have for the written word of God after the birth of Jesus Christ. Since these men were commissioned from God their writings are sacred and must be accepted as the truth of God. The churches at Galatia were being bothered by teachers who said that Paul was not an apostle so he had to defend his apostleship. If Paul were not an apostle then his gospel would not be special but since he was an apostle his gospel message is the only gospel message. Paul makes it clear that his apostleship is not from men like the apostles of the Pharisees. He makes it clear that his apostleship is from Jesus Christ and from God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. There is no doubt in Paul’s mind about his commission. He also clarified his apostleship in other writings:

1Cor 9:”I Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?”

*1Cor 15:6 “After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;
1Cor 15:7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;
1Cor 15:8 and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.
1Cor 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”*

Paul was very aware of his lack of personal qualifications to be an apostle because of his persecution of Jesus before his conversion. Similarly none of us are worthy in any way of being a child of God. Just as God chose Paul to be an apostle He chose us to be His children.

He then asks for grace and peace to be given to the churches in Galatia. Grace is the source of salvation and peace is the result of salvation so he asks for both to be present with them. He makes it clear that the peace and grace to which he refers comes to them

from Jesus and God the Father rather than from him. The peace that we need can only be given to us by God:

John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."

When we receive that peace through the grace of God we are blessed beyond anything that we could have imagined before then. Paul said that Jesus gave Himself for our sins. The New Testament teaches us that the sacrifice of Jesus is the necessary and sufficient condition for our sins to be put away from us. Paul then tells us that this sacrifice also removes us from the evil age in which we now still live. The Righteous Age began upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ and it will come in its total fulfillment when He comes back. Meanwhile, from the time of our realization of our salvation until the time of our death or the time when Jesus comes back we live both in the Evil Age and in the Righteous Age. While we live physically here we cooperate with God in our sanctification so that we live as much as possible in the Evil Age but as a child of the Righteous Age. All that God has done and is doing for us is according to His perfect will and to His glory forever.

Gal 1:6 "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;

Gal 1:7 which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Gal 1:8 But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed."

Now Paul gets right into the meat of the matter! The usual form of writings in this era and by Paul is to begin with a salutation and then move into expressions of thankfulness to God (see the Thessalonian letters). But here Paul omits the thankfulness and jumps into the problem at hand. Their departure from the Gospel message was such a horrible sin that Paul had to go ahead and address it quickly. We can almost see the drippings of sarcasm from his mouth in these first few words. Paul is amazed at how quickly the people were to desert the Gospel. The word translated here as "deserting" was used in other writings for soldiers who went AWOL from the military service. If anyone chooses to worship God by means other than how God has revealed for us then we have made up an idol and are not in His service. Departing from the Gospel is that serious!

The situation is similar to that encountered by Moses.

Exodus 32:7 "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.

Exodus 32:8 "They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'"

The people quickly deserted the truth of God for idols! Moses' reaction was quick:

Exodus 32:19 "And it came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

Exodus 32:20 And he took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water, and made the sons of Israel drink it."

Paul's reaction was also quick and he probably was as upset as Moses at how quickly the people deserted the Gospel for a false gospel. Paul's trip through Galatia had been one of the most successful evangelical trips of all Christendom. Here are some suggestions of the success:

Acts 13:43 "Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God.

Acts 13:48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

Acts 13:49 And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region."

Acts 14:1 "And it came about that in Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a great multitude believed, both of Jews and of Greeks."

They were treated as if they were gods:

Acts 14:11 "And when the multitudes saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us."

Acts 14:12 And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.

Acts 14:13 And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds."

Acts 14:21 "And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,

Acts 14:22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.""

There is only one Gospel and it is the one that Paul preaches clearly. We can add nothing to it for God is the one who initiated it and He is omniscient. We owe a debt of immeasurable amount to God for our sins. It is only by the death of God, the infinite One, that such a sin can be paid. So the complete Gospel is that Jesus was God incarnate, born of a virgin so that He had no sin nature, that He lived a perfect life of obedience to the Father, that He was crucified to pay the price for our sins, and that He was resurrected to show that His payment was accepted by the Father. God then substituted the payment of Jesus for our sins and put the perfect obedience of Jesus into our righteous account. Only a fool would attempt to add to this plan! Yet here these people had listened to some

slick talkers who said that we must add to the plan by some works of our own. As James tells us, our works after salvation are not worthless for they indeed show that we have been saved. Because God first loved us He used His plan for us and we then try to show our love for Him with our obedience to His commands. But our works are worthless for any payment for our sins!

Note that Paul even begins with himself in the list of people that might try to change their minds about the Gospel. He says that even if he for a reason he cannot contemplate should try to change their minds about the Gospel he should be accursed. He then moves on to the possibility that an angel might try to add to the Gospel and he says that he should be accursed also. Certainly we know that Satan can disguise himself as an angel, which is why we must be thoroughly grounded in the Word of God so that we can recognize deception.

2Cor 11:14 “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

The word “accursed” is a very strong word. The Greek word is “anathema” and the word has been transliterated to that word in English. Paul used the word in other writings:

1Cor 16:22 “If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Maranatha.”

Rom 9:3 “For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh,”

Comparing these writings we see that Paul used the word to mean someone who was cast out of the presence of the Lord. In the Romans writing Paul says that he loves his brethren so much that he would give up his salvation if such an action could earn their salvation. [Of course Paul is not God so he could not earn someone else’s salvation even by giving up his own.] Anyone who tries to change the Gospel should be damned.

Gal 1:9 “As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

Gal 1:10 For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.”

One method used by teachers today also is the method of repetition and Paul feels so strongly about the integrity of the Gospel that he repeats himself here. Paul, as an apostle, gave them the Gospel and they should be comparing any other presentation with that given them by him. Similarly today we need to pay careful attention to any Gospel presentation to make sure that it is not in deviation from the one Gospel. Paul then tells them that he has no reason to be a man-pleaser for he is a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, as are we.

Gal 1:11 “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

Gal 1:12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

He begins this section with a very strong phrase that we could translate as “you people pay attention!” Paul now starts affirming his apostleship to them. Since he is an apostle his message is from God and it cannot be modified by man. We must always remember that the Bible is God’s message to man and not man’s message about God. As an apostle he did not receive the Gospel by the teaching of any man but from God. Paul had a great education under the great teacher Gamaliel, but the Gospel that he taught was not that taught by Gamaliel or any other teacher. The Gospel was received by Paul from a special revelation of Jesus Christ. We need to always remember that the teaching of the apostles is from God and so it is sacred and not to be modified at all.

Gal 1:13 “For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it;

Gal 1:14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

Paul now starts to show the people why he could not have come up with this Gospel on his own by first starting to talk with them about his pre-conversion life. During this part of his life he was highly trained as a Jew with an impeccable background. He was present when Stephen was stoned to death and then he led many excursions into lands taking Christians to jail and worse. He was a traditional Jewish leader who hated this new religion that he saw as a great threat to his religion. He was so sold on the truth of his own religion that he could not possibly conceive on his own that Jesus was indeed the long promised Messiah!

Gal 1:15 But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased

Gal 1:16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood,

Now he proceeds to his conversion experience and shows that he had actually been chosen by God from before his physical birth to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. He clearly states that the revelation of the truth about Jesus was from God and that he had been commissioned by God to preach the Gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles. Now that last statement is also very inflammatory because the Jews hated the Gentiles who were without hope of salvation unless they converted to the Jewish religion. Paul also states that not only was the revelation of Jesus totally from God but he did not even immediately go to any of the original apostles or anyone else to consult with them about his revelation. The fact that Christianity is so foreign to the Jewish teachings of salvation by works is one portion of his story that totally is against his making it up on his own. But if he had either somehow decided that this new “religion” was real or some man had taught it to him he most certainly would have immediately gone to the original apostles to discuss the matter with them. But here is Paul, one of the most zealots of all Jews and a major crusader against the Christians, now willing to turn his life completely over to his

new Lord Jesus Christ without checking out the story at all. This story is certainly one of the most compelling cases for the truth of the Gospel for all to see.

Gal 1:17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.”

Paul was taught for three years by the Lord Jesus and this is the same length of time Jesus was with the other apostles. Arabia was a region stretching east of Damascus to the Sinai Peninsula and he probably stayed near Damascus. Paul had a tremendous adjustment to make in his worldview! He had to change his thinking from the Jewish realm of obedience to the law to the Gospel of grace. From his tremendous Jewish background I cannot even begin to imagine the enormity of the challenge he faced. He seems to have spent this time in meditation and reading to adjust his knowledge of the Old Testament to the truth that Jesus was the promised Messiah. I would venture to say that nobody would have even considered such a mental adjustment without the direct intervention of God. It would also take the direct teaching of the Holy Spirit to make the transition. For someone to make such a change in his life's work and thinking is tremendous proof of the validity of the resurrection and the person of Jesus as the Messiah. Luke does not tell us of any churches established by Paul in this area so it is unlikely that He began any such churches. It is likely that he did begin some of his teaching to Gentiles in this area as he developed his understanding of the Gospel. It also seems when he returned to Damascus that he preached there also but there is no record of a church being established.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he was taken up to the third heaven:

2Cor 12:2 “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago-- whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- such a man was caught up to the third heaven.

2Cor 12:3 And I know how such a man-- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows--

2Cor 12:4 was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

2Cor 12:5 On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses.”

He may be telling us here of the time when he received the revelation concerning Jesus Christ from God. The third heaven was the area reserved for God.

Gal 1:18 “Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.

Gal 1:19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

Gal 1:20 (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)

Gal 1:21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

Gal 1:22 And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ;

Gal 1:23 but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy."

Gal 1:24 And they were glorifying God because of me."

The pre-conversion Paul was well known to the Jews and Christians and now they were becoming aware of the preaching of the born-again Paul.

References

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- 6.) "The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 10", Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin, 1978.