

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A look at the Epistle to the Galatians: Galatians 1

Galatia was a broad strip of country in Asia Minor. Its population had exploded 300 years before Christ, when Gauls from Western France settled there. The peoples became mixed. Even today, tourists can recognise this mix by the number of the inhabitants who have fair hair and blue eyes. During his second missionary journey (Galatians 4:13), Paul was delayed in Galatia by an illness. Nevertheless, he used some of the time to preach the Gospel (Acts 16:6). He preached "Christ crucified" (3:1) and established a church there (1:6). The Galatian Christians loved him (4:15) so much that they would have given their own eyes to aid his physical affliction.

When Paul had left them, however, along came Judaizing teachers who pretended to be Christians. They tried to add to the Gospel of God's grace by stating that faith in Christ and His sacrificial work was not enough for salvation; but that they needed to keep the Old Testament law as well. For example, they insisted upon things like circumcision (Acts 15:1 and 5).

At the council in Jerusalem, Paul had stood out against such a thing in regard to the insistence of circumcising the Gentile believer called Titus. Little wonder that these professing Christians hated Paul and tried to discredit him at every opportunity. But Paul wasn't having any of it. He earnestly contended for the faith once delivered to the saints. All Christians are encouraged to do this. There has been a devilish diluting of the Gospel in this country in recent years. This, coupled with a materialistic attitude socially, has resulted in a steep decline in church attendance. When people go to church, they have a deep need to be met. The Gospel of God's Son has the answer to every need, but it is seldom preached with authority. The full truth is sacrificed in order that various religions may be brought closer together. This apostasy will flourish when the true church goes to be with Christ. The result will be the rise to fame of a false church. In the book of Revelation, this church is called Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth.

Do you remember the picture by Holman Hunt called "The Light of the World"? It shows Christ standing outside a church door with a lamp in one hand and knocking with the other. That represents the attitude of the Laodicean Church to Christ. They leave Him out in the cold thinking they have everything that they need. But Christ describes them as being neither hot nor cold. Ultimately, He spews them out of His mouth. May we never be guilty of dismissing the authority of Christ in order to adopt the false teachings of wolves in sheep's clothing.

So, Paul writes this epistle to prevent the Christians in Galatia from taking on board the false teachings of works for salvation. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8). No one in heaven will be able to sing those words, "I did it my way." It's God's way, and that way is through Christ alone. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father, except by me" (John 14:6). For this reason, Paul first establishes his apostolic authority in the first two verses. He then writes about the death of Christ from verses 3 to 5. Then, in verses 6 and 7, he identifies the way they have been diverted from the truth - insisting in verses 8 to 10 that there is no other gospel than the one he and the apostles had preached to them. He establishes that the latter had been given to him by direct revelation from Christ (verses 11 and 12). He then relates his actions before conversion and at the point of his conversion. He then outlines his movements after his conversion (verses 13-24).

Paul's Authority

Let us return in more detail to the first two verses where Paul declares his apostleship. "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead) and all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia..." An apostle is one who is "sent forth". The apostles of the Lord Jesus, in the primary sense, were those who had accompanied the chosen group during the ministry of the Lord (Acts 1:21-22). All of these, except for Judas Iscariot, had the authority of Christ's name to back up their witness. There were others who were called apostles in a secondary sense, for example, Barnabas, Andronicus and Junias to name but three.

So what about this apostleship of Paul. Was it authoritative? Although Paul had not accompanied the Lord Jesus and His disciples during the time of His ministry, His authority cannot be questioned. He was commissioned by the Lord Jesus directly to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 22 and 26). Here, in the first verse, Paul confirms this by

stating that his apostleship was not founded by a body of men, neither was he to represent men, but rather that his apostleship was of the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father. Any who dared to reject Paul as an apostle would be denying both the authority of the Father and the Son. Paul also mentions the fact that it was God the Father who raised Christ from among the dead. This emphasises the power of the authority of those who had commissioned his apostleship. Hence, Paul was to represent both of them.

It may be worthy to note the words of Paul “not of men, neither by men” again. This indicates that there can be no succession of apostleship. If there are those today who stand up and say, “We are apostles of Christ” meaning that they have the authority of the original apostles and can give new light, then they are lying. The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20). That foundation was laid almost 2,000 years ago. It needs no repairs or additions.

On the other hand, verse 2 shows that all Christians may be called “brethren” because they are part of God’s family (John 20:17). The brethren mentioned are not identified, but they did have fellowship with Paul in the sending of this letter to the churches of Galatia. Note also that there were a number of churches in the region. Each had a responsibility to witness for Christ, but each were also plagued with the same problems.

The Death of Christ

From verses 3 to 5, Paul greets them and immediately turns to their sights to the death of Christ. First, he desires that grace and peace would be theirs from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The word “grace” would remind them of the source of their salvation and blessing - even the divine favour of God. “Peace”, always accompanies grace. As a result of God’s grace, Christians have peace with God knowing they have been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Christ. They also know their sins forgiven (1 John 2:12) and that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). No amount of law-keeping could give them this assurance. Furthermore, the peace of God was resting upon them (Philippians 4:7). That is to say that their confidence was in God who would see them through any trial or difficulty - even death itself. The words of the greeting were a timely reminder to the Galatian churches.

In verse 4, Paul reminds them that Christ gave Himself for our sins in order to deliver us from this present evil world. He did this in accordance to the will of God and our Father. The verse may be split up as follows:

- “Who gave Himself” - *the Sacrifice* - He voluntarily delivered up Himself to death.
- “for our sins” - *the Purpose* - to bear the judgement we deserved.
- “to deliver us from this present evil age” - *the Intention* - to rescue us from the principles and practices of an age which rebels against God and, ultimately, turns people into Hell.
- “according to the will of God” - *the Motivation* - His obedience to the will of God was paramount, and He shared in the eternal plan.
- “and our Father” - *the Relationship* - His Father is now our Father.

Paul, filled with the wonder of these things, gives God the glory - and that to the ages of ages. So let it be.

The Diversion from the Faith

In verses 6 and 7, Paul seizes upon the fact that they were allowing themselves to be diverted from God the Father, who had called them into the grace of Christ. They were turning away from that especially intimate relationship of knowing God as their Father (with all its blessing) to go towards another gospel - one of Old Testament law-keeping where they could only know God as a Judge. Gospel means “Good News”. For the Galatians to put themselves under the yoke of bondage to the law was not “Good News”. Therefore, in verse 7, Paul tells them that this is not another gospel at all; but rather an agitating teaching of men that would turn the Gospel of God’s grace into teaching of the very opposite character. (This is the force of the Greek word “*metastropho*” which is translated as “pervert” in this verse).

Paul goes on to say that there is no other gospel but the one that they had already preached to them. There are two words for another in the section which lend emphasis to Paul’s writing. One means “another of the same kind” (*allos*) and the other means “another of a different or bad kind” (*heteros*). Paul goes on to speak hypothetically, stating that if the apostles themselves or even an angel came with another gospel to that already preached to them, it would be false. Teachers who came along with an alternative gospel were to be placed under judgment - they would be accursed.

This is a severe warning for those today who would say that they are Christians and yet refuse the authority of the New Testament Scriptures. Such men would say, “Much of the teaching of Paul is not for today. We have moved with the times. Paul’s teaching only applied to the culture of his day.” Have nothing to do with such people. The epistles express the Gospel of God. The epistles of Paul, in particular, outline Christian doctrine and practice

regarding the church of God. Let us not (in any way) despise the revealed and inspired Word of God which is as relevant today as it was in the day of Paul. And, as for culture, Christianity has its own God-founded culture. It is one that does not change and is based upon love in its highest sense. Furthermore, Paul is underscoring the fact that he is not a man-pleaser, but one who seeks to please God as the bondsman of Christ. It is noteworthy, that in the days just prior to the Lord's coming, professing Christians will only listen to those teachers whose doctrine pleases them rather than listening to those who bring sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3-5).

Direct Revelation.

Verses 11-12, find the apostle stating the fact that the Gospel that he preached was given directly by Jesus Christ. It was given independently of men. It had not been taught him by clever men like Gamaliel. No other apostles had been consulted. He hadn't attended a special school. The source and teacher of the Gospel was none other than Jesus Christ Himself. The Lord Jesus had unveiled this good news to Paul personally. God then breathed that Gospel through Paul to give us his epistles. They form part of the inspired Word of God. We believe that the scriptures as originally penned were, indeed, the very Word of God. (Lord willing, this subject will be dealt with in late July when we begin a series on "The Bible").

Actions Before Conversion.

Paul goes on to relate his actions and zeal before his conversion. He reminds them of his manner of life in the religion of the Jews and his exceptional zeal to uphold Judaism - that is to try to gain life by keeping the revealed Law of God in the Old Testament. An impossible task for anyone. In so doing, he persecuted and destroyed the church of God. This he was doing, as he then thought, in God's name. Acts chapters 8, 9, 22 and 26 tell us, in part, how he hunted Christians over a wide area. He entered houses to arrest men and women alike committing them to prison. He attempted to get them to blaspheme. He was even involved in the death of many.

Actions at the Point of Conversion.

It was at this time that God called him by His grace. There it is again! Grace! The undeserved favour of God. In this case, it called one who described himself as the chief of sinners. In 1 Timothy 3:13 Paul describes himself as a blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious. He then says, "But I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."

The words: "who separated me from my mother's womb" show that God had set apart Paul to be an object of salvation and apostleship before his birth. It was on the road to Damascus that Paul (then called Saul) met Jesus. There He submitted to the Lordship of Christ realising that he, previously, had been acting against the will of God. In persecuting Christians, Saul had also been persecuting Jesus Himself. But grace was shown to him. He was completely turned round, that is to say, "converted". He was now to energise all his zeal for Christ. An author writes from Paul's viewpoint:

*Sinners, it was not to angels
All this wondrous love was given,
But to one who scorned, despised Him,
Scorned and hated Christ in heaven.
From the lowest depths of darkness
To His city's radiant height,
Thus in me He told the measure
Of His love and His delight.*

Paul was commissioned to preach the Gospel of God's Son among the heathen (or Gentiles). Not only was the Son of God revealed to him; but He was also revealed in him. This seems to mean that the revelation of God's Son flooded his very being. If I look through the view-finder of a camera I might view my wife. I would recognise her for who she is. However, it is only when I press the camera's shutter control that I capture that image in the film. So it was with Paul and the Lord Jesus. The camera-man, so to speak, was God Himself and the film, the heart of the apostle Paul. Christ, the Object, was written in his heart and could now be revealed through the apostle to others. The same author writes again from Paul's viewpoint:

*I have seen the face of Jesus -
Tell me not of aught beside;
I have heard the voice of Jesus -
All my soul is satisfied.*

*In the radiance of the glory
First I saw His blessed face,
And for ever shall that glory
Be my home, my dwelling place.*

Actions After Conversion.

Following his conversion (verses 17-24), the apostle went to Arabia before returning to Damascus. He may have done this in order to be alone with the Lord. It was only after another three years that he stayed with the apostle Peter for about fifteen days in order to become acquainted with him. What an informative time that would have been for both of them. Of course, Paul's conversion and preaching were known to Peter as many reports had filtered through to Judaea concerning him. However, the churches in that area had not met him face to face. At some point, he did meet with James' the brother of the Lord before going to the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

It seems that Paul omitted details of his history in order to emphasise the fact that it was grace that won his heart and the Lord Jesus was the source of his revelation and teaching. He did this to combat those who refused his teaching in the churches of Galatia. Nonetheless, he who had once persecuted the church became subject to vehement persecution once he became a Christian. He who had made others suffer, suffered much for the name of Christ. The Gospel concerning God's Son was now the life of this apostle. May God give us the grace for it to be ours also.

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