

Galatians Study, Chapter 1
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Paul's salutation is designed to address one of the accusations made against him by the "Jewish faction" of the church--Jewish Christians who continued to believe in the necessity of observing the law for salvation. One of their central arguments against the legitimacy of Paul's message was that he didn't have the authority of Jesus' original disciples. Paul had not met Jesus. He had not heard Jesus speak. He did not know Jesus as Peter, James, John and the others—those who heard directly from Jesus Christ himself. Rather, according to them, Paul was a Johnny-come-lately who had only converted several years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Therefore, he was not an apostle in the sense of having been sent out by Jesus after his resurrection from the dead. (See Matthew 28:16-20) Because they, the "Judaizers," had been taught Jesus' message directly from the original apostles, they argued, the Galatians needed to listen to them instead. They had the truth about salvation. Paul did not.

In the salutation, Paul counters this argument by claiming that he was not sent out as an apostle through any human authority; neither was he commissioned by any human institution as pastors ever since have been, but rather "...through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead..." (Vs 1) Paul expressly adds "and God the Father who raised him from the dead" for two reasons. First, the disciples who knew Jesus became apostles only after Jesus sent them out as the risen Lord. Paul's argument is that he too was sent and commissioned as an apostle by Jesus, post-resurrection. Moreover, because the Father had raised Jesus, the Father's authority was exercised through Jesus himself. In other words, Paul was called to be an apostle in the same way as the disciples had been called. Therefore, Paul has the same message and the same authority as any of the original disciples who were taught directly by Jesus himself. The argument by Paul's Jewish detractors is false.

Paul also includes "...all the members of God's family who are with me" in the salutation. Paul did not travel alone. He always had companions to whom he had entrusted the message of the true gospel with him, in order to help establish his Christian communities. They too recognize Paul's authority and concur with what he has to say in this letter. As members of God's family,

they too have been instructed in the Christian faith, and through faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit, they too know what the good news means.

Paul writes, "To the churches of Galatia." Obviously, Paul had helped establish more than one Christian community in this region. Galatia is a large province in eastern Asia Minor (now Turkey) but Paul had limited his travels to the southern part of Galatia. These communities were probably not far from one another and so communication between them would not have been difficult.

After the salutation, Paul always includes a greeting in his letters. Usually, this greeting constitutes a thanksgiving for the community to whom Paul is writing. NOT in this case. (See Romans 1:8-17, I Corinthians 1:4-9) Paul rather goes right to the heart of the gospel message. The Galatians were told that faith in Christ was not enough to make them righteous (justified) before God. In addition to that, they were expected to observe the law. In other words, freedom from sin did not come through faith alone but also by doing what the law prescribed.

This, according to Paul, is in direct contradiction to the gospel message. That message is that Christ "gave his life" in order that we might be set free from sin. In other words, that Christ died in order to remove our sins; this doesn't mean that God simply forgets about the fact that we are bound to sin and can't free ourselves from it. Rather, Christ's death on the cross for us has the power to free us from the power of sin so that we don't continue as slaves. Forgiveness means unbinding us from sin so that we grow in holiness, unlike the rest of the world. ("this present evil age")

"...the will of our God and Father" was to free us from the power of sin in order that we might grow in righteousness. The law cannot do that. All the law can do is exert pressure on us so that we are restrained from giving the sin in our hearts free reign. This is not freedom from sin. It is pressure to control sinful acts while the heart that produces the motivation to sin remains unchanged. How Christ's death has this power remains unstated at this point. However, this constitutes Paul's opening salvo against the message those who contradicted Paul's teaching. This is not a thanksgiving for the Galatian Christians. It is an opening attack against Paul's detractors.

Verse 6 opens with the words, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ..." Paul is clearly agitated over the apparent willingness of the Galatians to accept the message of the Judaizers. Paul had called them to become participants in the grace of Christ. This means having a share in the power of Christ. Grace does not restrain us from sinful behavior as the law does. Rather, it cleanses our hearts and thereby frees us from the compulsion to sin. The Galatians abandoned the blessings of this grace and adopted a righteousness of the law instead. This only keeps us bound to sin. It leaves us enslaved so that we remain in our sin and therefore unreconciled to God. This was not the will of God in Jesus Christ. Were this the case, Christ's death would mean nothing. This is why Paul opens with an expression of astonishment. Who would trade freedom from sin for slavery to both sin and the law? And yet, that is precisely what the Galatians did by believing the message of the Jewish Christians.

Paul continues, "...and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." Here, Paul names the issue that moved him to write this letter. His detractors were culpable of actually betraying the gospel message. Paul's anger is not primarily centered in the Judaizer's insults against his authority. Rather, the more serious problem is the fact that they distorted the gospel of Christ. This was a betrayal of Christ himself. By adding the requirements of the law, they actually nullify the power of God's grace so that the Galatians no longer trust in the cross of Christ to free them from sin but rather turn to the law instead.

Paul goes even further in expressing the seriousness of this problem. There is no other gospel of Christ. Anyone who distorts the message that forgiveness and salvation come from God's grace in Jesus Christ and that we are thereby called to faith in Christ rather than works of the law should be "accused." That is, not only rejected, but condemned as well. For in so doing, they are no longer offering what God has called us to offer. This might be compared to the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob tricked his brother Esau into trading his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. Esau thereby lost his right to a blessing from God and received nothing of value in return. That is what the Judaizers did to the Galatians.

Paul then in verse 10 returns back to the issue of his calling as an apostle. As an apostle, his responsibility is to serve Christ. Were he seeking the approval of some human faction, as his detractors were, he would betray his office as an apostle for Christ. This further underlines his argument that he was called to become an apostle by Christ himself, not by any human institution or faction. This being the case, he must proclaim the gospel of God's grace, and this gospel is received by faith. It has nothing to do with any prescriptive behavior.

Starting at verse 11, Paul then goes into the details of his story, and of how he became an apostle. First, he asserts once again that he received the gospel "through a revelation of Jesus Christ." In other words, it was made known to him by Jesus Christ himself. Luke tells the story of Paul's encounter with Christ in Acts 9. As Paul himself says here, he was in the process of persecuting the followers of Jesus "for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors."

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul writes that he was a Pharisee (3:5), the group that was fanatically committed to observing the law. Nevertheless, as Paul understands it after his encounter with Christ, God had chosen him even before he was born to become an apostle. This is consistent with the way in which the Hebrew prophets had understood their calling. Jeremiah, for example, says the same thing of himself. When they (Paul and Jeremiah) experienced the Spirit of God coming to them, not because they asked for it or sought it in any way, but because God had bestowed it on them, it was clear that this calling came from God to them. They had been chosen.

Similarly, Paul clearly did not seek to become an apostle. Jesus chose him when he revealed himself to Paul, even though Paul, then Saul, was a persecutor of the church. This clearly demonstrates that Paul was an apostle through the will of God, not through his own will. He had been chosen just as the original disciples had been chosen. Moreover, Paul writes, this calling was specifically to the Gentiles. It was Jesus Christ who had sent Paul to the Galatians. Therefore, he preached to them under the authority of Christ himself.

Paul also gives a brief narrative of what he did after that revelation took place. He wants to make it clear that he did not learn what the gospel message is from one or more of the original disciples. He therefore

emphasizes that he did not go to Jerusalem and consult with any of them. Rather, he went off into Arabia and then to Damascus in Syria for a three-year period. Only after that did he travel to Jerusalem and, while there, met with Peter—considered the leader of the original twelve—for a mere fifteen days. He then went back into Syria, perhaps to the mixed Gentile and Jewish church in Antioch, a church that later sent him out on his missionary journey.

What he did while in Arabia and Syria he does not say. I think it is safe to assume that his point has to do with how he came to know the power and meaning of the gospel of Christ. Because he did not consult with anyone else, who was he with during this period?

Receiving Jesus Christ into our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit does not happen overnight. Paul had been convinced that in order to become acceptable before God and thereby receive the assurance of salvation, a person had to meticulously observe the laws of Moses. Moreover, he was not casual observant Jew. He was a fanatical one. Given this, it's clear that coming to terms with the facts that salvation had been accomplished by Jesus Christ, that the power of this salvation was bestowed on us through the Spirit who brought us Christ in a spiritual sense, and that we receive the Spirit of Christ through faith, this would have taken time and a great deal of struggle with himself for Paul to accept this. My view is that Paul's journey into Arabia, which is a desert, was a spiritual journey that mirrored the journey of faith of his ancestors when they traveled to the promise land. No one receives Christ into his heart overnight. This is an ongoing process of growth. Growth in faith requires personal change. It requires that we turn away from self and to Christ. It means letting go of self-will and embracing the Spirit. This is a struggle, and before Paul was ready to preach, he had to go through this transformation in himself.

In any case, his main point to the Galatians is that he received the gospel not from humans, but from Jesus Christ. It is essential for him to make this clear to them so that they will accept his authority and the genuineness of his message. He further indicates this by pointing out that other Christians were amazed by the change in him. They knew him as a persecutor. Now he was an apostle of the message had had formally tried to stamp out. This was a strong witness to the power of Jesus Christ and "...they glorified God because of me."