

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON THIRTEEN)

“THE BELIEVER AND PREACHER” (PART 3)

GALATIANS 1:15-20

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

15 But when the one who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace was pleased

16 to reveal his Son in me so that I could preach him among the Gentiles, I did not go to ask advice from any human being.

17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, but right away I departed to Arabia, and then returned to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and get information from him, and I stayed with him fifteen days.

19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.

20 I assure you that, before God, I am not lying about what I am writing to you!

We have noted in previous Lessons that with verse **11** Paul begins a new section of his letter to the believers in Galatia. In this section, Paul relates his personal experiences to his readers in an effort to defend the divine nature of his Apostleship and the Gospel that he preached.

His fierce opponents the Judaizers, pointed to his lack of conformity to Judaism as proof that his ministry and message were not really of God. They argued that he did not stand in the apostolic tradition. It is this misrepresentation that Paul answers in this section of his letter. His lack of conformity to Judaism was divinely deliberate. God had chosen to reveal Himself and His message to Paul in a unique way. Both his apostolic ministry and his message were divinely bestowed. Therefore, anyone who added anything to the Gospel that he preached was in danger of divine judgment.

The best way for Paul to prove the authenticity of his ministry and message is to reach into his past and remind the Galatian believers of the way that God had dealt with him. His past life was already known to his readers, but it was obvious that they did not fully understand what those experiences meant. So, Paul flashes on the screen pictures from his past as evidence that his apostleship and his Gospel are truly of God. In this Lesson, we will continue to look at the evidence he presents.

In verse **15**, Paul explains that his conversion was the result of God, “setting him apart” from birth, and “calling” him by His grace. He explains to the Galatian believers who were being troubled by the legalistic teaching of the Judaizers, that both his election and call were products of God’s grace.

In verse **16** he says that God revealed His Son, Jesus Christ “in Him.” The word “*reveal*” is a translation of the Greek word **apokaluptó**: (**ap-ok-al-ooop’-to**), which refers to the disclosure of something by the removal of that which had previously concealed it. In the case of Paul, the idea is the removal of that which had concealed the truth concerning Jesus Christ—the truth that He was the Messiah prophesied of throughout the Old Testament, the Redeemer of Israel and his personal Saviour.

Paul is not saying here that God called him in order that He might reveal the Lord Jesus Christ to the Gentile world through him, even though that was indeed the case. He is saying rather that God called him in order that He might reveal the Lord Jesus Christ personally to him! What we are

dealing with here is an **internal** revelation. Paul is emphasizing his **inward** experience of the grace of God in revealing to him the true nature and character of the Lord Jesus Christ, His Person and work, which had previously been hidden from him.

God had to reveal Christ **in** Paul before He could reveal Christ **through** Paul. God chose Paul to preach among the Gentiles the same grace that he had experienced, and it was important for him to experience it before he preached it. This, in itself, is evidence that Paul's conversion was of God; for certainly a prejudiced Jewish rabbi would never decide, in and of himself, to minister to the despised Gentiles!

Paul goes on to tell his readers in verse **16**, that when God was pleased to reveal His Son, Jesus Christ in him, he *“did not go to ask advice from any human being.”* Paul is saying in effect here, “I did not consult with anyone in order to learn the opinion of others as to this revelation I received, or to obtain instruction from them, or guidance, or advice.” This would have included even Ananias, the disciple whom God had sent to minister to him after his Damascus experience with the risen Christ. Paul is again asserting that his apostolic commission and message came to him directly from God, and that neither his commission nor his message was affected in any way by human intervention.

In previous verses Paul had emphasized that he had not received his Gospel message from human beings **before** or **at the time** of his conversion. Now he states categorically that he was free from human influences **afterward** as well. Though Paul certainly met and had fellowship with other believers after his conversion, he did not consult them on doctrinal matters.

In verse **17** he writes, *“Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, but right away I departed to Arabia, and then returned to Damascus.”*

Paul is explaining that he had no personal contact with any of the Apostles right after his conversion. The logical thing for him to have done after his conversion was to introduce himself to the church at Jerusalem and seek to benefit from the spiritual instruction of those who had been saved and called to be Apostles before him. But it was evidently not the will of the Lord for him to do so. It is very likely that if he had gone to Jerusalem immediately after his conversion, his ministry might have been identified with that of the Jewish faction of the church and this could have hindered his work among the Gentiles.

Paul says, that he did not go to Jerusalem, to see those who were Apostles *“before”* him. The word *“before”* is evidently used in its temporal sense. Paul is referring here to those who were Apostles before him in point of time, not in point of preeminence. The Greek text is literally translated as, “the before me Apostles.” This shows that Paul recognized the apostleship of the Twelve as essentially the same in character as his apostleship.

Instead of going to Jerusalem to consult with the twelve original Apostles, Paul *“departed to Arabia.”* In the solitude of the Arabian Desert Paul gave himself to study, prayer, and meditation. Verse **18** indicates that he may have spent the better part of three years there in seminary with Rabbi Jesus. The original apostles had received three years of teaching from the Lord Jesus, and now Paul was going to have his own opportunity to be taught of the Lord.

The Greek New Testament scholar, **Kenneth Wuest**, makes the following interesting comments in respect of Paul’s visit to Arabia right after his conversion:

“Paul does not state his purpose in doing so [i.e. going to Arabia], but his statement to the effect that after his conversion he did not consult with anybody but went into Arabia, leads one to the clear inference that he wanted to be alone with God. The word Arabia is the transliteration (spelling) of a Hebrew word meaning 'an arid, thus a

sparsely populated place.' He needed to be alone with God. He needed time and isolation in order to think. The revelation of the Son of God had blasted away the foundations of the Pharisaic thought structure which he had been building up with such consummate skill and zeal, and it had come tumbling down in ruins about his head. This revelation also furnished him with another foundation upon which to build a new theological structure. But the replacement of the ruined structure with a new one could not be the work of a day or a month. There in Arabia, isolated from all human contact, alone with God, the great apostle restudied his Old Testament scriptures, not now with the Pharisaic traditions vitiating [impairing] his thinking, but, led by the Holy Spirit, with the central fact of the Cross of the Lord Jesus as the controlling factor in his meditations. Out of all this study emerged the Pauline system of doctrine as we have it presented in **Romans.**"

Here again, Paul is emphasizing the fact that his call and his message were not influenced by the views of any human being.

We must not understand the word "*Arabia,*" to necessarily be a reference to the country now known Saudi Arabia. "Arabia" was the term applied by Greek writers of the First Century to the whole or various portions of the vast peninsula between the Red Sea on the southwest, the Persian Gulf on the southeast, and the Euphrates River on the northeast. There is nothing to indicate exactly where in this vast territory Paul went. In fact, he may not have ventured very far from Damascus because the Arabian deserts were within easy reach of that city.

When he eventually left Arabia, Paul did not go to Jerusalem. Instead he "*returned to Damascus.*" Again, it would have been reasonable to expect him to have visited Jerusalem at this point, but again the Lord directed otherwise. This return to Damascus, the place where he was first persecuted by the Jews, is not recorded anywhere else in Scripture. Certainly it was a risky thing for Paul to have gone back to Damascus where it was known that he had embraced Jesus Christ and Christianity.

The Jewish religious leaders there, who before his conversion would have considered him to be their champion against Christianity, would now definitely have sought to put him to death. His return to Damascus and the danger it brought to his life are further evidence that the Jewish leaders considered Paul an enemy, and therefore that his experience with Christ was an authentic one.

During all this time he had never met with one of the Apostles, nor does it appear that he had intercourse with any individual of note among the Christians.

In verses **18** and **19**, Paul speaks about his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion to Christianity.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and get information from him, and I stayed with him fifteen days.

19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.

The words “*after three years*” in verse **18**, do not merely refer to a lapse of time. Paul is showing all through this section, that he is entirely independent of the apostles in Jerusalem. Therefore, the three years have reference to the period of time after his conversion, not to the time after his return from Arabia. The main purpose of his visit was to meet with Peter. The phrase “*after three years,*” clearly indicates that he did not go to Jerusalem in order to receive any commission from Peter. He had been with His Lord and Master for three years before he ever saw the face of an Apostle. He mentions his fifteen day stay to show how brief were his interactions with Peter.

In verse **19**, he informs his readers that the only other Apostle he saw was James the half-brother of Jesus according to the flesh. Clearly Paul did not receive either his apostleship or his message from the Jerusalem church. There simply was neither the time nor the opportunity for that. In any case, he had already received both directly from Christ.

In **Acts 9:26-30**, Luke gives us a summary of the events surrounding his visit to Jerusalem:

26 When he arrived in Jerusalem, he attempted to associate with the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe that he was a disciple.

27 But Barnabas took Saul, brought him to the apostles, and related to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

28 So he was staying with them, associating openly with them in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.

29 He was speaking and debating with the Greek-speaking Jews, but they were trying to kill him.

30 When the brothers found out about this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

(New English Translation)

If Paul's ministry and message had been from the Apostles, he would have been welcomed by them with open arms; but because his experience had been with the Lord Jesus alone, the Apostles were suspicious of him. It is likely that he would not have even been able to see Peter and James without the assistance of Barnabas.

The reason why his visit to Jerusalem was so short was because the Hellenistic Jews were seeking his life, and also because the Lord Jesus appeared to him in the Temple and ordered him to leave Jerusalem since his ministry would not be received by the Jews there. Paul himself informs us of this in **Acts 22:17-21**:

17 When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance

18 and saw the Lord saying to me, 'Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'

19 I replied, 'Lord, they themselves know that I imprisoned and beat those in the various synagogues who believed in you.'

20 And when the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing nearby, approving, and guarding the cloaks of those who were killing him.'

21 Then he said to me, 'Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

(New English Translation)

Undoubtedly Paul would have spent meaningful time with Peter and James during his short visit, but there is no suggestion that either of them gave him any theological instruction or apostolic endorsement for his ministry. Paul was already a mature believer when he met Peter and James in Jerusalem. As one commentator notes,

"The contrast between Paul's fifteen-day stay in the Holy City and the three years he was on his own reveals that he did not go there to learn the gospel or to have James or Peter appoint him as an apostle. Remember that Paul is dealing with false teachers who are undermining his authority, claiming that the other apostles commissioned him, not the Savior Himself. The Judaizers probably knew that Paul visited Jerusalem after his conversion and likely claimed he received his call there. Paul is setting the record straight, indicating that his visit was too short for him to have learned his gospel from Peter and James... Matthew Henry says Paul mentions these time frames and swears an oath regarding the truth of his words 'so that it could not well be claimed that he was indebted to any other either for his knowledge of the gospel or his authority to preach it.'

Why, then, did Paul go to Jerusalem on this occasion? ...Paul went to Jerusalem to meet and greet other church leaders. He probably wanted to learn about Peter's and James' experiences with Jesus and some of the details of Christ's earthly ministry. But this data only added color to the basic theological content of the gospel that Paul learned from Jesus Himself."

In verse **20** Paul writes, *"I assure you that, before God, I am not lying about what I am writing to you!"* These words refer primarily to what he had just written in verses **18** and **19**, as these were facts that clearly showed Paul's independence from those who had been Apostles prior to his call. He considered these facts to be so important in his demonstration of his apostolic independence that he adds the words, *"Before God, I am not lying about what I am writing to you!"*

The strength of Paul's language is explained by the insidious falsehoods of the Judaizers regarding his supposed dependence upon the original Twelve Apostles. The logical inference is that they had circulated statements to the effect that Paul had spent much time at Jerusalem with the apostles there. He denies this charge most vehemently.

It is important for us to understand that Paul is not defending his apostolic ministry or message in order to merely win an argument. He is not presenting evidence of his independence of the Jerusalem Apostles because he desires to boast. In order to understand why he is so passionately defending the uniqueness of his calling and Gospel, we have to remind ourselves of the situation that occasioned his writing to the Galatian believers. In verses **6-10** he informs us of his main reason for writing his letter:

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are following a different gospel—

7 not that there really is another gospel, but there are some who are disturbing you and wanting to distort the gospel of Christ.

8 But even if we (or an angel from heaven) should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be condemned to hell!

9 As we have said before, and now I say again, if any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let him be condemned to hell!

10 Am I now trying to gain the approval of people, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ!

(New English Translation)

Paul's passionate defense of his ministry and message is caused by his love for his beloved converts who are going astray because they have started to believe a message that is contrary to the Gospel. Paul is engaged in a titanic struggle against the Judaizers for the spiritual wellbeing of the Galatian believers and he is determined to prevail, by God's grace!

