

## **In Defense of His Message**

### **Galatians 1:1-2:14**

#### **Greeting: 1:1-5**

Paul's introductions were modeled after the traditional letters of his day. The one difference is that Paul always made them distinctively Christian. In his introduction to the churches in Galatia, Paul immediately addresses one of the problems. He begins the letter defending the source of his authority as an apostle. This was an area of contention with his opponents. Paul claimed to be commissioned by God through Jesus. English translations may not communicate Paul's point very clearly. He makes two separate statements. His commission neither came from a community of people (probably a reference to the leaders at Antioch) nor through any human individual (probably meaning an apostle). Paul ends the opening introduction with a statement of the foundation principle of the gospel (the resurrection) and a statement that others supported his ministry (who are with me).

Paul then moved to his familiar prayerful greeting of grace and peace. But in this greeting he addresses a major point in this letter - grace vs. law. The idea of peace is more than absence of war, but carries the idea of that which gives fullness to life. For Paul, wholeness of life comes from God and Jesus. Grace and peace may be a shorthand way for Paul to express the essence of the gospel.

Paul's agitation toward what was happening in Galatia can probably be seen in the following statement about Jesus' sacrifice for sins. Paul's opponents failed to understand the significance of Jesus' sacrifice. For them, Jesus was not all sufficient for salvation. Paul's opponents believed it was the observance of Torah (for both Jew and Gentile) that would deliver them from the "present evil age." Paul's gospel proclaimed that teaching and observing Torah did not have the power to deliver them. Paul believed freedom came only through the gracious sacrifice of Jesus and the working of the Spirit in the life of disciples. Freedom would not come through the observance of laws and rituals. Paul concluded his opening by stating that it was God's will that the world would be set free by the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. This was the very gospel Paul was preaching and the gospel his opponents were perverting.

## **The Rebuke: 1:6-10**

Not only did Paul not open the letter with the usual greeting and thanksgiving, he continued to attack his opponents. If the audience (NT letters were read to congregations because most could not read) had not anticipated the tone of Paul's letter before they heard it read, they quickly experienced the tone. While his opponents may have viewed their message as complimenting Paul's message, Paul did not see it that way. His language is very strong. They had led the Galatians into deserting or being turncoats against the God who had called them into the grace of Christ. Dunn, in his commentary, makes an interesting point. There are texts in the book of 2 Maccabees (4:46; 7:24) that use this word to speak of Jewish turncoats who did not side with the Maccabees during the second century rebellion against the Seleucids two centuries earlier. If Dunn were correct, the preachers from Jerusalem would have made the connection. Connecting his opponents to the "turncoats" during the rebellion was a highly charged accusation. Paul's language is also very similar to the statements in Exodus 32:8 and Deuteronomy 8:16 which spoke of Israel's apostasy at Mt. Sinai.

"Different" is a word that means something of a different kind. There is another word Paul could have used that carried the idea of another of the same kind. The opponent's message was not a minor insignificant twist to Paul's gospel. Paul's opponents had turned the gospel into a totally different message that was in opposition to the gospel.

Paul was so sure that what he preached was the true gospel that he makes two very bold statements. (1) Even if those who first brought the gospel to the Galatians were to say something different than the original message, their message should not be accepted. The "we" of verse 8 probably refers not only to Paul but also to the other missionaries who worked with Paul. (2) Paul goes beyond his own authority and says the same about a message from a heavenly messenger. This was a very bold statement for Paul to make. It was common in the OT for an angel to bring the word of God to people. Such occurrences can be found in the life of Abraham, Moses, Daniel, and Ezekiel.

Paul's strong language continued with a call for those who preached another gospel to be "accursed." In Greek this word can simply speak of something being

dedicated, but it can also be a part of a curse. In the LXX the word is used to speak of something dedicated to God for the purpose of destruction (Lev. 27:28-29; Deut. 7:26). Such a statement seems extremely harsh. Dunn (pg. 46) writes that the statement is somewhat rhetoric and therefore hyperbolic. One reason to view it as such is found in texts that state the same thing concerning Paul (Rom. 9:3) and Jesus (1 Cor. 12:3).

Paul ends this section with an emotional outburst that comes out of the emotions of verse 9. Another charge against Paul may have been that by not demanding Gentile converts to follow the teaching of Torah, Paul was trying to please them. Paul categorically denied that anything he taught was motivated by what people thought of his preaching.

### **The Source of Paul's Gospel: 1:11- 24**

In this section readers are given the first hint as to what the specific problems were that Paul addressed in his letter. There were problems concerning the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. People were challenging Paul's message to the Gentiles. One of the main points of contention was circumcision.

Paul's opponents were claiming that Paul's message was a watered down version of the gospel because he did not include anything about circumcision or other ethical or moral codes of Torah. They also charged that Paul's message had been handed down to him from some human authority and that he had been commissioned by a human agency.

Paul was emphatic that the source of his gospel was neither of human origin nor was it given to him through some human source. His gospel was of heavenly origin. The phrase, "I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 12) can mean that Jesus was the source of the revelation or that he is the subject of the revelation. This certainly speaks of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul was most likely making the point that his encounter was of heavenly origin and that God revealed Jesus to him at that time. This same idea that God is the one who gave the revelation is stated in verses 15-16.

Paul then went into a brief history of his past in order to emphasize things that relate to his argument in this text. Some of the words used made very powerful

statements to a Jew both about who Paul had been and who he had become after embracing Christianity. One is “Judaism.” It is used only here in the NT. Its first known use is found in 2 Maccabees (2:21; 8:1; 14:38). The word came to designate “a body of practices that distinguish Jews from Gentiles, particularly with reference to circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance, and the system of sacrifices and feasts (Hayes, pg. 213).”

Another important term is Paul’s description of himself as a “zealous” observer of the Law. Remember this for some later comments in Galatians. The word “zealous” is more than a description of Paul’s vigorous activity. It is a word that during the second temple period (the rebuilding of the temple after Babylonian exile) had come to characterize those who sought to preserve the Jewish religion and its ethical purity. One OT event, among others, which the Jews looked to as a model for those who were *zealous* for God, was the story of Phinehas in Numbers 25. In order to protect Israel from the wrath of God, Phinehas speared two people who were attempting to lead Israel into immorality and idolatry. The text says that because of Phinehas’ *zeal* God did not consume the Israelites. Another such event in Israel’s history was in 167 BCE while Israel was under the Seleucid rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The priest Mattathias killed a fellow Jew who was attempting to offer a pagan sacrifice on the altar in the temple. It is stated in 1 Maccabees, “Thus he burned with *zeal for the Law*, just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu.” Later Mattathias would say, “Let everyone who is *zealous* for the Law and supports the covenant come out to me (1 Macc 2:27). This same word is used in describing Elijah’s battle against the prophets of Baal (1 Macc 2:58). Paul’s use of this word places him within the heritage of a devoted Jew in the tradition of Phinehas, Mattathias, and Elijah.

In his statement about being set apart before birth (v. 15), Paul identified his commission as an apostle with the call of prophets in the OT (Jer. 1:4-5; Isaiah 49:1, 5-6). Paul was not converted from one religion to another, he was summoned by the God of Israel to take up a prophetic mission as had Jeremiah and Isaiah.

There are two possibilities as to what Paul meant when he talked about God’s revelation to him (v. 16). It can be interpreted “to” or “in.” It could simply refer to the experience on the road to Damascus. Or it could be saying much more. Hays suggests

that this could be translated “in,” indicating that God made Jesus manifest in Paul’s life and teaching so that his life and teaching could be an effective proclamation to the Gentiles.

In order to address his opponent’s challenge that he had received his gospel from human authority, Paul spoke of his limited contact with the apostles or with the church in Jerusalem (vv. 16c-24). After the revelation, he did not go to Jerusalem but into Arabia and then to Damascus. We do not know why he went there or what he did there. Any suggestion is mere speculation. Paul’s main point is that he did not speak to any apostles for at least three years.

After three years (probably from the time of his revelation), Paul did go to Jerusalem. He spent only a few days with Peter, had even less contact with James, and had no official contact with the Jerusalem church. After that brief visit he went to Syria and Cilicia. This is the location of Antioch, the base for Paul’s early missionary trips (Acts 13-14) and Tarsus, his hometown. This area is also a great distance from Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church did not know Paul by sight at this time. They only knew the story of a former persecutor who was then preaching “the faith,” and they glorified God as a result.

“The faith” is, in Paul’s mind, a synonymous term for the gospel. It is not a system of doctrines but speaks of the work and person of Jesus.

### **A Meeting In Jerusalem: 2:1-10**

The chronology of Paul’s visits to Jerusalem and this whole section is somewhat difficult so space will not be spent on this issue. Focus will be placed on things that are important to Paul’s response to his opponents.

The lack of influence Jerusalem had on Paul’s preaching can be seen in that he had no contact with Jerusalem for fourteen years. Then, as the result of a revelation, he did go to Jerusalem. The meeting in Jerusalem was a private one including only the “acknowledged leaders” or “those who seemed to be leaders.” Paul had made another pointed statement in verse 6 where he again called the leaders in Jerusalem “acknowledged leaders.” Paul was probably making a point that even though these were leaders in the church, the real authority for the gospel did not rest with them. It’s

authority came from God. He went on to make a point that God shows no partiality. In verse 9, Paul again referred to them as “acknowledged pillars” making the point that the leaders, James, John, and Cephas, had accepted that he had been commissioned by God to preach a Law-free gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter had been commissioned to the circumcised.

It was important for Paul to have had Barnabas and Titus with him. Barnabas was a Jew with great credentials. He was a Levite who had been an influential member of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37) and Antioch (Acts 13:1). He was circumcised. Titus was an un-circumcised Greek. His presence in the meeting took it beyond a theoretical discussion to a present reality. The two of them stood as an example of the freedom in Christ. A circumcised Jew and an uncircumcised Gentile had been worshipping and working together as missionaries.

The only request the leaders in Jerusalem made was that Paul should remember the poor, which he was eager to do. It was important to note that remembering the poor was found in Torah’s teaching (Deut 15:7-11). Paul did not reject the teachings of Torah. Paul had an understanding of the intent and purpose of Torah, an understanding his opponents did not have.

Paul’s gospel was given a stamp of approval by the fact that the Jerusalem leaders did not compel Titus to be circumcised even though there had apparently been pressure from the false brethren. It is not clear whether these false brethren had slipped into the meeting at Jerusalem or Paul was referring to their being sent earlier by those in Jerusalem to spy on Paul, possibly in Antioch. Paul’s use of military metaphors to speak of the activities is another indication of the seriousness Paul placed on the issues (spies, infiltrated the ranks, enslaved free citizens). As an army should when being attacked, Paul did not yield. The use of these metaphors show the passion Paul had for this issue. Part of the reason for not bending to the pressure was so that the Galatians (or others) would not be confused about the “truth of the gospel.”

For the first time in this letter Paul used the ideas of freedom and slavery. This will be a major theme in Galatians (3:28; 4:1-11, 21-5:1,13). Paul saw imposing circumcision, as well as other law items, as putting Christians in slavery.

## **Rebuke of Peter: 2:11-14**

A very troubling event occurred during Peter's trip to Antioch. To Paul this undermined the agreement that had earlier been made in Jerusalem. Had Jerusalem taken a step back from the earlier discussion? Some suggest there may have been a shift in the power structure in Jerusalem.

Antioch was the largest city in the Roman Empire at the time and had a large Jewish population as well as a large number of god-fearers (Gentiles who worshipped Yahweh). Prior to the coming of representatives from James in Jerusalem, Peter had eaten with the Gentiles. But Peter was afraid of the representatives from Jerusalem and separated himself from the Gentiles. They even influenced Barnabas to join them. Hypocrisy is the putting on of a mask to play a role. It is playing a part that does not represent a person's true convictions. What Peter was doing did not represent his true convictions. Peter was calling on the Gentiles to live a life he was not always willing to live. Most importantly, Peter was not living "consistently with the truth of the gospel." The gospel is not about Jewish rituals that form separations between people. Anything that creates barriers between people is anti-gospel.

In the ancient world table fellowship was a sign of acceptance. Although there were no laws against Jews eating with Gentiles, the prohibitions on certain foods were a major obstacle. During the Maccabean crisis that was mentioned earlier, food laws became a test case for national loyalty and religious faithfulness (1 Macc 1:62-62). Eating with Gentiles where non-kosher food might be served was a risky proposition. Such close association might lead to contact with idolatry and immorality. Jubilees 22:16 states, "Eat not with them ... for their works are unclean." The magnitude of the issues can also be seen in Acts 10:28. On top of that, table fellowship would have involved the Lord's Supper that was celebrated in the context of a communal meal. The Lord's Supper was a symbol of unity, but it at times became a point of divisiveness in the church.

It is also worth mentioning that Peter, for years, had been empowered by the Spirit of God. But that did not prevent him from being swayed by the false brethren and caving in to their pressure. Those in whom the Spirit of God dwells still have to allow the Spirit to lead them and continue to turn to God for strength.

## Conclusion

God has taken care of the sin and death problem that has dominated humanity. Freedom from sin and death, relationship with God, and the ability to mature in Christ in spite of humanity's weak flesh has been provided by the faithful act of God in Jesus and by the ongoing transformational presence of the Spirit. None of this comes from human effort. Any message that places any of the burdens on the shoulders of people instead of giving all the credit to God is not the gospel. Such a message is a foreign perversion that is no gospel at all.

As we continue to look into this letter, it will become more evident that Paul had a passion for Christians to understand more deeply the wonder and power of the cross. A lack of understanding often leads people down a path that diminishes the glory of God and all sufficiency of the cross. It was a challenge for the Jews in the OT to totally trust in God's power and promises, and it has continued to be a challenge throughout church history. What is Christianity all about? What does it really mean to be Christian? Often people throw in things that are their ideas rather than God's.

People also tend to be very protective of what they know and are comfortable with. Change, particularly in areas that are considered to be the basic things of someone's culture are had to give up, and people often turn to harsh tactics to protect what they know and love. Dr. Dunn (pg. 128) states, *"When group boundaries are (perceived to be) under threat, a natural response is to castigate those who threaten those boundaries as polar opposites in order to strengthen the group's own identity and distinctiveness."*

## Points to Be Made

1. The mystery of God's work in Christ to redeem the cosmos can only come through revelation from God. People cannot image God's salvation out of their own wisdom.
2. A "different gospel" has nothing to do with things such as when in the service the Lord's Supper can be observed or whether or not churches can join together to support a mission. A perverted gospel gives people some of the credit for obtaining salvation and maturing spiritually rather than giving all the glory to God.

3. A “different gospel” creates ungodly boundaries that the gospel is designed to take down.
4. Teaching a “different gospel” is a grave mistake.
5. Being fearful of others (as in the case of Peter) rather than embracing the gospel and relying on the strength of God can lead to hypocrisy. What is at stake makes teaching and living the message of the gospel of paramount importance.