

From Enemy to Evangelist

Galatians 1:11-24

TEXT

Galatians 1:11-24 “But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. **12** For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. **13** For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: **14** And profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. **15** But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, **16** To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: **17** Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. **18** Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. **19** But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother. **20** Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not. **21** Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia; **22** And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: **23** But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. **24** And they glorified God in me.”

INTRODUCTION

Paul is defending the gospel that he preached. The question in verses 11 and 12 is: Where did Paul get this gospel? Did somebody teach it to him? Did he learn it from Peter? Did he go to Jerusalem, sit under the apostles, and then come back preaching what they taught him? Paul says no. He received it “by the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Then Paul proves what he is saying by walking through his own history. He tells us what he was before. He tells us what God did. Then he tells us where he went afterward. His own life and his own movements show that Jerusalem was not the source of his gospel.

And look at the man God used. Before Paul preached the faith, Paul persecuted the people who preached the faith. Before he built churches, he tried to destroy them. Before people glorified God because of his preaching, Christians were afraid of him because he was hunting them down.

I. PAUL WAS AN ENEMY OF THE CHURCH — VERSES 11-14

Galatians 1:11-12 “But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. **12** For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul says, “the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.” In other words, this gospel did not originate with man. Then he gets even more specific: “For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it.” Paul is telling us where his gospel did not come from, and then he tells us where it did come from: “but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Now why does Paul immediately start talking about his former life? Because his history helps establish what he just said. Look at the next verses.

Galatians 1:13-14 “For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: **14** And profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.”

“Conversation” here means his former manner of life—how he lived. And he says he persecuted the church “beyond measure.” Paul was not somebody who mildly disagreed with Christians. He was actively trying to destroy the church. When he says he “wasted it,” he means he was ravaging it, trying to tear it down.

Then he says he “profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals.” What does “profited” mean there? Paul was advancing. He was moving up the ranks in that religious system faster than many of the men his own age. He was serious about it. He was “more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.”

Listen to how Paul described that same period of his life later.

Acts 22:3-5 “I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day. **4** And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. **5** As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.”

Paul was educated. Paul was zealous. Paul had religious authority behind him. Paul had letters in his hand giving him authority to go after Christians. He says he persecuted this way “unto the death.” Men and women were being bound and delivered into prison.

Now go back to what Paul said.

Galatians 1:13-14 “For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: **14** And profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.”

Paul was intensely religious while he was fighting against the church of God. Religious zeal by itself does not make somebody right. Paul had zeal. He had training. He had position. He had tradition. And with all of that, he was persecuting the people of God.

You can be sincere and wrong. You can be dedicated and wrong. Paul’s problem was not that he needed to become a little more committed to his religion. He was already exceedingly zealous. Something had to happen that Paul could never produce by moving higher in that religious system.

II. GOD CALLED PAUL BY HIS GRACE — VERSES 15-17

Galatians 1:15-17 “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, **16** To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: **17** Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.”

Notice the first word: “But.” Paul has just told us what he was doing. He was persecuting the church. He was wasting it. He was advancing in the Jews’ religion. “But when it pleased God.”

That is where the direction changes.

Paul says God “called me by his grace.” Grace is at the center of Paul’s explanation. Paul does not look back and say, “I finally became religious enough.” He was already religious. He does not say, “I finally became zealous enough.” He was already exceedingly zealous. God’s grace explains why the persecutor is now preaching Christ.

And verse 16 gives the purpose connected with this calling: “that I might preach him among the heathen.” God was going to send this man to preach Christ.

What actually happened when Paul was on his way to Damascus? Paul tells the story himself.

Acts 26:9-20 “I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. **10** Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. **11** And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. **12** Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, **13** At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. **14** And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. **15** And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. **16** But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; **17** Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, **18** To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. **19** Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: **20** But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.”

Look at what happened. Paul was traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians. He had authority from the chief priests. He was still going the same direction he had been going. Then Jesus Christ appeared to him.

Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Paul asked, “Who art thou, Lord?” Jesus answered, “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” Then Christ told Paul that He had appeared to him to make him “a minister and a witness.” The man traveling to Damascus to stop the preaching of Christ was being sent to preach Christ.

Now go back to Galatians.

Galatians 1:15-17 “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, **16** To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: **17** Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.”

Paul says, “immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood.” He did not go ask men what gospel he should preach. Then he says, “Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me.”

That matters because Paul is still proving the statement in verses 11 and 12. His gospel was not after man. He did not receive it from man. He was not taught it by man. Christ had revealed Himself to Paul, and Paul began preaching.

Verse 17 says he went into Arabia and returned again unto Damascus. The text does not tell us enough here to build a detailed story about exactly what Paul did during his time in Arabia, so we should not invent one. The point Paul gives us is clear: he did not immediately go to Jerusalem and receive his gospel from the apostles there.

III. THE PERSECUTOR NOW PREACHED THE FAITH — VERSES 18-24

Galatians 1:18-20 “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. **19** But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother. **20** Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.”

Paul eventually did go to Jerusalem. He saw Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. So Paul is not teaching Christian isolation. He is not saying Peter was unimportant or that Christians have no need for one another. His point is about where his gospel came from.

Look at the chronology. Paul did not receive a gospel from Jerusalem, go away, and then claim Christ revealed it to him. He had already been preaching before this visit. His limited contact in Jerusalem supports what he has been saying from verse 11 onward.

Then Paul says, “behold, before God, I lie not.” Why say that? Because these details matter to his argument. He is putting his own movements on the record before God.

Now follow him farther.

Galatians 1:21-24 “Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia; **22** And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: **23** But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. **24** And they glorified God in me.”

The churches of Judaea did not personally know Paul by face. But they knew about him. What had they heard? “He which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed.”

That is Paul’s public reputation now. The persecutor is preaching. The man who tried to destroy the faith is publicly preaching that faith.

Paul later described the same change this way.

1 Timothy 1:12-16 “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; **13** Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. **14** And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. **15** This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. **16** Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.”

Paul knew exactly what he had been. “A blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious.” But he obtained mercy. Again he points to grace: “the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant.”

Now go back to the last two verses.

Galatians 1:23-24 “But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. **24** And they glorified God in me.”

Notice where the glory went. They heard what had happened to Paul, and “they glorified God in me.” Paul was not the object of their worship. They glorified God because of what God had done in Paul and because the man who once persecuted them was now preaching the faith.

What are people hearing from you? Paul could not erase what he had done in the past. The churches remembered that he had persecuted them. But that was no longer what Paul was doing. He was preaching Christ.

Your past does not give you an excuse to refuse to serve God now. Paul had a terrible past. He had hurt Christians. He had imprisoned people. He had fought against the name of Jesus Christ. Yet when Christ sent him to preach, Paul preached.

CONCLUSION

Paul begins this passage by telling us that his gospel was not after man. Then he walks us through the evidence. He shows us what kind of man he had been, what happened when Christ appeared to him, and where he went afterward.

He had been advancing in the Jews’ religion while persecuting the church of God. Then God called him by His grace, Christ appeared to him, and Paul was sent to preach. He did not immediately go to Jerusalem and receive his gospel from the apostles there. Years later, churches that did not even know him by face had heard the report: the man who persecuted them was now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.

So do not put your confidence in religion, position, tradition, or zeal. Paul had all of that and was fighting against the church. Put your confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And once you know the truth, preach it. Paul did not spend the rest of his life saying, “Look at what I used to be.” He preached Christ. The churches heard about the change, and they glorified God.

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