

The Message and the Messenger (Galatians 1 & 2)

Perhaps the first point to note is that this is the only one of Paul's letters which is addressed to a number of churches in a region.¹ Otherwise, all Paul's letters (the ones we have, anyway) were addressed either to individual churches or to individual people.

General opinion is that Paul probably either wrote this letter from Ephesus in about AD 54, or possibly from Corinth in about AD 57 or 58. If he wrote from Ephesus, it will have been very soon after his last recorded visit to Galatia (**Acts 18**). If he wrote from Corinth, then several years will have elapsed since he last saw them face to face.

Paul addresses issues which affected all the churches in the Roman province of Galatia – one issue in particular. At first sight, what he writes may seem to be specific to that time and situation, but there is very valuable teaching here which affects us all.

There was a problem in the Galatian churches, and Paul had either just seen something of it as he travelled through, or else had recently received reports – or perhaps both! Either way, after a brief initial greeting, he launches straight in to tackle it.

The message which he had brought to them when he had visited them (3 times for certain) was being twisted and contradicted by others who had come later, so Paul takes most of the first two chapters to underline the validity of his message – and himself as the messenger.

Greeting and Introduction (Galatians 1:1-5)

Even in his initial greeting, Paul takes the opportunity to underline his credentials as an apostle (= a 'sent one'), making it clear that, even though on each occasion he had been sent out from the church in Syrian Antioch, the real sender was God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Right from his first encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul knew that he was being sent to non-Jews.

“. . . and all the brethren who are with me". It is easy to forget that Paul usually travelled with a group of companions, often those sharing with him in apostolic ministry. We don't know how many may have been in the group when he was in Ephesus, though he sent Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia (**Acts 19:22**). By the time he was in Corinth, there were at least eight others with him, including Luke and Gaius who came from Derbe, one of the churches in Galatia. (See **Acts 20:3-5**) Plus, of course, he was staying with local believers, so they may have also joined in the greeting to the Galatian churches.

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . ." A traditional Jewish greeting when entering someone's house was (and still is) 'Peace be to this house' (**1 Samuel 25:6**) and Jesus repeated it in **Luke 10:5**. Paul includes grace – a central theme of his message – and uses 'grace and peace' as his greeting in *all* his letters. Naturally, he also always refers to 'God our/the Father and our/the Lord/Saviour Jesus Christ' – the source of both grace and peace!

¹ (though he did ask the church in Colossae to read a letter which he wrote to the church in Laodicea, and to share 'their' letter with the Laodiceans – **Colossians 4:16**)

Here were two big steps for this ex-Pharisee:

1) Grace. The Greek word is *charis* (from which we get words like charity and charisma), and its basic meaning is a free and undeserved gift. It is used in some places in the New Testament to mean a favour or concession from someone else apart from God, so it is not a special 'religious' word. But grace from God was totally opposite to the Pharisees' way of thinking. As far as they were concerned, true religion was a matter of obeying (and enforcing!) every little detail demanded by the Law of Moses, **plus** observing all the many traditions that had been built over the centuries.

But Saul/Paul's understanding had been completely overturned: He had been confronted by the grace of the God who **gave** rather than demanded. (See **Galatians 1:15**) His own life had been (and was still being) transformed, and he wanted the same for all he came in contact with. His first recorded message in Galatia (in Pisidian Antioch) traces God's promises to the Jewish nation, the fulfilment of these promises in Jesus as the Messiah, and culminates in the expression of his **grace** in forgiveness and being set free from guilt through the Lord Jesus, in contrast to the Law of Moses which simply could not offer such deliverance. (**Acts 13:16-41**)

2) 'God the Father' (**v.1**). We may be so accustomed to this phrase that we don't realise what a change this was for a Jew, especially perhaps for a strict Pharisee. There are only a very few references to God as Father in the Old Testament, and there is no indication that anyone ever prayed to him as 'Father' – until Jesus started doing just that **and** taught his followers to do the same! ¹ Paul then takes it on from there and says 'God **our** Father' (**v.3**). He has more to write about this in **chapter 4**, so we will look at it a little later.

Paul finishes his greeting with a summary of the purpose of God in sending Jesus: a) He gave himself for our sins and failures – so that: b) he would rescue us from this present evil age, c) in line with the Father's will and d) for his glory, literally 'into the ages of the ages'.

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Then, straight away without any other introduction, Paul launches into the reason for this letter, and it's not a comfortable message!

Had he not long left Galatia, and so had seen the problems for himself, or was he writing later because word had reached him about how things were going wrong? We don't know. But, either way, we can feel his urgency in getting back to these churches to try to restore them to the right track. He loves them dearly and, several times in the letter, calls them 'brothers' but, at the same time, he calls them foolish and says that they are deserting the Lord for 'a different gospel' (**v.6**).

It seems that the problem which had arisen in Antioch, Paul's 'home church', had not been completely dealt with, though both the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch had given it close attention and had diligently sought the Lord's solution. The letter which was written after the 'Council in Jerusalem' was addressed specifically 'to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles', and Paul and Silas shared its contents as they set out on their journey to re-visit the young churches. See **Acts 15:1-35** and **16:4**

Paul then takes the remainder of **Chapter 1** and the beginning of **Chapter 2** to underline the fact that the message that he proclaimed to them was not something

¹ See 'Who are You Talking To?' from www.justonecandle.uk for a short study on this.

that he learned secondhand from anyone, but that he had received it ‘through revelation of Jesus Christ’. This passage runs alongside what we have already studied about Saul/Paul’s earlier life in previous chapters of **Acts**, and fills in a few gaps for us as well. Here is one personal insight into Paul’s call from God: *“But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.”* (**Galatians 1:15-17**).

Why is Paul so determined to emphasise that the message he gave them came direct from a revelation of Jesus, and to defend his standing as an apostle? Simply that, since his visits, other people have come in and have perverted the message. He doesn’t directly refer to these trouble-makers very much, but they are definitely in the picture (see **3:1** and **4:17**), so he needs to make it clear that the message **he** had brought had been from God through Jesus, in contrast to this twisted message which was ‘according to man’ (**1:11**).

The **way** in which it had been twisted was the same as the way it had been twisted to the believers in Antioch back in **Acts 15**, so he takes the time to fill in the background for them. Although some of them at least will have almost certainly seen the letter that had been written back then (perhaps 6 to 10 years earlier), they may not have realised that now they were falling into the same trap – trust in Jesus being turned into a religion!

Those who had come along with their twisted message had tried to make faith in Jesus into a new version of Jewish faith, with all the requirements of the Old Testament Law. It was actually neither Judaism nor Christianity, but a man-made philosophy, full of legalism. In **Colossians 2:23**, Paul calls it ‘self-made religion’ – literally, ‘religious observance according your own desires’. Vital, then, that Paul clarifies the divine origin of **his** message and God’s commissioning of him!

He goes into some detail about how he received the message direct from God and not even from meeting with other believers (**1:11-24**). If we just read this on its own, we might think that Paul is conceited and thinks he is always right, simply because the Lord has revealed things to him. But then in **2:2**, we see him in Jerusalem, sharing his message *‘in private with those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain’*.

Galatians 2:1-10 tells how that meeting went. A real recognition of *‘the grace that had been given to me’* (**2:9**) and that God had certainly worked through Paul among the Gentiles. Nothing to add to his message, and an agreement between them to remember the poor. This looks to me very much like Paul recounting his impressions of that meeting in Jerusalem in **Acts 15**, but still there are those *‘false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.’* (**2:4**) An ongoing problem!

And then Peter (Cephas) visited Antioch (**Galatians 2:11-21**). This visit is not recorded anywhere else. It seems that, when he first arrived, Peter would join Paul and Barnabas in sharing meals with the Gentile believers there, but then ‘certain men’ came from James (in Jerusalem) and Peter stopped sharing in those meals, because he was afraid of those Jewish believers who were insisting on circumcision for Gentile

believers. Evidently, the problem had still not been properly dealt with in Jerusalem. Other Jewish believers there in Antioch were also swept along with this hypocrisy, and even good old Barnabas got pulled in!

This was no time for half measures. The whole of Paul and Barnabas's successful ministry to Gentiles, plus the letter from Jerusalem, had been based on the fact that believers had a direct relationship with God through faith in the Lord Jesus and NOT based on circumcision or any other aspect of the Jewish Law. So Paul confronted Peter face to face and in front of all the believers there in Antioch. This directly affected them all, whether they came from Jewish or Gentile backgrounds.

Some scholars think that the direct words of Paul to Peter end at **verse 14**, but in my opinion the quotation continues to the end of the chapter. Either way, we have some really precious truth here, coming out of genuine heart-felt agony of soul ¹ . . .

1) No-one is put right with God by obeying laws (**2:16**). The Greek doesn't have a 'the' in front of 'Law', so Paul is not just talking about the futility of obeying the Jewish Law, but about trying to follow **any** set of rules.

2) The **only** way to be justified (= counted righteous) before God is through faith in Jesus the Messiah. Justification comes out of faith in Christ; it doesn't come out of 'works of law'. No-one stands righteous before God on their own. **Psalms 143:2** confirms this!

3) **2:17** : On this journey to find justification in Christ, says Paul, we Jews have found that we are also sinners (just like the Gentiles after all! – **v.15**). This is underlined by the fact that he is now building afresh what he once destroyed (**v.18**).

4) **2:19 & 20** : The heart of Paul's liberty – he is dead to law and so to the whole Jewish Law, so that he can live in direct relationship to God. He expresses his 'exchanged life' succinctly in **v.20**. For more in-depth explanation of this vital truth, see **Romans 6:1 - 7:13**, ² which helps us understand what he means by **v.19**. Paul (especially as an ex-Pharisee) had a real battle with the demands of the Jewish Law but came out liberated! He sums it up in **Romans 7:6**. Also see Paul's (surprising) statement in **1 Corinthians 15:56** !

5) **2:21** : A very clear divide – if law is effective in making us right with God, then Jesus died for no reason whatsoever. Following the law is rejecting the grace of God!

Dave Taylor March 2023

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You will find more background to Paul, his life and ministry, in 'Paul – A Man Prepared' and 'Paul in Galatia', both also from www.justonecandle.uk

¹ "Great truths are greatly won, not found by chance, nor wafted on the breath of summer dream, but grasped in the great struggle of the soul, hard buffeted by adverse wind and stream" – Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

² See also 'By His Doing' and 'No Mere Remembrance' from www.justonecandle.uk and especially *The Normal Christian Life* by Watchman Nee – highly recommended!