

# **Galatians**

## **Paul, His Gospel, and Thomas Jefferson**

*Galatians 1:11-24*

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# Paul, His Gospel, and Thomas Jefferson<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

Today we continue our study in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Let us read Galatians 1:11-24:

<sup>11</sup> I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. <sup>12</sup> I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

<sup>13</sup> For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. <sup>15</sup> But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, <sup>17</sup> nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

<sup>18</sup> Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. <sup>19</sup> I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. <sup>20</sup> I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. <sup>21</sup> Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. <sup>22</sup> I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. <sup>23</sup> They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." <sup>24</sup> And they praised God because of me. (Galatians 1:11-24)

## Introduction

Thomas Jefferson was the third President of the United States of America. He was, in the minds of many people, a great president but a poor theologian.

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<sup>1</sup> Title borrowed from my professor of Systematic Theology, Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.

He admitted that he was not a total follower of Jesus Christ because Jesus took the side of “spiritualism,” he said, while he was a “materialist.” He agreed that Jesus preached the necessity of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He, however, believed in “a counterpoise of good works to redeem one’s soul.”

Jefferson believed that Jesus taught a simple life of repentance and good works, and his biographers (the Gospel writers, Peter, James and Paul) distorted his teaching.

The apostle Paul was the chief culprit. This is Jefferson’s assessment of Paul: “Of this band of dupes and impostors, Paul was the great Coryphaeus and the first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Well, what should we make of Jefferson’s and other critic’s views of Paul? Was the teaching of Paul, as John Stott asks, “the product of his own fertile brain? Did he make it up? Or was it stale second-hand stuff with no original authority? Did he crib it from the other apostles in Jerusalem, which the Judaizers evidently maintained, as they tried to subordinate his authority to theirs?”<sup>3</sup>

That is the issue before us. What is the origin of Paul’s gospel? Where did Paul get his gospel from? That is the question that I will seek to answer today.

## Lesson

Paul has already told his readers that his apostleship is from God. His authority to speak, preach, teach and write was given to him by Jesus Christ himself.

Now, in the section before us today, he asserts that there is only one gospel—his. He maintains that the gospel he teaches is no human teaching; rather, it comes from Christ through revelation. That is the proposition, and several statements support that proposition.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter to W. Short, 1820.

<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 30.

## I. Proposition: Paul's Gospel Is from Christ (1:11-12)

Paul's proposition is that his gospel is from Christ.

Whenever Paul uses the phrase, **"I want you to know, brothers. . ."** we should recognize that as a formula of his to introduce an important statement. In the vernacular, Paul is saying, "Let me be perfectly clear about this." "Let me tell you something about this gospel—this message—which I preach."

Paul makes three statements to support his proposition that his gospel is from Christ.

### A. *Paul's Message Was Not Devised by Man (1:11)*

First, Paul's message was not devised by man.

Paul says in verse 11: **"I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up."**

The gospel Paul preached was not something that man manufactured. It was not devised by man. It did not originate with man. It was not of human authority. It was not of human tradition. It was not invented by man. No man—Paul included—had anything to do with the origin of the gospel.

Ask yourself, "If the gospel had been something that man made up, what would it had have looked like?"

It would have looked like every other religion ever devised by man. It would have been shot through with works righteousness. Man insists on having a part to play in his own salvation, and cannot tolerate the idea that only by God's grace alone can we experience forgiveness and freedom.

The very fact that Paul preached a message in which man's works plays absolutely no part was evidence that Paul's gospel was from Christ and not something that man made up.

### B. *Paul's Message Was Not Received from Man (1:12a)*

Second, Paul's message was not received from man.

Paul continues and says, “**I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it**” (1:12a).

Most likely this statement was a direct poke at the false teachers, who received their religious instruction primarily from the rabbinical tradition by means of rote memorization. Instead of studying the Scriptures, Jews memorize what the authorities have to say. Paul himself was schooled as a Pharisee in that method and tradition. He is quite emphatic that he did not receive nor was he taught the gospel in that way.

*C. Paul’s Message Was Received Directly from Christ (1:12b)*

Third, Paul’s message was received directly from Christ.

The gospel Paul preached was neither a human invention nor a human tradition, but was given to him directly by revelation from Jesus Christ, as Paul says in verse 12b, “**Rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.**”

Prior to his encounter with Jesus Christ, Paul was familiar with the central teaching of Christianity. He knew that Jesus Christ claimed to be the Son of God. He knew that Jesus Christ not only dispensed with the rabbinical traditions but even with the ceremonial laws of Moses. He knew that Christians believed that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah. He knew also that Christians claimed that Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sinless life, that he died, was buried, and three days later rose physically and bodily from the grave. Paul knew all this in an intellectual sense.

But he did not believe those teachings were true and therefore had no grasp of their spiritual meaning and significance. . . . that is, until he had an encounter with risen Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1-16). On that day he received the supernatural truth of the gospel by divine revelation from Jesus Christ.

That is Paul’s claim: his gospel is from Christ. It was not a human invention. It was not a tradition. It was given by revelation.

Having made this startling claim to a direct revelation from God, without human means, Paul goes on to prove it from history,

that is, from the facts of his own autobiography. The situation before his conversion, at his conversion, and after his conversion was such that he clearly got his gospel not from any man, but directly from God. Let us look now at these three proofs to support his claim.

## II. Proof One: Evidence before His Conversion (1:13-14)

The first proof has to do with the evidence before his conversion.

Paul begins with a description of his **previous way of life in Judaism** (1:13a). Paul's previous way of life in Judaism was well known to many. Paul was a Jew of the first order, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Philippians 3:5-6).

Now, Paul mentions two aspects of his unconverted days: his persecution of the church (verse 13), and his zeal for the traditions of his fathers (verse 14).

### A. *Persecution of the Church (1:13)*

Paul mentions his persecution of the church. He says in verse 13, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, **how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.**"

Paul was totally devoted to his work of not merely *persecuting* the church but in fact *destroying* the church. He was determined to stamp out the church of Jesus Christ.

The book of Acts gives us many details of how he went from house to house and dragged Christians off to prison (cf. Acts 8:3). When these Christians were put to death, he would cast his vote against them (cf. Acts 26:10).

*B. Zeal for the Traditions (1:14)*

In addition to his persecution of the church, Paul was equally zealous for the traditions of his fathers. He was way ahead of the class, graduating *summa cum laude*.

He says in verse 14, **“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”**

Paul presents himself as a bigot and a fanatic. He was totally devoted to the Mosaic Law and to Judaism. He was a rabbinical student and practitioner *par excellence*.

And so, as his first proof that his gospel is from Christ, Paul implies that the only reasonable conclusion for a man to convert from being a persecutor of the church to a preacher of the gospel is that God radically and completely changed his life.

**III. Proof Two: Evidence at His Conversion (1:15-16a)**

The second proof has to do with the evidence at his conversion.

Paul explains that every stage of his conversion was by the initiation and by the grace of God. God was at work changing the apostle. Notice three stages in Paul’s conversion.

*A. Separation (1:15a)*

The first stage in Paul’s conversion was his separation.

Paul says, **“But when God, who set me apart from birth”** (1:15a)

The word **but** introduces a dramatic contrast between Paul’s previous life and the time of his conversion. The contrast is seen most clearly in the use of the pronoun “I” in verses 13 and 14. Up until his striking conversion all was of Paul, but then God intervened, and everything after that came from God.

Paul was **set . . . apart from birth**. Like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:15) who was set apart before his birth to be a prophet, so Paul, before he was born, was set apart to be an apostle. He had nothing to do with this separation to the ministry.

*B. Calling (1:15b)*

The second stage in Paul's conversion was his calling.

Paul says that God "**called me by his grace**" (1:15b).

The word **called** indicates that his pre-natal choice led to a historical call, and it all come from God. Although Paul deserved no mercy from God, God in mercy and grace found him and blessed him in time by calling him to salvation.

*C. Revelation (1:16a)*

The third stage in Paul's conversion was his revelation.

Paul says that God "**was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles**" (1:16a).

As I said earlier, Paul knew quite a bit about the central truths of Christianity. But then he had an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, **God was pleased to reveal his Son** to Paul. Suddenly he began to grasp the true meaning and spiritual significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The revelation was a personal, private revelation to the apostle, an intimate, subjective revelation, but it was for a public purpose. It was **so that he might preach Jesus Christ among the Gentiles** (cf. Acts 9:15).

The thrust of these verses is very compelling. Paul had been a fanatical opponent of the gospel. But it pleased God to make him a preacher of the gospel he so vigorously opposed. His pre-natal separation, his historical calling and the revelation of Jesus Christ in him were all the work of God.

But Paul's argument is not yet complete. Granted that his conversion was a work of God, as is plain from what happened, did



he not receive instruction after his conversion, so that his message was, after all, from men?

No. This too the apostle Paul denies.

#### **IV. Proof Three: Evidence After His Conversion (1:16b-24)**

This brings us to the third proof, which is the evidence after his conversion.

The emphatic statement in this rather long proof is the first, at the end of verse 16, **“I did not consult any man.”** Paul **did not consult** with anyone. We know that Ananias came to him, but apparently he did not discuss the gospel with him. Nor did he discuss the gospel with the apostles. Paul produces three alibis to prove that his gospel was not shaped by any man.

##### *A. Alibi 1: He Went to Arabia (1:17)*

In his first alibi Paul says that he went to Arabia.

Paul says, **“Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus”** (1:17).

After meeting with Ananias and having his sight restored, Paul **went immediately into Arabia**. He apparently spent three years in Arabia. It was a time of withdrawal, a time of spiritual re-adjustment, by which he rearranged his understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. It would seem that this was a time of intense study and meditation of the Old Testament Scriptures, under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit.

After his three years in Arabia he returned to Damascus.

##### *B. Alibi 2: He Went to Jerusalem (1:18-20)*

In his second alibi Paul says that he went to Jerusalem.

Paul says in verses 18-20, **“Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with**

**him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.”**

Paul had been forced to flee Damascus because of his preaching (cf. Acts 9:26). Paul apparently decided to go to Jerusalem. The false teachers insisted that Paul’s message was from the other apostles, who were in Jerusalem. Paul denies that this is the case.

First, the visit to Jerusalem took place after three years, that is, three years after his conversion. By this time, his message would have been clearly formulated, especially since he had spent three years in intense study.

Second, when he arrived in Jerusalem, he saw only two other apostles, Peter and James. The other apostles may have been out of town, busy, or afraid to meet with him. Whatever the case, Paul only saw two apostles.

And third, Paul stayed only fifteen days in Jerusalem. That would be too short a time to account for the depth of the truth he possessed.

As John Stott says, “To sum up, Paul’s visit to Jerusalem was only after three years, it lasted only two weeks, and he saw only two apostles. It was, therefore, ludicrous to suggest that he obtained his gospel from the Jerusalem apostles.”<sup>4</sup>

### *C. Alibi 3: He Went to Syria and Cilicia (1:21-24)*

In his third alibi Paul says that he went to Syria and Cilicia.

Paul says in verses 21-24, **“Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they praised God because of me.”**

This period corresponds to Acts 9:30, where we read that Paul was sent off to Tarsus via Caesarea. There he remained for

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<sup>4</sup> Stott, 35.

many years. Thus, his independence of the other apostles is established.

The final verse is a dramatic conclusion to the section. **The churches of Judea that are in Christ** did not personally know Paul at that time. But as they heard of the dramatic change of his life and ministry, **they praised God because of Paul**. The implication is that the false teachers, if they really understood the true gospel, would praise God because of Paul too.

What Paul is saying in verses 13-24 is this: The fanaticism of his pre-conversion career, the divine initiative in his conversion, and his almost total isolation from the Jerusalem church leaders after his conversion together combined to demonstrate that his message was not from men but from God.

### Conclusion

First, is Paul's message from God? Yes! Indeed it is.

What then shall we say of Jefferson and other modern views? Paul says, "I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie" (1:20). Either Jefferson or Paul is a liar, and Paul claims by divine inspiration that he is not. Who is the liar? Undoubtedly it is Jefferson and anyone who disagrees with the apostle Paul. He has clearly and convincingly proved his proposition that his gospel is from Christ.

And second, since Paul says that his gospel is from Christ, there is therefore no salvation by good works, by religious deeds, or by any other human devices. The only way of salvation is by believing the gospel that Paul preached. The only way of salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ.



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in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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