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Session 2: Free!

Bible Passages

Galatians 1:11-2:10

Brief Notes

The opening two chapters of the letter are mostly taken up with Paul speaking about himself: he is defending his authority as an apostle, which it seems was being questioned. But more than that, his concern is to defend his Gospel – a concern not so much for himself as for them: “so that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you” (2:5). He lays out the facts carefully to refute his critics. Just as today people very often seek to drive a wedge between Paul and Jesus, and to suggest he refashioned and corrupted the authentic Christian message, so in the 1st century there were those who sought to drive a wedge between Paul and other apostles and to suggest he had distorted and misrepresented the Gospel. Verses 8-9 have already made it crystal clear that his Gospel is the plumb line by which all other gospels are judged; here he goes on to show that his ministry was independent of the Jerusalem apostles, but in complete agreement with theirs.

The divine origin of Paul’s Gospel (1:11-24)

The purpose of this passage is stated in the first verse – verse 11. He didn’t make it up nor receive from anyone else. It came to him by direct revelation from Christ (v.12), indeed it was a revelation of Christ (v.16). Before his conversion Paul had been passionately opposed to Christianity and passionately committed to Judaism, so his Gospel could scarcely be something he would have made up himself. But nor did he pick it up from others – in particular from the other apostles, which

might have suggested he was under their authority. In the first three years after his conversion (v.17), he had no contact with the apostles but was “Arabia” [a province which at this time included Damascus and the area around, so it may not necessarily refer to where we now think of as Arabia]. No mention is made of what he spent this time doing, there may well have been time of prayer and study of the OT Scriptures during which his understanding of the Gospel grew, but Acts 9:20 suggests he was also preaching the Gospel immediately after his conversion, so this divine revelation on the road to Damascus gave him the substance of the Gospel message. His visit to see Peter and James was clearly not a time of formal instruction nor commissioning – a fortnight is not long enough (ordination training is 3 years!) and vv.21-23 suggests he had been given no public accreditation. His point is clear: he didn’t receive his Gospel by instruction but by revelation.

That may seem a rather laboured point, but evidently Paul thought it important, so take time to consider its importance to us today. Paul’s Gospel is God’s Gospel, God’s word. Not speculation, not a personal opinion. It is the truth, God’s truth. And clearly life-changing truth. It was all of God, and all of grace – notice how undeserving he was (v.13), how his conversion rested on God’s choice before he had done anything to earn it (v.15), and how it was all God’s doing (there is a striking shift in vv.13-15 from what “I” did to what “God” did).

The apostolic confirmation of Paul’s Gospel (2:1-10)

Paul was keen to demonstrate not just his independence from the other apostles (to show he was not subordinate to them – a 2nd rate apostle with a 2nd hand Gospel) but also his unity with them – they preached and practised the same Gospel. His next meeting with them was 14 years later, not in response to a summons, as though he was to be cross examined by them, but in response to God’s prompting (v.2). Most likely this is the visit in which Paul brought the gift collected from the church in Antioch to support the famine stricken churches in Judea (see Acts 11:27-30). The gift expressed a proper concern for the poor but also his conviction that together they were one family, united in Christ.

Paul's fear (v.2) was surely not that he'd got his message wrong, but that the his Gentile converts might not be accepted and welcomed by Jewish Christians, because some from Jerusalem had been trying to insist that people must become a Jew to become a full Christian (v.4). These would seem to be the same people as those referred to in Acts 15:1 (and the Jerusalem council mentioned in that chapter would settle this matter once and for all). That's why Paul took Titus along with him as a representative Gentile convert, and he had been fully accepted by the apostles. Paul also took the opportunity to compare notes on what their message was and they were seen to be in complete agreement (v.6). The other apostles recognised Paul's commission as being from Christ (vv.7-9) and wholeheartedly backed what he was doing and what he was preaching. The concern expressed in v.10 was a further indication of that, for it seems likely that "the poor" particularly referred to the poor brothers and sisters in Judea. Paul's gift had been meant to express the fact that the Jewish and Gentile churches were all one family in Christ, and the other apostles were saying "Yes, we are one and must stick together". This Gospel was to be guarded both by what was preached and by what was practised.

Discussion Questions

- What is the point Paul is keen to establish in this passage?
- In what ways does Paul's autobiography support his argument?
- Why should this matter to us today?
- (How is Paul often viewed today?)
- Suppose you (or a Galatian Christian) were having serious doubts about the truth of the Gospel, wondering whether it is just a man-made fiction, how might this passage help you trust the truth of what you have believed?
- Paul's gospel was a gospel of grace. How is God's grace reflected in his own conversion?
- Why did Paul go up to Jerusalem the second time?
- In what sense might he have feared that he had been running his race in vain?
- What did this visit establish?
 - Why should that matter to us today?
- What should we learn from verse 10?
- We should have a concern for the poor full stop, but which poor would the apostles particularly have had in mind?
- How would this concern have been an important expression of the Gospel?
- How might we be more careful to practise (not just preach) the Gospel?

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Supported by [Allchurches Trust](#) and [The Jerusalem Trust](#).



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