

Galatians 1:13-17- Zeal for the True Gospel

Last week we delved into the problem which had developed in Galatia which involved some Jews who claimed to be Christians and yet were introducing false teachings regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ.

They had actually made the claim that to be a true Christian one needed to not only embrace the redemptive work of the Jewish Messiah Jesus, but they must also adhere to the same laws Jesus kept during His life, if they were to be saved.

But Paul's point is that to change any aspect of the grace gospel by adding the law or some form of good work to obtain salvation is another gospel, which is really no gospel at all.

And then he goes so far as to say that anyone preaching such a false gospel will suffer the eternal consequences of believing that false gospel.

GAL 1:8-9 "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"

To suggest that it makes no difference what message we give to the world should be laid to rest in this passage. But Paul also stresses that there is a very good reason he is preaching the message he does; it was a message which is divine in origin.

In other words, it was not a message which was devised by men because the message came from the messenger who came from heaven.

JOH 6:37-39 "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day."

This message of Paul was given to him from the bread of life who came down from heaven. At this point in history there was no message like this. All other messages encouraged men to work their way to heaven through some form of appeasing their god or

gods. This message from Paul was unique, because the Son of God is the unique Savior of the world.

GAL 1:11-12 “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”

Paul was minding his own business on the road to Damascus as he was engaged in trying to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. And as Paul writes this letter to the Galatians he is pointing out how, if he had not been struck down by the risen Christ there on that road, his campaign of destruction of the church of Christ would have continued as he saw it as a way to promote the law of Moses.

Paul is using a bit of logic here as he explains that if what he encountered on the road to Damascus was some mere dream, or his imagination, or even some hallucination, he would have worked through that and resumed his campaign to destroy the Christian church.

But what he encountered was a real person. It was the person of Jesus Christ as our Lord revealed Himself to Paul and also revealed the hope found only in the risen Christ. To put it another way, Paul met God there on that road, and he recognized Him for who He was, the Son of God sent from the Father to fulfill all the Messianic prophecies Paul had read in his own O.T. Scriptures.

There is no other explanation for this zealot Pharisee doing a 180 degree turn, unless what he encountered was the real thing as the Lord turned his heart. And it's in this next portion of this letter that Paul takes the time to put his former life into perspective for these Galatians for this very reason; to convince them that what he first preached to them was the message he now gave his life for.

GAL 1:13-14 “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. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

What Paul is doing here is what you and I have been called upon at some point in our Christian lives to do, and that is to give a personal testimony of where we were and where we are now, and why.

His personal testimony is rather dramatic. It was after the death of Stephen, of which Paul was a part, at least in condoning it, that Paul, then known as Saul, being named after the first king of Israel, begins his conquest of the church of Christ. We read about it first in the book of Acts.

ACT 8:3 “But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”

In contrasting his former life to the church in Philippi Paul wrote this.

PHI 3:3-7 “For it is we [true Christians] who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh - though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 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. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”

Of course, the profit to Saul in those days as a Pharisee was that he had status and power in Israel. He was looked up to and certainly benefited in some financial and political ways. But for Saul to gain the whole world and lose his soul was no profit at all as he now understood that his former life was a life which only promised destruction. And so, “whatever was to his profit he now considers loss for the sake of Christ.”

But there really is no loss in the eternal sense for Paul as he compares his former life with what he now possesses.

GAL 1:14 “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

The NASB puts it this way. “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.”

Here Paul touches on his time in training. To be a Pharisee a young Jew went through extensive schooling and training. And what seems to be the case here is that Paul was at the head of his class. And not just at the head of his class regarding his grades, but at the head of his class in attitude.

Few of his contemporaries could have been more zealous for the traditions of his ancestors than Paul. In fact, the Greek word in our text is where we get our English word zealot. It is the word zelotes, which means one burning with zeal, a zealot.

But notice the adjective he puts before this word in our text. He refers to himself as extremely zealous. This is no mere hyperbole. This is not an exaggeration. Paul knew himself and he knew that his former life as a Pharisee was one of dedication and devotion to God as he understood Him. He was a zealot.

And by the way, this is one reason for our confidence in what Paul says regarding Christ and the gospel our Lord gave him on the road to Damascus. By using this word zelotes he is saying that nothing short of an encounter with the risen Christ would deter him from his mission to destroy the church.

This is why we know that what we believe is true. It's not some fabrication in the mind of Saul. It's not some misunderstanding of the Scriptures Saul finally realized and corrected on his own. He was not looking to amend his thinking. In his own mind he was correct in taking the path he did in persecuting the church.

In fact, secular scholars cannot look at the life of Paul and conclude anything but that he had a real encounter with the person of Christ. They may try, but the facts of Paul's life will not allow this. You have to reinvent history to do this.

No one will give their life for a lie. And if Paul and the other apostles were simply trying to create a new religion based on a lie then they were not good people, they were devious, evil and corrupt men who have deceived the world.

If you have gotten Dave Hunt's latest newsletter, the Berean Call, he addresses this issue of deception by the apostles as he writes about how "religious" scholars have determined that Paul and the other apostles were not really writing about historical facts but were writing in metaphors regarding good and evil.

In other words, when they wrote about the miracles of Jesus or His resurrection they were lying. When they wrote about the reason He came into this world to redeem men, they were lying. These were just stories to propagate a new religion which was based on the made up teachings of these apostles.

But Dave Hunt rightly points out that "these alleged scholars are saying that indeed the apostles were liars, but that what they taught

with their lives was so good that it has changed the world for the better. It makes no sense. How could lies possibly be the foundation for the greatest influence for good in all of history?"

And Paul is saying the same thing to these Galatians. How could my life turn around in the twinkling of an eye unless what happened to me was true? How could I go from persecuting the church one day, and the next day be a champion for Christ?

All of this is tied back to his statement, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all." (GAL 1:6-7)

Why is Paul giving his life for the gospel if it's a false gospel? There is only one true gospel and that's the gospel Jesus Christ gave Paul on that famous day on the way to Damascus.

Everything else pales in comparison to the eternal truth that the Messiah came to save sinful men, of whom Paul saw himself as the greatest sinner, precisely because he did persecute the church of Christ. But this is where grace can arrest any sinner and bring hope where there was only destruction.

In fact, this was the message late in Paul's life as he was writing to Timothy. Even after years of being in the ministry and serving the Lord Jesus faithfully, Paul never forgot the grace that was given to him in Christ Jesus, or how he was a sinner saved by grace.

1TI 1:15-17 "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Jesus Christ and His message of hope was the only thing that kept Paul going, and for anyone, including professing Christians in Galatia, to try and destroy man's only hope for salvation by preaching a different message from the one Jesus delivered is to doom mankind forever.

Paul would not allow them to trample on the grace of God as he describes it in his own life in our text.

GAL 1:15-17 “But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, 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.”

This section again explains how Paul’s message was not given to him by the other apostles. It couldn’t have been since he did not go up to Jerusalem after his salvation, which leaves only a couple of other explanations: he was either given this message through Annanias or the other disciples in Damascus.

But under the circumstances, prior to Christ striking Paul down, no one was willing to sit Saul down and explain the gospel. He was going to persecute anyone who admitted they believed on Jesus Christ. But notice verse 15. Paul points out a couple of truths which reveal the way in which God works in the lives of people.

Number one, he was called by grace. We’ve discussed this before but it’s always worth noting again. Grace is commonly defined as an undeserved gift. And this is certainly true. But there is a side to grace which goes to the heart of God Himself. After all He is not simply doling out free gifts contrary to His better judgment, especially when no one deserves such a gift.

The word for grace that Paul uses here gives us a glimpse into the heart of God. It’s the word *charisin* Greek, and it means that which affords joy, pleasure, or delight. The only reason that God extends grace is because when He does so for you and me it’s because He delights and takes great pleasure in doing so.

Imagine having the means and the ability to do something nice for someone and being so excited about it that you just can’t wait to spring this surprise on someone you love. In a similar way God is so excited about giving us this free gift that even the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who comes to Christ. They rejoice because God rejoices.

His love for us is just too awesome to fully comprehend. And yet Paul does give us a glimpse into this love when he wrote to the Romans.

ROM 5:8-11 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved

from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Jesus put it this way.

JOH 15:12-13 “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Peter also understood this unbelievable grace which was birthed in love and is the message that he also gave the world.

1PE 3:18 “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit...”

But this grace of God is also seen in the means by which He calls people to Himself. Notice that Paul says in verse 15 that God set him apart from birth. This is an expression which is not to be taken in its most strict theological sense.

In other words, in one sense God did not choose Paul while he was in his mother's womb. We know this to be true because God has chosen every one of His people before the creation of the world, which means from all of eternity. Paul addresses this in the letter to the Ephesians.

EPH 1:4-6 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

And so, when Paul says that he was set apart from birth this is a tender way of saying that in time the Lord had already planned on using Paul to His glory despite the fact that Paul would grow up and leave his mother and father and be a persecutor of the church.

This is also another way of saying that despite what Paul would choose to do from the time of his birth, God had a different plan for his life. But from a theological standpoint it is clear that God did His choosing from eternity past. He knew you and me in one

sense before this world was ever created since we were chosen in Christ before the foundations of the world.

And yet, despite how and when God does His choosing, He doesn't eliminate the means to bringing us into the Kingdom. For example, no one comes into the kingdom without hearing the message of the gospel and responding to it. We're told that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." (ROM 10:17)

In Paul's case he heard the message of the word of Christ from Christ Himself, but he heard it none the less and then responded by faith. The other aspect of this salvation is that people must believe on the message of Christ. God does not believe for us.

And so, there is a sense in which God saves as He regenerates men, at which point men do the responding because they are now able to respond. This goes into the whole issue of God's sovereignty in doing the choosing, but never negates the responsibility for all men to repent and believe on Jesus Christ. No one is excused simply because they say they weren't chosen.

ACT 17:30 "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

When Paul preached the gospel he didn't limit it to those he thought might be chosen of God. He gave the message to everyone and expected them to respond in faith.

ACT 20:21 "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

This salvation is meant to be taken to all men by God's design.

TIT 2:11 "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men."

The only reason people perish is not because they were not chosen. They perish because they are sinners deserving God's wrath. That's where all of us were, and Paul points this out when writing to the Thessalonians.

2TH 2:9-10 "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved."

They will not be able to blame their judgment on Satan because he deceived them. They won't be able to blame it on God because He didn't choose them. People perish for only one reason; they will not submit to the Creator so as to believe on Christ Jesus who is the only Savior.

Paul's point here in our text is not to lay the foundation for a discussion on man's free will and the Sovereign choice of God. He is simply noting that despite what direction Paul had made for himself, God had plans to intervene to use Paul for the glory of God in such a way that he would be an apostle to the Gentile world.

And believe me Paul isn't complaining that God stepped in and put him on a path which led to life through Christ. And this is why he's so upset with these Galatians. They too have received the same grace and love and salvation through Jesus Christ and yet they feel compelled through the false teachings of these Judaizers to change it into a false gospel.

How can anyone change perfection? And yet, every cult in the world today is attempting to do just that with their prophets and prophetesses who claim to have a new revelation from God and a new and improved way to attain and keep this salvation.

We need to strive to make sure that the gospel we give to people is the real message, but more than that we need to strive to show the world through our actions that we have the real message of hope.

There is nothing more disconcerting than to claim that we have believed the message of the gospel and yet not live according to the grace that was given to us through Christ, or to add something to the message.

This was the message Paul gave to the Corinthians when he said that they have received a heavenly message found in the gospel and yet their lives demonstrated worldliness.

1CO 3:1-3 "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly -mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?"

We have been given life through the life giving message of Christ. We have claimed Christ as our Lord and Savior. May we always

live to His honor and glory and defend the gospel, not only in the way we teach people the truth in love, but also defend the truth in the way we live before the world.

We may be in the world, but we are not of this world. And by that same grace which brought us salvation we can also be those faithful witnesses for Jesus Christ. Paul puts this grace and salvation into perspective when writing to the Ephesians.

EPH 2:4-7 “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”

I'll end with this.

2CO 13:14 “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”