

03. Galatians 1:6 – 2:5



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Part One 1. Paul is astounded that they would desert the gospel 1:6-10

Galatians 1:6-7

‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are **confusing** you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.’

‘**Confusing**’ (ταράσσω) - introducing fear into their relationship with their Christ.

Galatians 2:4

‘False believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might **enslave** us.’

To this point Paul has followed the customary form for beginning a letter. One would expect to find here some words of thanksgiving. Instead we find this abrupt expression of profound concern. It is a measure of Paul's confidence in the affection that has been established between himself and those whom he is addressing, but also of his amazement over what has happened, that he feels free to give vent so strongly to his feelings.

Information has reached Paul that something is happening in the churches of Galatia that cuts at the very heart of the gospel. Some, perhaps many, in the churches have been persuaded to embrace ideas and a way of life that are opposed to the gospel which Paul proclaimed while among them. Paul wants them to be in no doubt that in doing so they are abandoning God himself who has called them into communion with Christ and in whose grace they have been living.

The Judaeans missionaries judged that Paul's failure to insist on the Gentile converts keeping the Jewish Torah was a failure to be faithful to Jesus. However – and this is the key – they continue to fit Jesus into their reading of the scriptures, and they fail to read their scriptures in the light of Jesus. It is therefore unthinkable for them that any of their sacred traditions, any of the ways in which faithful Jews have expressed their obedience to God and their covenant obligations, could possibly have been transcended. They insist, therefore, that Gentiles who wish to share in the blessings of Abraham and in the fullness of life as lived by Jesus the Jew, must be circumcised (Galatians 6:12), must observe Jewish feasts (Galatians 4:10) and other regulations of the law.

They have come to Galatia as missionaries, confident in the support of a powerful group in the Jerusalem church. How much they represent the Jerusalem church is another matter. Luke tells us of ‘certain individuals’ who came down to Antioch ‘from Judea and were teaching the brothers: Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’ (Acts 15:1). He speaks also of ‘some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees’ who proclaimed during a meeting of the community in Jerusalem that ‘it is necessary for them [the Gentile converts] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses’ (Acts 15:8). However, at the conclusion of the meeting, this opinion was not supported and a letter was sent to Antioch stating that those who ‘have gone out from us’ and who ‘have said things to disturb (ταράσσω) you and have unsettled your minds’ went ‘**with no instructions from us**’ (Acts 15:24).

One can imagine the horror of the Judaeen missionaries when they came to Galatia to find that the Gentile Christians felt under no obligation to follow the Torah. They are obviously meeting with a good deal of success in convincing the new converts that the gospel given them by Paul is insufficient, and that, if they want to be saved, they must obey the law (Galatians 4:17). According to the missionaries, it is a matter of obedience to God and fidelity to their part in the covenant with God into which they have been welcomed.

This letter is Paul's response. He has already touched on the central point by speaking of Jesus as he 'who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father' (1:4). Again and again Paul will come back to the cross and to Jesus' gift of himself in love. This and this alone is their security. A so-called 'gospel' that requires of Gentile converts that they observe the Jewish Law is not gospel ('good news') at all, but counterfeit.



We need not assume that these missionaries were setting out intentionally to ‘pervert the gospel of Christ’, but this is what they are in fact doing. Later in the letter Paul will accuse them of wanting a following (4:17), of avoiding the cross (6:12), and of wanting to boast about their missionary successes (6:13). Here he wants to alert the Galatians to the fact that, if they continue to listen to these intruders, they are abandoning the grace of God offered them in Jesus.

Galatians 1:8

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed [ἀνάθεμα]!

- anathema = offered over to God for God's judgment

When something is made ἀνάθεμα, others cannot touch it, and Paul wants the Galatians not to get involved with the Judaean missionaries or the pseudo-gospel which they are presenting.

As Paul will go on to demonstrate, it is true that Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures – but not in the way in which the missionaries are claiming. It is also true that it matters how the Galatians behave – but they must be sensitive to the guidance of Jesus' Spirit, not caught up in fulfilling obligations that have nothing to do either with them as Gentiles or with following Jesus.

Galatians 1:9-10

As we have said before, so now I repeat, If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a slave of Christ.

It would seem that the missionaries from Judea have persuaded the Galatians that Paul failed to insist on their submitting to the law, and so proclaimed a defective gospel, because he wanted to ingratiate himself with them by making things easy for them. Paul is sent by God and by the risen Christ. The only approval that interests him is theirs. As he writes elsewhere: 'Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.'

(1 Thessalonians 2:4).

If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a slave of Christ.

When he writes: ‘If I were still pleasing people’, he seems to be admitting that that is how he used to behave when he persecuted Christians to get the approval of the authorities in Jerusalem. That was before he came to know Christ.

Now he is a ‘slave of Christ’. This is a particularly powerful self-description, especially in a letter which is about the freedom that Christ brings, and in which Paul is pleading with the Galatians not to desert Christ and the true gospel to go back into slavery.

Jesus lived a life of self-transcendence through self-giving, and he did so in obedience, ‘**according to the will of our God and Father**’ (1:4). It must be the same for Paul. The freedom brought by the gospel is not a freedom for self-promotion or self-satisfaction such as is encouraged by ‘**the present evil age**’ (1:4). It is the freedom to obey the gracious will of God and to enjoy the communion in love that comes only from being a ‘**slave of Christ**’ – captured by his love and living heart and soul for him. If any persuasion is needed, Paul is confident that the gospel has its own power. He leaves persuasion to God.

The Servant/Slave Songs in the Exilic section of the Isaiah scroll

To lead the people out of Babylon and to re-establish Judah what was needed was a humble people, and a new leader who would be, like Moses – the intimate, humble and faithful ‘servant/slave of the Lord’.

Jesus is portrayed as the Servant/Slave of God

The portrayal of Jesus as God’s suffering servant who is ‘taken up in glory’ (1 Timothy 3:16) is central to all of Paul’s writings. Here in his earliest letter, he identifies with the one who suffers in carrying out the mission entrusted to him by the Lord. Paul is a ‘**slave of Christ**’.

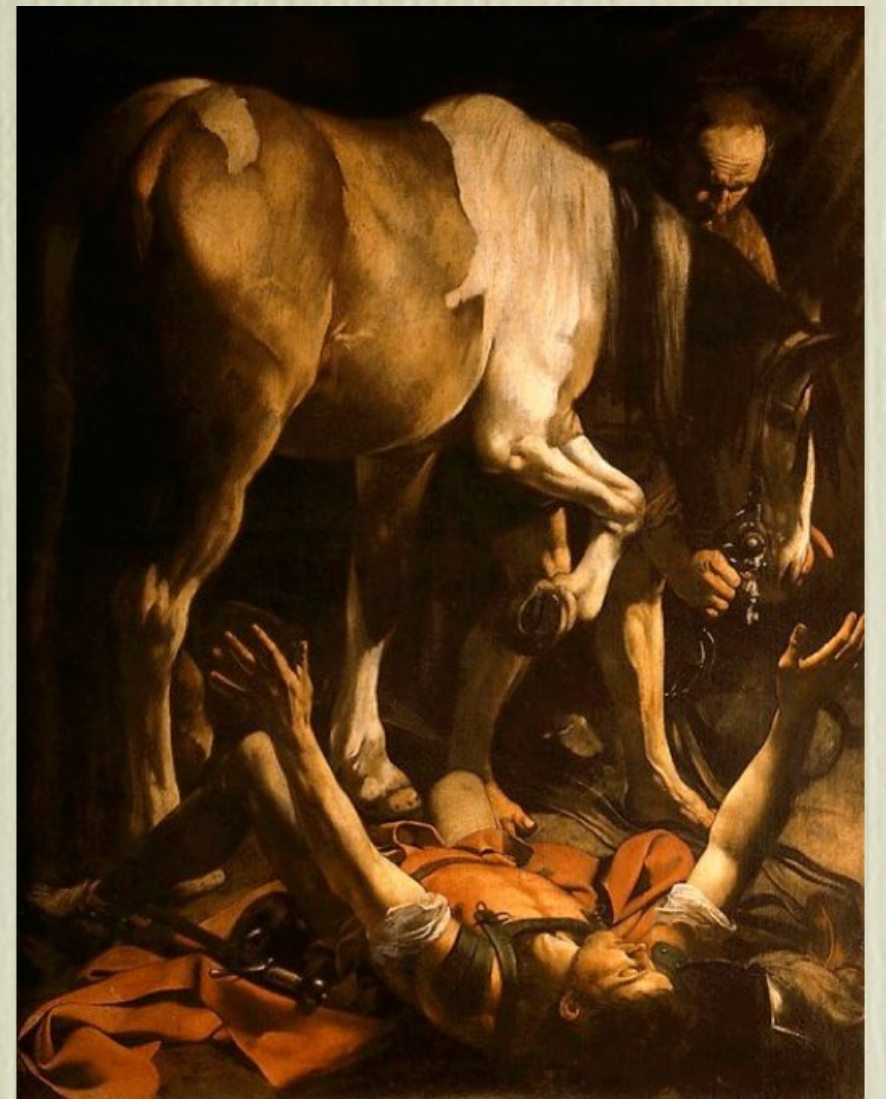
Galatians 1:11-12

¹¹For I would have you know, brothers and sisters, that the **gospel** that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin;

¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a **revelation** of Jesus Christ.

‘I handed on to you what I in turn had received’ (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Paul knows about Jesus from others.
He knows Jesus from revelation, (see Acts 9:3-8).



Paul is not denying the fact or the value of tradition. However – and this is at the heart of the difference that separates Paul from the Judaeian missionaries – tradition must always be judged by what God is doing. We must not limit God to what our tradition allows. Paul has already said that he was sent to the Galatians by God. He is not denying the role played by the community in Antioch in sending him to the Galatians. He is making the point that they, too, were acting under the direction of God's Spirit. To find the origin of his apostolic mission and gospel, the Galatians must look beyond the level of human decision; they must look to God and to the action of the risen Jesus.

When Paul says that he received the gospel ‘**through a revelation of Jesus Christ**’, he is referring to the way in which Jesus revealed himself to him (1 Corinthians 15:8; Acts 9:3-8), but he is saying much more than that.

He is claiming that Jesus is the one in whom God has revealed himself and his will to save. This is the good news. God is not locked into the past. On the contrary, the gospel of which Paul is an apostle is a new revelation which God has made in Jesus Christ. It is consistent with all that God has done in the past. It brings to fulfilment all that God has promised. It is the perfecting of the law.

And it is more. It is a new creative act of God. Nothing can be the same any more. God has revealed love in a surprising and new way. The self-giving of Jesus reveals that communion with God is possible for everyone and is offered to everyone through union with Jesus.

This offer must be welcomed, and it will radically change people's lives, but there is no place for attempting to become what we are not. There is no place for a Gentile to behave as though he or she were a Jew. God's grace in Jesus redeems us where and as we are.

The gospel proclaimed to the Galatians by Paul has its origin in God, and God has revealed the good news by revealing Jesus Christ. To know the true gospel we do not fit Jesus into our tradition as though he were a further step along a familiar path. We open ourselves in faith, hope and love to the action of his Spirit in our lives, freeing us from all that would limit God as well as from all that would distract us from God, including our human traditions, however sacred. Nothing Paul says indicates that he thinks that a Jewish Christian should cease to be a Jew. Christianity is the flowering of Judaism and its fulfilment. But for a group of Jews to come from Judea insisting that Gentiles follow the law is a preposterous enslavement that, in the name of the gospel, Paul cannot countenance.

Galatians 1:13-16

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.

¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

- Paul is familiar with the convictions of his opponents

¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born [Jeremiah 1:4-5; Isaiah 9:1,5-6], and called me through his grace, was pleased

¹⁶ to reveal his Son in/to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17).

Like them, he acted out of zeal for the law. However, something happened that changed all that, and it was something that God did: ‘God was pleased to reveal his Son in/to me’.

Paul expresses God’s choice of him in terms borrowed from the prophetic writings of Israel: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’ (Jeremiah 1:4-5).

Paul experienced a conversion on the road to Damascus. From being determined to keep Judaism pure from Gentile defilement, he came to see that fidelity to Judaism means recognising Jesus as the promised Messiah and welcoming the Gentiles to share in this truth and to form one family with Jews.

- Luke sums up Paul's preaching in Damascus: 'immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God"' (Acts 9:20).
- 'Son' is Messianic: 2Samuel 7:12,14; Psalm 2:7; Psalm 89:27-28.

The title 'Son of God', as with all other Messianic titles, takes on special depths of meaning when it is used of Jesus by Christians. It places the focus on the intimate communion in life between Jesus and God his 'Father'. What made the difference to Paul was when he came to see that the God whom he thought he was defending with such zeal had chosen to reveal God's self in Jesus.

The other key aspect of Paul's conversion experience was that God was calling him to proclaim this truth about Jesus to the Gentiles. Luke was very aware of this as we see from the three separate accounts which he gives of Paul's initial conversion.

In Luke's first account, Jesus appears to Paul, tells him that it is he, Jesus, whom Paul is persecuting, and instructs him to go into Damascus where he will be told what to do (Acts 9:4-6). Jesus then appears to Ananias and informs Ananias that he has chosen Paul 'to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name' (Acts 9:15-16).

In the second account it is Ananias who explains to Paul: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard' (Acts 22:14-15). This is followed by a vision which Paul has in the temple in Jerusalem in which Jesus tells him 'I will send you far away to the Gentiles' (Acts 22:21).

In the third account, Ananias is not mentioned. It is Jesus himself who tells Paul: 'I am sending you to the Gentiles' (Acts 26:17). Like Paul, Luke is not ruling out human mediation. The key point is that the choice of Paul as a missionary (apostle) to the Gentiles is a divine one.

In verse twelve, Paul says that he received the gospel ‘**through a revelation of Jesus Christ**’. He makes the same point in verse sixteen. The gospel is based on something that God has done in choosing to reveal himself and his saving will in Jesus. The basis of Paul’s apostolic mission is that God has revealed Jesus to Paul and commissioned him to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles. The choice is God’s. The call is God’s. The timing is God’s.

The revelation enlightened his whole soul and he had Christ speaking ‘**within him**’. Paul came to know Jesus and God’s will for him through his experience of the life-giving Spirit of the risen Christ who filled his heart and commissioned him to share this experience among the Gentiles. One reason for Paul focusing on his experience here is to invite the Galatians to step back from the persuasive arguments that have been presented to them by the Judaeans Christians, to remember their own experience, and to reflect on what God has done in their lives.

Galatians 1:16-24

¹⁶I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia; and afterwards I returned to Damascus. ¹⁸Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem [he had to escape from Damascus: 2Cor 11:32-33; Acts 9:23-25] to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days; ¹⁹but I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother [Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18]. ²⁰In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹Then [Acts 9:29-30] I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²²and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the **faith** (first mention) he once tried to destroy.' ²⁴And they glorified God because of me.

Paul has already stated that he was commissioned as an apostle by God himself and by Jesus, and not by the apostles in Jerusalem. He reinforces his point here. How could he have received the gospel from the apostles in Jerusalem, and how could he derive his authority as an apostle from them when he has had so little contact with them? When he says that he ‘**did not confer with any human being**’, he is not denying conversations or faith-sharing with Ananias and other Christians in Damascus (see Acts 9:17-19). He is stating that whatever conversations he had were not the origin of his gospel. As regards the apostles in Jerusalem, it was three years before he visited Jerusalem, and even then he stayed for only a fortnight and had contact with Cephas. Rather than give the Greek equivalent, Petros, Paul transliterates the Aramaic into Greek as Kēphas. Apart from Peter, the leader of the twelve, the only other person Paul conferred with was ‘James, the Lord’s brother’.

Paul passes quickly over the three years immediately following his conversion. The point he is making is that he did not spend them in Jerusalem with the apostles. He tells us only that he ‘**went at once to Arabia and afterwards I returned to Damascus**’. ‘Arabia’ refers to the Nabataean kingdom to the west and south of Damascus. This was quite a prosperous area with a number of large cities. If this was Paul’s first attempt at a Gentile mission it seems to have been short and quite unsuccessful.



Luke also passes quickly over this period, mentioning briefly Paul's preaching in Damascus and a plot by some Jews to kill him which forced him to escape through an opening in the wall. The disciples, under cover of darkness, lowered him down in a basket (Acts 9:19-25). Paul also mentions this incident: 'In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands' (2 Corinthians 11:32-33).

Luke also mentions Paul's brief visit to Jerusalem (37AD), and the role played by Barnabas in introducing Paul 'to the apostles' and in telling them that Paul had 'seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of the Lord' (Acts 9:27). In his brief account of this visit, Luke writes: 'Paul spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus' (Acts 9:29-30).

Luke also mentions the fact that some time after this Barnabas was sent down to Antioch from Jerusalem when they heard that Gentiles were joining the church there in great numbers (Acts 11:20-22). It was from Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria-Cilicia, that Barnabas 'went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch' (45AD. Acts 11:25-26).

Galatians 2:1-2

¹Then during [δ1α] these fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem [Acts 11:30] with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up in response to a revelation.

The fourteen years between his conversion and his letter to the Galatians (34 to 48 AD)

Luke also mentions a visit which Paul and Barnabas made to Jerusalem after the visit already noted (Galatians 1:18; Acts 9:26) and before the assembly described in Acts chapter fifteen.

‘Prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul’ (Acts 11:27-30).

Galatians 2:2-5

Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the **gospel** that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. ³But even **Titus**, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the **freedom** we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us – ⁵we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the **truth of the gospel** might always remain for you.

Titus, as a Gentile convert and an uncircumcised member of the Christian community is taken along so that the discussion will not be an abstract one. Paul wants the church in Jerusalem to meet an uncircumcised Christian from the area of Paul's mission activity.

Galatians 2:6-10

And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) – those leaders contributed nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked [ἐνήργησεν] through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognised the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

When Paul presented his gospel to the acknowledged leaders of the Jerusalem church, not only was no attempt made to have Titus circumcised, but Paul's gospel was accepted without addition or qualification. Those whose authorisation the Judaeans missionaries in Galatia are claiming recognised the validity of Paul's commission, and did not demand that Gentiles follow Jewish ways.

Paul is consistent in keeping the focus, not on himself or on the ‘pillars’ of the Jerusalem church, but on God. The fact that James, the leader of the presbyters who governed the Jerusalem church, Cephas, the leader of the twelve, and John, another of the twelve, agreed with Paul was significant, and Paul wants the Galatians to know about it. However, he is not appealing to their authority, nor is he impressed with the way others (presumably including the Judaeans missionaries) speak of them. ‘God shows no partiality’. God does not arbitrarily favour some and not others. Those whom the Jerusalem community look up to as their leaders are to be judged, like Paul himself, by their fidelity to the mission given them by God. What matters is ‘the truth of the gospel’ (Galatians 2:5).

It is God who is working (Greek: ἐνέργεω) through Peter, and it is God who is working through Paul. The agreement was reached because they looked at what was happening and saw God at work. God chose Peter to be an apostle to the Jews, and it is God who sent Paul to the Gentiles. It would be against the whole tenor of this passage to see these two categories as mutually exclusive, as though there were to be two separate churches. Such a conclusion would ignore what we know from Luke about Peter and the acceptance of Cornelius. It would also ignore what Luke tells us about Paul's missionary strategy, which was to go first to the Jews. The result of this meeting was that the leaders of the Jerusalem church accepted the practice of the church in Antioch of welcoming Gentiles without their having to be circumcised. It is important to note that, unlike the Jerusalem Assembly, nothing was said at this 'private meeting' about laws governing eating.