

## THE FULL TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

Part of my hope is that I can intrigue you into reading Galatians more often than any other book in the Bible. This is not because Galatians is better than the others, but because it is the fastest way to get recentered. In six chapters, Galatians reminds us of the core of the core of the Gospel. It is the heroin of the New Testament. In ten minutes we can get our fix, and then we won't be any good in the world for another five days. An unlovely analogy, except we might be very good in the Kingdom during that time, at least until Galatians starts to wear off again.

Galatians also leads us into many issues and items beyond its six chapters. Balanced with its brevity is the chance to explore and expand our understanding until we simply run out of time. There is endless controversy, for example, about the discrepancy between Galatians 2 and Acts 15. Both speak of a Jerusalem Council, but describe the proceedings in very different terms. Many assumptions – about Paul's character, the issues of the early church, and the nature of the theological struggles taking place – rest upon this comparison between Galatians 2 and Acts 15.

To the disgust of my liberal colleagues (at least those who still speak to me), I think Galatians 2 matches an earlier Jerusalem visit mentioned in Acts 11. If Peter visited Antioch about the time of Acts 12 – which I am told is silly but which I think is quite plausible – then everything fits much better. Only, that would also make the dating of these writings much earlier than modern liberal scholars consider possible. (By the way, for all my comments about liberal scholars, I still pay attention to them because many of them try to consider all the evidence. Conservative scholars come to their conclusions first, and then only gather evidence to support what they already assume has to be true. That may be entertaining but, like watching a juggling act, gets increasingly boring after the first fifteen minutes. Over the last twenty-five years, it has seemed to me that more and more liberal scholars are taking the same approach, only from the opposite perspective. Assumptions that everything in the Bible has to be false are no better than assumptions that everything in the Bible has to be true.)

I think Paul was martyred in Rome, under Nero, around 61 A.D. Then Luke, having lost his friend and spiritual father, decided his best

contribution would be to write an account of what was known of Jesus and what was happening to His church. So he wrote Luke and Acts around 62-64 A.D. Acts does not end; it just stops. So I wonder if Luke was also martyred before he finished his book. (Nero ruled from 54-68 A.D.) I also think that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians from Antioch at the end of his first missionary journey, around 48 A.D. Most of the scholars I trust say it was more likely from Ephesus around 52 A.D.

In many churches, nobody would care about such details. But well over half of our congregation is participating in formal Bible study every week, and many of you track such things – if not with agreement, at least with interest. The holocaust that destroyed Israel between 67-70 A.D. was so terrible that we might expect more comment from books written anywhere near that time. The solution has been to push the dates back into the 90s (A.D.) or later, so that the destruction of Jerusalem will no longer be newsworthy. A more likely explanation is that the synoptic Gospels were written *before* this shattering event, and so they are silent on the subject except for Jesus' warnings that it is coming.

In any case, we have some fascinating biographical material in Galatians. Paul is telling his Galatian friends that the Gospel is not of human origin. To support this claim, and to our delight, he mentions some of his own personal history. After his conversion, he headed off to Arabia without even going through Jerusalem. Two chapters later, in another connection, Paul mentions that Mount Sinai is in Arabia. That is not our geography, but it IS his! It is more than likely, then, that Paul headed for the holiest place on earth in his tradition: Mount Sinai, where Moses and Elijah and Jesus and many others went when they needed to sort through incredible events, regroup, and get their lives back together before going back into the world. Then Paul returned to Damascus.

Three years later, Paul went to Jerusalem to get to know Peter and stayed two weeks with him. Don't we wish we had tape recordings of those conversations! Paul also met with James, the Lord's brother – a meeting between the theological Mutt and Jeff of the New Testament. Then Paul went back to Tarsus, his home town, and we hear nothing further of him for nine or ten years. Next, Paul is traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus, who is an uncircumcised Greek. Paul and Barnabas have been working together in Antioch – before the first missionary journey – and Gentiles have been flocking to the church at Antioch. Of course, there is a big issue over Titus not being circumcised.

There is also a big controversy about whether or not Gentile converts had to begin obeying all the other Jewish laws and customs in order to be members of the church.

After the first missionary journey, in a more formal Jerusalem Council mentioned in Acts 15, the atmosphere will be more toward bringing unity out of the growing rift between the Jewish and Gentile ministries. At this earlier, less formal confrontation (before the first missionary journey), the conclusion is that Paul is a legitimate Apostle to the Gentiles, and no restrictions are laid upon him except that he is to remember the poor. Paul had come to Jerusalem with an offering for the poor from Antioch, and they want him to keep on bringing them more. And as you know, he did.

Peter, you remember, had paved the way for the Gentiles to be included in the Christian Movement by telling about his vision and by what had happened between him and Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. (Acts 10) So Paul and his group think they have won approval, but it does not appear to be an official gathering – just conversations and arguments, and maybe everyone goes home convinced of their own opinions.

Paul and Barnabas, and presumably Titus, return to Antioch, taking John Mark with them. Clearly the ferment and excitement of the growing faith is now in Antioch, and soon Peter comes to visit. But shortly after, so do a number of men from the Jerusalem church – friends and representatives of James. They don't like how things were left at the Council, and they come to see what the church at Antioch is really like. They suspect it has grown far more kooky than Paul and Barnabas had represented back in Jerusalem. Indeed it has! Jews and Gentiles are all mixed in together – eating at the Lord's Table together, breaking bread together – therefore breaking tradition, breaking Torah, breaking every practice sacred to Judaism.

For just a moment, consider the position of Paul's opponents. Circumcision was the symbol, the mark, the emblem of the Covenant between God and the Jewish People. From Abraham, from Moses, for two thousand years, circumcision was the mark and pledge of the Covenant Promises – the sign of the Chosen People; a sign in the flesh, in the most personal place possible – a constant reminder that everything must be dedicated to God, from the smallest individual act to the choices and behavior of the entire community. And now we are going to toss it

all away because some deluded young rabbi thinks he has seen a vision? Two thousand years of prophets, priests, and kings against one man's fantasy that he has had an encounter with Jesus, long after the legitimate apostles had seen the Resurrected Lord!? So now we are going to abandon Judaism outright? Does that make any sense to you?! So they come storming into Antioch. They love Jesus, but they love a thoroughly Jewish Jesus – according to their own convictions about what that means.

Under their cold stares and sincere concerns and arguments, the Jewish Christians become increasingly uncomfortable. Suddenly the love and joy of the Lord's Table starts to feel very different. Some of the Jewish Christians find themselves unable to make the meetings. Urgent responsibilities call them away. Finally Peter and even Barnabas hold back and stop sharing in the meals. The fellowship is falling apart, and the rift is established and growing wider. Have you ever been in a church fight?

But who is *Paul* to confront Peter? Peter was chief apostle among the twelve. Peter had walked with Jesus from the first. Peter had heard the preaching, seen the encounters, and witnessed the healings. Moreover, Peter had been especially trained by Jesus Himself, and was one of Jesus' closest friends. He was clearly and specifically chosen by Jesus to carry on the mission and to strengthen the other apostles in that task. And Paul? Paul had never walked with Jesus. Paul had hated Jesus and His entire Movement. Paul had been ringleader of the opposition, present at the stoning of Steven, and instrumental in getting Christians arrested, punished, even killed. And now, fifteen years (or so) after the crucifixion, Paul is going to tell *Peter* how things are supposed to be: what Jesus really wants; what Jesus is really about; what Jesus' church is supposed to look like and be like?

Well, that's what happens! "*When Cephas [Aramaic for "rock," which is "Peter" in Greek] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.*" (Galatians 2:11) Don't beat around the bush, Paul; come right out and say what you mean. But I also love it when, in verse 15, Paul shifts to "we"; I hope it reflects the actual conversation. Paul suddenly shifts from the accusation of hypocrisy, however accurate, and speaks personally to Peter: "Hey friend, we're both Jews, not Gentiles. And yet we know that no one is ever justified by doing what the Law requires. We have been there, done that! Only through faith in Christ Jesus did we find life. So now

we have put our faith in Jesus Christ. Why then – how then – can we possibly maintain the old ways and illusions? Shall we start building up again what we know never worked for us in the first place? We are all in the same boat, Jew and Gentile alike, and Jesus is the only one who can see us through this storm.”

Paul, of course, is recounting to the Galatians what happened. Peter was man enough, and Christian enough, to see his error and side with Paul – and, from our perspective, not really with Paul but with Jesus. The Gentiles were IN: *in* on the fellowship of the Christian Faith, and *in* all the way. Judaism could not save them; only Jesus could.

How hard it is to change our minds about truth we grew up with – truth that has been accepted all around us for as far back as we can remember: The Bible is inerrant. Mary was a virgin. Jesus was only nice while on earth, but now He’s coming back soon to judge, condemn, punish, and slaughter. Jesus hates rich people and likes it best if you stay unmarried and never have sex. If you are a really good Christian, God will reward you by making you healthy, wealthy, and wise, and others will be “left behind.”

Behind all the details and beyond all the context, I am amazed at Paul’s clarity and courage. “*I was determined that the full truth of the gospel should be maintained for you.*” How grateful I am. And how I hope that all of you are grateful too. I have the distinct impression that but for Paul, the full truth of the Gospel would have been watered down, compromised – lost in the efforts to keep harmony in the moment at the expense of the full truth. And I cannot escape the conclusion that Paul is unrelenting precisely because for him this is not just theory; it is personal, and connected with personal experience. This is not a written-down Gospel. After all, Paul was every bit as much a Jew as those who were sent by James and Jerusalem. Paul understood them and where they were coming from with complete and total familiarity. They felt no loyalty to the traditions of their ancestors that Paul could not double. They had no allegiance to God or to Torah or to the Chosen People that Paul could not cover in spades. They doubtless knew the Jewish Scriptures, but Paul knew them better. Paul was not afraid of them because they came with nothing Paul had not pondered, studied, agonized over, and prayed over for ten long years. Only, they did not know what Paul knew and had personally experienced: That Jesus had come out of this very tradition – out of all of this allegiance and prophecy

and love of God and honoring of the Covenant – only to carry it beyond what anybody had seen or imagined before. And that Jesus set it all in the light of a love from God beyond what anybody had believed before. Jesus was Jewish, but in Him Judaism itself was transformed and extended.

New wine in old wineskins bursts the wineskins. New light in old concepts and expressions does the same. No man ever loved God or the prophets or the Jewish Scriptures more than Jesus. But the very purity and strength of His love and allegiance blew it all into new dimensions:

**Love first**, and then obedience as a response. *Not* obedience first, and then love as a reward.

**God's Kingdom first**, and then all success and reward and pleasure in its wake. *Not* success in the world first, and then give God and his Kingdom whatever is left over after that.

**Prayer first**, and then all decisions, goals, values, and behavior shaped from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. *Not* get your life all set up first, and then pray afterward for God to come and bless it and help you to make it work.

**Have no fear of this world**, because this world is not in tune with God, and because the Life to come is far more important. *Not* be as faithful as you can until the world around you doesn't like it, and then backtrack, compromise, retreat, or go hide.

Almost everything that is familiar to us is reversed in the light of a true relationship with the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Once again, for Paul this is not mere theory or concept. This is personal experience. The light of the Damascus Road had shown him how blind he had been. And now that he sees a whole New Life – and knows the living presence of the Savior who revealed it – he is not willing to let it ooze away in compromises, rationalizations, or even in fierce controversy. *“I was determined that the full truth of the gospel should be maintained for you.”* The full truth of the Life you can have with the presence of Jesus by your side is too precious to give away, even if James and Jerusalem don't like it. Even if somebody *you* know doesn't like it. And minor though it seems, eating together with whoever wants to come to Jesus is one of the marks of His New Kingdom.

Paul also knows, from personal experience, that you cannot have the New Life without giving up the old. How many friends and relatives had he lost? How much reputation as a brilliant young rabbi did he lose? From a very conscientious beginning, from being successful beyond his peers, from a budding career in which he was becoming more and more prominent among his people, Paul went into sudden and total eclipse. It all went in that flash of light. His only possible friends were now those he was about to arrest and get killed. Nothing would ever again be the same for Paul. He understands about having to give up the old in order to claim and go with the new.

But he also knows that the new is far more beautiful and powerful and lasting. And he is not stingy. He wants it for *everybody*. People without the Gospel seem lost to him – frightened, cut back, held down. Even if they seem to be doing well, as he had himself, they seem timid and contained, and everything is so partial and temporary. He speaks often of bondage – the bondage of Satan, of this world, and even of the Law that can never be lived well enough. The Law is like a one-armed bandit: full of authentic treasure, but it never pays off; a few coins now and again, but never the jackpot. God is the jackpot. With the Gospel, you get the jackpot *first*, and then get to move on together to other things.

What if somebody knew how to preach the full truth of the Gospel to everyone in our country, and what if we could actually hear it and receive it? What if suddenly, between today and tomorrow, each individual here knew with absolute certainty that they were children of light – fully loved, totally valued, and fully freed from this world – unafraid of anything anybody could do to them in this world? Remember, “*Do not fear him who kills the body, and after that, has nothing else that he can do.*” There would be a bloodless revolution to shake the country to its core.

But what happens everywhere in our country is that we have the Gospel at half strength or at quarter strength. Everywhere there are compromises. Therefore the responses are also at half strength or quarter strength. We believe in the love of Jesus and put our trust in Him. But only sort of ... and only part of the time. So where do we really put our trust? What do we really count on? Where does our hope really reside? God cannot drive if we will not move over. We always want God to show us first, but how can God show us if we will not let him direct our lives?

And so Paul's words spring to life once again: *"I have been crucified with Christ; the life I now live is not my life, but the life Christ lives in me."*

Why? *"I trust the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."* So Paul will not hedge, quit, or back down on the full truth of the Gospel. Just like, from now on, none of *us* are going to, right? *"I will not nullify the grace of God."* I will not retract, apologize for, water down, compromise, or time-share the grace of God.

And then we feel the fire – not the fires of Hell, just the fire of Paul's passion and conviction: *"If righteousness comes by law, then Christ died for nothing."* It is no longer simple. If Moses is sufficient, Jesus is unnecessary. If you want to go back to Moses, to Torah, to the traditions and customs of your ancestors, you can do that. But you will lose Christ. Once you see the new, you cannot go back to the old without losing the new. The Galatian Christians are in a hard place. If Jesus really is Messiah and Son of God, then trusting in the old ways to save them means they cannot come with Jesus. Which do *you* trust? If you trust the Law – if you can get righteous by any way other than by tracking the sheer mercy and grace of God in Christ Jesus – then go for it. But if so, then Jesus' life and death and resurrection were unnecessary – silly and pointless; He came for nothing, and He died for nothing.

So what is your witness? What is your choice? Whom do *you* trust?