

Let Freedom Ring: Thoughts On Galatians – Part 5

By: Keith Keyser

“But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” Galatians 1:11-14

The contemporary scene is saturated with divergent worldviews and truth-claims. How may one discern truth from error – the counterfeit from the genuine article? Is there one truth or are there many truths that are equally valid? Is truth merely subject to personal preference or cultural background?

Paul provides the answer by pointing to his personal history: God revealed the truth to him. Because Jesus’ messianic claims did not agree with Paul’s rabbinic training, he was culturally predisposed to reject this supposed Christ. Nevertheless, the resurrected and glorified Jesus vindicated both His Lordship and His position as the Christ by appearing to the insolent persecutor on the Damascus highway. The truth was validated in a historical manifestation of Christ’s person in time and space. It created a marked change, transforming the persecutor into a preacher. The Pauline gospel came by direct revelation, and so was unadulterated by human philosophy or religion. As Vine says: “[It is] not of man’s device, not even in harmony with man’s ideas. The interpretation put upon the facts of the gospel by the Judaizers was ‘after man,’ human alike in its origin and its object.”ⁱ

Man’s Message Versus God’s Message

Paul did not receive his message “from man, nor was I taught it...” which is exactly opposite from his background in Gamaliel’s yeshiva (v. 12.) He further describes his successful career in rabbinic Judaism in verse 14, saying: “And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” One commentator explains the thinking behind Jewish seminary training in this way:

Such progress in a young rabbi would be shown mainly by knowledge and practice of the ‘traditions’ of Israel, the increasing body of material that had, over the centuries, grown up around the Torah like a protective fence. This was collected and summed up, first in the primary collection of the Mishnah, then in the secondary and later collection called the Gemara, the two together forming the Talmud. Of it, in later days, the rabbis would say: **‘The Scriptures are water; the Mishnah, wine; but the Gemara, spiced wine.’** How early this attitude had begun to develop, we cannot say; but passages like Mark 7:6–13 suggest that it was not unknown even in New Testament days.ⁱⁱ

Rather than obtain his good news from Jewish sages, Paul received it by revelation. Leon Morris explains the significance of this:

That he became an apostle by revelation is another indication that his apostleship was not brought about by human means. The revelation was not an end in itself; it was made *so that* Paul might be a preacher of the gospel and specifically so that he should preach Christ among the Gentiles. With centuries of preaching to the Gentiles behind us, we are inclined to take this for granted. But for a first-century Jew, and specifically for one who was prepared to go far afield in persecuting the new little band of Christians, this was a tremendous step. All his previous training would have been motivated by the conviction that there is only one God and that that God had revealed Himself to Jews alone. Occasionally Jews converted others to their religion, but they had no burden to bring good news to people of every nation. Paul did.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rake's Progress

Paul's personal history in Judaism did not incline him toward embracing Christianity, for it emphasized human effort in place of salvation by free grace alone. What is more, he demonstrated his opposition to Jesus and His followers by brutally persecuting them wherever he found them. Paul later recounts his mission against this new heresy: "...I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it" (v. 13.) The classicist F.F. Bruce captures the violent imagery of this verse in his rendering: "You have heard about my former course of life in Judaism, **how beyond all measure** I persecuted the church of God and laid it waste."^{iv} Morris explains the repetitive nature of his exertions:

Paul leaves no doubt as to the vigor with which he had carried out his persecution of the Christians. **When this is characterized as Paul's way of life it signifies that hunting Christians was not a sideline when he had nothing else to occupy him. For Paul in those days to be alive was to be hunting Christians (cf. Acts 9:1-2).** The imperfect tense of the verb rendered *persecuted* indicates that the activity went on for some time. The verb... 'laid...waste' [*"tried to destroy it"* KJV] denotes a thoroughgoing and successful activity; the lexicon gives its meaning as '*pillage, make havoc of, destroy, annihilate* (BAGD). Paul was both thorough going and successful in his persecution of the Christians. He was '*actually engaged in the work of destruction...Paul wished to be not a mere devastator, not a mere disturber...but a destroyer of the church.*' (Meyer).^v

Elsewhere he spells out his attacks on Christians in greater detail:

...I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities (Acts 26:9-11.)

His pre-Christian life was a violent campaign against believers, and he describes it in frank terms: “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man” (1 Tim. 1:13.) One writer point out the unexpected nature of his conversion: “Paul’s point in reciting these two general features from his past life was that, prior to his encounter with Christ, there was not the slightest human preparation or source for his understanding, much less accepting and proclaiming, the gospel of salvation by God’s grace working through faith completely apart from works. It was foreign to all his previous thinking.”^{vi}

But now Paul is different. The writer who addresses the Galatians is a friend and follower of Christ – not an enemy. His teaching as an apostle is diametrically opposed to his religious past, for it reflects the change that the risen Christ made in his life. This most surprising conversion of the archenemy of first-century Christians sets a pattern for the extent of the Almighty’s longsuffering towards lost people (1 Tim. 1:15-16.)

Turning Adversaries Into Allies

Since Paul’s time, many opponents of the gospel have similarly repented of their enmity against Christ. The Lord Jesus’ gracious working is able to bring enemies contritely to His feet, as they beg forgiveness for their past crimes. Bakht Singh, C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, and the Waorani spearmen who killed the Ecuador martyrs are but a few of the famous examples of former adversaries of Christianity who later became proponents of belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Still today, the Lord Jesus wins His opponents through the display of His incomparable love in the message of the cross, as well as through the testimony of His saints in this world. Likewise, the most hardened sinner can be transformed by God’s saving power, if they repent.

Of course, many refuse to heed Paul’s story, and continue on in their vain hostility to Christ. They will find out too late that they are missing the specific reason for their existence: to know and serve the Creator God Who revealed Himself through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. All opposition to Him is futile, for His triumph is certain. He has already vanquished the most feared powers of the universe: Satan, sin, death, and hell (Acts 2:31-36; Heb. 2:14-15.) Moreover, every knee will one day bow in homage to Him (Phil. 2:11.) Psalm 2 evocatively sets the scene of the King of kings’ future enthronement over all combatants:

Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, *saying*, ‘Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The LORD shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: ‘Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.’ ‘I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, ‘You *are* My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give *You* The nations *for* Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth *for* Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’

Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish *in* the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed *are* all those who put their trust in Him. (Psalm 2.)

ⁱ W.E. Vine, *Collected Writings of W.E. Vine: Galatians*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, electronic ed. (Logos.)

ⁱⁱ R. Alan Cole, *Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 9, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989, p. 89; electronic ed. (Logos); emphasis mine.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom*, Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1996, p. 56.

^{iv} F.F. Bruce, *An Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul*, R.N. Haynes Publishers, 1981. Emphasis mine.

^v Morris, p. 52; emphasis & brackets mine.

^{vi} John MacArthur, *Galatians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1983, p. 27; electronic ed. (Logos.)