



## IS THE GOOD NEWS OF GRACE RELIABLE?

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Galatians 1:11-2:10  
Third Message  
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The true gospel is what Paul calls in Acts 20:24 “the gospel of the grace of God.” The gospel is the good news of a God who is gracious to undeserving sinners. In grace God gave his Son to die for us. In grace he calls us to himself. In grace he justifies us when we believe. In grace he sanctifies us. It is all of grace. Nothing is due to our efforts. Everything in our salvation is due to the grace of God. This is the focus of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In his introduction, the apostle says that this is the only gospel. There is no other.

A question that could be raised at this point is: How do we know that this message of grace is reliable? Certainly Paul’s gospel of grace is a great message. He shares it over and over again in all of his letters—Romans, the Corinthian epistles, the great prison epistles. One is impressed at their depth and understanding, as Paul expounds on God’s purposes throughout the ages. Christians cling to many of his words. Take these verses from Romans, for example: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:1, 38-39). To the Philippians he says, “[I am] confident...that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6). After he prays for the sanctification of the Thessalonians, he assures them, “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Thess 5:24).

Is this merely positive thinking on the apostle’s part? Where did he get all of this? Did he make it up? Did he glean it from tapes or a correspondence course? Did he have long phone conversations with the other apostles in Jerusalem? Paul answers these questions in the passage from Galatians that we will come to this morning. He gives a summary answer in 1:11-12; and then elaborates on that answer, proving it from history by sharing his own experience. This is a lengthy passage. It may appear at first to be a tedious explanation that is distant and irrelevant. But no. The principles developed from these verses are of the utmost importance and relevance to each of us.

The narrative is arranged around the temporal adverbs: “when” (1:15); “then” (1:18); “then” (1:21); “Then, after an interval of fourteen years” (2:1); and “when” (2:11). First, Paul’s summary answer, in verses 1:11-12:

**For I would have you know, 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 I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12 NASB)**

Paul’s answer is clear. He didn’t make it up. Nobody passed it on to him. He didn’t learn it in school. He got it straight from God. Jesus Christ himself revealed it to him. Paul is saying that his words are God’s words and his message is God’s message!

In the verses that follow the apostle sets out to prove from history, by sharing from his own life, that there is no other answer for how he received this message. He divides his story into three parts: His circumstances before his conversion (1:13-14); the conversion itself (1:15-16a); and what happened afterwards (1:16b-24). He will show that each of these stages of his life clearly demonstrate that he got his gospel from God.

First, he tells of his pre-conversion life.

**For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. (1:13-14)**

Here the apostle highlights two characteristics of his former life: his persecution of the church, and his passion for his Jewish tradition. He was obsessive in both of these. It is no exaggeration to say that he persecuted the church “beyond measure.” Paul was not a “seeker.” His mind was closed. In Acts, his later friend and associate Luke uses strong language to describe Paul’s anger toward Christians. He speaks of him as one who was more animal than human. Paul “ravaged” the church. He went from house to house and dragged Christians off to prison. He was out of control.

He wasn’t even content to persecute the church. He systematically tried to destroy it. When the Christians were scattered from Jerusalem he followed them. At the time of his conversion he was on his way up to Damascus with extradition papers in hand giving him authority to arrest them and take them back to Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin could testify to this, since it was they who had issued him with the extradition orders. He hated Christians. He hated Christ. And he was just as zealous for his Jewish traditions. Paul’s role models weren’t athletes or rock musicians. He studied under Gamaliel, the

most eminent teacher of that time. He was brought up under the strictest party of Judaism, the Pharisees. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. His Jewishness was undeniable.

That was Paul's mental state before his conversion. He didn't make a decision for Christ. Christ decided for him. He wasn't in any shape to make a decision or to have his mind changed in any way. On a human level, there was no way he could have come to understand grace. It would take a miracle to change a man so drastically from Pharisaical legalism to the gospel of grace. And that is precisely what God did.

**But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, (1:15-16a)**

Describing his conversion, the contrast between verses 1:13-14 and 1:15-16 is vivid. This is evident in the subjects of the verbs. The former verses are all about Paul: "I used to persecute the church of God; I tried to destroy it; I was advancing in Judaism; I was extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions." But the subject of these latter verses is God: "He set me apart even from my mother's womb; He called me through His grace; He was pleased to reveal His Son in me." Paul's conversion was completely the result of God's initiative. In fact, it was decided before he was born. Paul says it was all of grace. He didn't deserve it. He was fighting against it. But God's mercy found him, and grace called him. That was when God revealed his Son to him.

Paul regarded Jesus as a charlatan, a rebel street preacher. But God opened his eyes to see him for who he was, the Messiah of the Jews, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. That was when Jesus commissioned Paul to preach the good news of Christ. Paul makes a convincing argument. He was a fervent enemy of the gospel, but God in his grace made him a messenger of the very gospel he tried to destroy.

But there is more. Even if Paul's opponents would agree that no human was involved in his conversion, there was still the possibility that he received his gospel from others after coming to Christ. Paul contradicts this notion by detailing what happened following his conversion.

**I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preach-**

**ing the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me. (1:16b-24)**

Following his conversion, Paul did not confer with anyone else. One might have thought that he would go to Jerusalem and check in with the other apostles, but he didn't. He then elaborates on what happened to confirm that. Following his conversion, no one influenced his message. He went to Arabia, not to preach, but to have quiet and solitude, for a period of three years. During this time Jesus taught Paul all the historical facts, all the theological data he needed: those distinctive truths about Jew-Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ, which he would later call the "mystery made known by revelation."

That's why Paul could speak with authority about events that he did not participate in. Take 1 Corinthians 11, for example: "I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed..." Paul received that from the Lord directly. Those events took place in the Upper Room, with only the eleven disciples present. How did he know about this? The Lord told him what happened. It is significant that Paul was in the desert for three years. That is about the same length of time that the Lord had with the disciples.

Paul says that his first visit to Jerusalem came three years later, and it didn't amount to much. He was there for only fifteen days, and he saw but two apostles, Peter and James. The others were away. Perhaps they were still afraid of him. It is ridiculous to think that in that time he received his gospel from the apostles. Following that he went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia, to the far north, nowhere near Jerusalem. The believers there knew him only through the rumors that the persecutor had turned preacher. They were glorifying God, recognizing that Paul was a trophy of God's grace.

It wasn't until fourteen years later (as we will see in 2:1 in a moment), probably meaning fourteen years after his conversion, that Paul visited Jerusalem again and had an extended meeting with all the other apostles. John Stott summarizes Paul's argument in this way, "The fanaticism of his pre-conversion career, the divine initiative in his conversion, and his almost total isolation from the Jerusalem church leaders afterwards, together combined to demonstrate that his message was not from man but from God."<sup>1</sup> There is no other way he could have received all of that information. He didn't crib it. So Paul confirms with an oath: "Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying."

Having shown that his gospel was independent from the other apostles, that it came from God and not men, he has one more thing to prove. He is now going to show that though he was autonomous, he was still part of the team. Though the source of the message was different, the content of his gospel was the same as that of the other apostles. He will describe his longer visit to Je-

Jerusalem and show that his gospel was authorized and accepted by the big boys, the Jerusalem apostles.

He gives us the circumstances of that visit in 2:1-2:

**Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. (2:1-2)**

Fourteen years after his conversion, Paul made a second trip to Jerusalem, taking along with him two friends: Barnabas, a Jew, that great encourager who traveled with him on his first missionary journey, and Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile, who himself was a convert, on that missionary journey. The reason for this trip, Paul says, was “because of a revelation.” This may be an allusion to the prophecy given to Agabus in Acts 11 concerning a famine in Jerusalem. If that is true, then the purpose of the visit was a relief mission designed to help the poor believers in Jerusalem. So this wasn’t an official visit where Paul was called on the carpet to defend his gospel.

However, while he was there, he wanted to meet with the apostles and present to them this gospel of grace that he had been sharing with the Gentiles, that the grace of God alone was necessary for salvation. He did it, he says, “for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.” In saying this Paul isn’t expressing any doubts about his message. He didn’t need the other apostles’ assurance that it was true. He had been preaching it for fourteen years. His concern was that the Judaizers would minimize the impact and effect of his ministry. As John Stott puts it, “It was to overthrow their influence, not to strengthen his own conviction.”<sup>2</sup>

It was a very important meeting, and a very stressful situation. Paul brought with him to Jerusalem both a Gentile convert and his Gentile gospel. How would the apostles respond? Would they welcome Titus as a brother, or reject him because he wasn’t circumcised? Would they accept Paul’s gospel of grace, or try to change it in some way?

Paul goes on to say what happened. First, Titus was accepted and was not obligated to be circumcised.

**But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. (2:3-5)**

The reason why Titus’s circumcision even became an issue was that these Judaizers who followed Paul around wherever he taught, whom he calls here “false brethren,” had somehow found a way to get into the

meeting. J.B. Phillips says, “they wormed their way into the meeting.” However they got there, Paul regards them as spies.

Their motive, according to Paul, was “to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.” Their whole purpose was to spy on Gentile freedom, and bring new converts back into a different slavery, the law of Moses. To be specific, they were insisting that Titus be circumcised. That was their platform, as we saw last week. They had hoped to find some weak points in Paul’s gospel, but they failed. They failed because freedom in Christ is so much better than legalism. Paul saw right through their manipulation. It wasn’t merely a matter of cutting a little foreskin off the flesh. It was an issue of freedom versus slavery.

In Christ there is freedom from law as a way of acceptance before God. Our acceptance depends entirely upon God’s grace, which was incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, which we receive by faith. To make God’s approval depend upon submitting to rules is to make a free man a slave again. Titus was a guinea pig, a test case. Paul stood firm against the pressure of these Judaizers. Having believed in Jesus, Titus was accepted by God in Christ. That was enough. The other apostles agreed, and the Council of Jerusalem would later confirm that (Acts 15).

Another important result of that meeting was that Paul’s gospel of grace wasn’t challenged or changed at all.

**But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do. (2:6-10)**

The outcome of this meeting with the Jerusalem apostles, whom these Judaizers regarded as being superior to Paul, is given in two phrases, one negative, at the end of 2:6: “[they] contributed nothing to me.” In other words, they didn’t find his gospel flawed in any way. Not only that but, positively, they “gave to me...the right hand of fellowship” (2:9). They acknowledged that both they and Paul had been given the same gospel. They were merely given different people with whom to share it: Peter to the Jews, and Paul to the Gentiles.

Perhaps you are wondering what in the world a chronology of Paul’s journeys and ministry, a trip to Jerusa-

lem, questions about whether Titus ought to be circumcised, and a meeting between Paul and the apostles have to do with us. It seems distant and possibly even irrelevant to the issues we face today. But that isn't true.

Let me suggest a couple of principles in closing.

### **1. The good news of grace is reliable; it never changes.**

The gospel of the grace of God is the gospel that every one of the apostles preached. They do not contradict one another. There are differences of style, because they had different personalities. They emphasize different things, because they were writing to different people. They complement one another. There is only one gospel, and that is the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul takes great pains to demonstrate that his gospel, the gospel of grace, is from God, and is consistent with the teaching of the other apostles. There is only one New Testament gospel. Whether you are five or ninety-five years old; whether you are Asian or Caucasian; whether you are a scientist or a plumber, it doesn't matter. Although the manner and style in which it is presented may (and I may add, probably should) change, depending on the audience, the content remains the same. It is the good news of a God who is gracious to undeserving sinners. In grace he gave his Son to die for us. In grace he calls us to himself. In grace he justifies us when we believe. In grace he sanctifies us. It is all of God. It all centers on Christ, his sufficiency and his work of the cross. That's why we can know that God loves us, that he likes us. God has an enormous amount of compassion and love for us. He saw us lost in our sin, and lonely and desperate in our longing, and he became one of us. He died for us in order to bring us to himself, so that he could fellowship with us. The Bible is the story of God's love. To read it any other way is to read it incorrectly.

### **2. The good news of grace must be protected.**

Paul was undaunted and unwavering in resisting the Judaizers. They did not intimidate him. He did so, he said, "so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you." He did it for the Galatians' freedom, and for ours as well. He withstood legalism, and so must we. There will always be people who will want to enslave us by limiting our experience of freedom in Christ. Eugene Peterson put it this way:

There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by his grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They want to control us; they want to use us for their own purposes. They themselves refuse to live arduously and openly in faith, but huddle together with a few others and try to get a sense of approval in insisting that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth.<sup>3</sup>

We don't need to look alike and act alike for God to like us. In fact, he has made us all different from one another. We are free to love and serve him creatively and uniquely. We are free to worship in different ways. We are free to enjoy different styles of music. And I might add, we are free to resist all of the pressures that others impose on us, telling us what we need to do and how we need to act, in order to be accepted by God. We are loved by God in Christ. We have been brought near to God in Christ. We have been forgiven in Christ.

*It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1).*

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 38.

2. Stott, *Galatians*, 41.

3. Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988), 67.