

each other. We cannot say much about Paul's visit to James the brother of Jesus (1:19). Some say that this visit was added in order to strengthen the association of Paul with Jesus himself, but this contradicts the clear purpose of Paul in the first chapter of Galatians, which was to affirm that the Gospel he preached was something Jesus gave him personally and independently of all others.

Paul's testimony was important, because it established his credibility, and his right to tell the church authoritatively where it was going wrong and what it should do to make things right. In verse 20, Paul made what is perhaps a crucial personal appeal; 'I assure you before God that what I am writing to you is no lie!' Paul may have been totally confident in his Apostolic calling and the veracity of what he said, but he still had to work at persuading those who had become skeptical.

Application

It is interesting that even today, some people think of Paul's letters as a part of Scripture which contains options. It is possible to hear people say 'I agree with Paul' on this or that matter, and the brief passages of Scripture in which Paul expresses personal caution about what he wrote is sometimes quoted as if it gives us permission to doubt his advice (1 Cor 7:12). This is not helpful, and we should admit that the Church has always accepted that Paul's letters are as much a part of Scripture as any other part of the New Testament; indeed, Paul's letters are some of the earliest documents which were kept by churches as writings regarded as holy. This was in no small part because Paul's authority as the foremost leader and missionary of the early church was genuinely unique. His testimony was indeed accepted by the Church as Apostolic, and the Gospel he preached was incredibly important. It played a large part in stabilising the early church, for letters such as Galatians were copied and sent around the growing churches probably long before the Gospels appeared. The Gentile church then survived and grew largely on the basis of the things Paul wrote as well as preached, and because they were written down, they could be used as a reference to settle disputes and arguments about the true Gospel. It is interesting that although some of the letters in the new Testament do not identify an author (such as Ephesians and Hebrews), the assumed author of each of the letters is an Apostle (note that Jude was believed to be written by Judas, brother of Jesus, see Matt 13:55, Mark 6:3).

What we need to re-affirm today is our confidence that there is one Gospel in Jesus Christ, and that this is reflected in the Apostolic heritage of Scripture which testifies to this Gospel. Modern scholarship has whittled away at people's understanding of the Gospel by placing a thousand queries against various New Testament writings, from the conclusion of Mark's Gospel to the authorship of Paul's letters, questioning his Apostleship and also the validity of what Paul says on cultural grounds. It is right to explore all these things, but to allow them to undermine our confidence in the unique nature of the Gospel is to belittle the heritage of faith we have received. If Paul were alive today, I do believe he would speak to us most strongly about accepting the testimony of those whom God has used to bring us our Gospel, including himself! Now, we may think him bold, but the history of the church shows him to be right. Scripture may be hard to understand and has problems we cannot easily solve; but it speaks of one God, one Gospel of salvation, and one Saviour. Jesus Christ our Lord.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. When our sins are forgiven by God, what happens to them?
2. Why is it not possible for us to claim a complete knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What makes Paul different from us?
3. Why did God refuse to allow Paul to learn more from Peter and the other Apostles?

Discipleship

This reading speaks volumes about the importance of spending time with God and sorting out what we believe. We live at a time when if someone confesses faith, we place them in a public pulpit in no time at all if they are willing to speak! Consider the experience of Christian people you know and then write down a list of things you would suggest that a new Christian might do to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God.

Final Prayer

Plant Your Word within my soul, Lord God. Not so that I may be able to claim I know it any more than anyone else, but so that I may be able to benefit from its truth and incomparable wisdom throughout my whole life. Bless me by answering my prayer, Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer

Clean us, dear Jesus, please clean us. Remove the dirt from our souls; the little sins we love to do, our precious habits which dishonour You, the words by which we swear and say what we think unthinkingly, the looks we give to pressurise even those we love. Destroy these sins within us, Lord, and may we never tolerate their grip. Change us utterly, dear Jesus, and may Your image in us be brighter! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Gospel

Pray for those who preach the Gospel within your church; either locally or in your area. Pray that those who are called to preach will make it their business to be sure of their knowledge of the Gospel; what it is, what it means and how it affects people. Pray that they will be willing to speak clearly and unashamedly about the Gospel to all people and in all circumstances.

Meditation

The call goes up for good quality people to lead the church of God.

- Preachers who are trained to understand the Word and expound it;
- Pastors who will spot people's spiritual needs and care for them;
- Healers who will minister the gift of healing with discernment;
- Leaders who will act decisively to tell the people right or wrong.

Still, hidden treasures lie undisturbed beneath the surface of the church.
Timid people, capable of standing the sternest spiritual tests;
Quiet people, longing to speak out the glories of the Gospel;
Caring people who do the loving things which no one knows about;
Praying people whose prayers protect the church from Satan's evil.

God has laid His hand on the lives of more people than you know.

- Those who bring their friends to church and speak about their Lord ;
- Those who ensure that things are said and done correctly;
- Those who always have a smile which says; 'God loves us';
- Those who never miss a single thing your fellowship ever does;

We lead each other; and reap the benefits of each other's love

Our Lord, our only King and leader, would not have it any other way.

Bible Study - Galatians 1:13-24

¹³ You have doubtless heard about what I used to do in my former life as a Jew, how I persecuted the church of God with extreme vigour with the intention of destroying it. ¹⁴ I progressed in Judaism beyond many of my Jewish contemporaries and was far more zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when it pleased God, who set me apart from within my mother's womb and called me through His grace ¹⁶ to reveal His Son to me so that I might preach Him amongst the Gentiles, I did not immediately look for worldly, human advice, ¹⁷ nor did I travel to Jerusalem to those who were Apostles before me, but I went away to Arabia and later returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and stayed with him for fifteen days, ¹⁹ but I did not see any of the other Apostles except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (I assure you before God that what I am writing to you is no lie!) ²¹ Then I travelled to the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²² and I was still personally unknown to the churches in Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only heard the report: 'The man who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once attempted to destroy!' ²⁴ And they praised God because of me!

Review

The passage we have read today is a famous testimony of Paul in which he talks about some of his life's experiences, particularly the early years after he was converted from being a Jew. There are a number of places in Acts where Paul talks about his conversion (9:1f., 22:1-5, 26:12-17) and he also describes his experiences whilst being a missionary in some of his other letters, notably 2

Corinthians (2 Cor 2:12f., 10:1f., 11:16-33 etc). For each personal testimony, there is a specific reason, and the reason in our passage today is that Paul had to explain how the Gospel he preached was given to him by Jesus Christ, and was not 'passed on' to him by the other Apostles (the twelve disciples). Only as an independent witness of the risen Christ could Paul justifiably say that his Gospel was original and true, and not subject to any amendment.

Paul began by describing himself as a 'died in the wool' Jew, someone with such an extreme aversion to Christianity that he had become the church's chief opponent in the years after Jesus' death. As the strictest of Pharisees, the teaching of the Church which said that Jesus was the Messiah was completely anathema to him as was the Gospel. As a Jew 'far more zealous' (1:14) than others of his day, Paul appealed to his readers to understand that he had not thought out the Gospel from anything he found in his former life. It had taken a completely miraculous work of God to turn him round to being a Christian who preached the Gospel to Gentiles! Paul wrote in a most appealing way about how God was at work in him through grace 'from my mother's womb' (1:15), long before his conversion (which he does not describe). For Paul, this grace of God alone gave rise to his preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles (1:16).

Paul did not describe his conversion in detail (see Acts 9) because this was not on his mind as he wrote to the Galatians; he was concerned only to make sure his readers knew that the Gospel he preached was not something learned or passed on to him by anyone, not even the other twelve Apostles in Jerusalem. So he said straight away 'I did not immediately look for worldly, human advice' (1:16), and indicated that he had not gone to Jerusalem to learn about the Gospel from those who were there. At the time, Jerusalem was the centre of the Christian church, but Paul sought a substantial time in private prayer, up to three years (1:18), staying in the Arabian desert regions to the east of Judea and also in Damascus. Some people suggest that Paul went to the southern Sinai regions of Arabia and to Mount Sinai itself in order to 'find' the Gospel, because this was where Moses had been given the Law. There was plenty of time for Paul to do this if he wanted; but if it was true, surely Paul would have made the most of such an experience. No, he was concerned to give us the strong impression that he simply spent time learning the truth from Jesus by himself, without any other aids.

The rest of the reading tells us of Paul's limited contact with Peter in Jerusalem and also with James (1:18,19), and yet again he contrasts this courtesy call with his description of going to Syria and Cilicia, a long way to the north of Jerusalem. By this time, Paul was largely unknown by the mainstream churches of Judea except as the man who had once been a bitter opponent of Jesus but was now a preacher (1:23)!

Even now, I have often heard people talk casually about the way Paul went to Jerusalem in order to learn about the Gospel from Peter and the Apostles. This is not how Paul saw it and is certainly not true of either Acts 9 or of Galatians 1. Paul's claim to be an Apostle rested on this one point; Jesus had appeared to him personally to reveal the truth of the Gospel. It had certainly not been passed down to him by others!

Going Deeper

Against this general backdrop, we will now explore what Paul said about his life before he was a Christian, about the revelation by which he was commissioned, and about the rather strange sequence of events which followed his conversion. It was many years after his conversion before Paul began work as a missionary. Surely, given all that had happened to him, there was much that he had to sort out before he was ready. But we get the strong impression that this was between him and God, and no-one else! His was a unique calling.

Life before Christ (1:13,14)

Paul was deeply affected by his former life, as we can see quite clearly in his other letters (1 Cor 15:9, Phil 3:6; 1 Tim 1:13). It is common today for Christians to refer to the way in which our sins are 'wiped clean' when we are converted, and some people suggest that it is as if those sins had not happened. This approach to past sin can be misleading, and the scriptural evidence is that for Paul, he knew that the power of past sin to condemn his soul had been broken by the saving work of Christ; nevertheless, he was fully aware of the terrible things he had done to his dying day. He did not seek to gain ever more meaningful forgiveness for his deeds, but he used his story as an illustration in his preaching, and indicated from time to time that he still felt something of the shame and the guilt of what he had done, and was not afraid to say so. His actions had been despicable.

Apart from reading verses 13 and 14 of our passage, the main source of our knowledge of Paul's early life comes from Acts 8:1-3 and Acts 9 and Acts 22:3-5. In summary, Paul was brought up in

the deeply religious home of a Pharisee and was rigorously taught the Law according to the 'traditions of my fathers' (1:14). Our reading is a fascinating description of Paul's estimate of his own former place within Judaism and his zeal for God. Paul claimed that he 'progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries' (1:14, but what does this mean? The word 'progressed' in this sentence comes from a Greek word ('prokoptow') which has the general meaning of 'cut through to the front'; a word which might aptly describe how someone pushes through to the front of a queue for example, or gets to the front of a crowd to see what is going on. This suggests that Paul had a great deal of inner strength, something which becomes clear in the rest of the sentence which describes his 'zeal' (1:14) in hounding those who he perceived as a threat to the Jewish faith in the One true God; i.e. Christians. Zeal is a good thing, but over-zealousness is dangerous, and before Paul's redemption it made him a religious bigot and extremist of the most dangerous kind, murdering people with whom he had a religious difference.

God, however, already had his hand on Paul's life and was about to change him completely.

The revelation (1:15,16)

In Psalm 139:13, we read 'You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.' It is one of the high points of the Old Testament, describing the creative work of God which makes a man or a woman, and Paul alludes to this great Psalm as he declares that God had set him apart from within his 'mother's womb' (1:15) for the task of preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15, 22:15, 26:16-18). He believed most firmly that this was God's plan for him and also that it was both similar to the call of Jesus' disciples and also different.

Jesus had called his disciples to take the Good News of the Gospel first to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 10:6), and then after His resurrection, to 'make disciples of all nations' (Matt 28:19). For them, the call of Christ was to preach the Gospel starting from the early Jewish / Christian communities founded after Pentecost, and building on that. If you read the Acts of the Apostles, you will discover that Peter did just that. Notably, he made the essential breakthrough of preaching the Gospel to Gentiles when he went to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:1f.). By fulfilling this prophetic call of Jesus, Peter opened up the way for the ministry of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, which Paul built upon.

Paul began his own ministry many years after his conversion by venturing out on missionary journeys firstly with Barnabas. After that, however, he retraced his steps on his second journey but did not base his work on the Jewish synagogues (Acts 16,17), boldly going where the Spirit led (see, for example, Acts 16:6-10). He was uniquely called to the Gentile ministry, and he was insistent that exactly the same Gospel preached by all the Apostles was equally capable of saving Gentiles as well as Jews, and he refused to let anyone attempt to alter or change this Gospel for Jews or Gentiles (see yesterday's study). As he said, the Gospel was not something for which he sought 'worldly, human advice' (1:16). My own guess is that God made the heart of the Gospel clear to Paul very quickly, but it took Paul many years to work through its consequences and understand it fully by checking it against the exhaustive knowledge he already had of the Old Testament scriptures, before he felt it right to go beyond preaching in local churches (see Acts 9:28,31) and commence missionary work. The fruit of his careful and considered work through years of contemplation and personal study in Arabia, Damascus, Syria and Cilicia are found in Paul's comprehensive theological works, such as Romans (and later parts of Galatians).

Life after the revelation of Christ (1:17-24)

There is a great deal of debate about where Paul actually went in his travels and personal 'retreat' in those years between his conversion (Acts 9) and the commencement of missionary work (Acts 13:1f.). Acts 9 appears to suggest that Paul began a peripatetic preaching ministry almost immediately after his conversion, but it concludes with Paul being sent away from Jerusalem because of antagonism from Jews (Acts 9:29). Here in Galatians, Paul says that he then spent up to three years in the Arabian Desert and Damascus, but how did Paul live? It would be interesting to know whether Paul had contacts in these regions, but we do not know. The only thing we can be sure of is that we know from later texts that Paul was a tent maker (Acts 18:3) and it is likely that he used this craft to support himself at that time. Whether or not he joined any local Christian fellowships or even Jewish synagogues we just do not know.

It was of course important that Paul should spend some time with Peter (1:18) and the visit of two weeks sounds like a courtesy. In the course of time, however, it became important that Paul and Peter knew each other. The controversies which arose about the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15) would have been infinitely more difficult if the main people involved had not known