

Watching Out for Paul – Part 1

Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I want to talk about Paul, and that was the opening greeting in Chapter 1:3 of Galatians, or more specifically, “To the churches of Galatia.” It just seemed appropriate. Paul is a fascinating person. I’ve always said I have a love/hate relationship with Paul. He seems to say one thing in one book and then contradicts himself in another book. Fully one half of the New Testament, 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament, are attributed to him, as is one half of the Book of Acts. I finally learned why that’s so.

But, to get into Paul’s sandals, we need some history. Philip of Macedonia, the country just north of Greece, wanted to rule Greece. He fought many battles and conquered quite a bit of it. When he died in 336 BCE, his son, Alexander the Great, took over and conquered and united Greece, and then went on to conquer Asia Minor (or Turkey) and much of the Mediterranean world, eventually instilling its Hellenistic culture and education as he went. Then, two hundred years later, Rome conquered Greece

and most everything else in the civilized world up to India. Thus, if you were born in Tarsus in the Cilicia region of Asia Minor, 10 miles north of the Mediterranean coast on the east side of current Turkey, you grew up schooled in Greek philosophy, science and rhetoric under a Roman state. And that would have been Paul, who was born about 8 CE (though I've read from 1 to 10 CE). In addition, if your father could claim to be a Roman citizen, then you were as well. The later fact, Paul didn't use much, but gave him certain rights, especially legal rights which he used when he was on trial and/or in prison.

This educational background gave him a different perspective on life and the world than the Jews of Israel and Judea. He was Greek. However, Paul was also Jewish, and a Pharisee, as was his father. They were the strict, conservative arm of the Jewish religion whose role was to keep the religion pure. Paul was a Pharisee with zeal, and in fact, called himself a zealot. He was probably in his middle teens when he came to Jerusalem and studied Torah under Gamiliel. He probably finished his studies at the age of 22 at about the time that Jesus was crucified. He became known for persecuting Christian converts for the next several years, while he was also occupied as a "tent maker",

which meant he probably sewed shop awnings and coverings more than what we would think of as camping tents.

He was likely in his mid-20s, around 33 CE, when he was going to Damascus that he had a life-changing experience. The Book of Acts says he saw a blinding light and heard a voice call after him, asking why he persecuted the Christian Jews. Blinded, he goes into the city and is met by Ananias, who removes the scales from his eyes, and he starts to preach the word there, to everyone's amazement. Acts continues that he returns to Jerusalem, preaches there to everyone's amazement, and after a death threat, he is sent to Tarsus.

Paul's version is very different. He says that he actually saw Jesus and then, after regaining his sight, immediately "went away at once into Arabia, and then afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then, after three years, I did go up to Jerusalem." (Galatians 1:17-18). He never explains what he did in Arabia, but likely went to the Nabatean Arabs, around the southeastern side of the Dead Sea, what is now Jordan. His mission there failed, for political reasons not of his own. In the late 20's, King Herod divorced his wife to marry Herodias. Unfortunately, his wife was the daughter of the Nabatean king Aretas IV. In 36 CE, Aretas went to war with Herod

and defeated him. He then went north and captured Damascus between 37 and 39 CE. It was not a good time for religious conversion and Paul realized he needed to leave Damascus, which he did at night through a hole in the city wall, lowered in a basket. He then reports that he went to Jerusalem, meets with Peter and James for 15 days, and then from there goes to Cilicia and Tarsus. Two very different versions of the same story. During his time there, he preaches and teaches in Tarsus and the surrounding area.

The second great center of the Christian movement is Antioch, then in Syria, now in an arm of Turkey that reaches down along the coast towards Lebanon. Paul's reputation as a Christ follower after his conversion was well known, and the church leaders in Antioch sent Barnabus to Tarsus to bring Paul back to Antioch to teach there. After several years, in about 47 CE, the church fathers send Barnabus and Paul off to what became Paul's "First" Mission.

From Antioch, they go to Crete, across the island, and then sail to Asia Minor into the region of southern Galatia. Their process is to go to Roman provincial cities that have synagogues and preach there. In their work, they find three groups of people. The first are



(https://www.theologyfortherestofus.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/paul_s_first_journey.png)

the Jews, who are largely unpersuaded. The second are the gentiles, who Paul refers to as the Greeks. They are somewhat receptive to their teaching. The third group are religious Greeks who are active in the synagogues but have not converted to Judaism, largely not undergoing circumcision and accepting Kosher dietary laws. This group is very open to the message and many become followers of the word. Even though there is resistance from the orthodox Jews, they are able to create several new churches there.

Upon their return to Antioch in 49 CE, Paul goes to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the apostles. There ensues a great debate whether a gentile convert has to become Jewish first before they

can become a Christian. That had been the norm for everyone until the time when Barnabus and Paul start to actively recruit non-Jews. As part of his conversion experience, Paul began to understand that Jesus's teaching was not just for Jews, but for everyone. As the old slogan went for a New York rye bread, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's." (I frankly never thought of the double irony of that line. Levy's bread ad was also Paul's argument!)

Understand here, throughout his life, Paul considered himself a Jew, a Jew with a love and understanding of his Jesus. But he also welcomed his non-Jewish "Greek" converts as his "Brothers and sisters in Christ." When he wrote, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, he was making that claim that the gentiles didn't have to be Jewish to be Christian.

The outcome of that debate was that the Jerusalem apostles would preach to the Jews and Paul would teach to the gentiles. However, things get worse. Paul goes back to Antioch and Peter comes to visit. With Paul's insight, Peter is enjoying his time there, eating with uncircumcised non-Jews in the local fellowship. When a group of conservative Jews visit from Jerusalem and find Peter eating with the non-Jews, Peter backed off and quit the

meals. When Paul recognized this, he rebuked Peter in front of the visitors and hit him with both barrels. They spilt after that, though Peter finally came around and commended Paul's writing as scripture.

Things aren't going well for Paul at this point, but he knows he is right. He takes off later in 49 CE on his second missionary journey and in 53 CE on his third.



(https://www.theologyfortherestofus.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/paul_s_second_journey.png)

But It was likely at this time in 49CE that Paul heard about the churches he and Barnabus founded in Galatia. Missionaries from Jerusalem were going to the churches and teaching that Paul was wrong and that you did have be fully Jewish and obey Jewish Law before you could become a Christian. Many were confused by

this and apparently some did undergo circumcision. Paul became livid! And this is likely when he wrote to the “Churches in Galatia.”

Galatians is six chapters long. It is some of Paul’s most masterful writing, showing his passion in its lesson. The following are just some quotes from the book.

Galatians 1:6-7

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. NIV

Galatians 2:16

Know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. NIV

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. NIV

Galatians 5:1

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. NIV

Galatians 5:6

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. NIV

Galatians 5:14

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." NIV

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. NIV

And Finally, to Chapter 6. We can see that Paul has been building to a climax here. “Restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” “Bear one

another's burdens." "Let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor."

"So then, as we have the opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are in the household of faith."

And here is summation of the chapter, and of Paul's basic and core belief.

"See what large letters I make when am writing to you in my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who try to compel you to be circumcised --- only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everthing. And as for all who will follow this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy , and upon the Israel of God!!!!

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers.
Amen. (Gal 6:11-18)

There is so much to Paul, his second and third missionary trips, his final trip to Rome, and all the writings attributed to him, some

of it very real, some of it questionable, and some of it actually anti-Pauline. And our lesson in two weeks will be on Colossians and I'll have a chance to follow up with more. This is your warning.

Amen.