



Galatians - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

Paul grabs his readers' attention in the introduction of his letter by filling the typical formal greetings with two strong emphases: his God-given authority and his Christ-centred message. Once these points are grasped, the reader has the gist of the whole letter.

Paul writes his briefest opening to any letter because he is clearly concerned with the deteriorating situation in the Galatian churches. The absence of a thanksgiving at this point indicates how extremely serious the problem in the Galatian churches was from Paul's perspective. This is something he immediately starts to address by stating, in no uncertain terms, that the Judaizers were proclaiming a false Gospel.

A great deal of Paul's concern is to make clear that his call, his commission as a true apostle, his conversation, his every action is from God and not from any human being, group, or worldly concern. He is God's servant alone. He knew the danger of mixing the two - trying to please both God and man always leads to destruction.

I Galatians 1:1-10 - Opening

Paul's brief opening includes a greeting (vv.1-5), after which he addresses the crisis in the Galatian church (vv.6-10).

I.a Galatians 1:1-5 - Salutation

Many of the familiar elements of Paul's greetings are present here, e.g. 'grace and peace', but this is probably the most muted of all of Paul's greetings to churches; there is no thanksgiving or reference to the Galatians' faith, hope or love.

¹ Paul an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead –

Galatians 1:1

Apostle indicates Paul's authority as one commissioned by God and equipped to represent him. Apostle literally means 'one who is sent'. Paul was therefore entrusted with the sacred deposit of the Gospel. On apostleship, refer to the comments made on Matthew 10:2 and Romans 1:1.

Paul's apostleship is especially important in Galatians because the false teachers had evidently raised questions about whether he should really be called an apostle, although the key leaders in Jerusalem did accept Paul's authority: <<***On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognised the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised***>> (Galatians 2:7-9).

Neither by human commission nor from human authorities. Paul stresses both here and in vv.11-12, vv.16-17, and v.19 that he received the Gospel directly from the Lord, not second hand, and certainly not from a human source.

Through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead. Paul makes an immediate reference to the resurrection and attributes it to the power of God the Father. It is also an early pointer to the fact that it was the Risen Lord who had directly commissioned Paul. Therefore, those who challenged Paul's message were in fact challenging the Lord who had commissioned him. Paul could have pointed to the words that Jesus had given to his apostles: <<***Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me***>> (Matthew 10:40).

² and all the members of God's family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Galatians 1:2

All the members of God's family who are with me. Those with Paul agree with the Gospel he proclaims, and hence the Galatians are mistaken if they accept the false Gospel that demands circumcision or law keeping for salvation.

The churches of Galatia probably refers to the churches of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, all of which Paul established during his first missionary journey. Refer to Acts 13:1-14:28. It seems that they were all in the same situation to one degree or another.

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

Galatians 1:3

Paul, as he often does in his letters, wishes his audience grace, God's unmerited favour, and peace, God's positive blessing of well-being. These two words sum up the basis and the consequence, the root and the fruit, of the total work of salvation accomplished by God through Jesus Christ.

The expression peace, Hebrew *shalom*, had a much richer connotation than the English word does since it conveyed not merely the absence of conflict and turmoil but also the notion of positive blessing, especially in terms of a right relationship with God: <<*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace*>> (Numbers 6:24-26), <<*May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!*>> (Psalm 29:11), and: <<'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the Lord Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Lord Almighty>> (Haggai 2:9 NIV); and also, as a result, the idea that 'all is well' in one's life. This may be manifested most clearly amid persecution and tribulation.

⁴ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

Galatians 1:4

Gave himself for our sins. The sacrificial, self-giving work of Christ on the Cross is the final answer to the problem of all human moral failure and guilt. The saving work of Christ on the Cross is in the forefront of Paul's mind and therefore shows up here at the very beginning of the letter. Jesus not only saves Christians from their sins but also sets them free from being slaves of this world. Paul will later explain that in wanting to be under the law, the Galatians effectively want to stay anchored in this present evil age, refer also to Galatians 3:22-26 and 4:1-11, which is the state of the world apart from Christ until his return.

To set us free was something that was an expectation of the coming Jewish Messiah: <<*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners*>> (Isaiah 61:1).

According to the will of our God and Father. It had always been God's good will to redeem his people from their own iniquity and this he did through his Son: <<*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*>> (Romans 5:8).

The revelation of God in Christ had already intersected and forever changed the nature of human history. The Cross of Christ inaugurated God's new created order in human history. All who believe in the Cross are rescued from the present evil age and included in the new creation. The present age is controlled by destructive, malignant forces. The works of the law do not offer a way of escape. Only the Cross of Christ sets the prisoners truly free.

⁵ to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Galatians 1:5

To whom be the glory. This is not just a formulaic expression but reveals Paul's concern to defend and preserve this central truth of Scripture: that God chose Israel and the church for his own name's sake, redeemed his people in Christ for his praise and glory, and calls believers to declare his majesty in the world. Those who have led the Galatians astray are doing so to <<***make a good showing in the flesh***>> (6:12b), whereas Paul will conclude the letter by stating that his sole desire is to give all the glory to Christ (6:14).

I.b Galatians 1:6-10 - There Is No Other Gospel

Paul addresses the problem of the Galatians abandoning the true Gospel and coming under the sway of the false teachers.

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel –

Galatians 1:6

I am astonished. Paul immediately makes his feelings known in a chastising tone. He restates the admonition in the form of rebuking questions in 3:1-5 and 4:8-10. His reprimand comes from a position of pastoral love and care for the church: <<***For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life***>> (Proverbs 6:23).

So quickly. It was a remarkably short time between Paul's first proclamation to the Galatians and their present disarray, perhaps only one year. The phrases deserting the one who called you and different Gospel show that these are not issues over which Christians might legitimately disagree. The Galatians are questioning the very Gospel itself, and Paul is a model of forthright frankness when central Gospel issues are at stake.

The present tense of the verb deserting indicates that the Galatian Christians had not yet decisively carried out their desertion. They were just starting to turn around and leave. Paul's letter was designed to arrest them before they had gone too far. It is God and not Paul they are deserting!

Turning to a different gospel. At no point does Paul claim those teaching the Galatians did not believe that Jesus was the Christ, that he died and rose again. What they were doing was adding to the Gospel message a burden that the hearer would not be able to bear. This was a challenge that Peter would lay before the Council in Jerusalem: <<***Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?***>> (Acts 15:10). Although it was a different context, there were opponents of Paul in Corinth who were leading the church astray and some were accepting their different teaching: <<***For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough***>> (2 Corinthians 11:4).

Although believers can genuinely have different opinions over certain biblical interpretations or their theology, there can only be one true Gospel: <<let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead>> (Acts 4:10), and: <<For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified>> (1 Corinthians 2:2).

⁷ not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Galatians 1:7

Not that there is another gospel. The content of this different Gospel will become evident as the letter is read. But it is clear already that this Gospel was not God-centred. It was drawing people away from God to focus on themselves. Preoccupation with racial identity, religious observance and ceremonial rituals was robbing them of their experience of God's grace expressed in Christ. The irony and tragedy of the situation was that in their pious pursuit of spiritual perfection (3:3), they were actually turning away from God.

There are some who are confusing you refers to visiting preachers who had tried to persuade the Galatians that they should require circumcision and obedience to the whole law as a means of justification before God, thus perverting the Gospel of Christ. Such was their confusion that they accepted what was being said: <<Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds>> (Acts 15:24), and: <<I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty>> (Galatians 5:10). Paul could have turned to the prophet for words of guidance: <<Thus says the Lord of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord>> (Jeremiah 23:16). Refer also to Galatians 4:17 and 6:12-13.

⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ⁹ As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Galatians 1:8-9

A Gospel contrary to what we proclaimed. The Gospel is unchanging. Thus Paul pronounces a curse of final judgment on those who proclaim or receive a different Gospel. Even if he himself, or an angel from heaven, were to preach such a Gospel, the Galatians should reject it. Mormonism is an example of a religion that is based on revelation supposedly given by an angel and teaches a Gospel different from justification by faith alone in the substitutionary death of Christ.

Even the authority of a messenger from heaven or the authority of Paul himself must be tested by their loyalty to the Gospel. It is important to note that Paul especially holds himself accountable to this ultimate measure of authority. His apostolic authority is not arbitrary; it is valid only as long as he is faithful to the true Gospel. Paul did all that was humanly possible to remain faithful: <<*Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience towards God and all people*>> (Acts 24:16).

Let that one be accursed shows the true depth of Paul's feelings in this matter. For him, there was no greater crime than perverting the Gospel by either adding to it or removing elements from it. John issued a similar warning: <<*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book*>> (Revelation 22:18-19).

Paul's stance here should not be confused with his apparent liberalism of allowing people to choose whether to celebrate certain festivals or eat certain foods. Here, he is defending the fundamental truth of the Gospel and the freedom it provides those who accept it.

Some Gnostics claimed to have had secret revelations from angels that they then passed on to a supposed select few. These men seemed to be making similar claims and Paul wants to ensure it is eradicated.

¹⁰ Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians 1:10

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Paul poses two absolutely incompatible goals: pleasing man, or pleasing God. There is no possibility of combining the two.

If I were still pleasing people. Paul had done so by persecuting the early church: <<*But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison*>> (Acts 8:3). His Jewish opponents were no doubt now claiming he was pleasing people by telling them they could come to God without being circumcised or obeying the law.

I would not be a servant of Christ. Paul always saw his freedom in Christ to be found in his role as his servant. He wore it like a badge of pride: <<*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God*>> (Romans 1:1), <<*Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries*>> (1 Corinthians 4:1), <<*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus*>> (Philippians 1:1), and: <<*Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ*>> (Titus 1:1). This was a position held by others: <<*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*>> (James 1:1a), <<*Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ*>> (2 Peter 1:1a), and: <<*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James*>> (Jude 1a); reflecting

the very nature of Jesus: <<*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*>> (Mark 10:45), and: <<*For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs*>> (Romans 15:8). Just as Jesus was always obedient to his Father's will, so too Paul would only do the will of God as seen through Jesus.

II. Galatians 1:11-2:21 - Indirect Appeal: Paul's Career with the Gospel

At this point Paul turns from his rebuke for desertion to an autobiographical account. By clearly setting forth the story of his own loyalty to the Gospel, Paul intensifies his rebuke for disloyalty. In contrast to the Galatian believers who turned from the Gospel of Christ to follow Jewish customs, Paul tells how he was converted from Judaism and commissioned by God to preach the Gospel of Christ, and how he was faithful to his commission. His life stands as an eloquent witness to the truth of the Gospel.

His autobiography begins with a thesis statement about the origin of the Gospel, recounts his conversion and call, describes his first visit with Peter in Jerusalem and the conference with the apostles in Jerusalem, recalls his conflict with Peter in Antioch, and concludes with a personal affirmation of his commitment to live by the Gospel.

His Gospel was not derived from Peter or any other human authorities, although it was validated by the 'pillar' apostles in Jerusalem (2:9). The authority of Paul's Gospel is evident in his rebuke of Peter when he failed to live in accordance with the Gospel (2:11-21).

II.a Galatians 1:11-24 - Paul's Vindication of His Apostleship

Paul apparently is responding to criticism that he is peddling a Gospel received from man, not from God, and that he is doing so simply to please man rather than God. Paul refutes this elsewhere: <<*For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence*>> (2 Corinthians 2:17).

Paul does not simply defend himself out of resentment or wounded pride but shows a pastoral concern in order to reassure the Galatians that the Gospel they received was the authentic one, not a false message delivered by an untrustworthy messenger: <<*we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you*>> (Galatians 2:5).

¹¹ For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹² for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:11-12

The gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin. Paul is not refuting the Gospel proclamations of the original apostles, who are acknowledged

by Luke in his Gospel: <<*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word*>> (Luke 1:1-2), for Paul was content to pass on what he did learn from them: <<*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures*>> (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). However, Paul also received much of his understanding by direct revelation and he wants to distinguish here that point, just as he did over the meaning of the Lord's Supper: <<*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you*>> (1 Corinthians 11:23a).

Paul received the Gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road. This was a revelation that Paul should take the Gospel to the Gentiles and therefore his was a Gentile-specific Gospel (2:7) that did not require believers to convert to Judaism first. Refer to Acts 9:1-19a, 22:3-21 and 26:12-23 for accounts of Paul's conversion.

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.

¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

Galatians 1:13-14

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. Paul had built a reputation among both the pious Jews and the early Christians concerning his passion to rid the earth of these heretics, from his perspective at the time, who were proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah, i.e. violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. The dramatic change in his life demands some explanation. How could such a fanatical opponent of the followers of Christ become such a devoted preacher of the Gospel of Christ? Paul goes on to explain that the cause of such a radical change was God's gracious revelation of his Son.

Paul distances himself from his earlier life in Judaism, although he does not in any sense renounce his status as an Israelite: <<*I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin*>> (Romans 11:1), and: <<*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews*>> (Philippians 3:4-5a). Rather, he has broken with the life of seeking righteousness through the Law of Moses. He underlines the shame of this former life by noting his persecution of the church: <<*For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*>> (1 Corinthians 15:9), and: <<*I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief*>> (1 Timothy 1:12-13).

I was far more zealous. As a Pharisee, Paul was rooted in the Law of Moses and lived his life for God according to the interpretations placed upon it; it was something he freely acknowledged for he truly believed it to be right at the time: <<*I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today*>> (Acts 22:3), and: <<*as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless*>> (Philippians 3:6). God still wants that zeal but requires it to be based in Christ alone: <<*He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds*>> (Titus 2:14).

The traditions of my ancestors. This rabbinic teaching was the foundation of Jewish life in the 1st Century AD, particularly for the Pharisees: <<*(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles. So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'*>> (Mark 7:3-5).

Jewish boys like Paul in his youth had their minds fed with tales of the Jewish heroes of long ago, the prophets and martyrs who had lived and died fearlessly for their God and his law. Paul describes himself as one of those who were strictest and keenest in their adherence to, and their application of, the ancestral traditions; that is, the detailed discussions around how precisely the Law of Moses should be applied in day-to-day living.

¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased

Galatians 1:15

When Paul recounts his life under Judaism all the verbs are preceded by the first person pronoun 'I'. Following his conversion it is **God** who truly becomes the focus of all that he does. Paul could not have made this dramatic change in his life other than by the **grace** of **God**.

Set me apart before I was born. Paul sees his calling as a personal act by God, as did the prophets: <<*Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me*>> (Isaiah 49:1), and: <<*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'*>> (Jeremiah 1:4-5). The emphasis is again on God's initiative; Paul was not called because of anything he himself had accomplished. Paul here acknowledges God as creator of all life in the universe and his own in particular. God's plan for his life started with his conception and birth, then his rebirth in God's calling him by his **grace**, changing him from persecutor to preacher. He may have lived his life to date in opposition to God's plan for him but he did respond correctly, perhaps in the only way he could, following his unique encounter with the Risen Lord.

Something that should not be missed here is that before Paul was born, God chose him. While Paul was trying to destroy the church, God called him. That is the meaning of grace - his undeserved love.

¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being,

Galatians 1:16

To reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles. Paul was converted in order to preach primarily to non-Jews, although Jews were included in his commissioning: <<*But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel'*>> (Acts 9:15). This was revolutionary because God's dealings in the OT had been focused on Israel as his chosen nation. Now, with the coming of Christ, there was no distinction: <<*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*>> (Galatians 3:28); all must come to faith in Christ irrespective of ethnic origin.

I did not confer with any human being. Paul had encountered the Risen Lord in person. He had no need of human confirmation of what had been revealed to him. Paul's argument is designed to show that he is not dependent on or subordinate to any other church leaders for his authority to preach his Gospel to the Gentiles. His authority is derived from the Gospel that had been revealed to him by God. Therefore, when the Galatians turn away from the Gospel preached by Paul, they are turning away from God.

¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Galatians 1:17

Go up to Jerusalem. The city is about 2500ft or 760m above the Mediterranean Sea and at an even higher elevation than some of the surrounding plains that are below sea level. Thus one always goes up to Jerusalem and down from it: <<*At that time the servants of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came up to Jerusalem, and the city was besieged*>> (2 Kings 24:10), <<*We will cut whatever timber you need from Lebanon, and bring it to you as rafts by sea to Joppa; you will take it up to Jerusalem*>> (2 Chronicles 2:16), <<*Any of those among you who are of his people – may their God be with them! – are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem*>> (Ezra 1:3), <<*If any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain upon them*>> (Zechariah 14:17), and: <<*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem*>> (John 2:13).

Those who were already apostles before me. Paul freely acknowledges those already chosen but in no way feels inferior or subordinate to them.

The journey to Arabia and back to Damascus takes place in the gap between Acts 9:25 and 9:26.

Roman Arabia included much of what is today Saudi Arabia, Jordan and southern Syria. Therefore, while Paul may not have travelled far from Damascus here, he can also speak of distant Mount Sinai as being in Arabia: <<Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children>> (Galatians 4:25).



As Paul approached Damascus to arrest followers of the Way, Jesus appeared to him (1).

Verse 17 makes it clear that soon after this Paul spent time in Arabia (2&3), before going to meet church leaders in Jerusalem (4).

When some believers learned of a plot to kill Paul in Jerusalem, they took him to Cæsarea, and he returned to his native Tarsus (5).

Damascus was 135 miles or 217km northeast of Jerusalem, a six-day journey by foot. Settled as early as the second millennium BC, Damascus was an oasis on the border of the Arabian desert, and was on the main route from Mesopotamia to Egypt. The Nabataean King Aretas IV maintained an ethnarch, i.e. governor, in Damascus who sided with the Jews when they determined to kill Paul for his Gospel proclamation, which is confirmed by Paul: <<In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the

Paul's Early Travels circa AD35-39
Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me>> (2 Corinthians 11:32).

Although modern Damascus is built on the ruins of the ancient city, one can still see the Straight Street, where Paul waited to be healed of his blindness, running east to west with its East Gate and monumental arch. Also visible are the ancient theatre and the concentric courts of its temple to Jupiter, now replaced by a mosque. Jewish presence in Damascus is confirmed in Josephus' record that many thousands of Jewish people were killed in Damascus during the time of the First Jewish Revolt in AD66-73; refer to Jewish War 2.559-561.

There is much debate among scholars and commentators as to what Paul did in his time in Arabia and later in Tarsus. Since Luke makes no reference to this and since there is no historical evidence, it seems unlikely that Paul planted any churches during this time. It can be speculated that he received additional instruction from God, or that he required this time to fully adjust to his new understanding of the Scriptures that he thought he had previously understood so well. In addition, he would have to come to terms with the impact this revelation would now have on his life and on the lives of so many others.

As a young Jew it is likely that Paul would have held Elijah in high regard. In some ways their stories cross at this point. Elijah fled to Horeb when Jezebel sought to kill him: <<*At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away'*>> (1 Kings 19:9-10). He then received a fresh revelation from God in order to continue the work he was called to do. Paul was being threatened with death for his Gospel proclamation and perhaps went to Arabia for three years for similar divine counselling.

It is a central strand of most Christian living that everybody needs, from time to time, to wrestle privately with God and his will. It is necessary, too, that Christian leaders should be seen to be telling their own story truly. For Paul, his story was closely linked with God's unveiling of Jesus as the true Messiah, the crucified and Risen Lord of the world. His life, his vocation, his whole identity was stamped with the Gospel message. He was a true apostle.

¹⁸ Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days;

Galatians 1:18

After three years. If Paul's conversion was in AD33, an approximate date, then this places the first Jerusalem visit circa AD36. It probably corresponds to the stay in Jerusalem in Acts 9:26-29.

Cephas here is the apostle Peter: <<*He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)*>> (John 1:42).

Paul's precise use of time frames is interesting. Three years after conversion he indicates that it was only necessary to spend fifteen days with Peter. This again

re-affirms that he did not go to Jerusalem to receive doctrinal instruction from the established church leaders.

¹⁹ but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother.

²⁰ In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!

Galatians 1:19-20

I did not see any other apostle except James almost certainly implies that James is counted among the apostles, even though he was not one of the original twelve. Acts 9:27 refers to Barnabas introducing Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul's statement here means that the apostles in Acts 9:27 refers to Peter and James.

Before God, I do not lie! As both a Jew and a Christian Paul would know that it would be unacceptable to take such an oath with God as his witness if it were not true. To do so would breach the seventh commandment: <<*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name*>> (Exodus 20:7). By taking such an oath here Paul is refuting any claims that may have been made that he was only a messenger of the church in Jerusalem.

Paul's key point here is to say that he was not a disciple trained by Peter, James, John or any other apostle; he was independently called directly by God. What Paul will go on to suggest is that the Judaizers who have come to Galatia, perhaps claiming authority from Jerusalem, are the ones who have got things wrong, not Paul. What he, Paul, was preaching as an independent apostle was in fact the same basic message that the Judæan churches were living by.

²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia,

Galatians 1:21

Syria is to the north of Judæa and Galilee, and Cilicia is to the north and west, in which lay Paul's home city of Tarsus: <<*When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Cæsarea and sent him off to Tarsus*>> (Acts 9:30). As stated earlier, there is no evidence that Paul planted churches during this time but he did freely and openly proclaim the Gospel from his time in Damascus onwards: <<*But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him*>> (Acts 9:27-29).

²² and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judæa that are in Christ;

Galatians 1:22

I was still unknown by sight. Paul is presumably unknown to them because of the short and narrowly focused stay referred to in vv.18-19. Furthermore, he refers to

the province of Judæa as a whole, not just Jerusalem. However, Paul was clearly known by reputation!

The churches of Judæa were probably house groups of Jews who had come to faith in Jesus, such as the people following the healing of Aeneas: <<***And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord***>> (Acts 9:35), or the raising of Tabitha to life: <<***This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord***>> (Acts 9:42).

²³ they only heard it said, ‘The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.’ ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Galatians 1:23-24

The faith is the Christian faith, a key requirement to accepting the message of the Gospel of Christ that was being accepted by Gentile and Jew alike: <<***The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith***>> (Acts 6:7)

They glorified God because of me. Paul does not say this in a conceited way but to demonstrate that God’s grace should always result in praise and thanksgiving. Jesus’ own ministry brought praise to God, such as the time he forgave a disabled man his sins ahead of healing him: <<***When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings***>> (Matthew 9:8).