

# **A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS**

## **(LESSON TEN)**

### ***“THE PERSECUTOR”***

#### **GALATIANS 1:13-17**

#### **(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**

*13 For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I was savagely persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it.*

*14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my nation, and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.*

In our previous Lesson we stated that verse **11** marks a new section of the letter. In this section, Paul relates his personal experiences to his readers in an effort to defend his right to preach the Gospel of grace. In order for him to vindicate his message it is necessary for him to first vindicate his apostleship. In verse **11** he writes, *“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the Gospel I preached is not of human origin.”*

Paul emphatically states here that the Gospel that he preached is absolutely not a human invention. By implication, Paul is claiming that His Gospel is completely divine in origin, and as such it counters all the theories of salvation contrived by the fleshly wisdom of fallen unregenerate human beings, who in some shape or form always add works as a means of attaining salvation. Both Paul’s mission and his message are independent of human beings since both were received directly from God.

In verse **12**, Paul categorically states that he did not receive the Gospel from a human source. He says, *“I did not receive it or learn it from any human source.”* These were the methods by which the majority of the believers and even the teachers of the believers had received the Gospel. But these were not the methods by which Paul received it. His case was exceptional. He received it, he says, *“by a revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

The Greek word translated “by” is **dia** which is a preposition expressing the intermediate agent of an action, in this case the intermediate agent is Jesus Christ, and the action is Paul’s reception of the revelation. In other words, it was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who revealed the message of the Gospel with all of its wonderful implications to Paul.

The word “*revelation*” is a translation of the Greek word **apokalupsis**: (**ap-ok-al’-oop-sis**), which conveys the idea of removing the cover and exposing to open view that which was not visible, known or disclosed. As it is used in Scripture, the word refers to the act of God uncovering or revealing Scriptural truth which is incapable of otherwise being discovered by the reason of human beings. This revelation is accompanied by the imparted ability to understand what is uncovered. In this case it was the Gospel which had been a **mystery** to Paul until he had been regenerated and given specific revelation from Jesus Christ.

The gospel is not an invention, or a tradition, but a revelation. The gospel was not grasped by Paul’s intellect, or attained by his moral power. Rather it was by **revelation**, a sovereign work of God in unveiling the truth to him. What Paul received was a direct communication of the mind of God! How then could the Galatians question Paul’s authority and the authenticity of the Gospel he proclaimed?

The words “*of Jesus Christ*” are in a construction in the Greek which indicates clearly that Jesus Christ is the One acting in the revelation. He is the One who did the revealing.

Regarding Paul's claim that he had received the Gospel by a revelation of Jesus Christ, **John MacArthur** makes the following comments: "It is one thing to claim direct revelation from God but another to prove it. Throughout the history of the church many people have falsely claimed such revelation, as many do today. But Paul was not content merely to make the claim. Nor did he expect his readers to believe him simply on the basis of personal assertions. In the next 12 verses (**Galatians 1:13-24**), therefore, the apostle proceeds to substantiate his claim by presenting irrefutable evidence of that divine revelation and of his apostolic credentials."

Paul's enemies, the Judaizers, pointed to his lack of conformity to Judaism as proof that his message and ministry were not really of God. They argued that he did not stand in the apostolic tradition. It is this misrepresentation that Paul answers in this section of Galatians. His lack of conformity was divinely deliberate. God had chosen to reveal Himself and His message to Paul in a different way. Both his message and his apostolic ministry were divinely given. Therefore, anybody who added anything to the Gospel that he preached was in danger of divine judgment.

The best way for Paul to prove his point is to reach into his past and remind the Galatian believers of the way that God had dealt with him. His past life was already known to his readers, but it was obvious that they did not fully understand what those experiences meant. So, Paul flashes on the screen three pictures from his past, the **Persecutor**, the **Believer** and the **Preacher**. He flashes these three pictures as evidence that his apostleship and his Gospel are truly of God.

In verses **13** and **14** we see a picture of Saul the **Persecutor**:

*13 For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I was savagely persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it.*

*14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my nation, and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.*

Paul's argument in verse **13** is that his early education is a proof that he did not receive the Gospel from a human source. He was brought up in a rigid school of ritualism which would have been directly opposed to the liberty of the gospel. He was a staunch adherent of the principles of that school, and as such, he relentlessly persecuted the Church. No human agency could therefore have brought about the change that occurred in his life. His conversion required the direct intervention of God.

The words, "*For you have heard*," indicate that the believers in Galatia had previously been informed of Paul's fierce persecution of the Church. It is likely that Paul himself had made them aware of his former lifestyle when he first preached the Gospel to them. Whenever Paul gave his testimony, he included a synopsis of his life before he was supernaturally transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have an example of this in **Acts 26:4-11**, as he made his defense before King Agrippa:

*4 Now all the Jews know the way I lived from my youth, spending my life from the beginning among my own people and in Jerusalem.*

*5 They know, because they have known me from time past, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee.*

*6 And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors,*

*7 a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain as they earnestly serve God night and day. Concerning this hope the Jews are accusing me, Your Majesty!*

*8 Why do you people think it is unbelievable that God raises the dead?*

*9 Of course, I myself was convinced that it was necessary to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus the Nazarene.*

*10 And that is what I did in Jerusalem: Not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons by the authority I received from the chief priests, but I also cast my vote against them when they were sentenced to death.*

*11 I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to force them to blaspheme. Because I was so furiously enraged at them, I went to persecute them even in foreign cities.*

**(New English Translation)**

Since the Galatians knew that Paul had formerly been a vicious persecutor of the church, the transformation that had taken place in his life after meeting Jesus Christ should have been clear proof to them of his statement that the life changing Gospel was not of human but of divine origin. Only God could change the heart of one who had been such a terror to the church.

In both verses **13** and **14**, Paul refers to his former way of life as being in “*Judaism.*” The Judaism with which Paul was acquainted and in which his life had been immersed, was apostate. It was no longer that supernaturally revealed system in which the Israelite was taught to look ahead in faith to a coming Sacrifice which God would offer for his or sins, this Sacrifice being typified by the Tabernacle offerings and priesthood. Paul knew nothing before his conversion, of the supernatural Judaism in which the Levitical sacrifices were the outward expression of an inward faith in a coming substitutionary atonement for sin. Judaism in Paul’s time was merely an ethical cult preaching a salvation-by-works message and observing the sacrifices as a mere form. Of course, after his conversion to Christianity when he was rethinking the Old Testament economy in the light of the revelations received in Arabia, the supernatural significance of it all opened up to him. But in these verses, he is speaking of the apostate Judaism of his early life. Paul was not saved **in** Judaism; he was not saved **by** Judaism; he was saved **from** Judaism.

It is evident that nothing in Paul's life prior to his Damascus Road experience provided the source of the truth he was now proclaiming. Grace was a foreign concept to the religion of Saul the Pharisee, despite the fact that grace was as much the basis of the Old Covenant as the New Covenant.

He says that he, "*was savagely persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it.*" In the Greek, the phrase, "*savagely persecuting*" and the phrase "*trying to destroy,*" are both in the **imperfect tense** which speaks of continuous action. It describes the course of action continuously pursued by Paul right up to the time of his conversion. The Greek word translated "*destroy*" is very strong. It referred not merely to an attempt to devastate or ravage, but to ruin and destroy. It applied not only to cities and lands, but also to people. In **Acts 9:21**, the same Greek word was used by the believers in Damascus, of Paul after his conversion, to describe the transformation that had taken place in his life. The reason why Paul mentions his attempt to destroy the Church here is because he wants to show that the bitter hostility which he demonstrated toward Christians proved that it was not his association with them which had led him to receive the gospel.

Paul speaks personally because he desires to use his own case as an example. He is saying in effect to the Galatian believers, "At one time, I defended the traditions of the Pharisees more fiercely than any of the **Judaizers** have ever done. Now, if the righteousness of the Law had been worth anything I would never have forsaken it. So carefully did I live up to the Law that I excelled many of my companions. So zealous was I in defense of the Law that I desired to destroy the church of God."

**Kenneth Wuest** comments that Paul's use of the term, "*the Church of God*" is significant. He explains that it clearly indicates that at the time of the writing of his letter to the Galatians, Paul had not only formed the conception of churches as local assemblies, but had already gathered these local churches in his thought into one entity, the universal Church.

By appealing to his personal history Paul establishes beyond any doubt that he did not learn the Gospel from human beings. Beginning with his pre-conversion life, he shows that his only relationship to the church was that of a fanatic persecutor of it. Coupled with his persecution of the church was the fact that he was also zealous to advance as a Pharisee in Judaism. He felt driven to excel over other Jews his own age. He was zealous for the traditions of his fathers. He no doubt spent much time studying the Rabbinical traditions which accompanied the Law of Moses. He informs us of all this in verse **14**. He says, *“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my nation, and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.”*

Paul advises his readers here of his great success as a Pharisee. He was so enthusiastic, so zealous for the traditions of his fathers that he was advancing beyond other Pharisees his own age. It is clear that Paul prospered greatly in Judaism.

What is his point in telling the Galatian believers this? He wanted them to understand that the credentials of the **Judaizers** who were opposing and discrediting him, were not worthy to be compared with his. Paul had the **Judaizers** in mind when he wrote the following in **Philippians 3:3-6**:

*3 For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials*

*4 —though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more:*

*5 I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee.*

*6 In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless.*

**(New English Translation)**

Paul says he was “*extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.*” The word “*traditions*” is a translation of the Greek word **paradosis**: (**par-ad’-os-is**), which literally means, “to give from the presence of, to give personally.” It signifies an act of transmission or that which is transmitted. In the New Testament it is used in the sense of that which is transmitted. These “traditions” were rabbinic expositions of the law which were in direct conflict with the Word of God.

According to **John MacArthur**, “Ancestral traditions refers to the body of oral teachings about the Old Testament law that came to have equal authority with the law commonly known as the Halakah, this collection of Torah interpretations became a fence around God’s revealed law and all but hid it from view. Over a period of several hundred years it had expanded into a mammoth accumulation of religious, moral, legal, practical, and ceremonial regulations that defied comprehension, much less total compliance...Yet the more complex and burdensome it became, the more zealously Jewish legalists revered and propagated it.”

In **Mark 7:7-9**, our Lord said the following concerning these ancestral traditions and those who practiced them:

*7 They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men.’*

*8 Having no regard for the command of God, you hold fast to human tradition.”*

*9 He also said to them, “You neatly reject the commandment of God in order to set up your tradition.*

**(New English Translation)**

It is interesting that Paul does **not** say that he was zealous for the Word of God. Rather he was zealous for the traditions of his ancestors! By using the word “*ancestors*,” Paul is making it clear that he is not referring to the Mosaic Law, but to the instruction received from



previous generations. This is a very important point in the context of this section of the letter. If Paul had lived as an unsaved man in the thought world of the Mosaic economy instead of in the thought world of Pharisaic traditions, his act of receiving Christ as Saviour would have had some reasonable background, for the Mosaic institutions pointed to a need for Christ. But Paul is stressing the point to his Galatian converts that his salvation, his appointment to the apostleship, and the Gospel that he preached, broke completely with all his background and all his traditions.

The truth is that as learned as Paul was, he did not have a true understanding of the Mosaic Law, and when he was converted, he therefore found it necessary to re-examine the Old Testament scriptures in the light of the revelations given him by the Lord Jesus Christ in Arabia. Before his conversion to Christianity Paul was more interested in, and paid more attention to, man-made traditions than the Word of God itself. He was therefore not amenable to be persuaded to receive the Gospel by any human instructor. Only a supernatural revelation could have persuaded him to receive it.

It is important for us to understand that the reason for Paul's hatred for the church and his violence towards believers was because the church meant the death of the traditions of the ancestors and of Pharisaism which was the product of the traditions. These traditions and the system that they gave rise to, were the apple of Paul's eye and therefore, prior to his conversion, he desired to tear the church of God to pieces in order to preserve them.

The Scottish theologian **William Barclay**, makes the following remarks concerning the verses we have examined this evening:

"It was Paul's contention that the gospel he preached to men was no...second-hand tale; it had come to him direct from God. That was a big claim to make; a claim which demanded some kind of proof. And for proof Paul had the courage to point to himself. He pointed to the

radical change in his own life. (i) He had been a fanatic for the law. The law had been his life; it had been the one object of his study to know it; it had been the one effort of his life to keep it. And now the one dominant centre of his life is grace. This man, who had with passionate intensity tried to earn God's favour and approval, was now content in humble faith to take what God had offered. He had ceased forever to glory in what he could do for himself; and had begun forever to glory in what God had done for him. (ii) He had been the arch-persecutor of the Church. He had devastated the Church. The word he uses is the word for utterly sacking a city; he had tried to make a scorched earth of the Church; and now his one aim and object, for which he was prepared to spend himself even to death, was to spread that same Church over all the world...When a man is proceeding headlong in one direction and suddenly turns and proceeds headlong in precisely the opposite direction; when a man suddenly reverses all his values so that his life turns upside down, there must be some adequate explanation. For Paul the explanation was the direct intervention of God...'That' said Paul, 'is the kind of effect which only God could produce.'"

