

Paul - The Authorised Autobiography

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Preacher: Danny Saunders

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of August 2003. The preacher is Danny Saunders. His sermon is entitled Paul, the Authorised Autobiography and is based on Galatians chapter 1 verse 11 through to chapter 2 verse 10.

...affair with British actor Jude Law. The article caused grave damage to her personal and professional reputation and she suffered considerable embarrassment and distress. Well you can just imagine the headlines in 1st century AD Palestine. The Galatian Times front page reads, Apostle Paul wins a Galatian court case.

Last week the Apostle Paul won an apology and damages from the Galatian Judaizers who claimed that he was not an apostle, that he made up his gospel and that his gospel was different from the message of the Jerusalem apostles.

Or another headline might read, Paul wins case, the gospel alone saves, no Old Testament law required. The Galatian Judaizers today lost their court battle and made admissions they were wrong in insisting that Gentile Christians be circumcised and follow the Old Testament laws.

[1 : 26] The Judaizers apologized for the distress and embarrassment caused to Paul and agreed to pay Paul's legal costs. Well this is the background to the book of Galatians.

The Judaizers were slandering Paul and defaming the gospel that Paul preached. Paul writes this passage in response to the Judaizers' false allegations against him.

They were telling the Christians in Galatia that they had to keep the Old Testament laws in order to be saved. They were saying that the true gospel is faith in Christ and obedience to the law.

So it was a gospel plus model of salvation we might say today. The Judaizers alleged that Paul's gospel was different to the Jerusalem apostles, that Paul had changed the gospel and so he had contradicted the Jerusalem church.

They accused Paul of removing certain legal requirements of salvation, like circumcision, in order to make the message more appealing to the Gentiles. They claimed that Paul had distorted the gospel by saying that you didn't have to follow the Old Testament laws to be saved.

[2 : 31] So at first glance this passage looks like Paul is defending himself against their attacks. But the stakes are much higher than this because the Judaizers were really attacking the gospel and the unity between Paul and the church in Jerusalem.

If Paul is a phony, then the gospel he preaches is phony. So what's actually on trial here is not Paul and his character and reputation so much, but it's the gospel on trial.

Paul's response to the Judaizers is really a defense of the gospel. Paul argues that he is an apostle. He is uniquely called and commissioned to preach in the name of Jesus Christ. He defends himself for the sake of the gospel, to show that his gospel is the only gospel and it's the same gospel that's preached everywhere else.

We might not argue today about the need for Christians to be circumcised or not. And so on one hand, it can look like this passage isn't really saying a lot to us. But these issues are still around in other forms.

There's many people around who want to discredit Paul and they want to change or ignore his gospel and his other teaching. And this is a cause of confusion amongst Christians and a cause of division in the church.

[3 : 45] There's people that might argue today that salvation is found in the gospel plus a believer's baptism or the gospel plus speaking in tongues or the gospel plus good works or the gospel plus any other religion or New Age practice that one cares to follow.

These ideas deny and distort the gospel. They deny that salvation is found only in faith in Jesus Christ. They argue that other things are required or that Jesus alone isn't the only way to God.

So this is Paul's response to the Judaizers and to people today that want to ignore Paul and distort the gospel. This is more than a defence of Paul.

It's a defence of the essential New Testament truth that we're saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Nothing more and nothing less. So Paul sets about answering the Judaizers' claims.

Firstly, he reminds the Galatian churches that he didn't make up the gospel. The gospel isn't his invention. Just as he said last week at chapter 1, verse 1, that he was sent by God and not man, commissioned by God and not man, now he declares that his gospel is from God and not made up by man.

[4 : 58] And this is in verses 11 and 12 of chapter 1. For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin. 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.

Verse 11 and 12 here, right at the start of the key to this whole passage. The rest of the passage is really written to prove these claims in verses 11 and 12. Paul had no choice about the gospel he proclaimed because it was given to him by God.

He didn't make it up or invent it or get it handed down to him from church tradition. The gospel Paul preached was received by him through a revelation of Jesus Christ. So it was given to him by God. So neither Paul's mission nor his message were derived from human beings. Both came directly from God. Let's be clear what the gospel is about.

Paul here isn't talking about the gospels as in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, although these books contain the gospel. He's not talking about a social justice gospel or a love gospel or any other type of gospel.

[6 : 08] Paul's talking about the gospel that is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes. And we know from last week's sermon, the start of Galatians, that there is no other gospel.

There's no other gospel. So just so there's no doubt, we can see the content of the gospel here in Galatians. Let's have a little look at that. At chapter 3, verse 1, Paul talks of Christ being crucified. But at chapter 1, verse 1, right from the beginning, he says that Christ was raised from the dead. So Christ was crucified, he was raised from the dead. Then in verse 4 of chapter 1, he says that Jesus gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, which means to set us free from this time of sin and evil in the world and to set us free from the final judgment that Christians would otherwise face because of their sin.

And finally, in chapter 2, verse 16, Paul declares that we are justified not by works of the law, but through faith in Christ alone. So this is the gospel. Christians were enemies of God, but through faith in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross and resurrection, we are made right with God.

Jesus takes the punishment that we deserve and we're forgiven for our rebellion against God and we're set free from the judgment to come because Jesus takes our place. And instead, we become friends with God.

[7 : 29] So here in Galatians, the gospel that Paul preaches is clear, but this isn't Paul's invention. The gospel is God's message of salvation. So what Paul is doing in the rest of this passage is not defending himself, but defending the gospel and his claims in verses 11 and 12 that his gospel came to him from God.

So Paul goes on to tell us his testimony, his life story. We saw some of this in the video before. He does this to show us that the situation before his conversion, at his conversion, and after his conversion all prove those claims that he's making in verse 11 and 12.

That Paul didn't make up the gospel, he wasn't taught the gospel, he received it from Jesus Christ, from God directly. So first of all, Paul points out to us what he was like before his conversion in verses 13 and 14.

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. 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.

So how ridiculous to think Paul made up the gospel. He was the greatest enemy of the gospel. He went around killing Christians. He was such a fanatical Jew, he wanted to destroy the church.

[8 : 51] In today's language, Paul was a militant. He was a militant Jewish terrorist. Only God's election and God's power could reach such a man. And Paul acknowledges this very fact in verse 15 and 16.

When God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles. You can see there how clearly it's God's initiative that makes the change in Paul possible.

The way Paul writes shows he had no part or choice in his conversion. God set him apart before he was born. God called him through his grace. God was pleased to reveal his son to him and God gave him his commission to proclaim Jesus among the Gentiles.

Paul persecuted the church because he believed that Jesus was a phony. There was no way Paul would suddenly change and become a preacher of the gospel of Jesus. But it was God that opened Paul's eyes to see who Jesus really was.

Jesus was the Christ, Messiah, the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. God converted Paul so that he'd proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. This was his commission.

[10:04] So Paul's conversion proves that the gospel he preaches came directly from God.

There's no other reason for the sudden and drastic change that came over Paul. Why else would a militant enemy of the gospel suddenly change to start preaching the gospel?

And what happened after this change? Did Paul suddenly go off to the Jerusalem Bible College to further his training and instruction? The Judaizers claim that Paul did receive further instruction.

So this meant that the message that he preached wasn't from God. It was actually originated from man. He was taught the gospel by other Christians in Jerusalem. But you'll see in verse 16 and 17 that Paul is quick to deny these claims.

He says there, I did not confer with any human being, 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.

So here Paul is denying that he was trained by the apostles in Jerusalem. Acts 9.20 says that after his conversion, Paul spent some time in Damascus preaching the gospel.

[11:07] And we saw this on the video. So right from his conversion, Paul knew what the gospel was. He understood it clearly enough to start preaching it in Damascus. He then tells us that he went away into Arabia.

And this retreat was probably to take some time to pray and to think about all that had happened to him. Let's not forget that Paul was advanced in Judaism. He was zealous for the traditions. In persecuting the church, he must have known some of the basic facts of the death of Christ and the claims of Christians.

So these things placed Paul in a great position to completely understand the revelation that was given to him. He didn't need to be taught the gospel. Paul knew the Old Testament.

He knew the promises concerning the Messiah. And now that he had been converted and received the Holy Spirit, he had experienced the gospel. All Paul's knowledge could now be focused on the gospel message and rethinking his position in light of his amazing conversion.

Well, Paul next admits that he did go up to Jerusalem, but he doesn't think this was a significant visit. And he tells us this in verses 18 and 19. Then after three years, I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas or Cephias, and stayed with him 15 days.

[12:19] But I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother. So Paul's first visit to Jerusalem is a full three years after his conversion. It's not as significant visit as it only lasts 15 days.

And he doesn't see all the apostles except for James and Cephas, which is Peter. This visit is three years after his conversion, and so he must have already known the gospel in these first three years. The point Paul is making is that 15 days in Jerusalem isn't enough time to absorb everything about the gospel. And he already knew the gospel because it was revealed to him by God, and he'd been preaching it for the last three years.

So it's crazy to claim that he obtained the gospel from the Jerusalem apostles. Paul denies the allegations against him to show that his gospel originated with God, and so he's absolutely authentic.

After Paul's first visit to Jerusalem, he goes off to Syria and Cilicia. He tells us this in verses 21 to 24. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and it was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

[13:28] They only heard it said, the one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy, and they glorified God because of me. This corresponds with Acts 9.30.

Paul's life was in danger, and so he was sent off to Tarsus, which is in Cilicia. This is in the far north regions of Judea, which is what Israel was called then.

So again, the basic point Paul is making is that he was nowhere near Jerusalem. He was right off in the north of Judea. Paul says the churches in Judea didn't know him in order to emphasise that he hadn't been in Jerusalem or anywhere around Judea being instructed by the Jerusalem apostles. No one in this region knew who he was. They'd only heard rumours that the anti-Christian terrorist was now proclaiming the faith that he once tried to destroy. So Paul was preaching the gospel wherever he went.

He was proclaiming the faith. The Judean churches praise God for this because they recognised Paul's message as a message that was proclaiming the faith. So they recognised their faith, their own faith, in what Paul proclaims.

[14 : 34] And this shows that Paul's gospel is the same as what had already been preached in those churches. So Paul's gospel, therefore, is the real thing. And he wants to make clear that this is the true version of events.

He goes to great pains to say this in verse 20. In what I'm writing to you before God, I do not lie. In chapter 2, Paul continues to answer the allegations of the Judaizers.

They claim that Paul couldn't be trusted because he wasn't an authentic apostle and he had distorted the gospel message that was taught in Jerusalem. But Paul has just shown us that his gospel is the same as the gospel preached around Judea.

There were no differences in the gospel proclaimed in these places and there was no division in the church about the gospel's content. Paul tells us that on his second visit to Jerusalem, his gospel was tested but then it was approved and endorsed by the Jerusalem apostles.

Let's look at verse 1 and 2. Then after 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation.

[15 : 39] Then I laid before them, though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders, the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles in order to make sure that I was not running or had not run in vain.

So Paul was with Barnabas and he was with Titus. This is important because Titus was a Greek. So Paul brought with him Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile who would become a Christian in response to the gospel that Paul preached.

The Judaizers were challenging Paul's ministry among the Gentiles and saying it was a dodgy gospel was a dodgy ministry. But Paul brings Titus with him to Jerusalem, the very heart of the church, to show a symbol of Paul's ministry amongst the Gentiles.

Gentiles just means non-Jews at that time. So Titus here is exhibit A of Paul's gospel. He's a test case. He's a real-life, uncircumcised, Gentile Christian.

Paul's gospel is laid before the Jerusalem apostles in a private meeting. So not an official church council or assembly. And so I think that this isn't the assembly in Acts 15 but different people disagree with that.

[16 : 47] But it looks like Acts 15 assembly probably comes later. But Paul doesn't lay his gospel before them because he or them has doubts about his gospel. After all, he preached it already for 14 years.

This is 14 years after his conversion. And he's already demonstrated in the last half of chapter 1 that his gospel is from God. Also, Paul wasn't summoned to Jerusalem for disciplinary reasons because he's preaching the wrong thing.

He says he went to Jerusalem in response to a revelation. So God's at work in these events. God is ensuring the advance of the gospel against its enemies. So Paul lays out his gospel to remove the influence of the Judaizers.

If their influence was allowed to succeed, then Paul's gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone would have been taught in vain. The Judaizers' false teaching undermined and damaged Paul's ministry.

If this undermining was allowed to continue, Paul would have worked in vain. That's what he means when he's saying so to see that he hadn't run in vain or worked in vain. So this meeting is a crucial moment for the early church.

[17 : 53] How would the Jerusalem apostles react to Titus, the Gentile Christian? And what about Paul's mission to the Gentiles? Wasn't salvation only for the Jews, God's chosen people?

Would they accept Paul's gospel or would they attempt to modify it? And the most important question, would the church be condemned to slavery under the law or would they maintain the freedom from the law found in faith in Christ alone?

Well, Paul tells us what happens next in the next few verses, verse 3 to 5. But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ so that they might enslave us, we did not submit to them even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you.

There were Judaizers, false believers, even in Jerusalem. They pressured Paul and Titus, but they resisted and stood firm and refused to circumcise Titus. This is establishing the truth of the gospel. They were all accepted by God on the same terms. That's through faith in Christ, in Jesus Christ alone. There were no grounds for the church to discriminate between Jews or Gentile believers.

[19 : 06] A Christian is set free from the law or works for salvation because our acceptance depends totally and entirely upon God's grace in the death of Jesus Christ that we receive by faith.

If works such as circumcision are introduced, then our acceptance before God starts to depend on these works, on obedience to rules and regulations. And this would turn the freedom that we have in Christ into slavery to rules and regulations.

About a month after I was converted, I was working in Israel at a waterside park on the Sea of Galilee. There is such a thing that exists. There happened to be a group of new Christians that were working there and one of them thought that we should all get baptised in the Sea of Galilee.

Very romantic notion. But I remember that he suggested that this was necessary for our salvation.

At the time it was clear to me that I had become a Christian. So it wasn't an issue about baptism.

The issue was the truth and freedom of the gospel. I was saved by my faith in Christ. Nothing else was needed for my salvation. To agree to be baptised as a condition for salvation would have been allowing a gospel plus model of salvation.

[20 : 20] This would have denied my conversion by faith in Christ alone and made my salvation dependent on faith plus baptism plus works. So this is like what the Judaizers are claiming here that salvation was faith in Christ plus circumcision and following the Old Testament laws.

We do face gospel plus issues in our world today. These things aren't as crazy as they sound. But here in this passage we see that Titus is a test case for the truth of the gospel.

He was an uncircumcised Gentile but he was a converted Christian. He had come to believe in Jesus so he had been accepted by God in Christ and this was enough. Nothing further was necessary or required for Titus' salvation.

This is why Paul didn't submit to the Judaizers. He resisted their pressure because the truth of the gospel was at stake. So the Judaizers lost on this point. Faith in Christ alone was enough.

Circumcision wasn't necessary. In the final verses then Paul shows that his gospel was the same as the other apostles and that there was no division in the church. This is in verse 6-10 and from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders what they actually were makes no difference to me.

[21 : 31] God shows no partiality. Those leaders contributed nothing to me. 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.

They asked only one thing that we remember the Paul which was actually what I was eager to do.

Paul's not being rude or disrespectful here because in chapter 1 verse 17 have a look at verse 17 he's already acknowledged that the Jerusalem apostles were apostles before him.

So what Paul is probably doing is just playing down their exalted status that the Judaizers had given to these apostles. These apostles Peter, James and John were actual disciples of Jesus.

So it's possible the Judaizers were claiming that they had far more authority than Paul who of course wasn't one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. So Paul acknowledges that they're leaders but at the same time he indicates that he's not overawed by them or inferior to them because God shows no partiality which simply means that God shows no preference or favoritism between them.

[22 : 57] Next Paul tells us two results from his laying his gospel before these leaders. First off in verse 6 they contributed nothing to him. This means they had no need to add to or modify Paul's gospel.

So again Paul's gospel is accepted as genuine. It wasn't effective or different to theirs. Second Paul goes on to say that rather than change anything or accuse Paul's gospel of being deficient they gave him the right hand of fellowship.

In other words they accepted Paul as a fellow believer and therefore a brother in Christ. Verse 7 can be a little bit misleading. There's not two different gospels one for the Jews the circumcision and one for the Gentiles the uncircumcision.

The whole passage is against that very idea that there's different gospels. And verse 8 and 9 are clear that the apostles realised that God was at work both in Paul and in Peter.

It was the same gospel they were just being sent to share the gospel to different groups of people. So that was the only difference between them. You might want to think about it like this a group of missionaries is sent to Papua New Guinea to proclaim the gospel and another group of missionaries is sent to China to proclaim the gospel.

[24 : 06] Both groups will be proclaiming the same gospel. They're simply sharing the gospel in two different places. Two different places same gospel. Peter's going to take the gospel to the Jews and Paul's going to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

Two different people groups same gospel. So the apostles acknowledge their unity in the gospel and they give to Paul the right hand of fellowship. They shake hands they do high fives.

There's no division in this church they're unified in the gospel. To demonstrate their Christian fellowship they request in verse 10 that Paul and Barnabas remember the poor and it seems that Paul was eager to do this.

This is an important witness to their Christian unity and Paul talks about collections and offerings in many of his letters. One of these passages is 1 Corinthians 16 verse 1 to 4 where Paul says now about the collection for God's people do what I told the Galatian churches to do.

On the first day of every week each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income saving it up so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then when I arrive I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.

[25 : 20] So this shows that Paul took this request very seriously. Their unity in the gospel was demonstrated in his words and in his actions. Paul did organise the Galatian churches we're told in this passage in Corinthians and Christians everywhere he organised to remember the poor and to give to the poor and especially to the poorer believers in Jerusalem.

Well how many times do we hear requests to remember the poor but fail to respond? Are we unified in words only or in words and actions? If this concerns you one really simple way to respond would be to bring a food item and place it in the crates at the front of the church here that food goes to St Mark's Fitzroy and is distributed to the poor and this is a simple and practical recognition of our unity in the faith with this church.

Unity in the gospel calls for unity in words and actions. Well let me finish now with just some important applications from this passage. Firstly we can't deny the gospel we can't add anything to the gospel neither can we subtract anything from the gospel.

We might think that a gospel plus something or a gospel minus something else will be more appealing to people but Paul warns us that anything other than the gospel of Jesus Christ is a distortion and a perversion of the truth.

There's no other gospel. The New Testament presents this one gospel consistently. Sometimes different aspects of the gospel are emphasised by different writers but there's not like several alternatives throughout the New Testament all of which might be okay.

[26 : 54] There's only one gospel. The gospel is still and always will be the power of God for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. We can't change the gospel.

God is the author of the gospel and if this is the way God has provided for salvation then the gospel of Jesus Christ is what we must try is what we must trust in and share with people around us.

Well secondly we must work to maintain the truth of the gospel. We're unified with other believers other denominations and other missions around the truth of the gospel but if this truth is at stake then we must be prepared to stand firm and not budge.

This passage shows that different Christian ministries can stand together in the gospel but have different areas of ministry. So unity doesn't mean that we all have to be doing the same thing or do it the same way and Christians will sometimes disagree on many matters that are found in scripture. But this passage does teach us what's important so that other differences don't have to tear us apart. Unity in the gospel is what's important. When another group or person can't agree to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ then we should resist unity and stand firm just as Paul was prepared to resist and stand firm against the Judaizers.

[28 : 15] Paul refused to work with the false believers because they denied the gospel but he was eager to work in unity with those that agreed with the gospel and they in turn extended to him the right hand of fellowship.

So Christian love isn't unity at any cost. Christian love is maintaining the truth of the gospel and showing this truth in words and actions. Thirdly and lastly we must take Paul seriously.

Paul was commissioned and called by God to proclaim the gospel that was revealed to him by Jesus Christ. Paul's writing is scripture. It's part of the Bible. No one has any right or authority to change the gospel or to reject Paul.

We'll encounter many people today in our society who want to reject Paul for one reason or another. Some opinions you'll hear that Paul was just a human and so he got it wrong from time to time like all of us or that Paul was influenced by the church in the first century and so really he corrupted or twisted the teaching of Jesus.

But remember these are the exact criticisms that Paul rebukes in this passage he goes to great length here to demonstrate that his message didn't originate with him.

[29 : 25] It's not subject to human fallibility and he didn't learn the gospel from church tradition. Paul couldn't have changed the message of Jesus because Paul's message was directly from Jesus.

If Paul is right in asserting that the gospel is God's message then if we reject Paul and the gospel we reject God. We'll see next week that the apostle Peter had many reasons to dislike Paul but listen to what the apostle Peter says at 2 Peter 3.16 about people that reject Paul.

2 Peter 3.16 Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand which ignorant and unstable people distort as they do the other scriptures through their own destruction.

There's no division here. Peter agrees that Paul's writing is scripture. Sure there's things in Paul's writing that are difficult to understand and we know that we have to wrestle with those things but we don't have the liberty to just throw them out or throw scripture out just because it's hard or difficult. Peter assures us that people that reject Paul and distort his writing are ignorant and unstable and they do so to their own destruction. This passage in Galatians is a warning to us and to anyone today that wants to distort the gospel and reject Paul.

[30 : 39] If we reject Paul then we're rejecting God's gospel message and if we reject the gospel then we're rejecting the power of God for salvation. If we hear someone say they can't accept Paul's teaching then we should be really concerned for that person.

In love we should try to tell that person that the message Paul preaches is the gospel of Jesus Christ for salvation. There's no other way to have your sins forgiven and to be right with God.

There's no other way to fill the emptiness that exists without Christ.

There's no other way to be free from this evil age. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. To reject this is to reject God's free gift of eternal life.

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