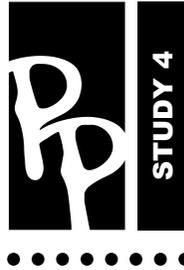


HOW THE MESSAGE

CAME TO PAUL



Galatians 1:15-17

This Study Paper contains the following:-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: The importance of Paul's conversion as an evidence of the supernatural power and truth of Christianity
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

False teachers were troubling the Galatian believers (1:7) by teaching differently from the true gospel taught by Paul. Paul insists that what he taught was the truth because it was a message from God and not a human message (1:11, 12). Now Paul tells how he had received this gospel from God.

What these verses mean

Verse 15

But when God,

Paul has just been describing how he once behaved. He had been zealous for what he considered to be right (Judaism) and persecuted those (Christians) who he thought were wrong. What brought about the change? The answer is in the opening words of verse 15, "But when God". The reason for Paul's having a complete change around in his life is that God intervened.

who set me apart

The Greek word used here for "to set apart" is also used in Acts 13:2 and Romans 1:1. It means "to set apart for a special purpose". A similar

word in Ephesians 1:5 is translated "predestinate". Paul is saying that God had settled his destiny before he was born – before he could do anything himself.

from [before my] birth

Paul has realised that before he was born God had intended that he would be a Christian. Compare Ephesians 1:11.

and called me by his grace,

Paul here refers to what happened on the Damascus Road (Acts 9: 3-6), and to the time when he was called into missionary service (Acts 13:2,3). "By" literally means "on account of, for the reason of" his grace. It **was** an act of grace for God to save one who so hated Christ! Paul certainly did not deserve this.

Verse 16

was pleased

The work of God alone (with no human involvement) is stressed by this, and other phrases here, such as "he set me apart" – "from before my birth" – "he called me" – "by his grace". Paul's becoming a Christian was entirely of God's doing! Paul could not have done any of these things for himself; nor did he, as a Pharisee, even want to do them!

to reveal his Son in me

It is significant that Paul uses the word "Son" about Jesus. As a Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus denied that Jesus was God's Son. Now he knows better! The Greek word "to reveal" means "to uncover something previously hidden". Paul says God was revealing his Son "in him"; i.e. God showed **in Paul's greatly changed life**, as he had not shown before, how the greatest of sinners could be saved. Compare 1 Timothy 1:16. Paul's conversion was a pattern of what God can do in any person's life, when Christ lives in them. Compare 2:20 and 4:19. The spiritual beauty seen in any believer is the beauty of Christ's life in them.

so that I might preach him among the Gentiles,

Paul understood that his conversion was for a special purpose; he was to be the apostle to the non-Jews (Acts 9:15).

I did not consult any man,

Paul did not give anyone the opportunity to impose their teachings on him at his conversion. The Greek word for "to consult" was often in daily life used of consultation with fortune tellers. Paul had no such consultations! Paul is making it quite impossible to say that the gospel he taught was of human ("flesh and blood") origin. Compare Matthew 16:17.

Verse 17

nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was,

Again there is the emphatic denial that Paul gained his teachings from any human source – not even from the apostles in Jerusalem.

but I went immediately into Arabia

The area known as Arabia was the vast desert country between the Red Sea on the west, the Euphrates river on the north and the Persian Gulf on the east. We do not know exactly where, in this great area, Paul went. But to go into such a desert place indicates a determination to be alone. Isolated from all human contact, alone with God, Paul doubtless studied again all the Old Testament scriptures he knew so well, in the light of his new knowledge of the risen Christ who had now met him.

and later returned to Damascus.

In the Acts there is no record of the visit to Arabia and this return to Damascus. This possibly happened at a time in the middle of verse 19 of Acts 9. We can understand that, ***upon his return*** – “Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus”. He would be far better able to preach the gospel powerfully (Acts 9:20) ***after*** his time of meditation and prayer in Arabia, than immediately after his conversion.



Summary

The gospel that Paul had preached and taught the Galatian believers was not invented by him or any other human being. Its origin is God himself. Look at the life of Paul himself as an example. His life was devoted to destroying anything and everything to do with Jesus Christ. Paul then became a follower of Jesus. This came about through the grace of God and nothing else. Paul never deserved to be saved by the one he hated whose followers he persecuted. After his conversion outside Damascus, Paul had no contact with the other apostles, so he could not have learnt anything from them. What he taught came through his own experience of meeting Jesus Christ and then studying the Old Testament afresh.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

How Christians are made

Introduction

a. In verses 13,14 Paul describes his own efforts to be religious:

“I persecuted . . .”

“I tried to destroy . . .”

“I was advancing . . .”

“I was extremely zealous . . .”

There are natural religions that can be designed and carried on by human wisdom and strength.

b. In verses 15, 16 there is a complete contrast:

“God set me apart . . .”

“God called me . . .”

“God revealed his Son in me . . .”

Biblical religion is supernatural in origin, and cannot be gained by any study or human effort. It is revealed by God.

Which religion is yours?

How does biblical religion come to us?

1. There is the outward hearing of the Word of God

Paul had no inward understanding of the gospel until he had heard the words of Christ (Acts 9:4). Paul speaks of his being “called” (1:15). Compare Romans 10:17.

Preaching is the means God uses to cause people to hear his Word. Not all who hear the preaching believe (Matt. 22:14). But all who become true Christians do so having first come to know the message of the gospel, usually through hearing a preacher or Bible teacher (1 Cor. 1:21). How important it is, then, to make sure everyone hears and understands the gospel message.

2. There is the inward experience of the truth of God’s Word

Paul says God revealed his Son “*in* him”, not merely “*to* him” (verse 16). Paul did see the glory of the risen Christ (Acts 9:3; 1 Cor. 15:8). So a revelation was made to him. But that was not the end of the matter – Paul rejected all his old beliefs and received the teachings of Christ; moreover his whole way of life changed and he became Christ-like;

compare 4:14. So the hearing and seeing of the outward revelation in Acts 9 was accompanied by an inward conviction of the rightness of the gospel and a determination to live obediently to Christ. It was not merely that Paul had a revelation of Christ; other people could now see Christ revealed in Paul (2:20). How much does our knowledge of the gospel alter our lives? Knowing the truth is not Christianity, but knowing **and** doing. Compare James 4:17.

3. There is a growing understanding of the significance of being a Christian

- a. Paul came to realise that if God had so made him a believer, it must have been God's eternal purpose to do so. God has always known everything he will do. So Paul speaks of God's choice of him before he was born (verse 15). God's preparation of Paul included his education as a Pharisee and his having the rights of a Roman citizen (Acts 22:26). All the details of his providential circumstances (God's plan for his life) combined to fit him for the task he was to do. So for us also.
- b. Paul came to learn that God's purpose was not simply to save him, but to use him in the salvation of many others (Acts 9:15; Gal. 1:16). There is a similar divine purpose for all Christians. Compare Matthew 5:16; John 15:8; Acts 8:4; 1 Peter 3:15.

Conclusion

What Paul had experienced himself he longed to see take place in the lives of others – see 4:19. This kind of longing is something all spiritually healthy Christians must know. There is something wrong if it is absent from us!



Focus Point:

The importance of Paul's conversion as an evidence of the supernatural power and truth of Christianity

1. By becoming a Christian, Paul had everything to lose and nothing to gain.

- a. Christians at that time were a persecuted minority (Acts 8:1).
- b. All the religious authorities of the time – the Sanhedrin, the High Priest, etc. – were convinced that Christ was an impostor (John 7:12,47; 9:16; 10:20).

- c. All his previous education would persuade Paul that no true Messiah would die, cursed, on a cross (3:13). The cross was a stumbling block to Jews (1 Cor. 1:23).
- d. From being a Pharisee, highly thought of by the Jews, Paul became a hated enemy. No-one deliberately rejects fame and chooses hardship easily!

Yet, in spite of all these immense difficulties, Saul the Pharisee became Paul the apostle and preacher of Christ. Such a change is only accounted for if Christianity has a supernatural power and convincing truthfulness.

2. By teaching all the basic facts of the life of Christ, Paul confirms the truthfulness of the Bible account.

In his epistles, Paul makes many references to the incarnation of Christ, his life, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension and coming again.

- a. Paul lived and experienced the events of gospel history as they unfolded. He had mingled daily with the people who had talked with Christ. If there were untruths in the gospel history, **he would know**.
- b. Paul was not likely to be favourably impressed, as we can be, by the long continuing history of the growth of the church in all the world. He had to face the fact that the church of his day was everywhere oppressed. If he thought the facts of Christ's life were false, **he could not have endured** such hardship for Christ's sake.
- c. Paul had every opportunity to disprove the resurrection of Christ, which would have destroyed Christianity at its very beginning. Clearly **he did not accept** the story made up by his chief priests and elders (Matt. 28:12-15).

As a Pharisee Paul was in the best possible position to expose Christianity as a fraud, if it were. Instead he preached all the gospel facts as truth! He became a member of the very church he tried to destroy. Therefore, Paul's conversion and Christian life are very impressive evidences of the truth of Christianity.

Tarsus and Paul's early life

Paul was born in Tarsus, a city on the plains of Cilicia, a province of Asia Minor. He was proud of his birthplace, referring to it as "no ordinary city" (Acts 21:39). Indeed it was a prosperous and important city. It was the capital of Cilicia and a centre of trade by land and sea. It had a fine natural harbour and ships from all parts of the maritime world came into its port. Located in the curve where Syria and Asia

Minor come together, it was a meeting place for Asia and Europe. It was a city of many languages – a centre of Greek and Latin culture, literature and philosophy. It had schools equal to those of Athens and Alexandria.

Tarsus had become a city of importance under the Roman emperors. It was made a “free city” governed by its own laws. Antony had bestowed Roman citizenship on all its citizens. They paid no tribute to Rome. Augustus Caesar confirmed these privileges. There was a large colony of Jews in the city. They were successful, for the Romans realised that they were an industrious people who encouraged business. These Jews enjoyed all the privileges of citizenship. Thus Paul was born a Roman citizen and could command the protection given to a citizen throughout the Empire.

As a Jew and a Pharisee from a family of Pharisees, he was well educated by his own people. After he had finished his studies in Tarsus, he went to Jerusalem to continue his learning under Gamaliel, one of the great Hebrew scholars of his time. Paul’s family must have been wealthy to be able to send their son away to study. We learn from a reference in Acts 22:28 that Paul had a sister and a nephew in Jerusalem. Whether there were other brothers and sisters we do not know. Through this period of his life Paul was called Saul, for he came from the tribe of Benjamin and was named after Saul who became the first king of the Hebrews. In the beginning of his career he was known as Saul of Tarsus.

Young Saul had been schooled in classical Hebrew and also spoke Aramaic, the language common to the Jews of Palestine. As a citizen of Tarsus, he spoke Greek, which was practically an international language. This fluency in language was of great advantage to him in his journeys.

In addition to his academic and religious studies, Saul was also taught a trade. Tarsus was famous for its weavers. Its speciality was a tough fabric woven from goats’ hair. It was used for sails, tents, and heavy cloaks. Somewhere along the city’s street of weavers, Saul learned the art of tent making (Acts 18:1-3). This skill, too, was to prove useful in later life.



Over to you

Do you think the message of your preaching is ever influenced by what people want to hear?

Would you be troubled if you discovered that the content of your preaching was different from that of the other preachers in your area?

When you stand as a preacher before a congregation, do you consider that this is something that is of God’s doing?