

Paul's Message and His Right to Lead the Church



SABBATH—JULY 1

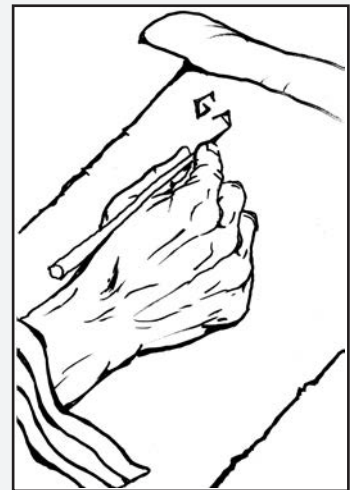
READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 2 Peter 3:15, 16; Galatians 1; Philippians 1:1; Galatians 5:12.

MEMORY VERSE: “Am I now trying to get people to think well of me? Or do I want God to think well of me? Am I trying to please people? If I were, I would not be serving Christ” (Galatians 1:10, NIV).

STUDENTS BUILT A CENTER at their university where everyone was welcome. Imagine that they returned years later to find other students had changed the center. There was no longer a large room where people could spend time with friends. Instead, the big room was divided into many smaller rooms. Each room had rules about who could enter and who could not. Some rooms allowed people from only one race or sex to enter. The students who changed the design said that they had the power to do so. They argued that keeping people separated was how things always had been done in the past.

Paul faced a real situation like this imaginary one when he wrote to the Galatians. He told them his plan for the Gentiles. Gentiles are people who are not Jews. Paul argued that Gentiles could join the church by faith alone. But false teachers fought against Paul. They insisted Gentiles first had to be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the skin at the end of the sex organ of a man or a boy is cut off. Then the Gentiles could join the church.

Paul saw that this teaching attacked the heart of the gospel itself. The gospel teaches that we are saved through faith alone in Jesus. So Paul fought against this attack. And his fight took the form of a letter to the Galatians.



Paul's fight took the form of a letter.

PAUL, THE LETTER WRITER (2 Peter 3:15, 16)

Read 2 Peter 3:15, 16. What does the church in Paul's day think of his writings? What do these verses teach us about how the Holy Spirit led men to write the Bible?

Paul is not trying to make a work of art when he writes his letter to the Galatians. Instead, the Holy Spirit leads Paul to write about situations that involve him and the believers in the churches in Galatia.

Letters were an important part of Paul's work for God. So, Paul wrote letters to the many churches he started along the Mediterranean. He visited these churches whenever he could. But he could not stay in one place for too long. So his letters guided the churches while he was gone. Over time, copies of Paul's letters were shared with other churches (Colossians 4:16). Some of Paul's letters have been lost. But he wrote at least 13 books of the Bible. The verses from Peter we read earlier show that, at some point, Paul's writings were viewed as part of the Holy Bible. The honor given to Paul's writings shows just how much respect his work for God gained in the early history of the church.

There was a time when some believed that the form in which Paul wrote his letters was very rare and special. They thought the Holy Spirit created it just to contain God's messages. But this view changed when two young men from Oxford made an important discovery in Egypt. The young men were Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt. They found about 500,000 pieces of very old documents, written on papyrus. Papyrus is a tall plant that is like grass. It grows along marshes. It was used to make paper in Bible times. Among the papyrus documents the young men found were very old copies of the New Testament. They also found bills, tax returns, receipts for payment, and personal letters.

Their discovery proved that Paul's form of letter writing was used for all letters in his day. These letters included four parts: (1) a greeting that named the writer and those receiving the letter, (2) a word of thanksgiving, (3) the main body of the letter, and (4) the closing thoughts.

So, Paul was following the form of letter writing used in his time. He spoke to people in his day in a form that would be easy for them to recognize.

Suppose the Bible were written today. What form of writing might the Lord use to reach us now?



Paul's letter included four parts: (1) a greeting, (2) a word of thanksgiving, (3) the main message, and (4) closing thoughts.

PAUL, CHOSEN BY GOD (Galatians 1:1, 2)

Paul wrote his letters in the form used for letters in Bible times. But Galatians has some special things in it not found in Paul's other letters. Knowing what these things are helps us to understand better the situation Paul faced.

Paul opens his letters with a greeting. Look at the greeting he uses in Galatians 1:1, 2. Now, read the greetings he uses in Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; and 2 Thessalonians 1:1. In what ways is the greeting that Paul uses in Galatians the same as the ones he uses in these other letters? How is it different?

The greeting in Galatians is longer than the ones in Paul's other letters. He also gives the source of his power. Paul is an apostle. The word *apostle* means "someone who is sent" or "a messenger." In the New Testament, the apostles were the 12 followers of Jesus, as well as others whom He sent to tell people about Him (1 Corinthians 15:7). In his greeting, Paul says he belongs to this special group of witnesses.

Paul makes it very clear that his right to lead does not come from any human. Paul's defense seems to point to people in the church who try to weaken his power. Why would they do that? We have seen that some people in the church are not happy with Paul's message. He said that being saved came from faith in Christ alone and not from obeying the law. So some people feel Paul made the law unimportant. They cause a lot of trouble for Paul. They are very sly in their attack. They know Paul's gospel message is tied to his right to lead. So they attack Paul's power.

They do not say Paul is not an apostle. Instead, they argue that his being one does not really mean anything. They say Paul is just a messenger—nothing more. They claim his gospel is just his own ideas, not God's.

Paul understands how dangerous this thinking is. So right away he makes it clear that God chose him to be an apostle.

In what ways is the Bible being questioned today within our church? What form do these attacks against the Bible take? How have they affected your own thinking about the power of the Bible to change your life?



Paul made it clear from the start that God called him to be an apostle.

PAUL'S MESSAGE (Galatians 1:1–5)

In the opening of his letter to the Galatians, Paul makes it clear where his power as an apostle comes from. What else does he make known in his greeting? How is Galatians 1:3–5 the same as Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; and Colossians 1:2? How is it different?

A special thing about Paul's letters is the way he joins together the words "grace" and "peace" in his greetings. A Greek writer in Paul's day would start a letter with the word "greetings" (*chairein*). But Paul uses the word "grace" instead (verse 3, NIV). In Greek, the word "grace" (*charis*) sounds a lot like the word for "greetings" (*charein*). But they are different. Paul also adds to this welcome the Jewish greeting of "peace."

Paul's use of "grace" and "peace" in his greeting is not just good manners or politeness. Instead, these two words describe his gospel message. (In fact, Paul uses these two words more than any other writer in the New Testament does.) The "grace" and "peace" are not from Paul but from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What parts of the gospel does Paul include in Galatians 1:1–5?

Paul does not have a lot of room in his opening greeting to talk about what the gospel is. But he describes the heart of the gospel in only a few short verses. On what main truth is the gospel founded? Paul says that the gospel is not founded on obeying the law. Instead, he says that the gospel rests fully on what Christ did for us through His death on the cross and His return to life from the dead. Christ's death and return to life did something for us we never could do for ourselves. These two things broke the power of sin and death. They freed His followers from the power of evil. The power of evil holds so many people in fear. It makes them slaves.

Paul thinks carefully about the grace and peace that God created for us in Christ. This wonderful news causes him, in verse 5, to burst out in praise to God.

Write down your understanding of what the gospel is all about. Try to use no more words than Paul uses in Galatians 1:1–5. Bring your words to class on Sabbath.



Christ's death and return to life broke the power of sin and death.

NO OTHER GOSPEL (Galatians 1:6–9)

Notice how Paul begins some of his letters. For example, look at Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philipians 1:3; and 1 Thessalonians 1:2. What often comes after the opening greeting? And how is Galatians 1:6 different?

Paul writes about all kinds of problems that the churches face. But first he begins his letters with a greeting. Then he gives a prayer of thanks to God for the faith of his readers. Paul writes his letter to the Corinthians in this way. The Corinthians struggled against the desire to do all kinds of sinful things. (For example, read 1 Corinthians 1:4 and 1 Corinthians 5:1.) But the situation in Galatia upsets Paul. So he leaves out his usual words of thanks to God. And instead he gets right to the point.

Read Galatians 1:6–9 and Galatians 5:12. What strong words does Paul use to show how worried he is about what is happening in Galatia?

Paul does not hold back any words in his letter to the Galatians. He accuses them of turning against their beliefs as Christians. In fact, the word “turning” (Galatians 1:6, NIV) often was used to describe soldiers who turned against their country by running away from the army. So, Paul says the Galatians are turning away from God in the same way.

How are the Galatians turning away from God? Paul says they have turned to a different gospel. Paul does not mean that there is more than one gospel. What he means is there are false teachers in the church. They teach that faith in Christ alone is not enough to save from sin (Acts 15:1–5). Paul is so upset by this false teaching. He hopes that anyone who preaches such a different gospel will fall under the curse of God (Galatians 1:8)! He even says it twice to show just how upset he is (Galatians 1:9).

Even in today’s church, we seem to teach that what we do is more important than what we believe. Some say the most important thing is our relationship or experience with God. It is true that experience is important. But what does Paul’s writing here in Galatians teach us about how important the correct beliefs are too?



The word “turning” was used to describe soldiers who turned against their country by running away from the army.

THE SOURCE OF PAUL'S GOSPEL (Galatians 1:11–24)

Read Galatians 1:6–9, 11–24. The troublemakers in Galatia accuse Paul of writing his gospel to win the praise of others. Suppose Paul wanted others to think well of him. Then what different things might he have said in his letters to get people to praise him?

Why does Paul say that Gentile believers do not need to be circumcised? Paul's enemies say it is because Paul wanted to bring as many people into the church as possible. They accuse Paul of caring more about numbers in the church than about the truth. Paul knew that Gentiles might not want to be circumcised. So Paul's enemies may have thought that was the reason Paul did not require the Gentiles to be circumcised. As a result, Paul is accused of being a people pleaser! Paul answers by pointing his attackers to his strong words in Galatians 1:8, 9. These verses clearly show that Paul's purpose is not to get others to think well of him. Suppose Paul wanted that. Then he would have answered in a different way.



Paul argues that he received his gospel from God alone.

Why does Paul say it is impossible to follow Christ and try to please people at the same time?

In Galatians 1:11, 12, Paul says that God gave him his gospel and the power to preach and lead. How do Paul's words in Galatians 1:23, 24 help make his point?

The set of verses in Galatians 1:13–24 gives Paul's life story before he became a Christian. These verses also tell what happened to him when he became a Christian (Galatians 1:15, 16) and after he became one (Galatians 1:16–24). Paul argues that the situations surrounding each of these times in his life show it is impossible to say he received his gospel from anyone but God. Paul refuses to let anyone insult his message by doubting where it came from. Paul knows he was chosen to teach. And he is going to do it even if it is hard to do.

How sure are you that Christ has chosen you to serve Him? How can you know for sure what God has asked you to do? Suppose you know for sure. Why must you still learn to listen to the wise advice of others?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “In almost every church [in Paul’s day] there were some who were Jews by birth. The Jewish teachers worked through these members to gain power. No one could use the Bible to weaken Paul’s teachings. So instead, the most dishonest lies were told about Paul to weaken his power. Some said Paul had not been one of Jesus’ first disciples. [Disciples are followers of Christ.] Others said Paul received no command from Jesus to preach. And they argued that Paul decided to teach things that went against the other apostles. . . .

“Paul saw the evils that threatened to quickly destroy the churches. He wrote right away to the Galatians and uncovered their false teachings. With very strong words, Paul scolded those who had left the truth.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White, *Sketches [Stories] From the Life of Paul*, pages 188, 189.

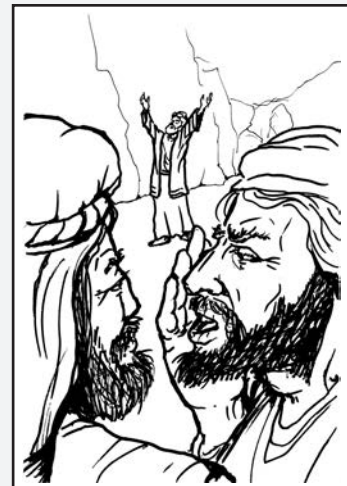
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Read again Paul’s greeting to the Galatians. In these verses, he says that Jesus’ death happened for a very important reason. What was that reason? And what meaning does it have for us today?

② In Galatians 1:14, Paul says he was once very eager to defend the traditions of the Jews who lived before him. By “traditions” Paul probably means the teachings of the Pharisees. A Pharisee was a member of a Jewish religious group. They followed Jewish laws very strictly. What part do traditions have in our faith? What warning might Paul’s experience have for us about not putting traditions ahead of Bible truth?

③ Why does Paul “seem” not to put up with those who do not agree with what he said and did? Read again what he writes about people who had different ideas of the gospel. How might someone with Paul’s strong views on things be looked at in our church today?

SUMMARY: The false teachers in Galatia worked against Paul. They said God did not choose Paul to be an apostle or give Paul his message. Paul deals with both of these attacks in the opening verses of his letter to the Galatians. He boldly says that there is only one way to be saved. And he tells how his becoming a follower of Christ shows that his calling and gospel could come only from God.



“The most dishonest lies were told to weaken [Paul’s] power.”