

In to the Breach!
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Texts: Acts 10:34-43; 1 John 1:1-4 and Gal. 1:17-24;

Straightaway Paul began preaching Christ—according to the revelation given him by the Lord. And his audiences no doubt included both Jewish synagogues and, while permitted Christian gatherings such as might have met at the home of the street called Straight, and at the home of Ananias' house. **He was some days with the disciples at Damascus.** (Acts 9:19). The Jews who knew of his hostility **toward Christians in Jerusalem** (v. 21). He **increased all the more in strength . . . confounding the Jews by proving that Jesus was the Christ.** (v. 22) **And, after many days, they plotted to kill him.** The chronology here is not spelled out for us in any detail so the exact placement of his time in the Arabian desert (up to three years) may be covered by this expression **after many days**, and after many days Paul may have returned to Damascus and resumed his preaching of Christ. So there may have been a significant hiatus between Paul's initial proclamation of Christ and his preaching after his time in the desert. All indications are that Paul was a city boy, he preferred the urban environment and, indeed, was most successful in that setting. This time in the desert must have been a major culture shock as he camped outside the city walls and learned from the Lord directly. What happened next was the assassination plot, and Paul's escape over the wall in a basket! It would appear at this time that **he went up to Jerusalem.**

Paul is careful to point out that he **went up to Jerusalem and remained with Peter fifteen days** and that the only other apostle that he saw in this brief visit was James, the brother of Jesus—not James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, who was the other Apostle James and who died in 44 AD (Herod Agrippa's persecution¹). What's curious about this is that James, the brother of Jesus was converted by his encounter with the risen Lord *as was Paul* and although he was alive during Jesus' earthly ministry his participation in it, personally, was minimal. Yes, there obviously were points of intersection—they were brothers after all! And the chances of sharing family feast days and festivals would be expectantly high. But James did not experience firsthand the miracles, healings, deliverances, sermons or dinner conversations that the other twelve, including Peter, had. Therefore Paul's credentials were very like those of James and yet they both were distinguished from the twelve **who were with him from the beginning.**

In Acts we read: **So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning with the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become to us a witness to his resurrection.** (Acts 1:21-22) **And they**

¹ In a curious way, the martyrdom of the James harmonizes this limited venue with the second visit (Acts 12:1-3) and places it afterwards in 47 AD possibly. Church expansion is occurring very rapidly at this time. Paul's missionary tours were not widely spread out over time. He was busy. And Antioch was his headquarters of operation, not Jerusalem.

put forward two: Jospheh called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Mattias. So, there were at least two candidates and James, the brother of Jesus, and Paul, obviously, were not among them. The lot fell to Mattias, so he and the other twelve were **the trove of information** regarding the comings and goings and doings of Jesus for something in the neighborhood of one thousand days. James would, like Paul, would have to ask them about that information, information vital to establishing the historical Jesus. But knowing about Jesus, historically and firsthand might never exceed carnal knowledge . . . and carnal knowledge doesn't save. Paul preached for years without that in-depth knowledge! And that should convince us of its secondary nature: knowing about Jesus is one thing, knowing and believing who he is saves us.

Here is the wonderful thing: God allowed two ways, from the start, for people to learn about the Lord and his gospel. Paul's way was that of encountering the risen Lord (converted by the incontrovertible fact that Jesus was alive after being dead) and then, through association with those who knew Jesus **according to the flesh**, that is to say, **incarnation-ally**—and then backfilling. And, then, to balance things out, there were those who knew the Lord **incarnation-ally**, whose experience aligned with John: **And the Word became flesh and dwell among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth.** (John 1:14) Then so as to press this perspective even more adamantly: in 1 John 1:1-3: **That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard, we also proclaim to you.** Thus the empirical side of things is addressed (Jesus was known by sensible approaches—in physical and material terms! Historically real as testified to. And the theological, spiritual approach is likewise put forth. In a sense, God would be known coming and going—both ways, in a complementary fashion, each confirming the other.

If we sort this testimony from 1 John 1:1-3 into two columns, and list on the left hand side the divine qualities and on the right the human experiential qualities, we come up with:

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|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Only Son | in the flesh, handled |
| • the Word | dwelling among us, embodied |
| • his Glory | seen and observed |
| • grace and truth | heard |
| • from the beginning | lived a life here, in history |
| • the life, eternal life | this we proclaim to us |
| • transcendent | immanent |

The significance of the pairing of these approaches becomes more obvious. They belong together and one should not exclude the other.

Paul therefore cut his teeth on preaching Jesus as the Christ, as the promised One, the Messiah of God as revealed to him. And subsequently he picked up pieces of doctrine from those who passed on the faith to him and from the Lord himself, by revelation and narration². Remember also that in an oral culture, huge swaths of teachings by a religious master, would be committed to memory . . . and then recited, commented on and, possibly corrected by others who heard the same teaching. It was very, very important to get it right and to transmit it accurately—even word for word.³

Paul's remark: **You have heard of my former life in Judaism** (Gal. 1:13) raised the question earlier of how this occurred. How would the Galatians have heard? Here are some options! First, they may have heard through the recitations of Paul himself. We have examples of that in Scripture! Remember, this letter is written just after the second trip to Jerusalem (AD 47) where much of the controversy over Paul and his gospel had erupted! Secondly, current events aside, the Galatians may have heard through the rumor mill (Ananias refers to this source: ***I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to your saints at Jerusalem*** which means Paul was publicly known, not just through private testimony!). A third source, of negative press, would be Paul's active detractors, opponents and resisters. They not only questioned his credentials, but impugned his character and described him as untrustworthy ("an apostate Jew"). Or, fourthly, in keeping with Oriental deference, this recitation may have been the first time they had heard of his past and it is brought up apologetically reluctantly. I lean towards the recent uproar, rumors and slander by others on top of Paul's transparency.

Here are a few notes on Paul's developing perspective—this is something that one's language discloses through diction, topic and tone. Language studies suggest that Paul's use of the word *Judaism* here (in v. 13) may be an indication that, as of this **writing, Paul is *beginning to see his former religion as another religion* and that sense was merging with a sense of its meaning "the opposition."** In his mind, the Jews rejection of Jesus as their Messiah signaled a diversion—that the Jews went off the main course of God's revealed plan of redemption! This he plainly states in Romans 11:17 where he articulates the **grafting in of the Gentiles**. The Greek word *ediokon* used here for "persecuted" (**how I persecuted the church** (v. 13)) is the same word that Jesus used in confronting Saul (**why are you persecuting Me?** (Acts 9:4); it would have made a lasting, indelible impression on Paul! And finally, **The church of God** (Gal. 1:13) may carry the seed thought of "the body of Christ" as it carries here the idea of God's company/assembly/congregation

² I heard the stories of Jesus growing up, but they didn't matter as much as they did post-conversion. The wonder was increased as I sought the significance of the traditions.

³Franz Boaz (1858-1942), as I recall, recorded the creation cycle of the Tsimshian, in the early 1900's—a tribe in British Columbia which was an oral culture—and the hours long recitation was re-recorded as recited by the original speaker's grandson (some fifty years later?)—the fidelity was exceptionally high. This was an astonishing scientific demonstration of the accuracy of transmission through time in oral culture of sacred/religious traditions. This was thought unlikely before tape and digital recordings. Concern for fidelity distinguishes oral tradition from spin" and state propaganda.

forward. The **people of God/Israel** is transitioning toward the fellowship of disciples, the Christian church. *This idea would be resisted by faithful Jews as an erosion of their sense of being chosen, their special calling and privilege.* This would tend to feed opposition and antagonism. How could it not? In re-reading old sermons of my own, I recognize traces of this same kind of self-disclosure; it's one of the perils of being a preacher. Our later end is previewed by our present discourse! Much pre-evangelistic work must have occurred in Paul's rabbinic training! He would be scripturally sound, informed in ways that the fishermen from Galilee only approximated through their tutelage by Jesus.

All salvation exists in the mind and purposes of God (His *eudokia*, or "good will" towards men was first manifest in Eden (created in goodness), and pre-eminently evident in the incarnation with Jesus **globing about doing good, healing the sick and delivering those oppressed by devils**. See Gen. 1-11, Acts 10:34-43 and Luke 2:14). In verse 18 we read **I went up to visit Cephas**, the word is *historesai* originally carried the sense "to inquire of." This is a little more than "visit" as in "to get acquainted with"—the Hellenistic sense that came later. There is an intriguing link here between getting to know someone by learning their history as the form that getting acquainted assumes. Persecution is typically a silencing of the other, a deny of the importance of their being, their history—first you silence and then you slaughter! Destruction of others is a denial of significance; objectification precedes murder (as Jesus warns us). However, there is another strand to history—it is not only key to personal identity, it is key to salvation! The history of Jesus is inherently redemptive and when we share his history others get saved!

We are not told explicitly what the topic of Paul's inquiry is! We can safely assume that they talked about Jesus as the theme of Galatians 1 concerns Paul's gospel of Christ and preaching credentials. That would be pertinent to Galatians. Perhaps Paul was perplexed by the extreme reactions that his preaching produced, the enemies it earned him in Damascus. Peter may have helped Paul accept that persecution for our faith is what Christians are to expect (**not some strange thing which has befallen you** 1 Peter 2:12)—steeling him for what was yet to come. Remember, we are still in the mid-thirties AD.

Verse 19 notes that the only other apostle Paul saw was James, the brother of John. The church had experienced its first persecution, following the death of Stephen but it does not appear that the apostles were dispersed from Jerusalem this early on. So suspicion of Paul, fear of a former, ferocious persecutor of the churchman have explained why Paul only saw two. I do find it curious that if James, the brother of Jesus was gaining apostolic standing this early, that James of Zebedee, who was the first apostle to die, did so a decade into the early church's history. There would have been more than twelve recognized **witnesses to the resurrection** active in the Jerusalem church. To be an apostle *by the will of God* (election) and *through the call of God* appears to have emerged **very early** as the test of apostolic authenticity. There are hints of a wider, vaguer apostolic circle (wider than the twelve!) in Scripture. Paul's claim is that his witness to the

resurrected Lord was equal to that of any other—whether Peter, or Thomas, or the women at the empty tomb. *Resurrection was the original, very big deal.*

Acts 10:39-43 expresses the qualification of the twelve by Peter:

39 We are witnesses of all the things that He did both in the [a]country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on [b]a cross. 40 God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He [c]be revealed, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who had been chosen beforehand by God, *that is*, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He ordered us to [d]preach to the people, and to testify solemnly that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify of Him, that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”⁴

Pay attention to the *historical* emphases: **witnesses of all the things that He did, They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross, God raised him up on the third day and granted that He be revealed . . . to witnesses who had been chosen(!) beforehand . . . to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead, All the prophets testify of Him, everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.** This is the peculiar and permanent place of the original apostles! Note then the content: death on a cross, resurrection on the third day, revelation to the apostles, completion of prophetic declarations and forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Him. This content has been entrusted to us—this is the history that matters—we must be conversant with it, share it as truth fearlessly and constantly. People are not saved by ideas about God, they are saved by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus! Of this message, entrusted to us, and of these facts the New Testament is the authenticating record.

By vv.21-22, Paul has largely proved his point: his gospel as well as his salvation came from revelation—minimal contact with other apostles and therefore no dependence on man, on what men taught, or passed on! It was new and different. It was also radical and revolutionary. We like Paul cannot claim that we kept company with the Lord from the baptism of John to the resurrection appearances (and ascension to heaven). We are supernaturally regenerated, or not at all. Those who reject the supernatural do not know what they cannot know!

Amen.

⁴ Footnotes

- a. Acts 10:39 Or *countryside*
- b. Acts 10:39 Lit *wood*; see Deut 21:23
- c. Acts 10:40 Lit *become visible*
- d. Acts 10:42 Or *proclaim*