

Asia Minor— Triumphs and Trials  
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I read the phrase “age of endemic distraction<sup>1</sup>” recently—just after I’d finished my draft of this message in fact. Oh, perfect, that’s exactly what Paul was facing in his letter to the Galatians. Distraction is one of Satan’s favorite weapons and it has had some hellish consequences. Satan hoped to distract Paul from evangelizing by creating this diversionary opposition business—by injecting division and disagreement into the church plants, Satan could weaken the fellowship, blunt church growth and even cause some to fall away. At any rate, Paul would have to fight a war on two fronts if those jealous for the honor and place of the original apostles could be persuaded to attack Paul as a fraudulent apostle, who was obviously in error and, so independently minded as to disavow any input, or guidance from his spiritual betters—that is, the original twelve. Yes, they were a trial to Paul, and they tested his patience (which the text suggests may have worn quite thin!); but they did not triumph. They did not triumph because, in part, they were ignorant of what they were doing. They were opposing God and would, most likely, have been horrified to have that pointed out to them. Paul, armed with the truth, had several spiritual weapons at his disposal. Here’s two: spiritual discernment and intuition. Paul knew intuitively, because it had been his own obsession, the weight of **the traditions of his fathers**, of Talmudic Judaism especially in the Pharisaical strain. And, just as it is hard for alcoholics to fool other alcoholics in recovery, it is plain to Paul what they are battling—even if subconsciously. Intuition, seconded by spiritual discernment (the Holy Spirit disclosing *what is actually going on* in any given situation), is very effectual; it reveals the truth. Natural intuition is real, but hardly as infallible as spiritual discernment. Besides we are not so perfect as to always get the correct reading of that discernment. Paul doesn’t have to be perfectly patient, to still rank high in patience!

I want us to ponder the external matter at hand, the swampy world of detraction, slander and fake innuendo that all of us engage with daily. People are complicated and unpredictable swamp creatures. Satan works in that medium. It’s dangerous territory because we are prone to treachery and betrayal ourselves. We are warned that Satan is a ferocious predator, who, roaring about, seeks whom he can devour. He literally **eats us as dust**. Alligators are predators, too. I watched a chilling video of a large alligator stalking a man fishing in the Everglades. It was all placid and calm as the alligator crept up on the unsuspecting man . . . and suddenly, there it was, menacingly near . . . a short predatory sprint from his bare legs! Such is the treachery that lies within the hearts of some of our fellowman. I am fairly certain that crocodiles along the Nile, or off the coast of Australia, are no less omnivorous. Be that as it may, the biblical metaphor is that of **wolves in sheep’s clothing**. These are the **false brethren** that Paul exposes as having been **falsely brought in (Gal.**

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<sup>1</sup> Frankly, I wonder if “newsworthy” in the media isn’t filtered for its “distractibility” and its entertainment value. It’s the bait to draw consumers into the advertiser’s web. It titivates and sells.

**2:4**), or as **having crept in among us** (Jude 1:4) because divisive personalities are found everywhere deployed by Satan to disturb, disrupt and distract.

Now, one further observation. These false brethren could also be designated as **meddling ministers**. About these William Still wrote (in “The Work of a Pastor”): “Some meddling ministers want to sort everyone out. God is not so optimistic. Some will die mixed-up personalities, and they may be true believers . . . Don’t try the impossible. Know your limitations, and know what God is seeking to do in the world and the part in it he wants you to play . . . Most people crack up because they try to do what God never intended them to do. They destroy themselves by sinful ambition, just as much as the drunkard and drug addict. Ambition drives them on.” Christlike patience will do for now, perfect patience awaits our change!

***There is only one Savior of the world, and it’s not you and it’s not me.***

Galatian 2:1: Calvin aligns this second trip to Jerusalem with the benevolence trip of Barnabas and Paul, a local church action, and suggests that this transpired due to a local Judean famine that put the urban poor in Jerusalem at risk. Whole regions of the ancient world were affected locally, but the entire ancient/known world as a whole was not. Grain supply and food staples were dependent on maritime commerce—grain from Egypt and from West Africa was a main stay but the crop was variable depending on the height of the Nile’s spring freshets—too much, or too little meant trouble for the supply chain. Famines occurred, typically, in a twenty-year cycle. 46-48 AD were the central years of a famine that began in 44 AD and the Gentile churches of Antioch responded with a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Donation<sup>2</sup> (began in 54 AD) was a later development, but a food scarcity was so evident in 45 AD that Helena, a Jewish convert, Queen of Adiabene, which lies east of the Tigris (a Mesopotamian region bordering on Armenia) sent to Egypt to buy corn and to Cyprus to buy dried figs for the starving populace around this time. Her sarcophagus lies in the Israel Museum and she is memorialized for her generosity and compassion. Times were very difficult and there was lots of suffering.

Be that as it may, the Gentile Mission coincided with the Jewish Diaspora movement, when synagogues were being planted strategically throughout the known world. There were many synagogues in the regions that Paul frequented! And because he often started at the synagogue, the proselytes to Judaism were those who were most open to Christian evangelism. That meant rivalry and competition for these “prizes” was sharp. What we call “sheep stealing” was going on apace and Jewish leaders were very resentful . . . and hostile to Paul. And, as the records show, they were not above venting their hostility, harassing and persecuting him. We have read how Paul was **confounding the Jews of Damascus . . . proving that Jesus was the Christ** from their very own scriptures.

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<sup>2</sup> When Paul delivered this contribution in 57AD—while it was received well, he was not. Various enemies (Asians—from Asia Minor, probably Ephesus where he settled for some three years). His success there was enormous; but so were his afflictions (Acts 19:1-20; 2 Cor. 1:3-11; and 1 Cor. 15:30-32.) It hadn’t happened yet, features in the 2nd tour, early 50’s AD.

Paul was an apologetic and doctrinal genius<sup>3</sup>—as Ephesians and Romans amply prove. Like an Isaac Newton (17th century—new physics) or Francis Bacon (16th century—the scientific method) or William Shakespeare (16th century, linguistic prodigy and theatrical innovator), Paul brought about a Copernican revolution (Nicolaus Copernicus, 15th century astronomer) in biblical studies (preserved in his epistolary writings)! He was the one to so brilliantly frame the doctrines of Christ that they became defensible—scripturally, and logically. Such a brilliant degree of coherence and clarity was both intimidating and enviable. He took the best of the Old Testament thinking, tradition and spiritual reflection to a whole new level—one more compatible with the completion signified best by the advent of the Christ, the dramatic impact of the incarnation which is God with us, God amongst us and God within us. As Jesus defended the truths of God to an errant generation (**You adulterous generation**, faithless and fickle, **how long must I bear with you!** Mark 9:19) Jesus was put out with the unbelief, and Paul, no doubt, was sympathetic to that same matter amongst the Galatians **who had Christ crucified plainly presented to them—publicly portrayed!** Gal. 3:1-2—with faith inducing power under the influence of the Holy Spirit. They seemed so entirely, and completely converted, **having begun by the Spirit, are you now**, would you imagine that it were even possible any longer, **to be perfected by the flesh**, by your works, your behavior, or obedience to external observation of ceremonial law?! How backwards, counter-intuitive, how foolish of them! This is, no doubt, some form of witchcraft! **Who has bewitched you?** Who has misled you? Who was singing the siren song of spiritual destruction, drawing them onto the fatal reef of error and deception? Demonic deliverances were common because satanic activity was widespread—spiritualism was alive and well in many places. Cyprus being the Haiti of that day, Haiti where voodoo, spells and witchcraft infest everything.

**We believe, we know, that one is justified by faith in Christ**—not by works, or self, or anything that self could will or do. It is not possible to unsee Christ crucified—or to undo the atonement! Whether it was religious nostalgia, and regardless of how well-intended the Judaizers were that Gentile Christians get “the full-gospel, their Jesus-plus-law version,” they were sowing discord and division. Believers were suspecting Paul, distorting his gospel and falling away—some nursing feelings of betrayal, no doubt—the collateral damage of controversy, disagreement and philosophical change. He was a revivalist revisionary, one who was as concerned with substance (the truth) as well as the optics.

With all of this (social turmoil, economic/food crisis, crushing poverty and starvation and religious contention between Jews and Christians) going on, communication was crucial, even critical. It was a perilous time, fear/panic was high and things were so extremely uncertain that many wondered, as did Paul himself, whether or not this was the end of the world. Jesus had prophesied calamity and catastrophe and the world situation certainly appeared to be manifesting itself as in its last apocalyptic throes! The word for “communication” (*anethemen* #394) is used

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<sup>3</sup> My hope is that I can assert this without anyone stumbling over his genius—his exceptionality.

in verse 2 and verse 6 (**they communicated nothing to me**—meaning the apostles listened, concurred, didn't revise, correct, or debate anything Paul proclaimed (his gospel message passed muster on its own). It means “I lay (a case) before, impart, communicate, declare, relate (with a view to consulting).” and that occurred in private! Where differences could be settled respectfully! Thayer's Greek Lexicon adds:

in the middle voice **to set forth** a thing drawn forth, as it were, from some corner (**ἀνά**), **to set forth** (in words), **declare** (R. V. lay before)

Paul's detractors were, apparently, not so courteous, or respectful—opposing and reviling him in public (much as the Pharisees and Scribes did<sup>4</sup> in trying to trap Jesus, in his word and so neutralize him—they mistakenly took him for “just a man.”) Jesus eluded their traps at every turn and often turned the tables on them to their embarrassment (for not only were they acting disrespectful, they were wrong).

It would appear that this meeting occurred after Paul had publicly rebuked Peter in Antioch for breaking communion fellowship with the Gentile believers there. As this doesn't come up, we may assume, I think, that the admonition had been handled with grace—it was behind them as a matter resolved. Peter was not unfamiliar with rebuke and he models the kind of humility that brings both growth and peace. And it seems equally clear that Galatians could not have been written prior to this conference—because Paul would not have failed to bring it up to bolster his position, theological speaking. The synodal resolution held firm because of the successful communication.

I want to hit the pause button for a moment and point out something very critical: Paul did not allow the opposition to prevent him from following his calling<sup>5</sup>. He did not allow the swampiness of others to deter him. Sometimes we allow that, their swampiness, or our own insecurities, or self-suspicion (fearful second guessing) to get the best of us and then allow those misgivings to derail us, divert us. Not being a people-pleaser means more than refusing to curry favor and approval—it also means refusing to allow their darkness be the deciding factor in choosing to obey God. Paul calls it **being faithful to the heavenly vision** (Acts 26:19) . . . Noah called it building an ark (100-120 years, Gen. 5:32, Gen. 7:6.) . . . and Elijah called it perseverance: seven times he commanded his servant to go and look towards the sea. (I Kings 18:43-44)

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<sup>4</sup> A tone of bare-knuckled antagonism colors their open, public questioning of Jesus. It was both hostile and antagonistic—rude and abusive. It was a breach of Mid-eastern etiquette.

<sup>5</sup> Note: Peter preached to the Gentiles (Acts 10) as well as the Jews (Acts 2, 3) and the latter led to his arrest (Acts 4:3). Paul preached to the Jews (Acts 21:39-22:22—even had a vision in the temple (22:17-23) and that resulted in his arrest/incarceration. And Paul preached to the Gentiles (Acts 17). So, the division of labor in evangelism/missions was real, but not exclusionary.

Now, let's suppose that these misguided men, who are operating out of such wicked motivations, were called out, say, by their superiors in Jerusalem. Let's say that Peter was able to sit down with them, and say, lovingly but truthfully: "Dear brothers, James here has some godly wisdom for us to consider. Is it possible that your lust for power, and desire for control, even out of a misguided jealousy for us, the apostles here in Jerusalem, seeking to elevate us and honor us beyond measure has moved you to sin?—For we have no urgency to control Paul, or to direct his mission, guided as he is by the same Holy Spirit as we are. Why are you agitated for our reputation, our apostolic authority is secure? We are not jealous, or threatened! We are doing a good work here, and Paul is doing likewise among the Gentiles."

Peter might continue. "Every man, brothers, is to follow his own calling. We are in no wise threatened by Paul's success amongst the Gentiles. Let's examine our hearts together. Should there be a **lust for power, dominance or control in our hearts? Jealous ambition** as James says. Do not such motivations turn our hearts into a jungle, a tangle of evil ambition?

What is this I hear of mobs being stirred up, and reports of attempts on our brother's life? Surely this is of the devil, not Christ. Who else would want him dead? Not any of us! If you are envious, lay it down. Don't let your jealousy for us, or the **traditions of our fathers** provoke you to sin when they are given for the opposite purpose? We treasure them as much as you! And if Paul did accuse you of espionage, consider, is there anything in your behavior that would account for that? Have you been open with him? Have you asked him to pray with you over your concerns of lawlessness, and moral laxity? Have you communicated? Wouldn't that be more pleasing to the Most High than plotting against him, slandering and forming conspiracies? Do you see the warfare and conflict you are fomenting? All this is contrary to the way of love that our Lord has commanded us to. Come, let's repent together and ask Christ to remove our envy, soothe our fears, shall we?"

*This would be, as James advises, submitting oneself to God. Had this transpired, then the suspicions of Paul could have been laid aside!*

In fact, something of this kind must have occurred. Paul reports that, in distinction from his opponents, the leadership had concluded that **Paul had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised.** The apostolic ministries of Paul, and Peter, and James and John were all affirmed together. And in recognition of **the grace given Paul**, they extended **the right hand of fellowship.**

What we may conclude is that communications problems are heart problems. There is war on the outside because there is war on the inside. We learn that relationships are ruptured, or broken because of unmet desires, or expectations (James). And those expectations are frequently of a particular kind: *they are unspoken.* It is flabbergasting how much mind-reading we expect of each other! It comes out in such phrases as "You should have known . . . if I've asked you once, I have asked you a thousand times." Really? Probably not. *This is an exaggeration*

*saddled up as a lie and then ridden to town!* But, hear this, straightening each other out, *our preference*, is not the order prescribed in Scripture (remember the speck and plank). If we were more patience, loving and kind, we would want to know what our contribution to the conflict is . . . and we might discover, as I have urged repeatedly, that admitting our part, and asking forgiveness for our tone, speech and actions (especially when they are wrongly motivated/ungodly) can quell a war before any shots are fired!

**Amen**