

The Odyssey Of An Apostle

by Steve Zeisler

One of the expected elements of the Christmas season is end-- of-- the-- year holiday letters from friends we have not seen for awhile. Sometimes these letters go on at length detailing the activities of Junior and his little sister, Aunt Peggy, etc. Such letters are histories, in a sense; they are the authors' personal recollections of the events of the past year. As such they let us see not only facts, but what the authors thought was important. We can learn something of the values of people who write such letters about themselves and about their history.

In a way the book of Galatians is like an end -- of-- the-- year letter from a friend. It is in part a personal history written by the apostle Paul. In the section we will look at today we will discover some of the things that Paul thought were important to record about a 14-- year period in his own history. The point of this autobiographical section is to underscore the great announcement of verses 11 and 12 of chapter 1, where the apostle says. "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man, for I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." That announcement is one of the main themes of the book of Galatians. Paul had a pure and authoritative gospel given to him directly by the Lord. He was in no sense beholden to the apostles and teachers and men of import who lived in Jerusalem. He had received from the Lord a commission and a message than allowed him to say what was true and what was false. that is a great theme in this book. Paul's history is given to prove that he could not have learned his gospel from the apostles in Jerusalem because he had not had contact with them.

We will read the passage section first, then I am going to suggest that we take a little excursion and spend some time looking at the life of this man. Last week we looked at what Paul called his "former manner of life in Judaism." Now, beginning with verse 15 of chapter 1, we read:

But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. [Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.] Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me. Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.

We will stop there on that note of suspense. The facts of Paul's life-story lead inevitably to the conclusion that he could not have learned everything he knew by hearing it from other apostles. He had to have learned it from the Lord himself; the evidence of history proves that. In the same way that the early Christians could point to an empty tomb as a fact in history that proved the resurrection, Paul proves that he could not have been taught by men because he never had the occasion to be where he could have learned it. A mere 15 days in the 14 years of his early Christian life were spent in the company of the other apostles; that is the point of his argument here.

In our excursion through the known history of the apostle we will use the "map" that Galatians gives us of events in his life. We will also look at incidents in the book of Acts and other places about this man; how he came to be who he was and what he learned, to see if his history -- because he has written his history for us--

can be encouraging and instructive to us.

In the suspenseful final statement of Galatians 2:2, the apostle, on his way to Jerusalem for a second time since his conversion, is wondering if he had "run in vain." He is wondering if the ministry he had been called to would result in him finally concluding that it was vain and empty. That is an important question when you think of the stature with which we now regard Paul. It is incredible to imagine that 14 years after his conversion Paul could still be wondering if his contribution to the cause of Christ would be empty and vain.

This is an important interpretive question, too. We need to answer for ourselves the question, "How is it possible that Paul could have wondered such a thing?" Clearly he does not, he cannot mean, in light of what he says in this book alone, that he had any question about his message; that he was now beginning to wonder if the gospel was true after all. That is impossible. The insistence of this book is that Paul knew for certain what God had said. He knew for certain what had happened in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. He knew for certain its import in the lives of all mankind. That cannot have been his question. I don't think Paul was questioning at this point his own calling to preach either. From the beginning he had been commissioned by Ananias and others to speak in the name of the Lord. That cannot be the reason he feared he may have "run in vain."

What I think he was wondering about as he walked up the hill to Jerusalem is whether God would allow him to make a mark in his own generation; whether the Lord would give him the honor of establishing something that would last. The question occurs to him, "Will I be merely a voice shouting in the wind? Has the Lord called me to preach what I know to be true and yet I will see no lasting response to my message? Is that my assignment from God?" I think that is what Paul was wondering. The prophet Jeremiah was called by God to tell the truth to Israel, to declare the sins of its people, to warn it of its dire future, yet no one was ever to heed his message. His declaration was not vindicated until decades later when repentance and restoration took place in Israel. But Jeremiah was not given the honor of establishing anything that would last in his own generation. It must be in that sense that Paul was wondering here, "After 14 years of hard, dangerous ministry, after clear announcement of the truth, am I going to be allowed to do anything that will take root and last."

So the apostle is heading for Jerusalem. There are three locales that are prominent in the autobiography we just read. I think these are types of places that are important and valuable for us to consider, too, as we may have the same locales in our own spiritual odyssey. Paul says that the first surroundings in which he knew the Lord were Damascus and its environs. He then speaks of an early first trip to Jerusalem, which lasted for 15 days. The third location, the third general environment he mentions is Syria and Cilicia, the region in which his own home town of Tarsus was located. As he reviews the 14 years of his Christian history, having not yet ever done anything that he knew would last, he reminds the Galatians of these three places.

Think of the same three places in your own experience. Where were you when you first knew that you were a child of God? Who were the people whom God gave you to know then, the first Christian associates who accepted you? The first time it occurred to you that perhaps you might be of some use to the Lord? That first flush of excitement on being a Christian and knowing you were part of the cause of Christ and wanting to do well at it? For Paul that place was Damascus and its environs.

The second location he highlights is Jerusalem. There his rebellion against God was most finely honed. Can you think of a similar place in your experience? Where were you located when you were most thoroughly antagonistic toward the things of Christ, where you served the flesh most faithfully in your life? Who were the people with whom you sinned most freely, with whom your rebellion was most overt? Paul went back into that environment too, the place where he had fought against the purposes of God, to attempt a ministry. Maybe you can think of such a place in your life also.

The third place Paul mentions is his home town, the place where his family lived. Tarsus was located in the region of Cilicia, right by the border of Syria, which Paul mentions in verse 21. That is certainly the place he is talking about. He went back to minister in his home town for perhaps 10 years, back to where his parents, his brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles and all his old friends lived. Many here can identify with that too; going back to our non-Christian homes to speak to our parents, to our relatives who have long since learned how to disregard everything we say, who treat us as ordinary family members and are not in the least persuaded by

our new religious enthusiasm. Paul had to go back there too. So in a sense these are types of places as well as specific locations for Paul -- his first Christian experience, the place where he had sinned most effectively, and his own home town.

This is going to be somewhat of a history lesson as we will try and tie it all in with the book of Acts. I have found it to be very helpful, given the "map" in the book of Galatians, to go back over what I know of Paul's history and see if I can discern what must have gone on inside him. Let us take the first area he mentions, Damascus and its immediate surroundings. What about the early days of his faith? He spent three years in this locale, and some interesting things occurred. First, it is worth noting that from the very beginning what Paul had to say about Jesus Christ was true and central to the gospel. We would expect that because he had been given a revelation by God. From the very beginning his preaching was clear and to the point.

Secondly, Paul says in this section in Galatians that at one point during the Damascus period he went away to Arabia. Arabia was a huge territory, a desolate desert wilderness, east of Palestine, ruled by a Nabataean king on behalf of Rome. Although Paul's journey to Arabia may have been for ministry, I am persuaded -- especially because Paul says he "did not consult with flesh and blood"-- that he went there on a wilderness experience with the Lord.

It is striking how often the Lord calls his servants to a wilderness experience early in their adventure in following him. Moses spent some 40 years in the Sinai wilderness in Midian as a shepherd, being prepared for his task of leading the children of Israel to the promised land. David spend years in the Judean wilderness hiding in caves, running for his life, a bandit chased by Saul. It was this wilderness experience that preceded his sovereignty as king of Israel. Our Lord was impelled by the Spirit of God to the wilderness for 40 days immediately following his baptism in preparation for his public ministry. I am convinced that that is exactly what happened to Paul here. For some reason (which he does not explain), Paul was led by the Lord into Arabia to have time alone with Christ. Perhaps much of the material that he would later teach as Galatians and Romans, etc., was taught to him by the Lord during that wilderness time. This suggests to me that if we are to serve the Lord faithfully it is more often than not the case that we will have a period of time in a one-- on-- one learning experience with him to lay the foundation for service to other people.

When I was 16 years old my family moved from Phoenix, Arizona, to Southern California. I had been a Christian for six months at that point in time, and I knew very little about the Scriptures. In the Phoenix area -- which is desert if ever there was one -- I met Christ amid a Christian community which was alive and loving and nurturing. I was thrilled to know the Lord. I considered it an unbelievable blessing that I had been allowed to know these people. I spent much of that summer working in a Christian camp. At the end of summer I left to join my family in California.

For all I knew the Lord hadn't a clue as to where California was. I was too young and ill-informed as a Christian I believed I was going with the Lord to a place where there might not be any other Christians. The only ones I had ever met were the little group of people I was surrounded by in my high school. I remember I had to make it as a servant of the Lord all by myself. For all I knew it was going to be God alone who was going to sustain me in what looked to me like a wilderness. That had some very important effects on the kind of person I later became -- although it turned out that God did know where California was located!

The last thing we will say about this first locale, Damascus and its surroundings, is that it resulted in a consummate experience of what Paul would later call "weakness," of which he would boast. He caused so much trouble and agitation that the followers of the Lord had to let him down over a wall in the middle of the night in a basket -- as if he were so much laundry-- running for his life because all he had managed to do was stir up trouble. He would later highlight that failure to accomplish anything in Damascus as a key learning experience for him. So although he had known the Lord three years and had faithfully proclaimed the truth and walked with God in the wilderness during the time, the end result was that nothing significant had been accomplished; he had to run for his life. We never hear him refer to the ministry days in Damascus as ever having amounted to anything, no churches planted, no leadership trained, nothing.

From there he went to Jerusalem, we read in verse 18 and following:

Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

In Acts 9 we have Luke's version of that 15-day trip to Jerusalem. Remember this was the city where Paul was the chief persecutor of Christians, the antagonist to the purpose of God, the rebel against the grace of God. He is going back where he wants to be able to do something' good in a place where he had done something terrible earlier. Acts 9:26:

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued in increase.

That 15-day trip to Jerusalem resulted in Paul's raising both fear and incredulity among believers and antagonism among unbelieving Jews. The three years he had walked with the Lord in Damascus were not enough to convince anybody (save Barnabas) that this man was truthful in what he was saying even though he had been faithful to God during those three years. He ends up dependent upon Barnabas' good name to be accepted at all. Though he had been given a revelation of Christ hardly anyone would listen to him. He was sent away to Syria and Cilicia, to the city of Tarsus, for everybody's good. The result was that peace, prosperity, strength and growth occurred all over the region as soon as he left.

Once again we have to wonder with Paul, as he looked back on that time, just what had been accomplished? He says that the outlying churches in Judea heard of his conversion but none of them ever heard of his ministry -- at least none that we are aware of. There is no record in this trip that people listened to him, responded to him or grew from his teaching. They were glad that he had come to Christ, but there were no open ears, no opportunity to establish a work for the Lord. In fact, that very work advanced the minute he left Jerusalem.

I wonder if this is not a little like what Charles Colson has to undergo in his ministry. For years he has been ministering in a dramatic way in prisons, yet many people only want to hear about his conversion, while he wants to talk about what God is doing in prisons. I wonder if Paul wasn't undergoing a similar experience. His reputation was not as an apostle, a teacher or a preacher, but as a convert_one who caused fear and consternation everywhere he went. His hope that he might minister in the city where he had once been a sinner came to nothing; it had no lasting impact.

The third place he went was Tarsus, in the region of Syria and Cilicia. Here we have the silent years. We know almost nothing about what happened in that area. Depending upon how you interpret chapter 2, this time could have been up to 10 years in length. Paul never directly refers to it later. There is no record that he ever felt a burden to go back and minister to those whom he had won to Christ in this area during this time. Clearly he taught and preached and evangelized and worked and served the Lord during that time, but there is no record that anything significant came of it. When Barnabas later gave him a call to come to Antioch he left immediately. Nothing was holding him in the Tarsus area, so he immediately jumped at the opportunity to minister in Antioch. Shortly after he went there he had an opportunity a second time to go to Jerusalem, and that is the occasion we read of at the beginning of chapter 2 of Galatians.

Let me place a parenthesis here. There is extreme difficulty in tying together the Galatians 2 visit to Jerusalem with the book of Acts. We have had some fun as a staff debating whether Galatians 2 equals Acts 15, or whether it equals the end of Acts 11. But I am convinced that Galatians 2 is speaking of the same trip to

Jerusalem that we are told about at the end of Acts 11, when Paul went on a famine-- relief ministry. On that basis we would conclude that only about a year or so earlier he had been called into ministry in Antioch. Then his question in verse 2 of Galatians 2 makes sense. He is going up the hill to Jerusalem wondering whether his life would amount to anything. In Damascus he had been run out of town on a rail; he had accomplished nothing. He had made a terrible mess of things in Jerusalem, and peace came only when he left. We have no record of any lasting effects of his ministry in Tarsus (Syria and Cilicia).

No wonder, therefore, as Paul ascends the hill to the Holy City he is saying to himself, "I have been called my God to preach his gospel, but I wonder if anyone will ever listen? Will I be allowed to leave a mark on my generation or am I running in vain?" He knew, as we can see clearly in retrospect, that if a wedge was driven between the Jewish and the Gentile church then the Christian cause would go nowhere. It would peter out and come to dryness and death, though I am sure Paul knew the Lord would bring it to life at some later point. But he saw that if the trouble that was being stirred up in Galatia and other places by the Judaizers succeeded -- if God could not call Gentiles without making them first Jews -- then the cause of Christ would founder. Thus he is wondering if he had "run in vain."

In summary, we have an argument based on the facts of Paul's life, the point of which in the book of Galatians is to underline the fact that he could not have developed his gospel as a result of any input from human teachers. His gospel had to have come from the Lord. Paul proves this great announcement in these verses.

In this autobiography -- like the holiday letters we receive this time of year -- are highlighted some things which Paul wanted the Galatians to know about his life. He wrote of three locales: First mentioned is his first Christian environment, Damascus, but nothing of any lasting value was established there. Then he talks about Jerusalem, the place of his serious sin, and again there is no record of success. Next he speaks of ministry in his home town. but there is no evidence anywhere in Scripture that anything lasting was accomplished in those years either.

Thus we are left with Paul's question still hanging: had he indeed been running in vain? We will discover next week, beginning with verse 3, how this story turns out. Meanwhile, I would like to suggest a couple points of application.

First, the lack of apparent success in our service to the Lord does not mean that the message we preach needs to be tinkered with. The one thing that was consistent and absolutely certain through all this 14 -- year period is that Paul never once varied his message. He centered his teaching on the cross of Jesus Christ, the Savior who died to rescue us from an evil age. The fact that nobody listened to this message did not make Paul even think of tampering with it. He was willing to let success come or not, but the truth would remain the truth.

Ray Stedman told some of us last week about his frustration in traveling around the world and seeing Christian leaders jump from fad to fad. Having grown tired of the hard work of teaching and preaching the gospel they are searching for a hook that will make things happen quickly and give them a sense of success, some chimera like possibility thinking, jousting with demons, voter registration drives, circuit-riding faith healers, lectures on how to grow rich in Jesus' name, whatever. Paul would have nothing to do with that kind of thing.

During the 14 years of his ministry he describes in this section of Galatians he never once centered his message except where God called him to center it -- and that is on the good news of what Jesus had done in his death and resurrection. If that message did not win friends and influence people then so be it.

The second point of application is that leadership requires character_and that takes time to develop. From day one Paul had the message he needed to change the world. What he needed was to grow in faith so that his inner man was mature enough to support the message he had been given to preach. Even for the apostle that took time. The twelve apostolic disciples of Jesus had three years with their Master, and even then they were only barely ready when their time came to accept the mantle of Christian leadership. Paul required 14 years. That ought to suggest that the Lord needs to change us from the way we were when we began our Christian life. He needs to break us of our pride, to strengthen us by his strength where we are weak, to teach us to disregard the wisdom of man and believe in the wisdom of God. All that takes time -- maybe 14 years (maybe much longer).

All believers who have known the Lord for some time and have felt somehow under-- used by him in ministry will sometimes find ourselves where the apostle Paul was as he walked up the road to Jerusalem -- wondering if God will allow us to make a mark on our own generation. But at that very time Paul was on the verge of changing the whole world. The next 14 years of this man's life were dynamite. He did not know it as he ascended that hill, but what he was about to do was break barriers that had stood in place since Adam, change the course of Western history, have adventures in Christ's name, plant churches, write Scripture -- to bless the whole world, in fact. The very word "vain" that he uses in Galatians 2:2 is the same word he later uses in I Thessalonians 2, where he announces with clarity, "For you yourselves know brethren that our coming to you was not in vain." He knew a church had been planted there that would last and be a blessing. He is on the very verge of a breakthrough in usefulness.

We need to consider this for ourselves. Even if a long time has gone by since we came to Christ it may be that all that was necessary preparation time for the opportunity that is just around the corner_a chance to speak, encourage, help, support or love for God's sake that will be exciting to us and a blessing to everyone around. I have a friend who talks about "turning the crank" in the Christian life, and how hard it becomes after awhile to do what is right. We long to make a mark, to do something that will last. Yet Paul had at least 14 years of such longing, and look what happened to him. Perhaps just the next turn on the crank is the one that will produce adventure and excitement in your ministry.

May the Lord grant us faithfulness as we wait for Him to bring about whatever results He intends our lives to accomplish.

Catalog No. 3920
Galatians 1:15-2:2
Fourth message
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December 11, 1983

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