

# Galatians Chapter 1

## A Deep Expository Study: The Gospel Defended, the Apostle Vindicated, and the Grace of God Declared

### Introduction to Galatians Chapter 1

#### Paul's Apostolic Gospel, Not Man's Gospel

#### The Origin of Paul's Message, the Astonishment of the Galatians, and the Curse on False Gospels

Galatians chapter 1 is one of the most urgent, theologically loaded openings in all of Paul's letters. He does not begin with warmth, thanksgiving, or gentle transition as he does in nearly every other letter. He begins with authority, because the gospel itself is at stake. This is not a minor pastoral adjustment. This is Paul standing in the gap between truth and catastrophe, between the church he planted and the destruction of everything he preached.

This chapter is not merely about Paul defending his personal credibility; it is about defending the source, content, and exclusivity of the message that saves sinners. Paul insists that his apostleship did not come from men, and his gospel did not come through human approval, human tradition, or human invention. It came through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead. That claim is either the most important thing a person can hear, or it is the most arrogant. Paul refuses to allow a middle position.

#### The Setting Behind the Letter

To understand the urgency of this chapter, we must understand what was happening in Galatia. The Galatian churches were a group of congregations Paul had planted in what is now central Turkey. These were largely Gentile converts who had never lived under the Mosaic law, who had come to faith in Christ apart from Jewish religious tradition, and who had received the Spirit not by works of the law but by the hearing of faith (Galatians 3:2).

After Paul left, a group of teachers arrived commonly called the Judaizers who insisted that Gentile believers must be circumcised and must observe the Mosaic law to be truly saved or fully accepted before God. They were not openly rejecting Jesus. They were adding to Jesus. That addition, Paul argues, is not addition at all. It is subtraction. It removes Christ from His place as the sole and sufficient ground of salvation.

#### The Three Major Movements of the Chapter

The chapter moves through three distinct and building arguments. First, Paul gives his greeting and immediately frames his apostleship as divine and not human. Second, he expresses sharp, undiluted astonishment that the Galatians are abandoning the grace of Christ so quickly, and he pronounces a solemn curse on anyone who distorts that message. Third, he recounts his own testimony as theological evidence: his gospel could not have come from men because his entire life trajectory proves that only God could have done what was done in him.

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### **Opening Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, as we open Galatians chapter 1, we come before You not with casual curiosity but with reverence and sobriety, because this chapter is about the gospel itself. Not our opinions about it. Not our preferences. The true, unaltered, Christ-centered gospel of grace. Lord, give us ears to hear Paul's urgency. Protect us from every false gospel. Keep us from spiritual drift. Keep us anchored not in religious tradition but in the grace of Christ alone. And when we read Paul's testimony, let us see Your mercy in full display. The man who hunted believers for prison and death became the man who preached the faith he once tried to destroy. That is sovereign grace breaking into a hard heart and turning it inside out. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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## **Galatians 1:1-5 -- Paul's Authority and the Gospel of Grace**

*Paul, an apostle sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead, and all the brothers and sisters with me, To the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

### **IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH**

This is Paul writing, and right off the bat he wants you to know he is not some self-appointed preacher or a guy the church committee voted in. He was personally commissioned by Jesus Christ and by God the Father, the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. He is writing to the churches in Galatia, and his greeting is short but loaded: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now Jesus did not just die as some kind of hero or moral example. He gave Himself up on purpose, specifically to deal with our sins, to pull us out of this messed-up, sin-soaked world we are living in. And that was not some accident or Plan B. It was exactly what God willed from the beginning. All the glory for that goes to God, forever. Amen.

## The Context

Paul opens by doing something he does nowhere else with this kind of sharpness: he defends the origin of his apostleship in the very first line of the greeting. He places the defense of his apostleship before he even identifies the recipients. That sequence tells us everything about the crisis at hand. If his apostleship is merely human, then his gospel is also merely human, and then the Galatians might reasonably entertain alternatives. Paul closes that door before it can open.

## The Greeting as Theology

"Grace and peace" is more than a friendly hello. In the first-century world, Greek letters typically opened with greetings, and Jewish correspondence often included peace. Paul consistently combines both into a compressed theological statement. Grace is the source of everything the believer has received. Peace is the result of grace applied to a soul that was once alienated from God. These do not come from human effort, religious achievement, or law-keeping. They come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## "Who Gave Himself for Our Sins"

This phrase in verse 4 is a foundational declaration of the atonement. Jesus did not merely die as a martyr. He gave Himself. That language is sacrificial and intentional. It echoes the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, who bore the iniquities of many. He gave Himself in our place, on account of our sins, to deal with what we could not deal with ourselves. This is the irreducible core of the gospel. Anything that replaces this, diminishes this, or moves this from the center is, by Paul's own definition in this chapter, no gospel at all.

## The Doxology

Paul ends the opening with worship: "to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Even in the most theologically intense moments, Paul cannot suppress doxology. Right theology always produces worship. When the gospel is distorted and it becomes about human effort or human status, the worship disappears, because you are no longer looking at God's glory. You are looking at your own.

## Key Observations

- **Paul's apostleship is divine, not institutional.** The gospel stands on Christ's authority, not human approval.
- **Grace and peace are gifts, not achievements.** They flow from the Father and the Son, not from religious performance.
- **Jesus gave Himself "for our sins"** -- substitutionary atonement is at the absolute center of salvation.
- **The goal of the gospel is rescue** from "the present evil age," not merely comfort or moral betterment.
- **The appropriate response to the gospel is always worship.** Paul's theology is doxological at its core.

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## Galatians 1:6-10 -- No Other Gospel

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

### IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

I honestly cannot believe what I am hearing. You people came to faith in Christ, you experienced real grace, and now already you are walking away from it? You are trading the real thing for a knockoff? Some guys showed up and started messing with your heads, twisting the gospel of Christ into something it was never meant to be. Let me be absolutely clear: it does not matter who shows up preaching a different message, whether that is me, my own team, or even an angel straight out of heaven. If the message is different from what we originally preached to you, that person is under God's curse. I am not saying that once and moving on. I am saying it again: anybody preaching a different gospel than the one you received is cursed. Now let me ask you something. Do you think I am out here trying to make everybody happy? If I were in the people-pleasing business, I would have quit serving Christ a long time ago.

## The Context

This is the emotional and theological center of the entire chapter. Paul skips the thanksgiving section entirely, which he includes in every other letter, and moves directly into confrontation. He is astonished. The Greek word *thaumazo* carries a sense of shocked disbelief. The Galatians are deserting, not just drifting, but actively turning away from the One who called them. To abandon the gospel of grace is to abandon the God who extended that grace. False gospels are not just theological errors; they are relational betrayals.

### "Which Is Really No Gospel at All"

Paul says the Galatians are turning to "a different gospel" and then immediately corrects himself: it is "really no gospel at all." What the Judaizers were preaching was not a variant version of the gospel. It was a different category of message entirely. You cannot add works to grace and still call it the gospel of grace. The moment human merit enters the equation, the entire structure collapses. Grace by definition means unearned,

undeserved gift. If it can be earned or supplemented by human effort, it is no longer grace (Romans 11:6).

## The Double Curse

Paul pronounces an anathema, a solemn judicial curse, on anyone who preaches a different gospel. He pronounces it twice, nearly word for word. The repetition is deliberate and emphatic. The criterion for evaluating any message is not the prestige of the messenger. It is the content of the message, measured against the apostolic gospel. Charisma, signs and wonders, impressive credentials, or supernatural phenomena are not evidence that a gospel is true. The only test is: does it match what the apostles preached?

## People-Pleasing vs. Serving Christ

Verse 10 is a penetrating diagnosis of where false gospels come from. False gospels consistently arise when the desire for human approval overrides the commitment to divine truth. When preachers adjust the message to avoid offense or to attract larger audiences, they become people-pleasers, and people-pleasers cannot serve Christ faithfully. When faithfulness to the gospel comes into conflict with human approval, there is only one choice for a servant of Christ.

## Key Observations

- **Deserting the gospel is not merely a theological error.** It is deserting the God who graciously called you.
- **A message that adds works to grace** is not another version of the gospel; it is categorically a different message that cannot save.
- **The double anathema establishes** that no human or spiritual authority can override the apostolic gospel.
- **Supernatural appearances and impressive credentials** are not credentials for a true gospel. Content is.
- **The motive behind false teaching** is frequently the desire for human approval, which is incompatible with faithful service to Christ.

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## Galatians 1:11-24 -- Paul's Testimony and Divine Calling

*I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in*

*me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles, only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they praised God because of me.*

#### IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

I need you to understand something crucial: the gospel I preached to you did not come from any human being. Nobody sat me down and taught it to me. I did not pick it up from a class or a religious tradition. Jesus Christ revealed it to me directly. And here is the thing, you already know my backstory. I used to be the church's worst nightmare. I was not just skeptical about Christianity; I was actively hunting Christians down, throwing them in prison, doing everything I could to wipe out the movement entirely. I was one of the most religiously driven, law-obsessed guys of my generation. But then God, who had His hand on my life before I was even born, decided it was time. He called me by His grace. Not because I deserved it, not because I was trending in the right direction, but purely because He chose to. He revealed His Son to me and sent me out to preach among the Gentiles. My first move after that? I did not run to Jerusalem to get the apostles' stamp of approval. I went to Arabia. After a few years I came back to Damascus, and only then did I go to Jerusalem, and even then I only spent two weeks with Peter and briefly met James. I swear before God I am not making any of this up. The churches throughout Judea did not even know my face. All they had heard was the rumor: that guy who used to hunt us down is now preaching the very faith he tried to destroy. And when they heard it, they did not give me credit. They praised God.

## The Context

Paul now turns to his own biography, not for self-promotion, but as theological evidence. His autobiography is an argument: the gospel he preaches could not possibly have come from human sources, because every detail of his life makes human-sourced transmission impossible. No human teacher would have sought out Paul. No human community would have trusted him. No human strategy would have produced the transformation that God produced.

### "My Previous Way of Life in Judaism"

Paul's former life is mentioned because it is evidence. He was not marginally religious. He was intensely, zealously, violently committed to a version of Judaism that saw the early church as a dangerous heresy. The word "intensely" translates the Greek *kath' hyperbolon*, literally "beyond measure." Paul was not a passive opponent of the church. He was its most dangerous persecutor. He approved of the stoning of Stephen. He went

house to house dragging believers off to prison. If Paul invented his gospel, he invented it while actively destroying the very movement that believed it. That is psychologically and logically impossible.

## "Set Apart from My Mother's Womb"

Paul's language in verse 15 is deliberately drawn from the call of the Old Testament prophets. Jeremiah heard God say: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). Paul is saying that what happened to him is in the same category: God called him before he was born, and that call was sovereign, not contingent on Paul's worthiness. God did not call Paul because Paul was a good candidate. God called Paul while Paul was hunting down Christians. The grace came first. The calling came first.

## The Testimony of the Judean Churches

The churches in Judea did not know Paul by sight. They had only heard a report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And their response was not suspicion or debate. It was worship: "They praised God because of me." They did not praise Paul. They praised God, because they recognized what Paul's transformation was: not human achievement, but a demonstration of the power of God. When God is the one who changes a life, the result is always worship.

## Key Observations

- **Paul's testimony is not biography for its own sake.** It is theological evidence for the divine origin of the gospel.
- **His former life in Judaism** was characterized by extreme, violent zeal, making human-sourced conversion implausible.
- **God's call preceded Paul's response.** Grace came before anything Paul did or sought.
- **The Arabian withdrawal** shows Paul was instructed by God before consulting human authorities.
- **The Judean churches' response** -- praising God rather than Paul -- shows that true transformation always redirects glory upward.

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## What This Means for Us Today

### 1. Hold the Gospel as Something Received, Not Invented

The gospel is not a personal philosophy you construct based on your preferences or what you think will be persuasive to your audience. It is a divine message that was given, proclaimed, received, and guarded. You are a steward of it, not its designer. The moment any preacher or believer begins to treat the gospel as raw material to be shaped for cultural acceptance, they have already started down the path the Galatians were on.

## **2. Refuse Any Message That Adds to Christ or Subtracts from Him**

The Galatian heresy added circumcision to Christ. Every generation has its own version of this error. Some add moral performance. Some subtract the exclusivity of Christ. Some remove the reality of sin. The test is simple: is the finished, substitutionary, death-conquering work of Jesus Christ the entire ground of a person's standing before God? If yes, the gospel is intact. If anything is added to or removed from that, it is not.

## **3. The Desire to Please People Is the Most Common Root of Gospel Distortion**

Preachers want full buildings. Teachers want positive reviews. Believers want to be accepted by their social circles. And so the message gets softened, adjusted, qualified. The offense of the cross is minimized. The demand for repentance is removed. Every one of these adjustments is driven, at root, by the desire for human approval. Paul names it and refuses it with finality: you cannot please people and serve Christ. You must choose.

## **4. Transformation Proves the Power of Grace**

Grace reaches impossible people and redirects them entirely. It does not clean up existing religious commitments; it overturns them. The person most convinced that they do not need the gospel, the person most violently opposed to the church -- that person is not beyond the reach of God's sovereign call. Paul's life is a permanent testimony to that reality: the God who can change Paul can change anyone.

## **5. Worship When You See God's Work in Others**

The Judean churches, upon hearing what had happened to Paul, praised God. They did not analyze Paul's theology or debate his credentials. They saw the fingerprints of God on a life and they worshiped. When you see grace at work, when someone's life is turned around, when a hard heart becomes tender, the appropriate response is not commentary. It is praise.

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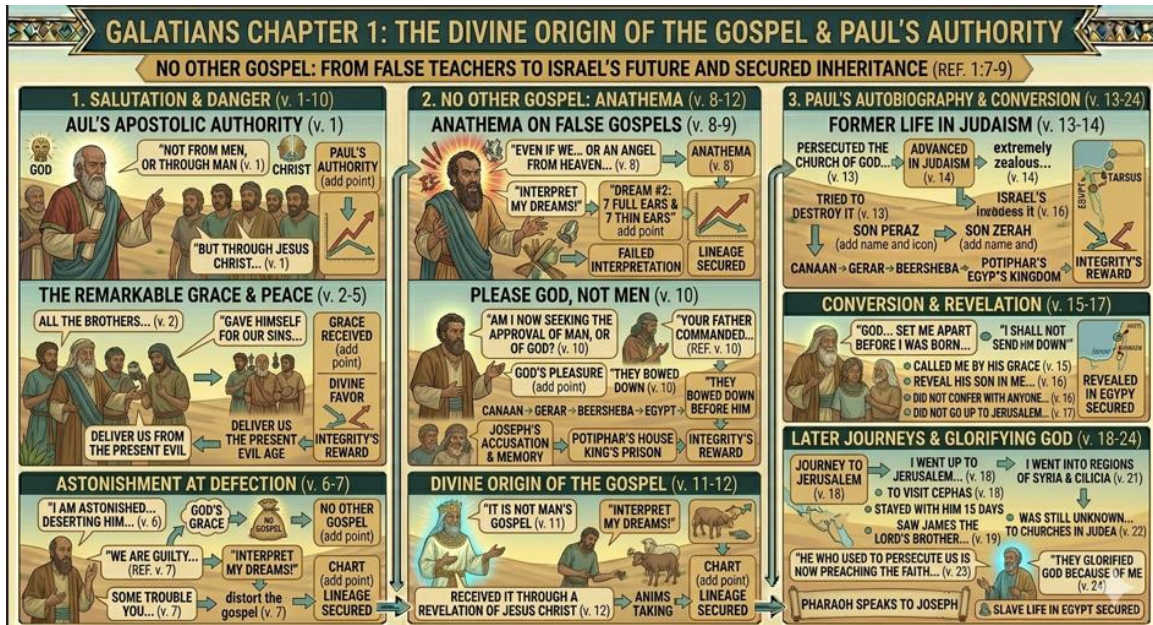
## **How This Relates to Today**

Galatians 1 speaks with remarkable directness into the contemporary church. The specific content of the Galatian heresy may not be the exact pressure the modern church faces. But the structure of the error is identical: taking the finished work of Christ and treating it as incomplete. Every prosperity gospel. Every moralistic religion. Every pluralistic theology that insists Jesus is one path among many. These are all Galatian errors. They are all messages that sound religious and still miss the gospel entirely.

Paul's answer is the same: the gospel is from God, centered on Christ's atoning death, announced with divine authority, and not open to human revision. The church today

needs the same courage Paul demonstrated: the courage to say with clarity that some messages, no matter how popular, are not the gospel, and therefore cannot save.

This chapter also carries an enormous word of hope. No past is too dark for God's calling to penetrate. No life is too far gone for divine grace to redirect. The God who can call a persecutor into a preacher has not changed His methods or exhausted His mercy.



### Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the clarity and force of Galatians chapter 1. We thank You that the gospel comes from You and not from human ingenuity, tradition, or preference. We thank You that Jesus gave Himself for our sins, not partially, not as a contribution toward our rescue, but completely and sufficiently, so that nothing remains to be added.

Lord, keep us from every false gospel. Keep us from the subtle and persistent temptation to seek human approval more than we seek to honor You. Let us not adjust the message when the message is inconvenient. Let us not remove the offense of the cross to win the favor of people who need the cross.

And like Paul, let our lives become evidence of Your mercy. Where there has been rebellion, bring repentance. Where there has been blindness, bring the revelation of the Son. Let Your Son be revealed not only to us but in us, so that when people see our lives, they do not praise us. They praise You. To You be glory forever and ever. Amen.