

5.

GALATIANS 1:11-14

I. REJECT THOSE WHO TEACH YOU A DIFFERENT DOCTRINE

A. My Gospel Is Not from Men

2. When I received it, I went to Arabia and returned to Damascus

Introduction

The second event to which Paul referred as evidence that he did not get his doctrine from men was that right after Jesus appeared to him he went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus.

Paul's statement about his trip to Arabia and his return to Damascus began in the middle of a sentence. The beginning of the sentence was discussed in Volume 4, because it describes Paul's conversion through an appearance of Jesus to Him. However, Paul gave that description to identify the time when he made his trip to Arabia. He emphasized that he went to Arabia right after his conversion. That trip was the first thing he did in response to Jesus' call to him to believe and change his life.

The significance of Paul's trip to Arabia was that he took time to be alone and let God show him how to correct the mistaken ideas that had been directing his life. He did not go to Jerusalem to confer with the leadership of the young movement of believers in Jesus. Instead he went to the sparsely occupied area of Arabia where he could pray and study Scripture alone. There he could rethink and revise his beliefs under the guidance of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. It was there that God showed him how to reform his understanding of salvation and of the grace of God.

The significance of Paul's return to Damascus after his trip to Arabia was that he did the first witnessing and preaching of his new understandings in Syria, away from the center of the developing movement of believers in Jesus. He developed his skills as a teacher and preacher of his new doctrines under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, just as he had developed those doctrines under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. His beliefs and his ability to communicate those beliefs came without guidance from human leaders and teachers. The correction of his beliefs came by revelation, and his ability to share those beliefs came by practice under the direction by the Holy Spirit.

Outline

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Verses 16d-17. **16d I did not consult immediately with flesh and blood**

17 I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. Instead, I went to Arabia and returned again to Damascus.

I did not consult immediately with flesh and blood. I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. Paul emphasized that after Jesus met him and called him to be a witness for Him to the Gentiles, he did not go to the apostles in Jerusalem in order to learn more. He vastly needed to reorient his thinking and to revise many

of the views he had learned wrongly. However, he did not consult recognized Christian leaders to get help in making those adjustments in his thinking. He wanted to learn directly from God and from God's Word what it all meant. So he took time to let God teach him, rather than seeking guidance from men.

Instead, I went to Arabia. Instead of going to Jerusalem, Paul went to Arabia. Arabia was not even in Israel, and certainly it was not a recognized center for the newly-budding Christian movement. Furthermore, it was a sparsely occupied area, isolated not just from Jews and Christians but also from people in general. He wanted to be away from people so he could be with God. God had called him to a new way of life, and God was the only One who could teach him what was involved in that new life. Paul chose to go away alone and spend time with God. It was a wise decision. No one on earth was equipped to help Paul learn what God was trying to teach Him. God had a bigger plan than anyone in the world understood at that time, and God was the only One who could teach Him to understand that plan. The resources God used to teach Paul in Arabia were the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit.

Probably Paul's time in Arabia was spent in the north of that nation, which was not extremely far away from Damascus. Paul must have spent his time there studying and learning how to adjust his thinking to the revelation that had been given to him. He did not do those studies under the guidance or teaching of any human person, but by communion with the Holy Spirit and by study of the Scriptures. Those Scriptures were the Jewish Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament. They were the only Scriptures in existence at that time. None of the New Testament had been written as yet.

Paul already was a great student of the Jewish Scriptures, but he had learned them incorrectly, from the viewpoint of the Jewish legalism of his day. He had to restudy and rethink those Scriptures in the light of the new revelation that had been given to him. He went away into the largely uninhabited desert area of northern Arabia to spend time alone with God and with the Scriptures. There he let the Holy Spirit direct him into readjusting his

understanding of the Scriptures he already knew so well. The resulting readjustment of his understanding of those Scriptures was a radical one. It changed him from believing in a doctrine of salvation by works through keeping the Jewish law to believing in the doctrine of salvation by the free grace of God through faith. His study helped him gain a better understanding and clearer vision of what salvation by faith means than was possessed by any other person in his time. His study also inspired him to share that understanding with others by preaching those truths and by writing them for people to read who would never hear him preach. One of those writings is this letter that he wrote to the churches in Galatia.

In time, Paul shared his new understandings in at least thirteen inspired writings that provide inerrant interpretations of the doctrine of salvation by grace and of the practice of witnessing to people of all the nations. God was in charge of Paul's writing down his new insights just as much as He was in charge of revealing those insights to Paul and of inspiring him to preach them. After Paul completed his writings, God supervised their careful preservation, so that they continue in existence today and are parts of Bibles. They still give us instruction in God's revealed truth and especially the truth of salvation for all peoples by grace through faith.

and returned again to Damascus After spending time in prayer and study in Arabia, Paul still did not go to Jerusalem. Instead he returned to Damascus. The Scripture is specific that in Damascus he began to preach his new understanding of the Scriptures. Significantly his first preaching was in a Gentile city. It gave him practice in preaching the Gospel in a Gentile environment. He preached in the synagogues, but he preached that God offered salvation to all the peoples of the world on the basis of grace and faith. It did not take long for fierce opposition to arise against his preaching, but it is clear that he began his new ministry by doing what Jesus called him to do, to preach that salvation is available to everyone on the same basis, which is by grace through faith (Acts 9:19b-25).

As important as Paul's time in Arabia was, his time afterward in Damascus were equally valuable. There he learned by practice how to share with others the truth Jesus had revealed to him. In Damascus, he gained experience in preaching to Jews that God offered salvation to Gentiles and to them on the same basis and that they were obligated to share that truth with Gentiles everywhere.

Sharing the true God with Gentiles was as radical an idea to Paul as was salvation by grace through faith. Paul had to change from a doctrine of salvation reserved for the Jews only to a doctrine of salvation open to everyone who would believe in Jesus. He not only had to learn how the Jewish Scriptures related to his new knowledge that Jesus was God's Son and the promised Messiah but also how they related to Jesus' instructions to him to preach that doctrine to "Jews, Gentiles, and kings" (Acts 9:15). No man could teach him how to conduct a deliberate mission to the Gentiles, because at that point no one had ever thought of such an enterprise. The only way for him to learn about witnessing to Gentiles was to practice it. He gained that kind of experience in Damascus.

Sharing the Gospel with Gentiles was an equally radical idea to the Jews to whom he preached it. Other Jews were not nearly as willing to accept it as he was. Jews in Damascus soon sought to kill him for preaching it. However, in Damascus he gained practice in presenting that truth to his fellow Jews and experience in facing the opposition it aroused.

What Paul emphasized to the Galatians about those early years after his conversion was that he did not go to Christian leaders in Jerusalem to learn what it all meant. Instead he spent time in Arabia

and Damascus learning directly from God. What he had taught to the Galatians, he had learned from God in Arabia and Damascus. Therefore, he cited his time spent in Arabia and Damascus as strong evidence that he did not get his doctrine from men, but from God. Therefore, by all means the Galatians should not reject it, change it, or add to it some contradictory idea or practice.

In Galatians 1:18, Paul says his period of study in Arabia and practice in Damascus ended "after three years." It often has been stated that after Paul's conversion, he spent the next three years in Arabia; but actually Paul said that during those three years he went to Arabia and then returned to Damascus (Gal 1:17b). How much of that three-year period he spent studying in Arabia and how much of it he spent preaching in Damascus is not clear, but both periods of time were important in developing him as an effective servant of Jesus.

Even the exact meaning of "after three years" is subject to interpretation. Three years probably might mean a part of the first year and a part of the third year. They surely did not coincide with the calendar year, so they stretched over a three year period. That period could have lasted from 14 months to a full 36 months and still have taken place during three different years. Most likely, however, Paul meant a full three years no matter in what part of the calendar year they began and ended. When we compare Bible time periods with what we know about events of the day in which they were written, those periods prove to be remarkably accurate. It is best to understand that Paul spent 36 months in Arabia and Damascus, or extremely close to that length of time.

A RELATED ISSUE

COMPARISON WITH ACTS 9:1-25; 22:1-25; 26:1-20

Further insight into this early period of Paul's Christian life can be gained from the Book of Acts. At that time, he still was being called by his Hebrew name Saul. Acts 9:1-19 tells how Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Jewish Christians who had fled there from his persecutions. He intended to return them to Jerusalem for trial and likely execution. When he neared Damascus, Jesus appeared to him, clothed in a light that was so bright it outshone the sun and caused him to fall to the ground. At that moment, he also was struck blind. Saul recognized the light was shining from a person, and he asked the person who He was. The answer

was immediate, "I am Jesus." Saul then and there recognized that Jesus was God and that he had been dreadfully wrong. Jesus added to Saul's consternation by telling him that He was the One he had been persecuting. As painful as that revelation was, Saul accepted it as true and asked what Jesus wanted him to do. Jesus told him to go to Damascus and it would be told him what to do. After three days, God sent a man named Ananias to restore Saul's sight and to tell him he was an instrument chosen by God to carry Jesus' name to "nations, kings, and sons of Israel." The statements in Acts are consistent with what Paul described as "when God was pleased to reveal His Son to me" (Gal. 1:16). However, Acts gives a much more detailed description of what actually happened on that day.

Two other passages in Acts recount how Saul told the story of his conversion in his own words. Those passages add clarifying details to what Paul wrote in Galatians. In Acts 22:1-21, by which time he was being called Paul, he told of his Damascus road experience to a crowd that had attacked him in the Jerusalem temple. In Acts 26:1-20, he told of it to King Agrippa in Caesarea, before whom he was being questioned about the reason the crowd had attacked him. So Acts gives us three confirming accounts of Saul's conversion. Each adds interesting details, but all are consistent with each other and with Paul's reference to it in Galatians.

Acts does not mention Saul's time of study in Arabia, but Acts 9:20-22 clearly describes his preaching in Damascus and his growing skill in expounding on the new truths he had learned. Those verses say that he began preaching that Jesus is the Son of God in the synagogues of Damascus. They add that all who heard him were astonished and that Saul continued to grow in his ability to preach Jesus. His preaching confounded the Jews in Damascus because he gave such clear Scriptural evidence that Jesus was the Messiah and that Gentiles are acceptable to God by faith. Those statements are consistent with what Paul said in Galatians, and they even add clarity to Paul's statements about his time in Damascus.

Acts adds little to our understanding of how long Paul preached in Damascus before he was forced to flee. It simply says that Saul's preaching and teaching in Damascus lasted "many days," an indefinite expression that simply means an extended period of time. It certainly could apply to the three years that Paul mentioned in Galatians.

Acts 9:23-25 gives additional information about the reason Saul ended his ministry in Damascus. Those verses explain that the Jews in Damascus became so incensed over Saul's preaching about Jesus that they conspired together to kill him. Saul learned of the plot and knew he needed to leave Damascus for the sake of the safety of the Christians there. The Jews knew he was planning to leave and posted watchmen at every gate of the city. The watchmen continued their vigil day and night, intending to capture Saul and to kill him when he passed through one of the gates. The plot was made known to Saul, so men in the Damascus church took him to an opening in the wall and lowered him to the ground in a large basket. The opening may have been in a window of a house built against the wall, or it could have been an opening for soldiers to use in firing arrows and other missiles at an enemy that might attack the city. By that courageous means, Saul escaped from Damascus.

Acts 9:23-25 also states that when Saul left Damascus, he went to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the natural place for him to go. He had been a Jewish leader in that city, so he knew many people there. Also Jerusalem had the largest congregation of believers in Jesus in the world at that time. The statement in Acts about his going to Jerusalem is consistent with Paul's statement in Galatians 1:18 that after three years he went to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas.

These descriptions of Paul's activities in the early years of his Christian life and ministry add details to what he wrote in the Book of Galatians, but in no way do they conflict with what Paul wrote. The accounts in Acts and Galatians are completely consistent, and do not contradict each other.
