

# THE MINISTER FOLLOWED GOD FIRST IN HIS LIFE GALATIANS 01:17–24

## *Introduction*

Paul was under attack by some critics in the churches of Galatia. They were saying that he was not a God-called minister and that he preached a false gospel. They sowed the poison of gossip: that he was in the ministry only as a profession and for what he could get out of it.

The present passage is a continuation of the former verses. Paul was proving that his call and message did come from God, that he was a God-called minister and his message was the true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, he had never received the gospel from anyone other than Christ Himself. To prove his point, he recounted his journeys right after his conversion. The point is this: he sought to learn the truth from God and from God alone. In the first few years after his conversion, he followed God first in his life, not men.

- I. First, he went to Arabia: he got alone with God (v. 17).
- II. Second, he returned to Damascus: he corrected the wrong he had previously done (v. 17).
- III. Third, he went to Jerusalem: he faced his past (vv. 18-20).
- IV. Fourth, he went to Syria and Cilicia, that is Tarsus: he faced his hometown (vv. 21-22).
- V. The result of a God-centred life (vv. 23-24).

## GALATIANS 01:17–24 PAUL’S JOURNEYS; TRIPS TO JERUSALEM

Paul said “I went immediately Sinful Nature into Arabia.” The timetable of his ministry would seem to be as follows. (See Acts 15:1-31.)

1. His conversion (Gal. 1:15-16; Acts 9:1f).
  2. His “immediate” preaching and ministry in Damascus (Acts 9:19-22).
  3. His time alone with God in Arabia (Gal. 1:17). The three years could be three full years or parts of three calendar years. In comparing this passage with Acts, Paul’s Arabian experience would seem to fit in best at the close of Acts 9:22. There seems to be a natural break there. Acts 9:23 begins by saying, “After many days had gone by,” which seems to be saying there was a long period of time between his conversion visit to Damascus (Acts 9:3, 10-22) and the ministry which he launched after his Arabian seclusion. He launched the ministry in the most natural place, Damascus, among the believers whom he knew (Acts 9:23)
  4. His second ministry in Damascus after returning from Arabia (Acts 9:23-25).
  5. His first trip to Jerusalem for fifteen days to see Peter (Gal. 1:18-19; Acts 9:23-30). The apostles in Acts 9:27 would be Peter and James, the Lord’s brother.
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6. His ministry in and around Tarsus which apparently lasted for about eleven years (Gal. 1:21-2:1).
7. His call by Barnabas to help him minister in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).
8. His second trip to Jerusalem to carry relief goods during a famine (Gal. 2:1f; Acts 11:30; 12:25). Some say that this return trip to Jerusalem is the trip to the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. However, two significant problems exist with this position. First, Paul emphasizes a private interview in Gal. 2:2, whereas the Acts account is a public meeting. Second, where does the famine visit fit in? If the account given in the second chapter of Galatians is not the famine visit, then Paul omitted the famine visit altogether from the account in Galatians. This is difficult to explain in light of the fact that Paul goes to extra pains in giving his contacts with the Jerusalem church. In listing his visits, he declares that he speaks the plain truth, "What I am writing to you is no lie" (Gal. 1:20).
9. His call and commissioning as a missionary (Acts 13:2-3).
10. His first great mission to the Gentiles: to Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13:1-14:28).
11. His return to Antioch after completing his first missionary journey (Acts 14:26-28).
12. His third trip to Jerusalem to defend the gospel of grace before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-30).
13. His return to Antioch with the message from the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:30-35).
14. His second great mission to the Gentiles: to Europe (Acts 15:36-18:22).
15. His return to Antioch after completing his second missionary journey (Acts 18:22).
16. His third great mission to the Gentiles: Asia Minor and Europe (Acts 18:23-21:16).
17. His fourth and final trip to Jerusalem when he was arrested (Acts 21:17-26:32).
18. His journey to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 27:1-28:15).
19. His ministry in Rome while a prisoner (Acts 28:16-31). □

### **I. *Galatians 01:17 Alone with God in Arabia***

First, Paul went to Arabia to be alone with God. He had just been converted, and his conversion was a most dramatic experience (cp. Acts 9:1f). Paul's former life had taken two terrible turns.

1. Paul had been very self-righteous. He had been steeped in religion and its traditions, form and ritual. He had felt that he was acceptable to God because he was religious and did as much good as he could. He felt that his own goodness and religion made him righteous before God. He failed to see the absolute perfection and love of God and the absolute imperfection and unlovingness of man. He was utterly deceived

about the true nature of man and God, of unrighteousness and righteousness, of sin and forgiveness, of life and death. (See Faith vs. Works, Gal. 2:15-16.)

2. Paul had become so self-deceived that he had launched a campaign of hatred and murder against the followers of Christ. He had used everything at his disposal to stamp out the name of Christ from the face of the earth. (See notes, Acts 8:1-4.)

The point is that Paul was saved from a terrible life of sin and shame, a life steeped in as much sin and shame as a man could be. He was self-righteous and arrogant, full of bitterness, hatred and murder; and he went about misusing his position and power just like a tyrant — to the point of imprisoning and murdering those who differed with him.

When Paul was converted, he had a dire need to be alone with God. He did not need the counsel and help of men; he needed the presence and help of God and His Spirit. He already knew the Scripture. He had studied them at the feet of the greatest religious teachers of his day, but he had not known God nor Christ, not in a personal way. Paul had no knowledge of God, not a personal knowledge. What he had known about God had been twisted and corrupted, misapplied and misused. He desperately needed...

- time to learn how to live with Christ day by day, drawing confidence and strength from Him.
- time to learn the real meaning of the Scriptures: how they applied to Christ.
- time to accurately handle the Word of Truth (the Scriptures).
- time to learn how to fellowship with Christ in daily worship (devotions, quiet times).
- time to learn how to walk in the presence and communion and fellowship of Christ all day.
- time to learn the commandments and will of Christ.
- time to think through how to go about making Christ known to a world steeped in dire need and sin and darkness.

How much time did Paul need? Apparently, he spent about three years in Arabia (see *Paul's Journeys*, Gal. 1:17-24). Imagine spending three years seeking the Lord and learning how to live and serve Him!

**Thought 1.** What a lesson for believers and ministers! What power would be in our lives and ministries if we sought to know Christ as Paul did!

**Mat 14:23** *After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.*

**2 Tim 2:15** *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

**James 4:8** *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

**Heb 10:22** *Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

**Deu 4:29** *But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.*

**Psa 25:5** *Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.*

**Psa 27:14** *Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.*

**Psa 62:5** *Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.*

**Psa 73:28** *But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.*

**Psa 91:1** *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

**Isa 40:31** *But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

**Isa 55:6** *Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.*

**Hosea 12:6** *But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.*

**Mat 5:9** *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”*

## GALATIANS 02:16

### FAITH VS. WORKS; SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, OBSERVING LAW

*“We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.” **Galatians 02:16***

Why is it that a man can never be justified nor secure righteousness by works and law? Why is it that a man can never approach God by works and law?

1. There are two ways that a man can try to secure righteousness and approach God.
  - a. A man can try to work to secure righteousness; he can do all he can to keep the law of God and to please God. But note: a man can do this...
    - only if he can keep the law perfectly, never breaking it once and never violating it a single time
    - only if he can make sure that every single thing he ever does or thinks is perfectly good and righteous and pure

- only if he can please God in every act, word and thought, never displeasing God in anything

Only if a man can do this can he secure righteousness by works and law. But what man can be perfect and good and righteous and pure in every single act, word and thought? It is absolutely impossible to secure righteousness by works and law. A person may try to approach God through works and law, but he can never achieve perfection — not perfect righteousness and holiness without which no person will ever see God.

*Heb 12:14 Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*

*Mat 7:22-23 “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”*

*Rom 3:20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

*Gal 3:10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”*

*James 4:17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*

- b. A man can believe that Jesus Christ is God's gift of righteousness to the world — that God so loved the world...
- that He gave His Son to live a perfect life upon earth in order to secure the Perfect and Ideal Righteousness for man.
  - that He gave His Son to take the unrighteousness of man upon Himself and to die for man, that is, to bear the judgment of unrighteousness for man.
  - that he gave His Son to arise from the dead for man in order to conquer death and to give man a new and perfect life that is eternal.

A man can believe that God loves him and takes his faith in Christ and counts it as righteousness.

A man can believe that God loves him and accepts him because he honours His Son Jesus Christ — honours Jesus Christ by believing and following Him.

A man can believe that God loves His Son so much that He will take any man who honours His Son and do anything for him. If the man believes in Jesus Christ for righteousness, then God will count the man righteous.

*Eph 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.*

*Titus 3:4-5* But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

2. Note another point: the two ways that men try to approach God are completely different from each other. Faith and works are incompatible. Faith is always the opposite of works.
  - => If a man works to keep the law in order to be righteous, then he can offer to God only self-righteousness, only the righteousness of the works he has done.
  - => If a man trusts the righteousness of Jesus Christ for his righteousness, then he can offer the righteousness of Christ to God. He can come to God in the righteousness of Christ.

God always accepts the righteousness of His Son, Jesus Christ. For any man who truly trusts the righteousness of Christ — who truly gives Christ all he is and has — God accepts that man's trust as righteousness. The man is not righteous, but God takes his trust in Christ and accepts it as righteousness.

3. Note still another fact: a man who believes God for righteousness approaches God entirely differently than the man who approaches God in his own self-righteousness.
  - a. The man who approaches God in his own righteousness...
    - presents his self-righteousness to God by himself.
    - depends upon his own righteousness.
    - trust his own righteousness.
    - believes in his own righteousness.
    - declares that he has the strength and power to make himself righteous and acceptable to God.
  - b. The man who approaches God in the righteousness of Jesus Christ...
    - presents his love and trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ as his righteousness. (God could never turn down a person who loved and trusted His Son with all his heart.)
    - rejects dependence upon himself and depends upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ.
    - gives up trusting his own righteousness and trusts the righteousness of Christ.
    - no longer believes in his own righteousness, but believes in Christ for righteousness.
    - declares that he does not have the power to make himself righteous and acceptable to God; he trusts the power of God to make him righteous and acceptable.



Note what this is saying: a man either believes he has the power to save himself and to keep himself from dying or else he believes that God has the power to save him. A man either trusts his own power for salvation and life or else he trusts God's power. If he believes that he has the power to save himself, then he works to make himself righteous and to live forever. If he believes that God alone has the power to save him, then he trusts God for righteousness and life.

In conclusion, no one is ever justified by works or by law. We may try to secure righteousness by works and law, but it is always self-righteousness, and self-righteousness always ends up with self: in the grave — dead, having passed the way of all flesh — short of God's glory, perfection, and disqualified from ever living with God. Self-righteousness is never acceptable to God; works and law can never justify a man and make him perfect.

However, we can secure righteousness by faith. We can trust God as a child trusts his father. We can trust that God loves us enough to count our love and trust for His Son as righteousness.

FAITH IN CHRIST IS GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS,  
THE ONLY RIGHTEOUSNESS  
THAT MAKES A PERSON ACCEPTABLE TO GOD.

**Rom 3:21-22** *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference.*

**Rom 10:4** *Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

**Phil 3:9** *Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.*

**1 Cor 1:30** *It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*

**2 Cor 5:21** *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

**Col 3:3** *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*

4. Note one other fact: righteousness by works honours and makes man supreme and preeminent, the centre and core of life. Righteousness by faith honours God and makes God supreme and preeminent, the centre and core of life. God is the One to be obeyed out of a heart of love, adoration, and appreciation for what He has done (Rom. 2:29). □

## II. *Galatians 01:17 Restitution at Damascus*

Second, Paul returned to Damascus to correct the wrong he had previously done. When Paul was converted, he was on his way to Damascus to arrest and stamp out the followers of Christ. It was his intent and purpose to literally cleanse Damascus of all Christians. The bitter persecution had, of course, greatly disrupted the lives of believers. It had forced many to flee for their lives, leaving their families, homes, jobs and all means of livelihood.

The point is this: Paul had returned to Damascus to do what he could to right the terrible wrong he had done to the believers of Damascus. He wanted to ask their forgiveness and assure them that he had been saved; and no doubt, he wanted to share Christ among the very people he had been so bent on destroying.

*Mat 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”*

*Mat 5:23-24 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*

*Rom 14:19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.*

*Eph 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

*Col 3:13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

## III. *Galatians 01:18–20 Paul at Jerusalem*

Third, Paul went to Jerusalem to face his past. Before his conversion, Paul had lived in Jerusalem and had been one of the officials of the ruling body (the Sanhedrin) or else had been close to the leaders of the Sanhedrin. We know this because the Sanhedrin had been the official body which stood behind Paul’s attack against the Christians. Whatever the case, Paul was well known in Jerusalem, and he knew that some of his former friends would consider him a betrayer to their religion and cause. Nevertheless, Paul wanted to share his testimony with as many of them as could be trusted.

However, Paul’s primary reason for going to Jerusalem was to see Peter, the leader of the early Christians. By sharing with Peter, Paul felt that many of the believers would know that he had been truly converted. They would thereby be more ready to accept him and his ministry.

But note: the other apostles were apparently away on evangelistic and mission tours. Paul saw no other Christian leader except James, the Lord’s brother, who was pastor of the great Jerusalem church. Imagine the sharing that must have taken place between Paul and Peter...



- as Paul shared his past, his conversion, and his experiences with the Lord in Arabia.
- as Peter shared the life of Christ while on earth.

Remember that Paul was relating his journeys to the Galatians for a very specific purpose: to show that he had not learned the gospel from men; he had received it from the Lord Himself. He was a true apostle and minister of the Lord, and his gospel was the true gospel, the gospel revealed to him by Christ Himself. Paul asserted the truth of his claim with the solemn declaration:

I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. (v. 20)

**Thought 1.** As much as possible...

- believers should seek to share Christ with former friends and associates. Unbelievers need to see the change Christ can make in lives.
- believers should seek counsel and help as they launch their ministries, in particular the counsel and help of leaders.

**Mark 5:19** *Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”*

**Acts 1:8** *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem [home], and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”*

**1 Pet 3:15** *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

#### **IV. Galatians 01:21–22 Evangelisation of Hometown**

Fourth, Paul went to Syria and Cilicia, that is, to Tarsus, to face his hometown. Tarsus was where Paul’s family lived and where his childhood friends were, the place where he had gone to school and played as a child. It was, of course, Paul’s desire to share Christ with as many of his family and friends as he could.

**Mat 5:16** *“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

**Mark 5:19** *Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”*

**Luke 8:39** *“Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.*

**Acts 16:30-31** *He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household.”*

**Acts 4:20** “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

**Psa 66:16** Come and listen, all you who fear God: let me tell you what he has done for me.

## V. **Galatians 01:23–24 A God–Centred Life**

The results of a God-centred life are twofold, and they are powerful results.

1. The testimony of a God-centred life was spread throughout the whole area. Paul had not yet visited the churches in Judea, that is, the area surrounding Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the believers of the area had heard about Paul’s conversion, that he who had formerly persecuted the church was now preaching Christ.
2. The testimony of a God-centred life stirred believers to honour God. The churches of Judea had never seen Paul, but they glorified God because of his strong testimony about which they had heard.

**Mat 5:16** “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” ■





