Changing sides: Galatians 1:13-2:10

Many of us will be familiar with Luke’s account of Paul’s three missionary journeys, which are recorded in Acts 13-28. From Galatians 1:13-2:10, we get Paul’s own perspective on what happened in the years before he and Barnabas were sent from Antioch on the first of those journeys. Reconstructing the chronology of these early years is not straightforward. What Paul writes in these verses can be taken in different ways, and the task becomes exponentially harder if you try and reconcile what Paul says here with Luke’s account in Acts, but as I understand it, this is the sequence of events. (But take my words with a pinch of salt!)

AD 34: shortly after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Paul was zealously persecuting the followers of Jesus, but this came to an abrupt halt when God revealed Jesus to Paul, commissioning him to be an apostle to the Gentiles, at which point Paul left immediately for Arabia before returning to Damascus (1:13-17).

AD 37: Paul spent a couple of weeks with Peter (Cephas) in Jerusalem, before heading off into the regions of Syria and Cilicia (1:18-24).

AD 48: fourteen years after his encounter with Jesus, Paul returned to Jerusalem. He was accompanied by Barnabas and Titus. It looks as though Barnabas and Paul had been working together in Syria and Cilicia, and Paul had a private meeting with the Jerusalem leaders to make sure that they agree to his gospel message. Titus was a Greek convert to the faith, and the fact that no one insisted that he should be circumcised was taken by Paul as a clear indication that Gentiles could become Christians without needing to convert to Judaism and to keep the Jewish law (2:1-3).

Because I find it hard to envisage how a private meeting between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders could have been infiltrated by outsiders, it seems likely to me that in 2:4-5, Paul is referring to an earlier incident, perhaps in Antioch, where those whom he calls ‘false brothers’ tried to muscle in and undermine his work by depriving Gentile converts of the freedom they had in Christ. These interlopers insisted that gentile believers should be circumcised and keep the Jewish law. Paul fiercely resisted them.

At Paul’s meeting with the Jerusalem leaders, James and Peter and John endorsed the message about Jesus that Paul has been proclaiming to the Gentiles. They recognised that God had graciously commissioned him to this task and they gave him the right hand of fellowship. Their only request was for Paul to remember the poor (2:6-10).

A key theme of this Galatians 1:13-2:10 is Paul’s relationship with the leaders in Jerusalem. Reading through the passage, what are your impressions of how he views them? Paul seems quite conflicted here: it seems that he wants to assert his independence of Jerusalem, show that his gospel has been approved by them and to cast doubt on their authority, all at the same time… One way to make sense of this is to suppose that the teachers who have come to Galatia with their ‘false gospel’ are claiming that they have been sent by the leaders in Jerusalem to correct errors in Paul’s teaching, and that Paul is defending himself here against these charges. Paul really doesn’t know now whether he can trust the leaders in Jerusalem or not. Does that make sense? Put yourself in his shoes. How would you feel? What would you do?

Paul expresses a very negative view of Judaism here (1:13-14). He may want to emphasise the role that Judaism played in his persecution of the church as a way of deterring his readers from accepting circumcision, the rite of entry for converts to Judaism. He deliberately draws a stark contrast between Judaism and Jesus. There is no doubt that the change that happened to him through his meeting Jesus was dramatic and profound (1:23). How has meeting Jesus changed you? Paul clearly senses that being an apostle was God’s purpose and intention in creating him (1:15). What sense have you had of God having a purpose for your life, or of God calling you to a specific task?

Paul refers to ‘the freedom we have in Christ Jesus’ (2:4): what do you think he meant by this? What ‘freedom’ do we have in Christ? Are there ways in which this is under threat today, and if so, how should we respond to that?

Spend some time looking into and praying for those who are persecuted for following Jesus, and for those who are persecuting them ([Pray - Christian Solidarity International (csi-int.org)](https://www.csi-int.org/get-involved/pray/))

‘Loving Lord, we lift up our brothers and sisters that are being persecuted in so many places in our world and in so many inhumane ways. Lord, we lift up all new converts, all those who have accepted the Lord Jesus as their Saviour, knowing that they will have to face possible rejection and even persecution from family, friends and the communities in which they live.

Guide and protect them we pray, from all assaults of the enemy, in body soul and spirit. Lord, we ask that You would keep them from harm, and provide all that they need to sustain their lives. And Father, please provide the spiritual food that they need to grow in You and mature in their faith, so that their trust in You becomes strong and they are able to withstand the fiery darts of the enemy.

Give them the courage to face the future, knowing that You are with them and in them, and Father we thank You that You are growing Your church with the dear new converts to Christ. Be with them always I pray, Amen.’

Source: https://prayer.knowing-jesus.com/Prayers-for-the-Persecuted.