

But God, who is at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles – Galatians 2:8.

Background

Today we’re continuing our series of studies into the book of Galatians. I want to review the background of this book so you can follow the line of reasoning that unfolds and threads its way through this letter, and then we’ll look at chapter 2, and then we’ll look at this verse 8.

The Apostle Paul wrote Galatians to churches he had established on his very first missionary tour. We read about this missionary journey in Acts 13 and 14. Paul went through the area of Galatia in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). He established churches in some of the major cities of this region. But after arriving back in Antioch, Paul learned that some of Judaizers from Jerusalem had been following in his footsteps and had confused his believers. I was thinking of this the other day when I saw some literature for a “Footsteps of Paul” tour. Nowadays you can take a “Footsteps of Paul” tour with groups that travel around Turkey and Greece, visiting some of the sites made famous in the journeys of Paul. Well, the first “Footsteps of Paul” tour was a problem to him. It was false teachers who were following in his footsteps and messing up his churches.

There were two issues seized upon by these Judaizers and by these heretics.

First, these Judaizers had said something to this effect: “This man Paul is not one of the original disciples. The original twelve did not send him out. He’s a maverick. He’s gone rogue. He didn’t come from Jerusalem, but from a splinter movement up in Antioch. He doesn’t speak with apostolic authority.”

Second, they said, “This man is teaching a flawed message. He is saying that we can throw out our Jewish heritage. He’s saying we no longer have to observe the law. But we do. We still need to retain the Jewishness of our faith. If you are a follower of the Jewish Messiah, you need to live within the framework of Judaism. Your Christianity has got to be defined within the framework of Judaism. If you are a Gentile, you need to be a Jew in order to be a Christian. You need to be circumcised. You need to keep the Sabbath. You need to keep the feasts and festivals. You need to keep the Law. You need to keep the Jewish dietary requirements. Forget this idea of grace alone.”

So these iterate Judaizing teachers had thrown Paul’s churches into confusion, and the congregations in Galatia were in turmoil. They were divided. They were arguing. They were becoming legalistic.

So the apostle Paul wrote a letter to them, which is probably the earliest of his recorded letters in Scripture. Galatians has been called the little Romans. It is an early and smaller version of the book of Romans. But it is very different. Galatians was written in a fury. It was composed by an upset man. In Galatians, Paul was aroused with holy wrath to defend the doctrine of salvation. It’s full of passion and fury. Years later, he articulated the same doctrine but in the form of a treatise, which is our book of Romans. It didn’t have the fire and fury of Galatians, but it was a logical presentation of the doctrine of

justification. You put the two together and you have Paul’s heart and his head, His passion and His presentation.

Galatians 2

Well, in Galatians 1 and 2, Paul defended himself and his message. He said, “It is absolutely true that I was not sent out by the twelve apostles, but by Jesus Himself. Yet my message of justification by grace through faith is the same message that the apostles are preaching.” In chapter 1, he began giving his story, his testimony. Now in chapter 2, we’re picking up the thread of his argument at this point. Look at verse 1:

Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the Gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might remain with you.

Let me give you an extended paraphrase. Here is what I believe Paul was saying:

“My Gospel was a message of grace. I believe we find salvation and eternal life in the finished work of Christ. We can’t add to it. It is not grace plus circumcision, grace plus baptism, grace plus rules, grace plus lists, grace plus law. It is grace alone. But not everyone felt that way. Some false teachers are preaching the necessity of the law. Some are saying we have to become Jews in order to become Christians. Some are saying we have to be circumcised. So the Lord prompted me to go to Jerusalem and defend this doctrine, and I took with me an uncircumcised Greek Christian named Titus. Some of these Judaizers slipped into our meetings or overheard our discussions, and they yelped in criticism at us. But the apostles stood by me. Peter agreed with me. We had a unified message.”

Look at verse 6:

As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they are makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews.

Now we come to the verse I want to emphasize. This is a wonderful verse for those in the Lord’s work—Galatians 2:8:

“But God…”

But God, who is at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.

The other day I received in the mail the quarterly magazine from my alma mater, Wheaton College, where I attended graduate school. The cover story was about twenty-three Wheaton students who had left school on a particular day in 1943, interrupting their studies, to go off and fight in World War II. The men had gathered for a group photograph; the president of the school had prayed for them; then

they had gone to the train station and disappeared into the war. Now almost 70 years later, the school tracked down those 23 men or their descendants to find out what had happened to them. Twenty-two of them had returned home after the war, many to become pastors and professors and missionaries. But one from among them, a man named “Fritz” Lang had not returned. He had died for his country, most likely in a mortar blast, on a Pacific island in 1944.

What’s interesting is that Fritz had written more than eighty letters home from the war, and in those letters he spoke of his efforts to win his fellow soldiers to Christ. This is what he wrote in one of his notes, shortly before his death: “I believe the Lord has sent me here for a special purpose. I have talked to many a man about his soul but have seen no results. But I am sowing the seed; someone else will do the reaping, and then we can both rejoice together.”¹

Those words moved me very much. Fritz Lang was a soldier for the Allied Forces, and he was a soldier for the Lord Jesus Christ. He was fighting in two armies at once. Both were hard, both were daunting and dangerous, both demanded his all. But Fritz was undeterred by discouragement, and he soldiered on without a doubt in his mind that victory would come for the Allies and that the harvest would be realized for the Kingdom.

That’s exactly how we feel. We’re all soldiers for the Lord Jesus, and we’re all deployed here in His service. All of us would like to see more immediate results, and we pray for them. All of us would like to be winning someone to Christ every day, and we pray for that. Some of you are discouraged about the lack of progress you see in whatever you’re doing. Maybe you’re discouraged about your children. You have prodigals, and some are in crisis or they’re away from the Lord with so sign of returning. Some of you are teaching a Bible study or LifeGroup, and you wonder if you’re doing any good. Some of you have been praying for the conversion of a friend or a loved one for many years, but you’ve seen little evidence. Some of you have had a negative ministry experience, and you wonder if it’s worth it.

Well, the apostle Paul gives us a great deal of comfort here in Galatians 2:8, when he says: *But God*....

Anytime a sentence in the Bible begins with the words: “But God...” you know it’s going to be a good sentence. I have a little book in my library based just on the “But God” statements of the Scripture. Well, that’s the way Paul begins this verse. It means, “Here are some terrible things or discouraging circumstances. But God...”

“But God...is at Work”

But God is *at work* in Peter’s ministry. He is *at work* in my ministry. Peter and I have different ministries. We’re reaching different audiences. We’re evangelizing different areas. But God is at work in both our ministries. We don’t have to compare ourselves with each other. I don’t have to worry if he’s more successful than me. He doesn’t have to worry if my church is larger than his. We aren’t in competition. We aren’t in conflict. We’re both laboring for the Lord, and the Lord is at work in both the ministries to which He has called us.

Peter has open doors among the Jews. I have open doors among the Gentiles. The Lord is working through us both.

In the same way, the Lord is *at work* in your ministry today. He is *at work* in our ministry. The Greek word that Paul used as he wrote to the Galatians is the word *energeo*, from which we get our English word *energy*. It has to do with the idea of a power source that propels an operation so that it functions with effectiveness.

That’s a description of the Spirit-filled ministry, whatever personal or public ministry you might have. The Lord Himself is the power source propelling an operation that is functioning with effectiveness.

This is true even when it seems to be untrue.

I have always had an interest in reading success literature. A generation ago there were a lot of door-to-door salesmen. They represented a lot of great companies and great manufacturers (back when America was still a manufacturing nation), and they peddled products from house to house and from office of office. It was discouraging work, especially starting out before you had a customer base. In sales, you might have 100 cold calls and only get one order. You’d make a visit, present your spiel, leave your literature, and get in your car to go to the next place. Or walk down the street to the next door. Time after time after time you’d be disappointed. And how would you keep up your morale during this process? How did you persevere to become a great salesman? You read or listened to motivational speakers. You’d put a tape in the tape player and listen to Earl Nightingale, who was one of the most motivational speakers of the era. Or Norman Vincent Peale. Or Dale Carnegie. Or Zig Ziglar. You kept pumping yourself full of self-help and motivational literature. Even as a young minister going door-to-door in my East Tennessee community, I listened to these tapes and to these men. I found some encouragement there. I’ll admit there’s something I like about success literature. I like someone who tells me to keep dreaming, to keep going, to persevere, to work hard, to never give up.

But after awhile, it all begins to sound the same. After awhile, it begins to wear you out. It’s based on materialism. It’s based on personality. It’s based on aspiration. It’s based on a world-centered view of success.

But there’s one motivational speaker who’s different and one success book that’s above all the others—as high as the heavens are above the earth. I’ve always found that’s the best place of be refueled. That’s the best place to be recharged. When I get tired and discouraged, I go to the Word of God. I go to the cross. I remind myself that God is at work. I find and claim the promises of God. I remember 1 Corinthians 15:58, that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. I remind myself of Galatians 6, that we will reap a harvest if we do not faith.

Jesus said, “My Father is at work and I am at work” (John 5:17, my paraphrase). The Lord is at work when I can’t see Him. He is at work when I can’t see the results I desire. He is at work when I don’t see the success for which I have prayed. He is at work when I’m tired, for His strength never flags. And those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up on wings as eagles. They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not faint.

God is at work! He was at work when Christ died on the cross and when they laid His body in the tomb. He was at work in Paul’s ministry and in Peter’s preaching, despite the outer conflicts and external pressures

they bore. And Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Our job is to be faithful, to persevere, to keep our eyes on Him, and to work in the power and energy He provides, trusting Him for the results He ordains in His timing.

What if Paul had not encountered these problems? What if the Judaizers had not bedeviled him?

Then we wouldn't have the book of Galatians. Then we wouldn't have the clarity and forcefulness of the articulated doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Then we wouldn't have had the crucial teaching in which the theology of the early church was clarified.

All things work together for good, and God is working in all things for His glory.

Be Part of a Chain Reaction

I've been working on a presentation involving a ministry I've mentioned several times from the pulpit—Child Evangelism Fellowship. In doing some research, I ferretted out a story that will tie these truths up very well. On Sunday morning, January 6, 1850, a thin man living in Colchester, England – no one remembers his name or vocation, though it's thought he was a cobbler or a tailor or gardener – wrapped his warmest coat around him and stepped out of his cottage. A snowstorm was bearing down. There were few signs of life. Arriving at Artillery Street Primitive Methodist Church, he knew it would be a lean Sunday. Not even the pastor showed up that morning—only a dozen or so stalwart souls. They huddled near the front of the chapel and eventually started the worship service as best they could.

Meanwhile a local 15-year-old fellow was also fighting the blizzard, heading to another church some distance away. He was on midwinter break from boarding school. He was terribly unhappy. He'd been battling depression. His emotional problems were spiritual in nature, as he well knew; he craved a sense of God's mercy and love. But hopelessness hung over his soul. The storm got the best of him that day, and he ducked into an alley to escape the biting wind. Seeing the sign for Artillery Street Primitive Methodist Church, he pushed through the door and took a seat in the back beneath the balcony.

At length, the thin man stepped to the pulpit and attempted to give an impromptu sermon. Finding a text in his Bible, he read Isaiah 45:22: "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth!" He seemed ill prepared to preach, and he sputtered about trying to spin out a brief message.

As the boy later recalled: "He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: 'My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, "Look." Now lookin' don't take a deal of pains. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just "Look." Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look.... Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, "Look unto Me." Ay! Many of ye are lookin' to yourselves but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves.... Jesus Christ says, "Look to Me.... I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto

Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"

The man extemporized along those lines for about ten minutes, and then seemed to run out of steam. But spying the boy beneath the gallery, he felt a surge of inspiration, for he said bluntly: "Young man, you look very miserable, and you always will be miserable if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved."

The boy was gloriously saved at that moment.²

It was one of the greatest days in the history of English Christianity. Charles Haddon Spurgeon left that chapel aflame for Christ. Soon he was preaching his own sermons and telling others to look to Jesus. At age 20, he became pastor of London's famous New Park Street Church and was soon preaching to thousands every Sunday. Every week his sermons were transcribed, published, translated into various languages, and sent around the world. This has made him the most widely-read preacher in the history of Christianity.³

Long after Spurgeon's death, a copy of one of his books ended up on the desk of a frustrated, sixty-year-old California pastor named Jesse Overholtzer. He was discouraged with his work. As he poured over Spurgeon's sermons he was jolted by a sentence that shocked him as though they held an electric charge:

*A child of five, if properly instructed,
can as readily believe and be regenerated as anyone.*

That was news to Overholtzer. His austere denominational background had offered him no training in children's work. This man began witnessing to children, and in short order, twenty-one had professed Christ as their Savior, and some of them began bringing their parents to Christ. Spurred by this success, Overholtzer founded an organization for the purpose of evangelizing youngsters – Child Evangelism Fellowship.

Overholtzer traveled across the United States, promoting the work, and soon his vision swept beyond the borders of America. Unable to enter Europe or Asia because of World War II, he set his sights on South America. As the movement spread to Argentina, two women took up the work of evangelizing children in Buenos Aires.

One was a missionary from England named Theda Krieger; the other was Margaret Tyson from South Dakota. These two single women poured their lives into CEF, and one day while pursuing their work they met several children of the Palau family. One of the youngsters, Luis Palau, a young teenager, was eager to learn how to lead others to Christ. Theda and Margaret taught him how to share the Gospel.

Tutored by these two CEF workers, he started leading others to Christ, beginning with five boys in his neighborhood. Thus commenced a vast ministry that has spanned the globe for sixty years. Luis Palau, one of the world's foremost evangelists, has shared the Gospel with more than a billion people at evangelistic events in 72 countries. Under his ministry, more than a million converts have registered their decisions to receive Christ.

What an unlikely chain of events! Over the course of 150 years, a cause-and-effect series of blessings snapped into place, one after the other, to change the world. From an unschooled layman in Colchester... to a far-famed preacher in London... to a defeated pastor in California... to a pair of single missionaries in Argentina... to a worldwide evangelist reaching a billion people around the world.

I believe with all my heart that every child of God is a part of a chain reaction like that. We may be the thin man. We may be the far-flung pastor. We may be the local children's worker. We may be the missionary. We may be the prayer warrior. We may have heartaches and heretics, as the apostle Paul did. We may sow and see few results, like our friend in World War II. But when God is at work, we rejoice, we labor for the Master from the dawn to setting sun, and we know the harvest is coming and it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.

(Endnotes)

¹Quoted by Jeremy Weber and Dr. Robert C. Baptista, "A Cohort of 23," in "Wheaton," Volume 15, Issue 2, Winter 2012, p. 16.

²Charles Haddon Surgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, and Joseph Harrauld, *The Autography of Charles H. Spurgeon, Compiled from his Diary, Volume 1*, (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1898), 106.

³*Christian History Magazine*, Issue 29 (Volume X, Number 1), p. 2.

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