

Identity Revealed 3) Praised by His Enemies

Galatians 1:11-24 • January 25, 2026 • Epiphany Series



When you read through the New Testament you might not catch it at first, but the Bible is made up of many different books or letters. And if you open up the New Testament you will find four different authors of the gospels, another historical account of the early church by the author of the gospel of Luke, two letters by the apostle Peter, a letter by Jude and James who are called brothers of Christ, plus one by an unidentified writer to the Hebrews. And then there are thirteen letters. One man wrote all thirteen. That's almost half of the listed books in the New Testament. Some are shorter books. Yet when you break down the amount of content and number of words it's nearly one-fourth of the New Testament, all written by Paul.

What am I getting at with identifying Paul's authorship? My point here is that it is important to know just who this man was and what type of credentials he claims. When we read the New Testament one-fourth of it comes from this man's pen and we do well to understand where Paul is coming from when he writes. Today we'll look at what some argue is the earliest surviving letter we have from Paul, his letter to the Galatians. And as we look at the first chapter we'll see just what Paul claims for his credentials and identity as a writer of God's Word. As we do this, we will further come to understand our own identity as followers of Christ.

Paul begins by asserting that what he writes and the message he preaches is not his own message. Paul's message about Jesus giving himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age is "not of human origin." Paul himself claims he didn't receive it from any man and wasn't taught it by man. He makes the claim that the message he preaches and writes about was something directly revealed to him by Jesus Christ.

That's a pretty bold claim to make. Paul makes the claim here in one of his very first letters and throughout all his letters to the early Church. He is consistent on this point as well as the message he received from Jesus!

This is an important truth because there are many people today who charge Paul with inventing his teachings. They claim that he developed his thoughts over time. There are so-called Christian scholars today who argue that Paul's theology is not the theology of the gospel accounts. They argue that Paul carries it to the next level, adding or changing things. If that were true, what kind of a theologian would Paul be? He would be just some guy coming up with clever ideas about Jesus and the gospel. His writings would be fanciful thinking trying to advance the teachings of other men.

Well, it shouldn't surprise us that people today question Paul's authority and authenticity. That was exactly what was happening during his lifetime. The enemies of Paul were trying to tear down his reputation and authority so that they could tear down his message and preaching. So, we have in the start of the letter to the Galatians a brief overview and defense of Paul's message and preaching.

Paul writes to remind those who believed his preaching of the working of God in the gospel. We'll briefly consider six points regarding Paul's authority and authenticity. We'll get to the heart of his identity in Christ.

Firstly, Paul had a reputation that preceded him. And it was not a reputation of one conspiring to advance the message of Jesus. Just the opposite! He was well known for his past reputation in trying to destroy the gospel. His previous way of life in Judaism was filled with a zeal to persecute the church and destroy it. Paul doesn't shy away from mentioning this fact. Nor does Luke fail to mention it in his record of history of the early church. Paul is credited with supporting the great persecution that broke out against Christians. Luke records how Paul went from city to city with permission from the chief priest to arrest and condemn Christians. What kind of a man was Paul, the author of 13 letters of the New Testament? He was an enemy of God and enemy of Christians! He says he cast the vote for their death. Christians knew him. They knew him as the devil himself, tireless in his pursuit of followers of Jesus. He wasn't changing the gospel. He knew what was being preached about Jesus and his aim was to altogether silence it.

Secondly, Paul wasn't just someone steeped in the traditions of Judaism. He was advancing in his study and his position far beyond his peers. He was destined to be a renowned and great preacher, but not of Christ. He was on the track to hold a high position perhaps as a rabbi or on the Sanhedrin as a Pharisee. He was known for his zeal. But it wasn't zeal for how the prophecies pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. It was zeal to preserve the traditions of the Pharisees and silence anything pointing to Jesus as the Messiah. What kind of man was Paul, the greatest in zeal as an enemy of Christ!

Thirdly, Paul wasn't carrying out his own plan when he taught and preached the gospel of Jesus. Paul pauses in his argument to note the sudden change in his identity. And with it came a major change in his plans! Did you notice how he described that event? We read about it earlier. Luke recounted how Jesus stopped Paul along the road when he was headed to Damascus to roundup Christians. Paul highlights for us that this conversion wasn't his idea! "*God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me.*" Paul had a whole new identity and a whole new mission in life. And he didn't come up with the idea. It ran against everything he was and believed. But God had called Paul by his grace. This was a plan already set in motion when Paul was conceived as God has a plan for Paul. God converted him. When he was stopped along the road Paul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" I'm sure

he had an idea already. But imagine when he heard this, "I am Jesus, who you are persecuting." Who is Paul? He was the man stopped in his tracks by Jesus because he was an enemy of God and persecuting Christ! But God called him. It was all God's idea to use his enemy, Paul, for his kingdom's good purposes!

Fourthly, Paul argues that after his conversion he didn't seek human advice or council. Why should he? Should Paul go to Jerusalem and consult with Peter or the other apostles? Should he make sure his teaching and message is accurate? Paul didn't need to! Jesus had appeared to him. Jesus revealed his gospel directly to him. Paul was not inferior to the other apostles. He too was directly taught and sent by Christ. He too was baptized by the Holy Spirit. The first thing he did upon having a whole new understanding of the Old Testament was to preach Christ Jesus!

Our fifth point is also important. Paul didn't spend much time when he finally did meet with Peter and others who were apostles before him. After three years he briefly visited Peter and saw James in Jerusalem. But that only lasted for fifteen days. (Luke's account reveals why. The others urged him to leave the city because Paul himself became the target of heavy persecution.) What kind of man is Paul? An enemy of God turned to Christ and now himself the object of persecution. And he is not taught by others!

Finally, Paul shares what was common knowledge in his lifetime. His reputation as an enemy of Christ made some people nervous at first. *"When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple."* (Acts 9:26) How could this be? Paul was their enemy! But Barnabas and others confirmed it was true: Paul had been converted! Paul was preaching the gospel -the very same faith he once persecuted.

This is what God does! He takes those who are his enemy and he turns them completely around. Paul preached the grace of God. It was the grace that came to him. Jesus Christ came to save sinners. Paul considered himself one of the worst -one who fought against the gospel and killed followers of Christ. But that was exactly the message those Paul had killed believed. They believed that Jesus came to save sinners, even the worst. They believed that the man Jesus of Nazareth was killed by his own people. They believed that man fulfilled the prophecies regarding the Redeemer of Israel. They believed that by his death he atoned for the sins of Israel and the world. They understood what Jesus had done and why he said regarding those who crucified him, "Father, forgive them." Paul now believed in such a gospel too! Paul not only knew it was true but saw the living Jesus and became another eyewitness of the living Christ who forgives sinners!

Isn't this the best kind of witness? Paul had no human reason to share the gospel which he began to preach. He was not motivated from his past. That only brought guilt. He had no connections or companions to get him started in the gospel he shared. He just started sharing it. And he shared it because God in his grace chose a man like him to be his witness.

Sound familiar? Isn't Paul's story the same picture for all those who are called by God's grace. Listen again to what Paul said regarding his conversion experience. *"God who set me apart from my mother's womb called me by his grace."* God did that for you. In grace he set you apart from being an enemy of God to being under his grace. He called you from fighting against the Lord and dragging your own guilt into the pits of hell as an enemy of God to being part of his kingdom of grace. When Jesus appeared to Paul, he changed Paul's life and Paul's purpose. When Christ brought his gospel into your life, he changed your life and its purpose. When Paul was baptized by Ananias God put his name on him and washed away Paul's sins. When you were baptized your identity changed as you were adopted into the kingdom of God and made part of his family by grace. He washed your sins away.

What's the proper response to all this? The early church knew it. When they first heard the reports that Paul was no longer their enemy at first some were afraid. They didn't believe it. But when they heard how Paul shared is the same gospel as them, that God forgives sinners through the atoning blood of Christ, they rejoiced! That's the gospel: rejoicing that those who were once enemies of God no longer are! Paul didn't just preach the gospel. He experienced it! He knew exactly what grace meant! And the early church didn't just receive the gospel for themselves. They rejoiced when they saw it spreading even to their enemies! And they praised God on account of Paul's conversion. The only proper response to seeing your enemy become your friend is to praise God! That's the way Jesus works. He brings praise from his enemies!

Now if the six points Paul made to defend his authenticity aren't enough for you, then I invite you to consider Paul's message and the life that followed. His new life and purpose were fulfilled as he poured out even greater zeal to serve the gospel than he did to destroy it. He once killed others to stop the gospel. But he ended up pouring out his own life to spread it. Facing threats and dangers Paul continued to preach this message: God brings praise from his enemies!

It is the same message shared by all the authors of the New Testament. Peter affirms that what Paul wrote is on par with Scripture. Christ himself affirmed what Paul wrote as he forgave Paul. The message is the same throughout the New Testament. Those who are in Christ have a new identity. They were born enemies of God. But God in grace called them by his gospel and made his enemies into his own people. It's not about Paul, after all. He preached Jesus Christ. And Jesus' identity is clear because of his great mercy and love: he is praised by his enemies.