



WHAT WAS PAUL'S ILLNESS IN GALATIA?

The Apostle Paul had a serious illness when he first preached to the Galatians. By studying three different Bible translations, we can see that it was a physical illness, and it was revolting to the point that people might despise him or try to avoid him. Fortunately the Gospel of Jesus Christ was more than sufficient to cause the Galatians to want to hear Paul deliver the Good News of Jesus.

Galatians 4:13-15 (NIV) As you know, it was because of **an illness** that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with **contempt or scorn**. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

Galatians 4:13-15 (NASB) But you know that it was because of **a bodily illness** that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not **despise or loathe**, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.

Galatians 4:13-15 (TLB) You did not despise me then when I first preached to you, even though **I was sick** when I first brought you the Good News of Christ. But even though **my sickness was revolting to you, you didn't reject me and turn me away**. No, you took me in and cared for me as though I were an angel from God or even Jesus Christ himself. Where is that happy spirit that we felt together then? For in those days I know you would gladly have taken out your own eyes and given them to replace mine if that would have helped me.

OVERVIEW OF PAUL'S ILLNESS

Many Bible scholars have wondered what kind of illness Paul had. The Bible does not tell us. Many believe that he had some kind of eye problem. Of course there have been many other attempts to determine what illness Paul had. Some say he had malaria; others say epilepsy; others say Malta fever. Malta fever is a highly contagious infectious disease caused by ingestion of unpasteurized milk or undercooked meat from infected animals, or close contact with their secretions. Malta fever is also known as undulant fever, brucellosis, and Mediterranean fever.

It is possible that Paul had a combination of a physical illness and spiritual attacks from Satan.

Verse 14 indicates that Paul's illness was repulsive. It would have been understandable if the Galatians had turned away from him in disgust. But even though his illness was a trial for them to bear, they did not treat him with contempt or scorn. *"Instead"*, Paul exclaims with gratitude, *"you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself"* (v. 14).

Of course Paul does not mean that the Galatians actually regarded him as an angel of God or as Christ. The repeated *"as if"* introduces two exaggerated comparisons that compare how the Galatians initially welcomed Paul to the welcome they would have given an angel of God or Jesus Christ himself.

WAS PAUL GOING BLIND?

An eye problem is supported by his statement in verse 15 that the Galatians were so concerned for him that they *"would have torn out your eyes and given them to me"* if they could have done so. And Paul's use of *"large letters"* when he wrote Galatians 6:11 is also taken as evidence that he had eye trouble. Likewise 1 Corinthians, Paul seems to draw attention to the fact he wrote the *"greeting in my own hand"*. In Acts 23:5, Paul seemed to not recognize the High Priest

Galatians 6:11 (NIV) See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

1 Corinthians 16:21 (NIV) I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.

Acts 23:4-5 (NIV) Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!" Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"

The dazzling light from Jesus could have permanently affected Paul's vision. Because of this light, Paul fell to the ground and was blinded for three days.

Acts 9:3-9 (NIV) As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

WAS PAUL'S ILLNESS FROM BEING STONED BY THE JEWS?

Some Bible scholars think Paul was stoned in Lystra just before he went to other churches in the region of Galatia. Galatia is a region, not a city, so the letter to the Galatians would have been sent to churches in cities like Derbe, Iconium, and Antioch.



Acts 14:19-22 (NIV) Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

If Paul was stoned just one day earlier, he would appear pretty beat up at the time that he went to Derbe. He might have looked repulsive due to the cuts and bruises on his face and head. Stones might have hit his eyes, since in a stoning the victim cannot use their arms to protect themselves.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL WAS SUFFICIENT

The most important lesson is that the power of the Gospel was sufficient, and Paul did not need to be cured of his physical illness to effectively give the Good News of Jesus, the risen Son of God.

The truth is, we have insufficient evidence to make an accurate diagnosis. But we should not let all the speculation about the nature of his illness distract us from Paul's perspective that even his illness was an opportunity to preach the gospel. It is common to view illness as a hindrance to preaching the gospel or an excuse not to do our duty. But Paul realized, as he says in a letter to the Corinthian church, that God's grace is sufficient for us in our weakness--in fact, that God's power is best expressed through our weakness.

In the Galatians' reception of Paul we see a wonderful example of the way to receive a messenger from God. In our day people want to listen to someone who has a good "TV image." If preachers' outward appearance is appealing, they get a big audience. But if they were ugly and sickly, as tradition tells us Paul was, then most people would switch channels to find a more attractive image. But the Galatians' reception of Paul was not based on outward appearances.

If they had responded to Paul simply on the basis of his physical attractiveness, they would have rejected him with contempt. Instead they evaluated the messenger on the basis of his message and then welcomed him with open arms. For his message was the redemptive love of God expressed in Christ Jesus.

Does God always heal in response to a prayer of faith? The case of Paul is unquestionable evidence against such a hypothesis. Three times Paul besought God to remove the disability. God's answer is that His grace is sufficient and further, that God's strength is made perfect through human weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:6-10 (NIV) Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.