

“Paul’s Story and Your Story”

Galatians 1:11-24

Last week we began our series on Galatians looking at 1:1-10 and introducing ourselves to the context of the letter. Perhaps Acts 15:1 helps us understand the context at the time where we read,

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: “Unless you are circumcised as required by the Law of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

This was the problem Paul addressed in Galatians. After he and Barnabas had come back from their first missionary journey, these Jewish people came after them and began telling the Galatian churches that Paul wasn’t a real apostle. That his message about Jesus was incomplete. After all, you can’t simply believe by faith alone in Jesus. God has always expected His people to follow the Mosaic laws. You have to be circumcised, you have to honour the Sabbath and all the holy days. You can’t eat certain meats, etc., etc.

So, not only does Paul have to defend who he is he also has to defend the gospel itself. How does he do that? By telling his testimony; how he came to know Christ after being known as a Christian hater and how he came to know the gospel as the Bible teaches us.

Paul of course had a powerful testimony; one that was dramatic and life-changing. And a personal testimony is hard to discount and explain away. It happened. Jesus changed Paul. But if sharing his testimony to defend the gospel and himself worked for Paul, can it not work for us as well? Should not part of our being ready to give an answer for the reason that the hope of Christ is in us be telling people how the hope of Christ got in us? And even though as dramatic as Paul’s story was, he gives us a framework by which we too can share our story.

After showing his exasperation that some in the churches in Galatia had departed from the simplicity of faith in Christ to a false gospel that required observing Jewish practices, Paul confronts the false claim of the Judaizers that Paul was a people pleaser. That he was just telling people this ‘simple’ gospel and that people don’t have to work for their salvation, so he can be popular. However, Paul shattered that false charge in vv.8-9 when he declared that anyone who follows a different gospel other than what he preached – which was consistent with the apostles and the Scriptures – *“then let them be eternally condemned”*. Telling people they will be forever separated from God is not how you please people or win friends.

Okay, but what about his ‘easy-believe-so-called-gospel? That’s too simple.’ So now Paul begins to defend his message and his ministry in declaring it by sharing his story of how he was saved and where his message comes from. Because the two are connected. What right do we have to share the gospel? Who gave us the gospel? God does of course. So if God is the One who saves us and our message comes from God and Jesus with their authority to deliver it, we not only have the right to share Christ with others but we understand the need to share Christ; because people are lost and separated from God. So Paul begins his defense in v.11

¹¹ *I want you to know, brothers that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up.*

¹² *I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.*

Paul is going to share parts of his story of how he came to know Christ and how he heard the truth himself. No doubt many had heard about Paul and maybe snippets of his story but there were many other things they never heard. And many of us are the same way. How many of us know each other's story? How do we tell our story? In the beginning of course like Paul. We begin by telling people,

What We Were Like Before Christ **(1:13-14)**

¹³ For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Paul gives a summary of his past. Ironically Paul came from the same background these Judaizers came from; legalistic, law-keeper and tradition adherent. If Paul is defending his knowledge of God, Jesus and the truth, he is saying that even though he was religious it was at a time

When he wasn't right with God (v.13)

And yet at the time he thought he was doing God's work. We first read about Saul (his Jewish name; most Jews had a Jewish and Gentile name) in Acts 7-9 where he was present and gave approval at the stoning of Stephen. He was destroying the church, going from house to house dragging off Christians and imprisoning them (8:3), 'breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples' (9:1). There are other places in the New Testament where Paul give his testimony. In Phil. 3:5-6 he says of his Jewish religious credentials,

⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Isn't murder against the Law? Yet Paul had no qualms about having Christians killed even though he 'obeyed the law without fault'. He thought like that because he wasn't right with God even though he thought he was. Many people think that way. Many of us thought that way too, before we came to believe in Jesus by faith alone. We thought we were okay. We thought we were good people or at least better people compared to others. For Paul he looked back on his life when he wasn't right with God yet at the time when he thought he was doing God's will.

But he wasn't really doing God's will. He came to understand later on this was ...

When he was focused on himself (v.14)

'**I** was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of **my** own age.' Paul learned under one of Israel's most well-known Rabbis of his day, Gamaliel. He is even mentioned in Scripture in Acts 5:34. The apostles were arrested for preaching the gospel but released with orders not to preach about Jesus anymore. Yet they continued anyway and when confronted by the Sanhedrin they declared 'we have to preach about Jesus'. Gamaliel, who was also on the Sanhedrin calmed them down because they wanted to kill the apostles, by saying there have been other so-called Messiahs before, and when they died, their followers disbanded. So he said,

³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

He probably didn't realize what he said assuming this wasn't of God, yet wisely saying if it was, you won't stop it. His star pupil, Saul of Tarsus was not as wise. Saul was only out for himself. He saw himself as advancing more than his peers. He knew he was Gamaliel's golden boy. Surely Paul would have become a member of the Sanhedrin himself in time.

While we may not have had any similarity to Paul's story, in principle ours is probably not much different. What were you like before you came to Christ? You probably thought you were okay with God even though you were living mostly for yourself. Even as a young person your thoughts were probably similar.

"But God", v.15 begins. But God intervened in Paul's life to rescue him from himself and sin.

¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

While our story is different than Paul's, we do have to admit we all had some kind of a 'but God' experience. So

What is Your 'But God' Experience? **(1:15-23)**

Paul doesn't give any information here about his Damascus road experience here but he does elsewhere. Paul was so self-righteous he was absolutely blind to his own sin. 'But God' indicates

When and where Paul first saw God's grace (v.15)

Paul could have spent a lot of time giving the details about his salvation experience but he chooses not to here because 1) the church was already familiar with it ('you have heard of my previous way of life'); and 2) his purpose is to show everything he has and received came directly from the grace of God. Nothing earned. Nothing learned from man. This is how God did it for me. And notice Paul's post-salvation perspective:

¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles,

Paul echoes the words of Jeremiah in Jer. 1:4 saying now he's saved he can look back and see how God's hand was in his life even when he didn't know it. All of grace. What's your 'but God' experience? Perhaps not as startling as Paul's, it may have been a gradual understanding but at some point the light came on and the Holy Spirit enabled you and I to understand the grace of the gospel and that's

How you came to know Jesus (v.16)

I like how Paul says 'God was pleased to reveal His Son in me.' It brings joy to God when we understand the grace of the cross, the free gift of salvation available to us through faith in Jesus

alone. When did you first understand that? When did you realize it wasn't you that had to come to God through good works, or that God was already pleased with how good you were, but rather you understood how much He loved you in spite of our inability to save ourselves and be good in our own strength?

But notice his testimony doesn't stop here. And if your testimony stops at this point as to only mention when God saved you, you have misunderstood salvation. Because God doesn't plan our salvation from before the world began (as Paul declares in Eph. 1:4) only so we can have a reserved seat in the new earth when we die, He saves us for a purpose. And so Paul still in the same sentence, tells when and where the grace of God came into his life, how he came to know Jesus and to validate his salvation

How his life changed since Jesus saved him (vv.17-23)

This has been his whole point all along. In defending the gospel and his right to share it Paul explains how God saved him by grace and enabled him to do what he is doing – not in Paul's power - but in God's.

¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles,

We see this in Acts 9:20-22. Once Paul was saved, God struck him blind for 3 days

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

After only a few days of being saved Paul was sharing the gospel. Here's the first fruit of the authenticity of our salvation – we've told others about Jesus or we've tried to at least. If you have the most wonderful gift in the world and people need it more than anything else why would you not share it? Paul realized quickly how gracious God had been with him. He realized quickly as well that the world was lost as he used to be. And many like himself stooped in religion thinking they were already pleasing God by their good works, which now he realized was, as Isaiah says in Is. 64:6, filthy rags. His own boasting.

Paul now explains that he didn't go immediately to Jerusalem. Why is that important to his argument? Because he was a wanted man. After only a few days in Damascus Paul himself was on the hit list. That's when he had to be lowered in a basket over the wall to escape. In Acts 9:26 Luke says *'When he came to Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples but they were all afraid of him ... But Barnabas took him to the apostles*

And he told them how Saul/Paul was saved. What we don't realize in Acts 9 is there's a large gap of time between v. 25 and 26. Here in Gal. 1 Paul fills in the years between Acts 9:25 and 26. Because here he says I didn't go up to Jerusalem (right after he was saved) but instead went into Arabia and later returned to Damascus and 3 years later finally came to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter, James and John and was only there 15 days. The point is; if Jesus' apostles brainwashed me or coached me in my gospel – as the Judaizers were claiming – he says I only met 3 of them 3 years after I was saved and I was only with them for 2 weeks?!

We know from Gal. 2:1 that Paul does not stay with any of the church leaders until at least 14 (probably 17) years later if he was 3 years in Arabia. Luke picks up this part of Paul's life toward the end of Acts 9 where Barnabas and Paul connect with Peter, James and John but, again he becomes a wanted man and then goes off homeward to Tarsus (Acts 9:30) where he stays until Acts 11:25-26 when Barnabas goes looking for him [show slide].

We don't know exactly what Paul did in Arabia or in his home town of Tarsus for all those years. We can safely assume he was preaching the gospel and in this time he met Titus and discipled him (because when Barnabas finds Paul in Tarsus Paul already knows Titus as we see in Gal. 2). Somewhere in this time frame, probably while in the desert region of Arabia in Paul's first 3 years of salvation he had an encounter with the risen Jesus and was given revelation he could not share (2 Cor. 12:1-7). Back in 1:12 when Paul says he "received" the gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ, this word 'receive' is a word for 'formal education, or teaching handed down'. He uses this word elsewhere to describe what he learned from the Lord himself.

1 Cor. 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

1 Cor. 15:1 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

So Paul very clearly explains to the churches in Galatia that, contrary to what these Judaizers were accusing him of, his gospel did not originate from any man but the Lord Jesus Himself. Which is also exactly what the apostles taught and which they had heard from Paul. So in essence, the Judaizers were lying not Paul. He even swears an oath in v.20 ("*I assure you, I am not lying*") which was a serious thing to do for a Jew. It means you are willing to incur the wrath of God if you are not telling the truth.

As he wraps up this section he reminds everyone who is reading this that when God has saved you through your profession of faith in Jesus that that is what God did in your past. What is He doing in you now? The evidence of our salvation is that ...

God is Being Glorified through You Now

(1:24)

²³ They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they praised God because of me.

Literally, they continued to praise God because of Paul. So much for Paul being a man-pleaser; instead he was a God-pleaser. His life continued to be one where he sought to glorify God through his life. And this is where our testimony should be at now. How is God being glorified in our life now? How is he changing us more into the image of Jesus a little bit each week?

When we break down Paul's testimony we find out that it's really not that much different than ours. Since we are all born sinners who need saving, there is a time in our life 'Before Christ' when we weren't right with God and our focus was self. And all of us experienced salvation through people or circumstances where God revealed to us His grace and our sin and we came to know Jesus by

faith. And our life began to change and Lord-willing, our purpose now is to glorify God with our life. If you have never sat down and written out your story I would like you to do that this week. Use this framework to note what your life was before Christ, what transpired to bring the gospel to you, who did God use, what circumstances came into play and how God changed you at that time and how you're seeking to glorify Him now. I'm going to give you a piece of paper with this outline on it and use it to jot down highlights of your testimony. Then I want you to give it to three people, one including me please.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us
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