

Paul: From Terrorist to Evangelist
Galatians 1:11-24

Video – We traveled a long way to bring you today’s sermon!
... I’ve had the privilege of standing at the Syrian border 3 times, and each time I marvel at the grace of God in the conversion and commission the apostle Paul.

Today we are talking about how God loves to save bad people.

Many of you have been transformed by Jesus. I want to allow one of our members to share his story of conversion. (**Ben Palka testimony**)

Some of you might think **“My testimony is not that powerful.”** **“I never sold drugs, and I’m not from Buffalo!”** *But oh, that’s where you are wrong.* According to Scripture, **all of God’s people us have been rescued.** We’ve been transferred out of darkness into light, from death to life. *All of us our beggars in need of grace.*

Desperate people love grace.

Deceived people don’t think they need grace.

Until you see your desperate need you will not come to the Savior.

Galatians 1:11-24

In this passage, the amazing, powerful, counter-intuitive grace of God is on display! Paul gives us a picture of God’s transforming grace by relating his story: ***from terrorist to an evangelist.***

He was **transformed**. He was not just **tweaked**.

You tweak a sentence, a graphic, or a schedule. But we don’t need to be tweaked; we need to be transformed.

Religious acts tweak people externally, but only the Gospel transforms people internally.

Overview

In these verses, Paul is demonstrating his credibility (which was under attack). He points to two things to show that he is a true apostle, and why he should be listened to like the other apostles. He emphasizes (1) **the origin his message**, and (2) **the story of his conversion**.

Some of Paul's critics thought that either (1) Paul made up his message, or (2) that he just had "second hand stuff" with no original authority and that *he was inferior* to the other apostles, being subordinate to them.

Paul shows us that he did not make it up. Jesus gave it to him. And Paul didn't just borrow the apostle's message, but rather, he acted independently from them for a season before finally meeting and discussing the fact that they did preach the same gospel.

So we'll notice these two themes:

- The Origin of Paul's Message
- The Transformation of Paul's Life

#1: THE ORIGIN OF PAUL'S MESSAGE: (1:11-12)

What is clear in these verses is that Paul's message was derived from God's revelation, not human imagination.

This is really the big idea into chapter 2:14. Where did his message come from?

- **Not from man** ("not man's gospel," v. 11; "nor received from man," v. 12 – also 1:1)
- **Not from Jerusalem**, ("nor was I taught it," v. 12; "nor did I go up to Jerusalem," v. 17)
- **Not from the Pillars** ("to those who were apostles" v. 17).
- **But from Jesus** ("I received through a revelation of Jesus Christ," v. 12, also 1:1). He met the risen Christ and received it from him.

Because the Gospel is not invented by man, it is the standard by which we measure every other set of ideas, and every other religion and philosophy.

We wouldn't make this gospel up. *We would make up a scoring system, or something that emphasized human works.*

Why? Because **the natural default mode of the human heart is works righteousness.** The message of grace, that the work has already been done is **counter-intuitive.** Grace offends our natural sensibilities. **Works righteousness is motivated by UNBELIEF.** We don't naturally believe grace. We want control.

Man didn't make up the gospel of grace; it came from God.

The Gospel of grace is like water, man didn't invent it and man can't live without it.

Movie: The Way Back – men & a lady walk 4,000 miles to escape a Russian gulag, from Russia to India, through all types of awful situations, including endless desert. There are incredible images of thirst. You can't live without water.

As Believers: We Need to keep drinking from this well of grace. Many believers think they need to move on from the gospel. No, keep drinking more of grace; keep working the gospel into your heart. Stay thirsty my friend!

For Unbelievers: We want to say that **what you need is not good advice for moral improvement; you need good news from God for new life.**

Where do you get your beliefs? It is imperative that you get your beliefs from the right source.

How many of you have a Tom Tom? How many of you have had the Tom Tom lead you somewhere other than your destination? There have been stories of the Tom taking someone to a rail road track; others into a wall, where there used to be a road (my brother in law). ABC did a story where a neighborhood had become a commercial thoroughfare (Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*). What happened? Often the

maps that are downloaded are 7-8 years old; and sometimes the roads are what city planners intended to do!

Everyone has a spiritual Tom, Tom. You are listening to someone. It is critical that you get your source of information correct on the road to eternity.

- Pharisees: “tie up heavy burdens” (works)
- Jesus: “come to me and I’ll give you rest” (grace).
Listen to him! And it is the message of the gospel of Jesus that Paul was presenting to his people – and he got that message from Jesus himself...

#2: THE TRANSFORMATION OF PAUL'S LIFE: (1:13-23)

Paul’s conversion is an example to all of us (1 Tim. 1:15). Notice some things that are consistent with ours.

Pre-Conversion: Paul’s Need for Grace (13-14)

His Persecution (1:13)

“I persecuted the church violently.” Paul was a terrorist.

- He approved the martyrdom of the Christian servant Stephen (Acts 8:1).
- He dragged Christians to prison (Acts 8:3).
- He cast his vote against Christians (Acts 26:10).
- He was on his way to persecute Christians when he was arrested on the Damascus Road by Jesus.

Garlington notes how the same language ('violently') of v 13 is used in Josephus’ writings to: “denote the burning of villages and towns of Idumaea by Simon Bar Giora” (Schriner, 99).

“and tried to destroy it” He wanted to stamp out Christianity. He was totally convinced that he was doing a good thing and that Christianity was false. “blasphemer, “persecutor” “violent man” “worst of sinners” – are all words to describe him. **Some picture Paul has a guy on a flannel graph, or a cartoon, or a little softy – he was violent! Fanatical!**

His Tradition (14)

“Advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age.” Paul was a rising superstar in Judaism. He was an honor student of Gamaliel (Acts 5:34, 22:3).

“so extremely zealous for the tradition of my fathers”

- **“traditions”** refers to his life as a Pharisee. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees (Phil. 3, Acts 26:5). These are not OT traditions; but traditions that developed over time.
- **“zeal.”** Before Paul’s conversion he thought he was doing the right thing by persecuting believers. Schreiner compares him to OT characters like
 - Phinehas (Num 25:11), displayed zeal for observance to the law when he slew an Israelite man and Midianite woman w a spear because their were engaging in immoral sexual relations.
 - Elijah displayed zeal by slaying the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19:10, 14)

Paul probably saw himself as a modern day hero of the Pharisees.

Paul is the classic case of a person who was **“sincere”** in his belief before he was a Christian. Sincerity cannot bring you to salvation if you do not sincerely believe in Jesus. You can be sincerely wrong. Many people are zealous for religion, but they’re running the wrong way.

You can be consumed with religion and miss Jesus.

Paul was in a desperate situation. Stott says:

Now a man in that mental and emotional state is in no mood to change his mind, or even to have it changed for him by men. No conditioned reflex or other psychological device could convert a man in that state. Only God could reach him – and God did! (John Stott)

B. Conversion: God’s Work of Grace (15-16a)

Work these truths deep in your heart... Notice the work of God in the conversion and commission of Paul in four parts:

i. **God Intervened! “But” (1:15-16).**

The first thing to notice in these verses in general is that the gospel is a rescue mission! God intervened in the life of Paul and for all believers.

See this Gospel in a conjunction: “But!” It’s a word of rescue. We use it a lot to describe the good news of certain situations

- **The other team scored a touchdown, but there was a flag on the play!**
- **The plane went down, but no one was hurt...**
- **Your son was in a wreck, but he’s okay...**
- **You have cancer, but it’s treatable...**
- **I was at my wits end with this kid, but God changed him.**
- **I was on the verge of suicide, but God kept me alive.**

Paul uses it most popularly in **Eph. 2:4**, but a favorite is in **Titus 3:3-7**. ('but' or 'yet')

ii. **“[God] set me apart before I was born” (1:15a).**

Paul had been set apart from before the womb to serve as an apostle, similar to Jeremiah (Jer 1:5), Isaiah (Isa 49:1), and John the Baptist, who were set apart before birth.

We have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world – to the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:4)

iii. **“[God Called by his grace]” (15b)**

a. **Calling**

God called him powerful and effectively. God’s call is different than our calling of the kids. Our call is a desire, but it doesn’t always bring reality. “Come to dinner.” Kids: “Okay.” Ten minutes later, nothing. “Time to eat.” Kids: “Coming.” “Just a minute.”

There is a difference in calling the children and getting the children. Eventually, you have to go grab the little guy and bring him to the table.

God's call is different. God's call is action and God's Word is a deed, it is reality.

- "Let there be light" – there is light.
- Jesus, "Peace be still" – it's still. Not "I invite you to be still." "I hope you are still."
- "Lazarus, come forth" – he doesn't have to go do resuscitation. He brings life.

If you are a Christian, there has been some point in which you have sensed a power. You've sensed God call you. You've sensed that something or someone is dealing with you.

And I don't necessarily mean it will be traumatic. He worked on some for a while... but you know God is dealing with you.

Paul was called on Damascus – have you ever responded to this call? Maybe after the sermon, in a room... in a church service?

b. Grace "called by his grace"

I want you to get grace. Every week we are talking about it!

How did we become Christians? By grace. Paul was not searching for God, he was actually an enemy of God.

My testimony

The whole Bible is filled with stories of people who receive God's grace and blessing, not because of their goodness, but because of his grace.

Mark Dever told the story of his relative who said the church was a "pit of vipers." He said, "Do you think outside is better?" She said, "no." He said, "Well, I don't disagree with you. We are. And we've got room for one more, any time you

want to slither on in.” We are the company of the redeemed; people who have been saved by grace.

iv. “[God] was pleased to reveal his Son to me” (16a).

The wonderful reality of Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and reigning, was made known to Paul.

Paul previously knew Christian teaching, but he did not accept it. The idea of a crucified Messiah was repulsive. Then Christ was revealed to him.

You may not have a Damascus Road experience. You probably won't. But you will have a 2 Corinthians 4:6 experience:

“God who said ‘let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

God by his Spirit makes the reality of Christ known to us.

We are blind until God opens up our eyes, just as a previous verse says, “the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Cor. 4:4)

“We can see nothing apart from the spectacles of the Holy Spirit” (Thomas Manton)

I took my Driver's exam the other day to get an NC driver's license. The lady asked me if I needed to wear my glasses when I drive. I said, “No. They're not that strong. My eyes are not that bad.” She proceeded to tell me to read the first line of numbers. I started laughing because I had no idea what they were. I could not see without my glasses. She said, “I'll change the information. Put your glasses on, and try again. I could see perfectly.

We can see nothing apart from the spectacles of the Holy Spirit.

Unbelievers: We want you to see the Son. Oh, that the Spirit of God would shine in your hearts to give you the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ!

Believers: Marvel at the fact that God would appear to you; that you would see him through the eyes of faith.

C. **Post Conversion: Faithfulness to Jesus (1:16-23)**

i. **Christ now lives in us (16a)**

“to me” could be rendered “in me.” Regardless of it’s translation, we know that it is true based upon verses like **Galatians 2:20**. “Christ lives in us.” You are not yourself, but you are yourself. “There is a new I.”

You don’t become a Christian and then try to live it out in your own power. No, you live the same way you enter. Notice 3:3 – by the Spirit, by faith, by grace.

Every true Christian does have Christ dwelling on the inside.

- “He who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ.” (Rom. 8:9).

ii. **Christ is proclaimed by us (17-23)** “that I might preach to the Gentiles.”

Notice the purpose clause, “that.” Paul was not converted just for his own benefit. His conversion had a commission with it. (Like **Psalm 67**).

Paul’s life was not easy, but it was purposeful. **I would rather have a hard life with purpose, than an easy life of meaninglessness.**

Think of **Jeremiah** (weeping prophet), or **Isaiah** (preaching naked), or **John the Baptist** (head rolling): all guys who had a calling before the womb, to proclaim – all had a tough life but one filled with purpose.

Paul reveals his own experience of being converted and then preparing for a life of public proclamation. In so doing, he shows that he acted independently of the apostles (back to the beginning verses). He did not need anyone to confirm this message

He goes to Arabia (16b-17). Galatians adds to what is missing in Acts.

- Paul started by proclaiming Christ in the synagogue in Damascus (Acts 9:19-22),
- then goes to Arabia (not in Acts – maybe referred to in verse 23a: “when many days had passed”).
- He then returns to Damascus (probably Acts 9:23b-25).
- He then goes to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-ff).

Three years in Arabia– probably three years from his conversion.

Some believe this corresponds to the disciples three years with Jesus. But he was probably preaching, as well as being alone – 2 Cor. 11:32.

Three years is a long time of silence, right? Some of you think you're in a desert. Others had times of "silent years" in the Bible like Moses, Nehemiah, and even Jesus! Waiting time is not wasted time. God wastes nothing in the lives of his servants.

He goes to Jerusalem for a very brief visit (18-20) to meet Peter and James. According to Acts 9:28-29, most of this time was spent preaching.

He goes to **Syria and Cilicia** (21). Cilicia – Tarsus was home territory (probably referred to in Acts 9:30). “Syria” meaning that he might have re-visited the churches in Damascus.

- **Verse 22** – The churches in Judea only heard of him.

- **Verse 23:** The former persecutor was now a preacher! He is now preaching that which he tried to destroy!
- **Verse 24:** Learning this, they glorified God (1:24)

It is not until 14 years later (14 years after his conversion) does Paul go to Jerusalem for an extended stay. These previous ventures show that he was apart from Jerusalem, except for a short time of visit –all proving the independence of his gospel. Paul got his message from Jesus.

Summary:

- **Pre-Conversion:** he was a fanatic headed in the wrong direction...
- **Conversion** – it was all of God's grace from beginning to end...
- **Post-Conversion** – It was almost entirely apart from the other apostles. It was a story of faithful proclamation of Jesus, who gave him the message.

For us, it is a story that shows us that God loves to save bad people; that no one is beyond the reach of God's amazing grace! This message only comes from God.

The gospel is not good advice from man; it is good news from God.

Rejoice in this gospel. In Christ, you find what your heart has always longed for:

- No love is this great.
- No hope is this secure.
- No forgiveness is this complete.
- No joy is this deep.
- No freedom is this liberating.
- No peace is this sweet.

All of it, is found in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Do you know this Savior, the fountain of saving grace? Come and drink.