

Introduction

On a Friday night back in December 1987, Melissa and I were traveling across the delta of northeast Arkansas on our way to a Christmas party. We were coming up on the junction of two highways basically in the middle of nowhere. Rumble strips and decreased speed limit signs warned of the intersection, and I was slowing down and preparing to stop. I looked down at my speedometer. And when I looked up, two headlights were staring us in the face. I slammed on the brakes and swerved to the right; the rear of the car fish-tailed to the left. The span of no more than a second seemed like 2 or 3. I braced for head-on impact. There being none, I waited for what seemed like forever for the oncoming vehicle to collide with us in the rear since it was swinging around in that direction. Again, there was no impact. I looked in my rear view mirror to see the two red tail lights of the vehicle which we just miraculously avoided. And I could not contain my relief or astonishment. There was no way we were not going to crash and yet we didn't. I shouted out, "The Lord did that!" The intervening hand of God is the only explanation for why we were not involved in a life changing automobile crash that night.

This morning as we return to our study of Paul's letter to the Galatians, we encounter Paul's testimony of how he came to embrace the gospel and become a servant of Christ. The only explanation is the intervening hand of God.

[Read text and Pray]

Teachers had come to Galatia with the message that believing in Christ was not enough to be made right with God. The message of their so-called gospel was that the Galatians also needed to become Jewish; they needed to receive the sign of circumcision and follow the law of Moses. Paul's intent in writing to the Galatians was to demonstrate that the gospel being preached by the newcomers was in fact no gospel at all. It was contrary to the gospel he preached to them. By adding law-keeping to the gospel of Christ, they were in effect destroying any real hope of salvation, which is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So Paul is contending that he is an apostle chosen and commissioned through Jesus Christ and God the Father. And the good news message he had preached was in fact THE ONE TRUE gospel of Christ. Any other is perverted and worthless.

Paul is doing more than simply making the CLAIM of being an apostle of Christ and preaching the true gospel. He is supplying EVIDENCE to back up his claim. And part of the evidence for the Galatians' consideration is Paul's own conversion and call. As we turn to the substance of the text, I want us to observe three elements of importance. We are going to look at the conversion of Paul, the saving work of God, and the implications for you and me.

I. The Conversion of Paul.

The experience of Paul in Christ's coming to him is set forth as a personal testimony of God's grace. Here at GCC, when we have the joy of baptizing believers, we ask them to share their testimony with us. The gospel is the same but everyone's own situation is unique, and it is a joy to hear in the testimonies how God has worked uniquely in each person's case.

Well, this morning we are being treated to the testimony of the Apostle Paul. This testimony is evidence that the gospel he preaches is the one true gospel because it is God's gospel. It is not man's. Paul's testimony reveals that he did not receive this gospel from man in any way. He

received it directly from God through an encounter with Christ. And it came on the occasion of his conversion, the only explanation for which is God.

There are three basic components to a testimony of one's conversion— before, when, and since—that, is before conversion, when converted, and since conversion. It is striking in the text before us that Paul supplies precisely these three components. He tells us of his life before Christ came to him. He tells us when Christ came to him. And then he tells us what happened in his life after Christ came to him. We need to look at each of these.

A. First, Paul tells us about his life BEFORE Christ came to him. Look at what he says. "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism." What marked Paul's life before Christ came to him? What marked him is that he was prolific among the Jews for his love of Jewish law and tradition and his zealous hostility towards whatever opposed it. He makes three specific points about his past. He persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. He was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his own people. He was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers.

What this means is Paul was a self-righteous zealot for Judaism. We should understand the term Judaism as referring to the keeping of the law of Moses and the traditions that were added by the rabbinic interpretations and applications. Paul was a rising star among the Pharisees. He fit uniformly among the group who challenged Jesus at just about every turn. He saw his role as stomping out the enemies of God. What he now calls the "church of God," he was seeking violently to destroy. He was at odds with God but convinced he was doing God's work.

Do you remember Phinehas in the OT? There was this instance of the children of Israel falling into grievous immorality and idolatry with the Midianite women. The Lord God commanded Moses to execute the leaders who participated in the sin. And just then in public view an Israelite man took a Midianite woman into his tent. Well, Phinehas, filled with zeal for the Lord, took a spear, entered the tent, and slew both the man and the woman, and the wrath of the Lord was abated. Phinehas was honored for his zeal.

It would seem that the Apostle Paul saw himself as a contemporary example of Phinehas. He saw the growing Jesus-movement of his day as the same kind of threat as the immorality of the Israelite men back in the days of Phinehas. Filled with zeal for what he thought was the pure religion of Judaism, he was engaged in an all-out effort to snuff these Christ followers out and eliminate them from endangering the purity of Judaism. But he was mistaken. If you are going to be like Phinehas and strike out with zeal, you better be sure that you have rightly identified what is the truth and who the real enemy is. Paul was sincere and zealous, but he was gravely mistaken. Judaism represents a corruption of what God had revealed, and to defend it was not being faithful to God.

Paul came to realize that he was not like Phinehas after all. Was he zealous? Yes, but an avenger of wrong? No. Elsewhere in the New Testament, he says of himself that he was "a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" (1 Timothy 1:13) and the foremost of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

That certainly is not the way he thought of himself before his conversion though. He thought of himself as God's champion though he was God's enemy. He was sincere but gravely mistaken. Zeal does not make you right. Sincerity is not the be-all-end-all. Paul's hostility to the gospel was born out of the absolute conviction that Jesus was not the Messiah but a trouble-maker. And there is no way that Paul would have relinquished that conviction through arguments or teachings. It was going

to take divine intervention. Paul could not have been more lost. He could not have been more deluded.

B. But God intervened. This is WHEN Christ came to him. Paul described his conversion as an act of God which changed everything about him. This past Wednesday evening we were looking at the mercy of God. God is a God of superabundant mercy. And he certainly dipped into his ocean of mercy when he revealed his Son to Paul. In the midst of Paul's hostility against the church of God, indeed God himself, the Lord came to Paul.

In Acts 9 Luke tells us how it came about. Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest followers of Christ and bring them back to prison in Jerusalem. All of a sudden, however, a light shone from heaven and he fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." In that moment, Paul went from being a pleaser of men to being a servant of Christ. Born from above, he was a new man.

C. AFTER Christ came, there was a complete turnaround in Paul's life. He did not need to go consult with anyone because Christ himself was the one who gave him the gospel. So what did Paul do? Well, he tells that he went to Arabia and then to Damascus. After 3 years he went down to Jerusalem but he only saw Peter and James. Then he went to Cilicia and Syria. What was he doing? Well, he was doing what he had been appointed to do. He had been called to preach the gospel of Christ. And this is actually what Luke tells us he did in Acts 9. When Paul regained his sight and was baptized, he immediately began preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. He grew in strength and in his ability to demonstrate to the stubborn Jews that indeed Jesus was the Christ. The followers of Christ who heard about the dramatic change gave witness to it. They were saying, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."

You cannot have Christ come to you and your life not be changed. And that was the case with Paul in an obvious and powerful way. With conversion comes transformation. And this transformation is a demonstration that the gospel he preached is God's gospel. The Judaism that the new coming teachers were bringing into Galatia was the very thing to which Paul had not merely been sympathetic but for which he had been a crusader. And if it had been able to be coupled with the gospel of Christ, he certainly would have joined the two. But it could not. And if it had not been God who visited him on the Damascus road, he would still be the devout Jew he had always been. So, Galatians, don't be led astray. This new gospel is not God's gospel. Therefore, it is not a gospel at all.

And so this is the testimony of Paul as to his conversion. Let's look again through this text and examine what it tells as about ...

II. The Saving Work of God.

Paul's testimony not only expresses the change that took place in him. It also illustrates the magnificence of God in the work of salvation. There are ways of speaking and thinking about God's work of salvation that miss the mark, and they can lead us to think about God's work in a man-centered way. It is correct that we preach the gospel and call upon hearers to repent and believe. "Believe on the lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved," is what Paul said to the Philippian jailer. But the reality of salvation even in our believing is that our salvation is a gracious work of God. Sometimes people say, "I found God" or "I found Christ." It is more accurate, however, to say that "God found me" or that "Christ found me." Yes, we must receive him. Yes we must love him. But looking at the process of salvation here as illustrated in Paul, we see that our believing, our

receiving, and our loving him is because he first loves us and comes to us. Let's see it here in the act of God to bring Paul to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

First, it is God's gospel. It is not from man or according to man. It is not a way that simply is taught. Paul received the gospel through a revelation of Christ's person. God's gospel is not just a list of human traditions and teachings. It does involve truths and it does need to be taught, but its focus is the person of God's Son, Jesus Christ. It is a message no human being would ever have come us with. There is no gospel if it is not the word of Christ.

Second, salvation is the saving work of God. It is God's work. It is not man's work but the work of God. Paul's testimony recounts his own works. He was persecuting the church of God. He was acting in zeal for Judaism. He was advancing beyond many of his contemporaries. But all Paul was doing was making his situation before God worse. It was sin upon sin. It was self-righteous arrogance upon pride in himself. The work of salvation does not depend on the man who runs or the man who wills but on God who has mercy. It is the work of God. God is the one who set Paul apart and called him and revealed his Son to him and turned him completely around.

Third, salvation is based upon God's choice. Paul asserts that the Lord "set [him] apart before [he] was born." Paul is declaring that it was the plan of God to call Paul to himself and to commission him to preach his gospel before he was even born. Paul's statement here calls to mind the statement the Lord made to Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet." What Paul says about his call sounds so similar. God's purpose to save and use specific individuals is set before we are born. It something we only come to know when he comes to us in the course of our lives. But having come to him we must acknowledge that the first cause in our coming is that God decided specifically to have mercy on us.

Paul makes this point because the infiltrators in Galatia were challenging his apostolic claims. But you do not preach Christ without first believing in Christ. His call to preach involved the call to salvation. The salvation of God comes in the course of time, but it comes because of his choice before we were born. Salvation is of God.

People have been known to say "yes, God chose Paul, but he does not choose every one who is saved." That statement would be mistaken. All who are in Christ, all who may be called saints, were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). For this reason the saints of God are also called the elect of God.

Fourth, salvation is brought into action by God's grace. Paul states that God called him by his grace. God's choice is unconditional. Our salvation is completely undeserved. It is not based upon our works, our abilities, our attractiveness. Before God we are unattractive and without ability to please him. But God by grace saves sinners. He saves the worst of sinners and ones we might think the most improbable to come to faith. When Paul was standing by watching with approval the stoning of Stephen, when he went and got authorization to track down any claiming to be Christians to bind them and bring them to Jerusalem, who would have ever thought that one day he would preach the very gospel he sought to destroy? No one! Except that is God. Having chosen Paul, God was not going to be impeded by all Paul's' sin from fulfilling his gracious design to save him.

The same can be said of you. If you are a follower of Christ Jesus, it is because of the Almighty gracious God.

Fifth, salvation is wrought by God in order to accomplish a radical transformation in the lives of those he saves. This is a point upon which Paul is quite emphatic. His case to the Galatians is "You must believe this is God's gospel because look at the complete change it brought about in me." Before conversion, Paul was a man violently determined to destroy the church of God and the faith of the gospel. But afterward, he was not merely believing but was indeed preaching that gospel he sought more zealously to silence than any one else. He went from being a blasphemer of Christ to being a worshiper of Christ. He went from being an enemy of Christ to being his most humble and willing servant. He went from arrogant self-righteousness to a man whose only desire was to have the righteousness which comes through faith in Christ.

You may not be called as an apostle, but every person who truly embraces the gospel of God cannot remain the same. God saves and transforms sinners. They will not become sinless but they will certainly sin less and less. Before conversion, they may have been sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers. They may be blasphemers and haters of the gospel, lovers of the world and lovers of pleasure. But by grace when they are converted, they are washed, they are sanctified, they are justified and they will not be the same. It is a work not of the flesh and human strength. It is a work of God!

Sixth, salvation includes a calling. Paul's calling by grace was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. God saved him for holiness but he also saved him with a purpose. There was a work to do. God called Paul to do it. We are not all called to be a missionary in a foreign land. We are not all called to be a preacher, an elder, or a deacon. However, all who are converted by God's saving grace are called with a purpose unique to us. We are called on purpose for a purpose. All are gifted to minister in the body. Every believer has a role, a place, a purpose. It is the doing of God.

Seventh, the salvation work of God results in God's glory. From start to finish it is God's work for God's glory. Paul concludes his account of his conversion by noting a wonderful fact. The churches of Judea had not seen Paul in person, but they were hearing about the great change in his life, and they glorified GOD because of him. This fact further establishes the point Paul is making of a night-and-day change that occurred in him. Even those who had not seen Paul were witnesses unto the change. They were not talking about how great Paul was, however. They were glorifying God, ascribing the transformation that had taken place in Paul to the power and grace of God. This is the purpose for the salvation of every believer. We are saved for the glory of God.

So, see, even as we hear Paul bearing testimony of his conversion, we are treated to a marvelous display of the work of God that brings it to pass.

Now, having looked at these verses from the standpoint of Paul's conversion and God's saving work, let's draw attention to some important implications:

III. The Implications for You and Me.

A. Our confidence in the gospel of Christ should be strengthened. We see in Paul's conversion evidence that supports the validity of the Christian faith. And that should either bolster the faith we have or it should reinforce the realization that we should believe the gospel Paul preached.

Paul is pointing to his conversion in order to persuade the Galatians of the gospel he preached. He was bearing witness against himself that unless God had revealed Christ to him, he would not have believed. He was stubborn-hearted and convinced he was doing the Lord's work by violently persecuting the church. Nothing would have changed the direction of his life but God himself. To

the Galatians, he is saying, "Look at me. Look at who I was. And look at who I am now. I would never be who I am except for the grace and the power and the work of God. The gospel I preach is not from man because I did not get it from man. It is from God. So believe it.

No Christian is immune from doubts. Living in the flesh, we are sometimes led to question, is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ the truth? There are a number of evidences to which you could point. You could point to the strong evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. You could point to the amazing unity and message of the Bible. But another reassuring evidence is the power of God which has operated in the lives of people to make them what we all know they never would be without the power of God at work in them. Hear the testimony of Paul. If the gospel were not true, he would have died a zealous Jew and Pharisee. If you are holding out on the gospel today, oh, I pray you would be stopped in your tracks like Paul was stopped that day on the road to Damascus. Acknowledge that this is the truth. Grace alone. Faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone. Believe in Jesus today. God can change you as surely as he transformed the apostle.

B. Be warned by Paul's unconverted zeal. Don't think that sincerity alone is what counts. Sincerity led Paul to persecute the church. It led him to fight against Christ and to seek to kill his disciples. Check your sincerity. Check your zeal. Be sure that it is a zeal according to truth.

C. Be encouraged by God's power to change the most unlikely people. Was there ever a man less probable to become a disciple of Jesus Christ than the apostle Paul? Certainly the world has seen its share of improbable persons become disciples of Jesus. No doubt there are people in your life who are hardened against the gospel. You think of them and you are tempted to think that they will never come to faith in Christ. But the fact is that no one would come to faith in Christ without God first coming to them. So don't be without hope. If we want to see people changed, the role God has given us is this: share the gospel and trust in the grace and power of God.

D. Be certain that you have a role in God's kingdom. God called Paul to be an apostle. Just as surely God the Holy Spirit places each person into the body of believers with particular roles and particular gifting. God does not save you so you can spectate like a fan in the stands. We are all saved to get onto the field and get into the game. What are you doing to fulfill your unique calling?

E. Be determined to live for the glory of God. I believe this final statement in the chapter gave Paul great and abounding joy. He writes, "They glorified God because of me." That's what we should all be aiming at—that God be glorified because of me. Pray that God will do that in you. Seek his face that he will be glorified in you. Pray for brothers and sisters that God will produce such transformation in our lives that we will inspire more and more glory to be given to God.