

Galatians: Faith Alone in Christ Alone

Called by Grace (Galatians 1:11-24)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 19, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ Testimonies are great. They're wonderful vehicles for conveying gospel truth and the power of gospel grace to change lives. **Some of the most impactful moments in the life of our church have been those opportunities where individuals were able to stand up here and publicly testify to the life-transforming effect of the gospel.** They glorified God in their sharing and they edified us.
 - That's why we occasionally ask members to share a testimony – either at their baptism or when they're welcomed as new members. If you come to our quarterly English Membership Meetings, we usually have individuals sharing testimonies of what God has been doing in their lives or in their ministries. If you haven't been to a Membership Meeting in a while, I encourage you to attend our next one in August. Otherwise, you're missing out on the blessing of hearing these public testimonies – where God is glorified and believers are edified.

- ❖ This morning we have another opportunity to hear another testimony that we pray will have the same effect. This testimony comes from the pages of Scripture and retells one of the most well-known conversion stories in church history. **The conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus.**
 - As you may well know, prior to his conversion, Paul was one of the most ardent opponents of the early Christian movement. In fact, he was on his way to Damascus to arrest more Christians and to bring them to Jerusalem to be punished – likely to be executed (Acts 22:4-5). **But that's when the grace of God interrupted his life and interrupted his plans.** It's where he met Jesus. Where he was converted. Where his life calling was completely changed.

- ❖ Now Paul is recounting his conversion testimony, here in Galatians, as part of a larger argument he's making to his readers. Last week, we started a new series in this book, and we saw how rival teachers had arrived on the scene among these churches in the Roman province of Galatia. Paul and Barnabas had initially evangelized this region and planted these churches. **But since they've been gone, these rivals have been undermining the gospel they preached by contending that Paul's message is watered-down.** It's gospel lite. He's leaving out the hard parts. He's trying to please you and tell you what you want to hear.
 - Those are the basic accusations that Paul is responding to. So his testimony plays a part in answering these critics. In defending the gospel he preaches. But his testimony is also fairly instructive for us. **We learn quite a bit about the gospel – the good news about the grace of Christ.**
 - As we walk through Galatians 1:11-24, we can learn three important realities regarding the Christian gospel. (1) Where the gospel comes from originally. (2) How the gospel applies to us personally. (3) What the gospel does in us decisively.

Where the Gospel Comes From Originally

- ❖ Let's begin with a consideration of where the gospel comes from originally. This is a point that Paul is urgent to clarify. **He wants to make it crystal clear that the gospel he preaches did not come from the Jerusalem church.** He wasn't trained under the Jerusalem apostles. He didn't learn it from pillars of the church like Peter or James the brother of Jesus.
 - Here in vv11-12, Paul's concern is to establish his independence from those leaders in Jerusalem. Listen again, *"¹¹For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹²For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."*
- ❖ Then he goes on explain that, after his conversion, he didn't immediately seek out the apostles in Jerusalem to learn from them. Instead, he says in v17 that he *"went away into Arabia,"* referring to modern-day Jordan, and then he *"returned again to Damascus."* During that time, he was likely going about preaching this newly received gospel.
 - Then Paul says, in v18, that it was three years after his conversion that he finally visited Jerusalem. Even then, he only met with Peter and James. He may have been known by reputation, but no one in the churches of Judea knew him on a personal level. Because since converting, he barely spent any time there. That's his point. **His apostleship was established independently from the Jerusalem apostles.**
- ❖ **Now why was Paul so intent on creating that separation.** It's not because he disagrees with Peter or James. It's not because he's ashamed of them or of what they've been preaching to the Jews. It's not because Paul is driven by a prideful independent streak – always wanting to do his own thing and be his own man.
 - **No, the reason Paul establishes his independence is because those rivals are painting him as a second-rate apostle who misconstrued what he learned from the true apostles in Jerusalem.** They're claiming continuity in their teaching with what Peter and James and all true apostles teach. **They say that the true gospel requires your faith in Christ AND your faithfulness to keep the entire Mosaic Law.** Including stipulations like getting circumcised. Observing Sabbath. Keeping kosher. Essentially to become a follower of Jesus includes adopting the identity and lifestyle of a Jew. Jesus was a faithful Jew, so to be his follower requires the same.
- ❖ But when Paul planted these churches in Galatia, the gospel he taught sounded different. **He taught – that to become a follower of Jesus – you only need faith in Jesus.** In who he is as the Son of God and in what he did in delivering us from this present evil age through a substitutionary sacrifice on the cross (1:4; 3:1, 13).
 - The good news that Paul preached is not that there is more room in the Old Covenant for Gentiles to join. **The good news he preached is that Jews and Gentiles can now be bound together under a New Covenant established in Christ.** There is now a new community that represents the people of God. Called the Church. And it's comprised of vastly different people unified by a common faith – where our only hope in life and death rests in Christ and Christ alone.

- ❖ That's the gospel Paul preached. **And his point here is that he didn't learn it from any human teacher.** From any other apostle. He learned it directly from the Lord himself. This is not man's gospel. No one invented this. No one concocted this story. **No one arrives at the gospel of Christ crucified by reasoning it out – by self-discovery or intuitive deduction.** No, the gospel is counterintuitive. It confronts many of the cherished values of our culture.
 - **But the thing is – the gospel confronts all sorts of cultures in all sorts of different ways.** Because the gospel is from God in heaven, it's not native to any particular culture. Even the thick Jewish culture of the original apostles. It confronts that.

- ❖ That's really the whole point of this letter. **The gospel confronts Judaism not just doctrinally but culturally.** It's not just about correcting the Jewish understanding of Messiah. It's about confronting the Jewish cultural expectation that all followers of Messiah must act and behave like Jews. Paul wrote Galatians to correct that.
 - And Paul writes sympathetically. He understands that Jewish way of thinking because he once thought like that. That's why he brings up his past. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. Advancing in Judaism beyond his peers. **He would be the last person you'd expect to set aside the requirements of the Law in his public teaching just to please more people or gain more converts.**
 - The only explanation for such a radical change in Paul would be a life-transforming encounter – not with man's gospel – but with God's. **Paul's gospel convictions were not developed through reasoning (self-discovery) but received through revelation (divine disclosure).** Listen to v12 again, *“For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”*

- ❖ C.S. Lewis puts it this way in his book *Mere Christianity*. **He argues that one of the reasons he believes in Christianity is because it's not something anyone would've made up.** He writes, *“It is a religion you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up.”* In other words, the gospel must have come from divine revelation because there's no way it came from human reason or human tradition.

- ❖ Friends, I hope that encourages those of you who are struggling right now to believe in Christianity. **Some of you are hesitant to go all in because of all the ways in which it doesn't make sense to you – not just intellectually – but culturally.** Culturally, you've been told all your life to be true to yourself. You've been taught that your subjective feelings are self-validating. That is, if you feel a certain way about yourself, then that's your truth and no one should oppose it or suggest you question it.
 - But the gospel confronts that very way of thinking. **By telling you that what's fundamentally true about you is not found by self-discovery. Instead it's received by divine revelation.** You don't find yourself by searching within. You find yourself by listening to God's Word.

- ❖ Look, if we were making up a religion – hoping to gain a lot of followers among the masses who are steeped in today’s secular culture – then this is *not* the kind of gospel we should be preaching. **But don’t let the countercultural, counterintuitive nature of the Christian gospel discourage you.** Let it be an encouragement to know you’re dealing with a message that is truly true and from above. Because you and I, as humans, could’ve never guessed it.
- ❖ Now for those of you who have received this gospel, who are Christians – **I encourage you to embrace the role of an evangelist.** A teller of good news. In 2 Timothy 4:5, Paul commands Timothy – and by extension all Christians – to “*do the work of an evangelist.*”
 - Nowhere in Scripture are we called to do the work of a **revisionist**. Our job is not to update God’s message to fit modern times and modern sensibilities. The Lord doesn’t need public relations officers to help manage his reputation in the eyes of the world.
 - And on the other extreme, we’re not called to do the work of a **preservationist**. Merely preserving the gospel from any false teaching while failing to propagate it. Failing to proclaim it.
- ❖ No, we are called to do the work of an **evangelist**. That means our job is to speak gospel. To herald good news. And to do it as clearly, as accurately, and as faithfully as we can. And let me encourage you with this thought. **Since this is not man’s gospel but God’s, what he’s chiefly concerned about is *not* the results of your evangelism – but your faithfulness to evangelize.** He’s not going to commend you for how many people were saved as a result of you sharing the gospel – as if you were responsible for that. No, if God commends you, it’ll be for your faithfulness to share his gospel in the first place. That’s what he cares about.

How the Gospel Applies to Us Personally

- ❖ Now this idea that you’re not responsible for anyone’s salvation because it’s all on God – that leads to our next point. To the second thing we learn about the gospel. We saw where it comes from originally. Now let’s consider how the gospel applies to us personally.
 - The gospel, as we’ve said, is all about the grace of Christ – about how sinners get right with God, how their sins are atoned for, how they’re welcomed into his family all because of the life and death of God’s Son. **But this gospel will only be good news in general and not good news for you specifically – unless its benefits are applied to you personally.** Well, if the gospel is not a message that originates from man – but from God – then it makes sense that the gospel will only apply to you if God is the one who initiates and calls you to himself personally.
- ❖ **I think there’s always a tendency to treat salvation like it’s something *you* have to find.** Like it’s a treasure you find at the end of a long and arduous search. Or we treat salvation like a puzzle we have to figure out and solve. That’s why any presentation of the gospel that includes *your* works – suggesting that you somehow contribute to your own salvation (which is what Paul’s rivals taught) – that kind of gospel generally sits well with us. It makes sense to us. But as Paul explained in last week’s passage, that kind of gospel is no gospel at all.

- ❖ Paul's testimony makes this point emphatically. Look at vv15-16, "¹⁵*But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.*" He's saying he was set apart by God before he was born and called by grace to be a follower of Jesus and a preacher to Gentiles. **His point is that it's all a work of sovereign grace by a sovereign God.**
 - The only reason you're a Christian, in the present, is because God, in the past, set you apart before you were born – before you had done anything either good or bad (Rom 9:11). He chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). To prove that when God, one day, calls you to himself at your conversion, it's all a gift of grace. That's how the gospel is applied to you personally. **You become a Christian whenever God, in his timing, sovereignly calls you to himself by his grace.**

- ❖ Now did you notice how Paul's experience of God's calling in v15 is reminiscent of other biblical callings rooted in grace. His testimony resembles that of the prophet Isaiah, who said in Isaiah 49:1 that "*the Lord called me from the womb.*" Or like Jeremiah who was also set apart in his mother's womb and divinely called to be "*a prophet to the nations.*" (Jer 1:5)
 - **In like manner, Paul was divinely called to be an apostle to the nations.** This is something he was destined to do. It was always in God's plan. According to God's will. If left to himself, Paul knows he'd still be busy seeking Christians and throwing them in prison. He's only where he is now in life – seeking the lost and preaching them the gospel – because the very God he had been opposing has called Paul by grace; applied the gospel to him personally; and appointed him to serve as an apostle.

- ❖ **Paul's point in recounting his former life is to underline how utterly disqualified he is to serve in this capacity.** But, at the same time, it proves how utterly amazing God's grace is. As he recounts his former life, Paul realizes it wasn't a complete waste. His zeal for the Law led him to do things he's not proud of. **But only someone that zealous for the Law can testify, from personal experience, of the impotence of the Law.** Of how powerless it is to save. How it can't bring you peace with God. All it can do is teach you what sin is and convict you of your need for a Savior from your sins.
 - **Paul now realizes that his past experiences were all a part of God's sovereign plan – determined before the foundation of the world.** All of it was preparing him for his unique calling as a preacher to the Gentiles.

- ❖ **Brothers and sisters, you should view your former life, before Christ, in the same way.** You don't have to be proud of your sinful past. You shouldn't share your testimony in a way that sounds like your boasting in your past sinfulness. But you don't have to view it all as a complete waste. You're always going to be responsible for your own actions, but all of your actions – even the sinful ones – fall within God's sovereign will and foreordained plans.
 - **So just as in Paul's case, your past failures have prepared you for your present calling.** The Lord is calling you to serve others. And like in Paul's case, if you would be more vulnerable about your former life – if you'd be willing to share your testimony more publicly – that would expand your opportunities to minister to others.

- ❖ Friends, it's because you have those life experiences – the ones you're not proud of; the ones God did not spare you from but rather ordained – **it's because you have those experiences, you're now intimately familiar with the grace of Christ in the gospel.** Now you're ready to testify to that grace, especially to those who can relate to your life experiences.
- ❖ Thank God that he calls you by his grace. Imagine how horrible it would be if God called you by anything else. What if he called you by your performance? By your righteousness? You'd be immediately disqualified.
 - **What if he called you by the standards of his Law?** You wouldn't come. You couldn't come. That would not be gospel. That would be anti-gospel. Bad news. **Thank God he didn't come to call those who are already righteous.** No, he came to call those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those who are poor in spirit. Those who mourn. Those who are meek. When he calls, he calls you by his grace.

What the Gospel Does in Us Decisively

- ❖ So we've seen where the gospel comes from originally, and we just talked about how the gospel applies to us personally. Now let's consider what the gospel does in us decisively. **When the Lord does call you by his grace – when he applies the saving benefits of the gospel to you – what happens in you?** What sort of conclusive, decisive effect does the gospel have on us? What does it do in us?
 - Again, Paul is answering those questions as a means of refuting those rivals who were accusing him of misconstruing a gospel he learned from human authorities. So he recalls his former life and the radical change attributed to his conversion as a way to defend the divine source and authority of the gospel he preaches.
 - Look at v13, *“¹³For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”*
- ❖ **He brings up his former life in Judaism as a way to stress just how inconceivable it is for him to be a Christian.** There is no human reason as to why Paul would reject his former life and former zeal for Jewish tradition – *unless* something outside himself and greater than himself confronted him and utterly changed the course of his life.
 - **The point is that no flesh and blood, no human authority or tradition, could have changed him 180-degrees.** To put him on a completely different trajectory. He joined the movement that, not so long ago, he vehemently hated and zealously suppressed. No mortal power can transform a nationalistic Jew into a lover of Gentiles.
 - It would be like a former KKK leader becoming an ardent Civil Rights activist. Or like the staunchest defender of Hamas suddenly becoming the staunchest defender of Zionism. You would find that hard to believe. **People so deeply engrained in a particular worldview don't change like that.** Especially so quickly and so radically.

- ❖ And that's Paul's point. **His conversion from chief persecutor of the church to chief preacher of the gospel should be evidence enough that God is the One who – not only changed his mind – but changed his life altogether.**
 - Man's gospel can improve your character. Man's gospel can make you a nicer person. A more agreeable, friendlier person. But only God's gospel can make you into a new creation – where the old is gone and the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). Only God's gospel can grant you a new life and a new identity. **There's a significant difference between man's gospel and God's gospel when it comes down to what it does in us.** But sadly, many today don't recognize the difference and confuse the superficial effects of man's gospel with Christian conversion.
 - In other words, I don't think we expect much nowadays from conversion. As long as the person is nicer than before and more committed to church, we chalk it up as a genuine conversion.

- ❖ **But Christian conversion – according to Paul's own teaching and testimony – will result in a 180-degree shift from death to life.** From the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. From hostility with God to peace with God. It'll involve receiving a new life and a new identity in Christ.
 - That was evident in Paul's case. Since his conversion, everyone marveled at his new identity. Look at v23. Believers in the churches of Judea didn't know him personally. *“They only were hearing it said, “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.””*

- ❖ That's the power of conversion. **The church's greatest enemy can become its greatest apostle.** It can be *that* dramatic of a change. But notice how a true instance of Christian conversion – as spectacular as it might be – won't result in praise directed towards the one who is converted. The praise will always be for the God who does the converting. Look at v24. *“And they glorified God because of me.”*
 - When people heard Paul's testimony, they didn't come away praising Paul. They didn't marvel at him. They didn't lionize him. No – because his was a true instance of genuine conversion – everyone glorified God because of Paul.

- ❖ Now I realize some of you read that, and you aren't so sure if anyone would be glorifying God because of you and your testimony. **Your conversion seems so bland compared to Paul's. Your testimony seems far from spectacular.** You might even describe it as boring. And it makes you wonder sometimes if you've been genuinely converted.
 - Now that's not necessarily a question to shy away from. Sometimes we need a healthy introspection and to examine whether or not we've been genuinely converted. So don't be afraid when someone asks: **Have you been converted?**
 - Just make sure you understand the question. I didn't ask if you've been educated with knowledge of the gospel. I didn't ask if you've been indoctrinated with good theology. I didn't ask if you've been conditioned to go to church and small group.

- ❖ **I asked if you've been converted – converted to Christ.** And you know if you have been – not by measuring your testimony up against Paul's or any other saint's. Not by asking if your conversion is spectacular enough. If the amount of change in your life is great enough.
 - **No, you know if you've been converted if you've placed your hope in Christ and in Christ alone for your salvation.** Granted, you were not the chief of sinners like Paul or God's greatest enemy. But don't sell yourself short. Don't diminish how bad off you were before Christ. **You were a great sinner and great enemy against God.**
 - And though your conversion may not be all that spectacular in the eyes of man – **I can assure you that it took the same amount of Jesus's blood on the cross to save you as it took to save the Apostle Paul.** In God's eyes, your conversion is just as dramatic as Paul's. Both your testimony and Paul's are powerful testimonies of grace.

- ❖ The point is that Paul's spectacular testimony is not intended for anyone to measure up against and feel doubtful of their own salvation. It's intended for the opposite effect. **Paul's testimony has been forever recorded in the pages of Scripture and regularly preached for two millennia of church history – so that countless souls will hear his testimony and draw the unmistakable conclusion that no one is beyond saving.** If the chief of all sinners can be converted, then no one is beyond the reach of God's converting grace. **Why should any of us worry about our salvation if our hope is in the same Savior in whom Paul put his hope?** In other words, his testimony should give us even more confidence.
 - I'll leave you with the Apostle's own words in **1 Timothy 1:15-17**. *“¹⁵The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”*