



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
You are Your Best Argument

Galatians 1:11-24

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For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And 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. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Introduction

Last week, we reflected on the theme of people-pleasing. Paul introduces this theme into the letter here in the opening verses. This is a surprising move, until you realize that people-pleasing was a big part of the crisis in Galatia; and thus people-pleasing was a critical issue Paul needed to address. The Galatians had succumbed to the temptation to people-please; so, too, had the Judaizers before them. Evidently, the only person who wasn't playing the people-pleaser was Paul. He seeks to demonstrate this throughout the letter (cf. 2:5-6; 2:11-14; 4:13-18; 6:12-14), beginning with the string of rhetorical questions: "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (1:10).

We see Paul, then, defending his character. And he does so because he knows that the message he preaches is closely tied to the kind of messenger he is. If the messenger can't be trusted, then neither can the message. So he must defend himself in order to defend his gospel.

But how? With autobiography, that's how. For Paul, autobiography becomes his argument. He tells his own story, not only to vindicate himself, but more importantly to vindicate his gospel. Thus, he begins his defense of himself and his gospel this way: "For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel" (1:11).

It's as if Paul's saying to the Galatians: Despite what you might think, or what you've been told, the gospel I preach isn't geared for easy consumption by Gentiles; in fact, it's not even the kind of gospel a human being would come up with or invent. My gospel didn't originate in a creative brainstorming session; nor did I pick it up at the mall, see it advertised on television, read it in a book, or buy it online. "For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:12).

However, notice where he goes from there. Not to a string of tightly argued proofs from theology; nor to a long series of biblical proof-texts. Instead, Paul simply tells his story: "For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism . . ." (1:13). You see, he argues for the divine origin and nature of the gospel by describing the profound change the gospel has made in his life. His own autobiography is his argument. This is because Paul knows he is his best argument; his transformed life is the most compelling case he can make for the truth of the gospel.

And it's no different for you, friend. You are your best argument. Do you realize that? Your changed life is your best argument for the truth of the gospel. It is your most powerful apologetic. Nothing argues more forcefully for the reality of the gospel. Nothing makes the truth of the gospel more real to others. Nothing brings the power of the gospel closer to others so they can see it and indeed touch it. Your life, changed by the gospel, is your best argument for the truth of the gospel. *You are your best argument!*

Breathing Threats and Murder

You are your best argument for the truth of the gospel, particularly when your life is changed *against all odds*. It's one thing to believe the gospel and be changed by it when everything in your life seems to point in that direction. It's another thing altogether to be changed by the gospel when everything in your life seems to be working against that ever happening.

That was Paul's situation before he met the Lord Jesus Christ. If ever there was an unlikely candidate to become a Christian, it was Paul. Two things made it highly unlikely; indeed, humanly speaking, completely impossible. First, he was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, in fact. As he says: "And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my father" (1:14).

But his Pharisaic beliefs made him, secondly, a persecutor of the Christian faith; not just opposed to the faith, but aggressively opposed, to the point of violence. Paul reminds the Galatians how he "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (1:13). Listen to the way Luke, in the Book of Acts, describes the pre-converted Paul, or Saul as he was called: "But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (8:3). Saul the Pharisee was, as Luke says a bit later, "breathing threats and murder" against the church (9:1). Such was his opposition to the faith.

Paul was obviously, then, a tough nut to crack. He was an excellent Pharisee. And excellent Pharisees don't make easy converts; but not because there's anything particularly unique to

being a Pharisee. It's because excellent Pharisees, like excellent athletes or musicians or academics or mothers or businessmen, have so much to take pride in. And this was Paul's fundamental problem; not primarily his Pharisaism or even his persecution of the church, but his *pride*.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Phil. 3:4-6).

Pride, or what Paul calls here "confidence in the flesh," this is what blinds you to your need for Christ; this is what makes it impossible, humanly speaking, for you to come to Christ. When you've put your confidence in your own background or status or achievements, you find it very difficult to come to Christ. Perhaps this is the very thing that's keeping you from coming to Christ. This is why Jesus says that unless you receive the kingdom like a little child you cannot enter it (Mark 10:15).

Pride. It's insurmountable. Left to ourselves, we can't climb over ourselves to get to Christ. But the good news is this: God is sovereign in salvation! And when he transforms your life against all odds, as he did with Paul, it proves to you and to everyone else the truth Paul himself knew so well: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But 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. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Tim. 1:12-17).

You see, God's got a specific strategy when he saves the seemingly un-savable. He wants to show forth his patience; if he can have mercy on that guy, he can have mercy on anyone, even on me!

So, don't lose confidence in the power of God to change lives. Never give up hope that God can change even the staunchest opponents of the Christian faith. Don't forget that even the most hardened of atheists is never more than a moment away from conversion. Thus, should God choose to reveal his Son to, say, a Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris, a Hugh Hefner or Ted Turner, a Charlie Sheen or Lindsay Lohan, a Kim Jong-il or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, nothing's going to stop him. When it comes to saving souls, God always gets the job done. God is sovereign in salvation!

God can transform lives against all odds. In fact, he loves to do so because it's powerful proof of the truth of the gospel.

A Revelation of Jesus Christ

You are your best argument for the truth of the gospel, not only when the change in your life is against all odds, but when the change in your life *comes from out of nowhere*. This is how Paul's own transformation came: literally, from out of nowhere. He was busy advancing in Judaism and wreaking havoc in the church, "when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me" (1:15). It was like being struck with a burst of light from the sun; in fact, that's precisely what happened. In Paul's own words:

"As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do' (Acts 22:6-11).

We sometimes talk about finding God. But the truth is that we're found by God. The Apostle Paul didn't so much find God, as God found him and revealed his Son to him. The same was true for the Galatians themselves, as Paul reminds them: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God" (4:9). And the same is true for you, if you have found Christ and made him Lord of your life. You were found by God. From out of nowhere, as it were, Jesus Christ stepped onto the scene of your life and saved you.

Sometimes God will show up when you least expect him. Out of nowhere, he'll simply appear like he did one Friday afternoon, December 17, 1992. There I was, sitting in the corner booth of the McDonald's at the intersection of 96th and Meridian in my hometown of Carmel, Indiana. It was just an ordinary McDonald's, one we used to bike to as kids in the summer for an ice cream cone. Now, I was a young adult, sixteen, in fact; a junior in high school. And I found myself sitting across the table from a man I hardly knew. There I was sipping my Diet Coke through a straw, making small talk the best I knew how, when all of a sudden this man drew on his napkin the story of the gospel. And, then, from out of nowhere, God showed up! And I got saved. And my life, instantly, began to change, as though from out of nowhere.

You see, when the change in your life comes from out of nowhere, it makes clear to everyone that *it is by the grace of God that you are what you are*. Paul understood this as well as anyone could. He viewed himself as "one untimely born" (1 Cor. 15:8); he thought of himself as "the least of the apostle, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:9). Yet, it was his own sense of unworthiness that enabled him to grasp the grace of God for what it truly is, and caused him to say: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).

By the grace of God, the great Apostle Paul was what he was. And so, too, for you and for me: by the grace of God we are what we are. Nothing else explains who you are—or who you're not. Nothing else can make sense of why you are in Christ Jesus and someone else isn't. Only grace makes sense of who you are; only grace explains your life. And the grace of the gospel at work in your life is the most powerful argument you have for the reality of the gospel.

The Persecutor Becomes the Persecuted

You are your best argument for the truth of the gospel, then, not only when your life changes against all odds and from out of nowhere but, thirdly, and most importantly, *when the change in your life is so real that others see it and say so.*

This is what happened in Paul's case; and he's careful to remind the Galatians of it. As he tells them: "I was still unknown in person to the churches in Judea that are in Christ" (1:22). Although many of the believers in and around Jerusalem still didn't know Paul personally, his reputation nevertheless preceded him. In fact, so dramatic was the change in his life, and so well-known was it among the early Christians, that evidently they had a specific way of talking about Paul. They referred to him as *the persecutor turned preacher*; in fact, Paul tells the Galatians specifically what was said of him: "They only were hearing it said: 'He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy'" (1:23).

Obviously, in Paul's case, the reversal was real; it couldn't have been more real. And the change was dramatic; so dramatic, in fact, it was undeniable. Who could argue against the reality of Paul's life?

But more than that: not only were others convinced of the power of the gospel, but they were *made to worship because of its power in Paul's own life.* "And they glorified God because of me" (1:24). You see, you are your best argument for the truth of the gospel when the change in your life is so real that others see it and praise God because of you. Your life is a powerful apologetic for the reality of the gospel when the light of your life so shines that others see it and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

When the change in your life is so real that others see it and say so, it proves to you and to everyone else that *the gospel truly is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.* What else can explain these dramatic reversals in the lives of countless Christians down through the ages? What else can explain the profound transformation in your own life?

Sometimes we domesticate the gospel and forget it is *itself* the power of God. The gospel's not a flannel graph illustration to charm children; it's the power of God to transform the life of even the most hardened of criminals. The gospel's not a mere formula for how you get saved; it is divine power that actually brings about your salvation from first to last. The gospel's not simply a message about how to get right with God; it's the very presence of Jesus Christ himself enabling you to be right with God—and to live right before God. The gospel's not a quaint story about who Jesus was and what he did; it's a declaration about who Jesus is even now, an announcement that creates the reality of which it speaks.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. You and I need to treat it as such, in the way we speak about the gospel, in the way we tell our own story of being changed by the gospel, and, of course, in the way we live our lives in light of the reality of the gospel.

Conclusion

John Newton, the eighteenth-century pastor, was a man who understood the power of the gospel and, of course, the grace of God. He was the author of that timeless hymn, “Amazing Grace,” whose lyrics seem to tell each of our stories better than we ourselves could. But before John Newton was the great Christian hymn writer, he was a rascal, a slave trader, a rebel. Yet the mercy of God intervened in his life; the Lord Jesus Christ interposed his grace; Jesus got in Newton’s way and ultimately saved Newton from himself.

Shortly before his death, Newton composed his own epitaph; it reads like something the Apostle Paul might have written. He wanted it inscribed on plain marble with no other monument or inscription, lest anything distract from the grace of God which made him what he was. It reads:

JOHN NEWTON,
CLERK,
ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE,
A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA,
WAS,
BY THE RICH MERCY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR
JESUS CHRIST,
PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED,
AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH
HE HAD LONG LABOURED TO DESTROY.¹

John Newton’s life, a powerful argument for the truth and power of the gospel!

Friends, the single best argument for or against Christianity has always been the same: *Christians*. A superficial, hypocritical life is a strong case against the claim that the gospel saves. But a transformed life, lived to the glory of God, is powerful proof of the truth of the gospel. You are your best argument. May you, therefore, so experience the grace of God in the gospel that others might see your transformed life and glorify God because of you.

Amen.

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¹ Josiah Bull, *The Life of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2007 [org. 1868]), pp. 310-311.