

**“PAUL’S STORY”**

Several commentators have noted that the book of Galatians can be divided into three main sections, each of which is about two chapters in length. The first two chapters are primarily biographical, as Paul recounts the story of how he came to be an apostle. The next two chapters are theological in nature, as Paul expounds the doctrine of justification by faith alone. And the last two chapters are essentially ethical in nature, as Paul applies the theology of the preceding chapters to explain how believers should conduct their lives in this world. The passage we are studying today is clearly a part of the biographical section of the letter. After expressing his dismay over how the Galatians were turning away from Christ to embrace the false gospel that was being taught by the Judaizers, Paul now takes special care to show the Galatians that the gospel that they received from him was indeed the true gospel, the one gospel against which all other supposed gospels are to be judged. And in order to show them this, Paul writes about how he came to be a minister of the gospel. He tells the Galatians the story of his conversion and of his calling as an apostle. Paul’s purpose in doing this is to defend his apostolic authority against the accusations that the Judaizers were leveling against him. They were trying to undermine Paul’s message by attacking the credibility of the messenger. Paul defends himself against these attacks because he wanted the Galatians to know that the gospel that they received from him was indeed the real thing.

Paul begins by saying that the gospel that he preached is not man’s gospel. It is not of human origin. The very nature of the gospel message testifies to this truth. All of the

religions that have been invented by man share one thing in common: they are all based upon some kind of human works. In man-made religion, salvation is always attained on the basis of human effort of some sort. This was clearly the case with the “different gospel” that was being preached by the Judaizers. They were telling the Galatians that they needed to become circumcised and follow other Old Testament ceremonial laws in order to find full acceptance with God. And we see the same sort of thing in all of the false gospels and false religions that are proclaimed in our world today. In all of them, the way to be accepted by God is to have a certain kind of attitude, to do certain things, to not do certain things, to be a basically nice person. But the gospel that Paul preached was not like that. It was not based upon human works but upon the grace of God. It declared that a person could only be saved by the free grace of God, and not by any kind of performance on his or her part.

The thing that made Paul’s gospel, which is the only true gospel, distinct was its origin. It did not come from man but from God. And Paul supports this claim by going out of his way in this section to demonstrate his independent standing in relation to the other apostles. He did not learn the gospel from them. It was given to him directly though a revelation from God. This is why his gospel is the standard against which all other supposed gospels are to be assessed. Paul made his point very clear: his message was God-given. He was claiming the same kind of authority for his preaching that Peter wrote about in describing the authority of God’s prophets: “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the

Holy Spirit.” [2 Pet. 1:21] That is what Paul was saying about the gospel that he preached: it was not produced by man but by God.

Paul is talking here about the doctrine of revelation. He even uses the word “revelation” to describe how he received the message that he preached about Jesus Christ. It is because of the doctrine of revelation that we refer to the Bible as the Word of God. The argument that Paul makes here to defend the authority of his preaching is the same argument that we use to defend the authority of the Bible. Of course, the doctrine of revelation is not unique to Christianity. Other religions make similar claims about the authority of their sacred writings. Muslims believe that the Koran was given by divine revelation. Mormons believe that the Book of Mormon was given by divine revelation. But the thing that sets the Bible apart from those writings is the context in which it was given. Both the Koran and the Book of Mormon were produced in a sort of vacuum. They were the product of visions purportedly experienced by Mohammed and Joseph Smith, respectively. While there are portions of the Bible that were given through visions, the thing that sets the Bible apart is that it was given in the context of the historical outworking of God’s great plan of redemption. As the great theologian Geerhardus Vos pointed out, God’s revelation in the Bible goes hand in hand with his works of redemption within history. In Vos’s words, “Revelation is the interpretation of redemption.” [*Biblical Theology*, 6] For this reason, we can say that Paul’s God-given message, the apostolic message, which is the same message contained in the pages of the

New Testament, is the definitive interpretation of what Jesus accomplished in his life, death and resurrection.

Christianity is a revealed religion. It is not man's thoughts about God. It is a God-given message to man, a message that explains what God has done to make a way of salvation for mankind. This is a claim that people in our culture find extremely offensive. Who are we Christians to claim that our religion, and ours alone, is God-given? Such a claim sounds like the height of arrogance to people in our culture. It is in direct conflict with the prevailing view about things pertaining to God and religion. I have come to refer to this mindset as "I-like-to-believe-ism." When I have conversations with people about God, there is often a point in the conversation when they say, "Well, I like to believe" and then they proceed to tell me what it is that they like to believe. And what is their basis for these things that they like to believe? Nothing but themselves. It is simply what they like to believe. It is purely subjective. It is man's gospel, which is another way of saying that it is no gospel at all.

After making his bold claim about the divine origin of his gospel in verses 11-12, Paul then goes on to prove this claim from the facts of his autobiography. First, he talks about his life before his conversion. He was fanatical in his practice of the Jewish religion. As he writes in his letter to the Philippians, he was "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. 3:5-6] Before his conversion, Paul saw the church and its teachings as

blasphemous, and he sought to destroy it. We read in the book of Acts of how he dragged both men and women off to prison because of their Christian faith, and of how he cast his vote against them when they were sentenced to death. [Acts 8:3; 26:10] Paul's point in mentioning his past life in Judaism is clear. He is pointing out that he was not the kind of man who would be able to be won over to Christ by human persuasion.

Next, Paul tells us about how he came to place his faith in Christ. And the thing that stands out here is the emphasis Paul places upon the gracious initiative of God in saving him. First, he says that God set him apart before he was born. He was chosen to belong to Christ, chosen to be an apostle of Christ, from before his birth. Second, he says that God called him by his grace. This is referring to God's effectual call, the call that produced Paul's new birth. And Paul says that God is the one who did it. And third, Paul says that God was pleased to reveal his Son, Jesus, to him. It was God's good pleasure to save Paul. It was an act of God's free grace. It pleased God to save Paul. And it is clear that Paul did not do anything to merit this salvation. What was Paul doing when Christ was revealed to him? He was seeking to destroy Christ's church. By persecuting the church he was persecuting Christ. This is why Jesus called out to him as he made his way to Damascus, saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" [Acts 9:4] Paul was trying to destroy the church that Christ shed his precious blood to save. He deserved nothing from God's hand but judgment. Yet God was pleased to save him. John Stott paraphrases what Paul is saying here in these words: "in my fanaticism I was bent upon a course of persecution and destruction, but God (whom I had left out of my calculations)

arrested me and changed my headlong course. All my raging fanaticism was no match for the good pleasure of God.” [*The Message of Galatians*, 32]

After describing his conversion, Paul then moves on to talk about what happened next. He says that he did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did he go to Jerusalem to see the apostles. Instead, he went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. This trip into Arabia is not mentioned in Luke’s account of Paul’s conversion in Acts, but Paul’s point in mentioning it is to emphasize the fact that the gospel that he preached was not shaped by any instruction that he received from human hands.

Paul did go to visit the apostles in Jerusalem three years after his conversion, but this was only after he had begun preaching the gospel. Furthermore, he only saw Peter and James on that visit, and he was only there for a period of fifteen days. It is easy to see that he is downplaying the significance of this visit. He did not go to Jerusalem to receive instruction or approval from the other apostles. Clearly, he could not have received his gospel from the apostles in Jerusalem. He preached the same gospel that they did, but his authority as an apostle was not derived from their apostolic authority. He was not a “sub-apostle,” but a full-fledged one. He was, as he said at the start of this letter, “an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father.”

From Jerusalem Paul went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Cilicia was the region in which his hometown of Tarsus was located). These regions were well to the north and west of Judea, so that Paul was still a relative unknown among the churches of Judea.

Again, Paul's point in mentioning this is to show that his gospel was not shaped by the influence of man, not even by the churches that were beginning to be established among the cities of Judea. His gospel was not the product of church tradition. It was given to him by God.

Paul does say, however, that the Jewish Christians in Judea heard about his ministry, and he says that they were amazed to learn that this man who once persecuted the church was now building it up through his preaching. And they praised God for the transformation that he had brought about in Paul's life. Take special note of that last verse: "And they glorified God because of me." They did not glorify Paul. They glorified God, because it was only by God's gracious initiative that this transformation took place. Paul was entirely God's workmanship.

The autobiographical material contained in this passage provides us with a pattern of Christian conversion. Paul is in many ways the representative Christian. The spiritual transformation that took place in Paul's life is something that takes place in the life of every believer in Jesus Christ. The details of how it takes place vary from case to case, but the fundamental reality remains the same. If you have been born again, then you have experienced the very same thing that the apostle Paul experienced. God set you apart before you were born, appointing you to eternal life in Christ. And at some point in your lifetime, even though you may not be able to pinpoint exactly when it was, he called you by his grace. He was pleased to reveal his Son to you, not because of any works on your part, but entirely because of his free grace. And if you belong to Jesus Christ, your

life has been transformed, just as Paul's was. Now, depending on how and when you came to faith in Christ, you may not be able to see a radical transformation in your life. This is probably the case if you had the benefit of being raised and nurtured in the church from the time of your birth. But even if that is your experience, the same transforming power that changed Paul from a persecutor of the faith to a proclaimer of the faith is at work within you. Think of it this way. What kind of life would you be living right now were it not for the presence of Christ in your heart? Where would your priorities be? What would your relationships look like? What would you be living for? Where would your hope reside? You would be a completely different person were it not for Jesus Christ. When you think of it that way, you will begin to get a glimpse of the difference that Christ has made in your life. And the more you realize this, the more you will do exactly what the churches of Judea did when they heard about what Christ had done in Paul's life: you will glorify God because of what he has been pleased to do in your life.