

God's Amazing Grace

Galatians 1:10-24

Last week we begun studying one of the most important books in the New Testament. I say this because in this letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul is confronting the definition of the gospel itself. Last week we learned that the church in Galatia was under attack. Not by soldiers, but by religious leaders who were teaching a different gospel than Paul had originally taught them.

Paul's gospel was that we are far more wicked than we ever could imagine, but yet we are far more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever could hope. **In other words, salvation is totally by grace.** We can't earn it, and we don't deserve it. **God saves us because he loves us.**

The difference was simple. These new teachers were saying that we are saved by faith, plus religious obedience. Or faith plus the law. For them, salvation was not a gift we receive from our loving Father, it was a wage we earn from a holy judge who keeps record of all our actions.

Paul says, however, that this is no gospel at all, and those who teach this false gospel should be condemned. A very strong accusation to make. *What right does he have to accuse them? How do we know Paul's gospel is the true one? Who is right and who is wrong?*

Today we will answer this question, and again we will see the true nature of Paul's gospel. **Grace.** But first, let's read the letter.

READ Galatians 1:9-24

Everyone has a story to tell. But for those of us who are followers of Jesus, we have two stories. The first is who we were before God saved us, and the second is who we are now that God has saved us. This is because we are born again through our faith, and God begins a great work of making us new creations. When a believer shares this story, it is called a testimony. In this section of Paul's letter, he is giving us his testimony of God's grace in his life.

He is retelling his conversion story of how God saved him. But his motivation isn't so that people would marvel at what a great man he is now. He's not trying to draw attention to himself. He is using his story to refute the claims of people who want to discredit his message, and he wants it all to point to God's amazing grace.



First, Paul wants us to be sure that his Gospel message did not come through personal reflection, reasoning, or deep thinking. It didn't come through talking about it with other church leaders. And after he received this message, it was confirmed with the other Apostles to be true.

In fact, he reminds them that until his conversion he was hostile towards new followers of Jesus. In verse 13 he tells us that he wanted to destroy the new church. There was no way it was a gradual process as a result of his own line of thinking. In other words, Paul didn't invent the message he is proclaiming. Actually, it was the polar opposite of what he had been doing! Before Paul was a Christian, he was so violently opposed to Jesus that even watching and approving the murder of innocent Christians had no effect on him.

So what happened? How did he changed?

READ Acts 9:1-19

So what happened? Paul met Jesus. This was not a vision or trance. The physical, resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul and everything changed. The man who once opposed Jesus was now baptized as a new follower of Jesus.

Paul's point in all of this is to establish himself as an authority on the subject. He is claiming that every other message about God and salvation is false. We are only saved through faith in Jesus alone. If you come with another message, God will condemn it. And based on Paul's testimony, and the affirmation from the Apostles who walked with Jesus during his life on earth, we can trust him.

But Paul's testimony doesn't only establish his authority. It also illustrates one of the most important aspects of the gospel itself. His story demonstrates what grace truly is.

Paul was a man who had done many terrible things. He had violently persecuted the church, killed innocent Christians solely because they believed in Jesus. And just before his conversion, he was on his way to put more Christians in prison for their faith. He was a very sinful man, filled with hate.

Yet at the same time, he was a man who had done many religious deeds. He had spent years seeking to live according to the Jewish laws and traditions. He was more zealous and righteous than anybody his age, and had become a high level religious leader. And yet, all of this religious activity had not made him right with God. Paul was the same type of person that is opposing him now. They say we are saved by works, and that is what he believed. They say we need to obey all of the



commandments in order to be right with God, just as Paul had been doing his whole life.

Paul is saying: *I've been there and I've done that! I know all about that type of religion. But I know now that you cannot make yourself acceptable to God by religious activity!*

Before his conversion he was a zealous rule keeper, full of pride, and he violently opposed Christianity. His testimony is a powerful witness to the heart of the Christian message - **the gospel of grace.**

Grace is the free, unmerited favor of God, working powerfully in our hearts and minds to change us. And there is no clearer example than Paul, that salvation is by grace alone. We are saved despite our sin and failure, and not through our moral and religious performance.

Through Paul's life we see that **no one is so good that they don't need the grace of the gospel, nor so bad that they can't receive the grace of the gospel.** Paul was very religious, but he was set free by the gospel. Paul was also deeply sinful, but he was rescued and forgiven by the gospel.

As Paul looks back, he can see that all along God's grace had been preparing him for this day. In verse 15 he says that God had "set him apart from birth". He is showing us that the grace of God had been shaping his heart, and preparing him all of his life for the things that God would call him to do.

This is astonishing. Paul had been resisting God, but God was using all of this experiences and even his failures to prepare him for his conversion. All the knowledge of the Bible and religion, all the zeal, the training, the effort Paul used to oppose the church - all were being used by God to humble him and equip him to be God's instrument for building His church. **God had been working all along to use Paul to establish the very faith that he had once opposed.**

We don't just see this in Paul's life though. It is a major theme in the Bible. God uses everything, both the good and the bad, to accomplish his purposes. Even opposition to God, and sin against God, will be seen in the end as having done nothing but bring about God's plan.

Paul shows us through his testimony, that the gospel gives us a lens through which we can review our own lives and see God preparing us and shaping us, even through our own failures and sins, the becomes vessels of His grace in the world.



As you look back at your life, can you not see this? How God had used all of your past to bring you to this point today? Your successes and failures, your victories and defeats? He uses all of it to prepare our hearts to believe in the Gospel, and to be used by God for his purposes in the world today.

He does all this because he loves us. Not because we are worthy of it. Paul was not worthy of God's love. Paul received God's love and grace simply because it "pleased God" (verse 16) to give Paul his love and grace. **He loves us simply because he loves us.** And this is the only kind of love we can ever feel secure in, because it's the only kind of love we cannot possibly lose. **This is grace.**

The God of grace saves sinners like Paul. He reveals Jesus to both the proud and the evil. The religious and the rebellious. And he is working in our lives even before he saves us, to bring us to faith and to equip us to serve him.

But that is not where grace finishes its work. Grace has continued to work in Paul's life. Paul is not only showing who he was, and how God saved him, but also what a life lived under God's grace looks like. We will see this throughout the whole letter to the Galatians, but for this week we will focus on one particular idea. This whole section of Paul's testimony starts with Paul saying in verse 10, "Vado forse cercando il favore degli uomini, o quello di Dio?" Paul is asking a question but the answer is obvious. He is seeking to please God!

The gospel frees us from a life enslaved to pleasing other people, or needing to seek human approval for the things that we do. In other words, the gospel produces confident and fearless followers of Jesus, doing what is right without concern for the approval or opinion of other people.

Another way to put this would be "fear of man." Which is in contrast to "fear of God." When the Bible talks about the fear of God, it doesn't simply mean to be frightened by Him. The best way I can describe this is to think about the first time I stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon. It's not that I was afraid, like I would be afraid of a man threatening me with a knife. It was truly wonderful what I was seeing. I was completely in awe, almost breathless. But yet as I stood near the edge of the cliff, I was overtaken by a reverent fear of the magnitude of what was in front of me.

Fear of God, in the Bible, **means to be filled with awe and wonder and attraction to His greatness.** Therefore, "fear of man" must be to have a similar view of people. It means you elevate their importance, or hold them in awe. You crave their approval, or fear their disapproval. You are giving them control over your hearts when you let them determine your actions. In many ways, we become slaves to



them. We desire the approval of other people so badly, that we will do anything we can to get it.

That is the difference between men and God. With men, we have to work to earn their approval. With God, he already approves of us in Christ. This is how the gospel changes us and sets us free. When we trust in Christ, we receive God's full and complete approval. When He sees a believer, He sees Jesus. This is because of the substitution that happened on the cross. Jesus took all of our sin, and he gave us all of his righteousness. **Through Jesus, God is fully pleased with us.**

Before we believe in the gospel, living a life that pleases God was a weight. We did it out of duty, so that God would accept us. But now we can be assured of God's love and approval, so **we desire to obey God**. Not so that he will accept me or save me. We obey God out of gratitude, knowing that he has already saved me!

God's grace liberates us to live in a way that pleases God. It gives us both assurance of our salvation, and motivation to live in radical obedience. **We do not live God's way in order to become his children, we live God's way out of gratitude that we already are God's children!**

In summary, Paul shared his story with the churches of Galatia for two reasons. First, he was defending his authority to declare the only true Gospel of grace. Second, he is reminding them that it is the grace of the gospel that changes lives, and makes us acceptable to God. Not religious obedience. But ultimately, his desire for all of this is in verse 24. That they would "glorify God" because of Paul's story.

So my prayer today for each of us is just that. As we consider Paul's story, that we would give glory to God for his ability to save the proud and religious, and at the same time save the worst of sinners. This means that there is hope for each one of us. If God can save Paul, he can save you. **No one is so good that they don't need the grace of the gospel, nor so bad that they can't receive the grace of the gospel.** So give glory to God today by worshipping him for his unending, amazing grace.



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