



LESSON 3: "The Goal of the Gospel" **Date:** Sept 7/Sept 21, 2014
TEXT: Galatians 1:13-24

INTRODUCTION

The message of Galatians can be summarized by this quotation, "Hallelujah! We are free to struggle; we're not struggling to be free. Your blood bought and makes us children. Children, drop your chains and sing." Freedom to struggle against sin and not be enslaved by it; freedom to sing praise to a Rescuer and not experience eternal hopelessness—these are the goals of the gospel that further compel us to *make the gospel of grace our priority*.

We've learned from Paul of the nature of the gospel and the source of the gospel; in this final section of chapter one, Paul will use his own life to illustrate the goal of the gospel. Before we jump in to Galatians 1:13-24, let's again look at some details behind this letter.

Background: On the First Missionary Journey, Paul faced persecution in every city in Galatian that he visited (with the exception of Derbe—Acts 13:14-14:28). However, since he had also reaped spiritual fruit in those cities, he refused to abandon them. So, on the return leg of his journey, he went back to those very places of violence (14:21) in order to further disciple the believers. Acts 14:22-23 describes his ministry on this second visit this way, "[He was] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed."

This discipling heart of Paul was just as evident a few years later when he decided to go on a Second Missionary Journey (~AD 48/49-51) to the same region of Galatia. Acts says that the Holy Spirit initiated the First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:2), but it was Paul's own discipleship burden that provoked the second (Acts 15:36). His stated reason for this second missions endeavor was to "return and visit the brothers in every city where [they] proclaimed the Word of the Lord [i.e., the cities of

Galatia] and see how they [were]" (Acts 15:36). The ministry was again one of "strengthening the churches" (cf. 16:5).

From this purpose, evident in his first two missionary journeys and throughout his ministry career, we learn that the great evangelistic apostle understood the vital importance of discipleship for all those who responded to his preaching in saving faith. Clearly, his apostolic mission was more than our strict definition of evangelism; it involved the discipleship of souls and the planting of growing and strengthened churches. Paul's example of active concern for the growth and stability of his converts is an important model for us (cf. Galatians 4:11; Colossians 1:24-2:5).

In our passage today, we're going to get a feel for what compelled Paul to be so concerned with building and growing people. In part, it was due to his understanding of the goal of the gospel. The gospel isn't an esoteric theory or static message—it is "power" (even as we saw in Lesson 1, vv. 1-5). And he knew exactly what that power could and ought to be doing in the lives of others, for he had experienced it himself. He wanted all Christians to know the fullness of the gospel's ability—he wanted them to know its goal!

Illustration: When you turn the key in the ignition of your car, a lot begins to immediately happen under the hood. See, located within that engine are 4 to 8 cylinders containing the pistons and the spark plugs. As the pistons move downward, air and fuel is drawn into the cylinder. The pistons then move upward compressing the fuel-air mixture. The spark plugs at the top of the cylinder finally ignite the mixture causing the engine to start and all its functions to fully operate.

Similarly, when spiritual life is ignited within a soul through the power of the God's grace, it commences a whole process of energy and synergy. And as you have a goal for turning the key in your car's ignition (i.e., for the engine to turn on so that you can use the car to go somewhere), so God has a goal in graciously awakening the gospel in your heart. And, as you prioritize your car key, being ever so careful that you don't misplace it and always have access to it, so we should prioritize the gospel of grace as the key to God's purpose for us.

Friend, you were not rescued only to remain stagnant or indifferent (i.e., idling in the garage). No, God saved you for a purpose. Therefore, ***make the gospel of grace your priority***, so that you might experience the glorious goal God has for you.

In verses 13-24, Paul becomes very autobiographical as he illustrates the goal of the gospel. From his testimony, we discover that the Lord's gospel-work has two aims.

TO TRANSFORM YOU (vv. 13-23)

Paul's life is a stunning example of this first goal. In fact, this transformation was such a defining aspect of Paul's testimony that it became a regular conversation topic among early Christians (v. 24; cf. Acts 9:21). Paul's dramatic salvation experience, like ours, contained three main acts.

1. ***Past religion (vv. 13-14)***

Paul first begins to describe his "former life." For him, it was full of religion, but a works-righteousness or self-righteousness (i.e., Judaism). So committed was he to his religious system, that he zealously opposed all seemingly unorthodox sects, including a growing group known as "The Way" (i.e., the way of salvation, or the way of God—Acts 9:2; 22:4; cf. Acts 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22; 16:17; 18:25, 26; Isaiah 30:21; 35:8). He testifies that he "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (v. 13; cf. Acts 8:3). While Paul had inherited this religion from his fathers (v. 14b), he eventually personalized it and devoted himself to it as his own faith (i.e., "so extremely zealous was I for" it). And his devotion was unrivaled even by those much older than him (v. 14a). Paul describes his "former" life with these poignant words in Philippians 3:4-6, "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."

Every believer has a past; every Christian has a "former life." Some of us have a similar testimony of religion and morality. Others admit to rebellion and wickedness. The common denominator in both

experiences is the presence of destructive sin and the absence of the freeing and transforming grace of God (v. 15).¹ On the one hand, even the most self-righteous individual is sinful in his very core (Isaiah 64:6; Jeremiah 17:9), and Paul himself eventually understood this, calling himself the "foremost" of "sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15-16). On the other hand, rules and rebellion offer no grace, but instead enslave and exasperate. Rules enslave us to the forever-unmet standard of "do more" and "be better," and they exasperate us with their inability to declare us righteous even in our own conscience. Rebellion enslaves us with its destructive debauchery, and it exasperates us with its failure to provide lasting satisfaction. Only God's grace can transform us from slaves to free men and women.

And such grace is what Paul remembers next in his salvation testimony.

2. ***Personal rescue (vv. 15-16a)***

Act 2 of Paul's salvation experience is the moment when he, enslaved to his own labor to earn God's favor, was freely and marvelously rescued. Paul was saved apart from himself and only by divine intervention. You can read the historical account of Paul's deliverance in Acts 9:1-31, and he rehearses it again in Acts 22:1-21 and 26:1-23. In our passage, Paul rejoices in four activities of God's gracious rescue.

a. ***Election (v. 15a)***

Paul credits God's sovereign choice alone as being the reason for his rescue: "But when He who had set me apart before I was born." This is unconditional election—in eternity past, God had chosen Paul for salvation, simply because He wanted to. Ephesians 1 confirms this over and over again (cf. John 6:37, 39):

[God] chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace...He lavished [grace] upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which he set forth in Christ...In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will...to the praise of His glory.

Such election was entirely of God and entirely of His grace!²

b. Calling (v. 15b)

While God's gracious election happened in what we refer to as "eternity past," before time and space had been created and before Paul was born, God's grace was also working in time when it issued to Paul an effective call to salvation. He remembers the time when "[God] called me by His grace." At the right time, God renewed His gracious activity toward Paul and began to draw this enemy to Himself. Jesus said in John 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." God didn't forget Paul (or you and me, for that matter), but having chosen him for eternal life in eternity past, He called Paul to salvation in real time so that he might know God's rescuing grace. And this gracious progression of God's saving activity will only continue, for as Romans 8:30 (cf. also v. 29) puts it, "Those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified."

c. Regeneration (v. 16a)

In conjunction with His Savior's gracious call was the very moment when God "was pleased to reveal His Son to me." While this undoubtedly refers to Acts 9:3-6 when Paul heard the voice of Christ and was confronted with the resurrected Lord, it also hints at the internal aspect of God's saving grace. The phrase "to me" is more literally rendered "in me." Stott explains, "We know that it was an external unveiling, for Paul claimed that he saw the risen Christ (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8, 9). Yet essentially it was an inner illumination of his soul, God shining into his heart 'to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor. 4:6)."³ This was illustrated to Paul physically in Acts 9 by his temporary loss and then regaining of sight (Acts 9:8-9, 18-19). Paul was illuminated, awakened, regenerated—the dead had come to life, because God's grace was now "in" Paul!

d. Commission (v. 16b)

The final activity of God's grace in rescuing Paul is his commission. God had delivered Paul "in order that [he] might preach Him among the Gentiles" (cf. Acts 9:15; 26:16-18). Like every believer, Paul had been saved (or "set apart," v. 15a) to serve. Ephesians 2:10 puts it this way: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Peter agrees, writing in 1 Peter 2:9, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." As for Paul, preaching Jesus so that others might experience His rescuing grace is our commission. And that privilege is itself God's grace.

As you can imagine, such a gracious rescue left an indelible mark on Paul's life. His life after conversion was never the same.

3. Present reality (vv. 16b-23)

Much of what Paul records in these final verses (i.e., Act 3) is to further prove that his message and mission were not "according to man" (vv. 11-12, NASB), so that he might further reaffirm his apostolic authority for these deceived Galatians. He carefully outlines how he "did not immediately consult with anyone" (v. 16c), least of all the apostles in Jerusalem (v. 17). When he did finally go to Jerusalem three years later (recorded in Acts 9:26-30), he only visited with Peter (i.e., Cephas) and James (the Lord's brother) for a short while (fifteen days), certainly not enough time to be re-indoctrinated with a new gospel. When he left Jerusalem and went into his hometown area (i.e., "the regions of Syria and Cilicia" whose capital is Tarsus) where he continued preaching the gospel, the churches of Judea didn't really know him at all and could only express amazement over the transformation they were hearing had happened in his life. All this is offered by Paul as proof that his apostolic ministry was from God, and he intensifies it with a vow similar to our "I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God" (v. 20)!

More relevant to our discussion of Paul's transformation by the grace of God are three characteristics now evident in Paul's life in these verses: (1) a new Christ-centered mission in life (i.e., to "preach [Christ] among the Gentiles"); (2) endurance in the face of violent opponents (i.e., he both went to Jerusalem and left Jerusalem because of persecution—Acts 9:23-26, 29-30), some of whom were undoubtedly those who used to be persecutors with him; and (3) a reliance on and relationship with Jesus (i.e., "did not consult with anyone" is literally "did not consult with flesh and blood" [in contrast to a divine or spiritual source?]; instead, he spent "three years" in Damascus and Arabia, undoubtedly preparing himself through communion with Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in Bible study and prayer⁴).

Paul's transformation had become so clear that people could only marvel, saying, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (v. 23). Paul himself never got over the incredible goal of the gospel in his own life. Listen again to his testimony as expressed in 1 Timothy 1:12-17—

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 the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Application: Titus 2:11-14 reminds us that, just like for Paul, the gospel of grace is a divine key that is intended to start the engine of transformation in our lives. It reads—

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting

for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works.

Illustration: Every temptation, then, is a homework assignment from our teacher, grace, and we know the answer—"No!" Our teacher has instructed us how to do our spiritual homework (i.e., "to renounce [deny, say no to] ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives"), and every time it gives us a worksheet full of spiritual problems (i.e., temptations and trials), it has already equipped us (and will even enable us) to handle those issues correctly. And, in so doing, our instructor will transform us into the image of Him who always answered those problems correctly.

So, let's ask ourselves some questions in order to evaluate ourselves, and we'll do so in three groupings.

Have you been obeying God's grace? Have you been learning from its teaching and doing its homework?

Do its activities of election, calling, regeneration, and commission still revive your heart unto personal holiness?⁵ Is your "former" self passing away and are you becoming new in every area? Can other people, who are usually better judges, attest to a transformation in your life? Are the marks displayed in Paul's life evident in yours—commitment to the gospel's mission, endurance through obstacles, and communion with Christ?

If transformation has stalled in your life, why is that? Was the gospel key never inserted in the first place? Or, have you just let the motor idle?

Because of what God wants the gospel to accomplish within us, we must make it a priority in our lives by responding to it in faithful obedience.

TO GLORIFY GOD (v. 24)

Verse 24 simply reads, "And they glorified God because of me." This is the ultimate goal of the gospel (cf. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14; 2:7; Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:9). Whatever Paul accomplished and whoever Paul became—it was totally regardless of Paul and all because of God's

grace. Apart from the “good news” of Jesus, Paul would have continued on his religious and rebellious path of disillusionment and destruction. But when he met Jesus, everything changed! And people knew that there was no earthly explanation for such glorious transformation. God is on a mission to magnify His glory through the gracious rescue of rebels, and our salvation, like Paul’s, is a brilliant testimony to God’s glorious grace!

Application: So again we ask, “Why should the gospel be our priority?” Well, in light of what we’ve personally rehearsed through Paul’s own spiritual drama, how can it not be our priority?! Why would such freeing transformation not be our goal? Why would we be silent about our Rescuer? Why are we not jealous for His glory, the One who we know is alone worthy? Truly, because the goal of the gospel is transforming grace in our lives and eternal glory to our gracious God, this message of “good news” must be our priority!

CONCLUSION

In this passage, a brother who experienced the power of the gospel in great ways in his own life exhorts us to make that message a priority in our own lives. When we do—when we turn the key in the ignition and fan the flame of God’s grace in our own hearts—God’s goals of transforming us and magnifying Himself will define our autobiography, too!

FOOTNOTES

¹ “Here Paul describes his former standing and activities while he was in Judaism, offering them as a kind of negative proof that his message of grace had no foundation in the beliefs,

² “Paul’s Jewish readers knew immediately that he was comparing his call to apostleship to the calls of those great men of God. He was not trying to rank himself with them but to establish unequivocally that, like theirs, his call was entirely God’s doing” (Ibid., 28).

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 33.

⁴ “The place and purpose of his sojourn in Arabia are unknown, but that was surely the place of his preparation for ministry.... The two periods of preaching in Damascus and the in—between sojourn in Arabia alone with Lord Jesus—learning, meditating, and studying the Old Testament totaled three years” (MacArthur, 30).

⁵ “May they never lose the breathless wonder that exclaims, ‘Out of all this world, you’ve chosen me!’”