

Nothing But The Truth

by Steve Zeisler

I have come to see that the book of Galatians opens in somewhat the same fashion as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony--with a loud, challenging, and attention--arresting introduction. In this letter the apostle Paul hits the ground running. He is obviously concerned about something, and he communicates that very early in the book. The controversy in the Galatian churches was causing him such concern that he could not help but speak with passion and thunder. He realized that the hope of all mankind was at stake. In a gripping phrase at the end of chapter 2 we can see just how concerned he was: "If righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly." If righteousness comes through the Law, the sacrifice of the Son of God himself who died in our place means nothing; it is a sham and a mockery. Paul had heard that in the churches of Galatia that very hope of the gospel, the very grace of God, was at stake, thus he begins, this letter with passion.

You may be familiar with preachers who are effective at communicating in a passionate way, as Paul is in the opening verses of this book. I remember as a new Christian attending a church where the preacher was well known and highly regarded. To this day I can recall his attention--gripping voice, his broad and communicative gestures. But the problem is, that is all I can remember about him. I can't remember anything he ever said. In Galatians, though the apostle introduces the letter with the kind of passion we have spoken of, he is wise enough to realize that emotion and concern alone are not enough: people need to be instructed too. We need to be taught truth, to have our understanding enlightened, to see beneath the surface of things so that we can be truly helped. Therefore in verse 11 of chapter 1 of Galatians we have this statement:

For I would have you know, brethren [now the focus of the letter will be on teaching, as Paul goes on to clear up some misconceptions], that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.

The heart of the instruction that Paul wants to give here is found in verses 11 and 12. Stated most simply, it says, "The gospel which is preached by me came by revelation of Jesus Christ." That is a critical concept. One of the foundation stones to our faith as Christians, one of the critical truths that we must believe and be clear about is this: that God spoke from himself; he revealed himself.

This truth which we believe came from God in a miraculous way--by revelation. It did not come from any human source. We do not believe in spiritual truth that proceeded from enigmatic oracles like those from Delphi in the first century. We have not heard vague phrasings from horoscope readers who have searched the stars. We do not have information about what is true because wise, elderly priests spent a lifetime searching out what God meant and then drew for us some helpful conclusions. What we have is truth that God himself took particular attention to speak through spokesmen all throughout the biblical period; a personal God who revealed himself to people from every walk of life, educated and uneducated. He chose spokesmen, and he gave them the responsibility to clearly say what he had said. Sometimes what they said was a surprise to them. They didn't always understand everything they said, but they had been found by God, broken through to by him, and given a message to declare.

Our gospel comes by revelation, by that process of God explaining himself. John begins his gospel by saying, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The name given here to the Messiah is "Word of God"--logos, the communication of God, God speaking to us. The book of Hebrews begins, "God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers and the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the world." God has spoken to us. Paul refers in 2 Corinthians to revelations that he had had. Throughout his ministry, evidently, God spoke to him in a person--to--person way and gave him truth that he was then responsible to communicate. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul talks about being caught up into Paradise and seeing and learning things beyond his powers of expression. The apostle John, with whom the word revelation, apocalypse, is most frequently associated, describes his experience this way: "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things'." John was called through an open door in heaven to see things that he was responsible to say. The gospel comes to us like that, in the tearing-open of heaven, the communication of God, giving to responsible spokesman a burden to say to us with utter clarity what God had said to them.

The truth which we believe comes by revelation from God, therefore it is pure and trustworthy. We can count on it. We can judge ourselves by it. We can be refreshed as we drink of it. Paul says, "I want you to understand this: the gospel which was preached by me, this breaking-open of heaven so that we could hear what God wanted us to hear with clarity, came by revelation of Jesus Christ."

In verses 11 and 12 we see what the gospel is not. It is not a message that is "according to man." It is not the best attempts by the smartest of humans to organize all the thinking that is possible about God in such a way that it is persuasive. It did not grow up from among human beings. It is not "according to us." We could never have thought of it. We could never have discovered the mysteries of the gospel.

Paul says further, "I neither received it . . . nor was I taught it." We have received a lot of information in our lifetime. As children growing up in the homes of our parents we received by osmosis their attitudes and opinions, their values, etc. Some of you have worked as apprentices. You have received from your masters information about how to do certain things and carry out tasks, in a long process of reception by observation, etc. Paul did not garner the truth as an apprentice. "Nor was I taught it, even," he says. "I didn't have a human teacher, a rabbi at whose feet I sat." What happened was miraculous, frightening, unbelievable. It was a tearing--open of the curtain that hid God from him, in a revelation of Jesus Christ. That was the source and heart of his message. That is why Paul can be so certain of it, why he can judge false gospels. The truth he was given came from God. And our confidence is in the same thing: the Lord has revealed himself, thus we have a pure and certain message.

Verse 13 introduces a history lesson which will occupy most of the next two chapters. In it, Paul will share with us some old diaries and photo albums of his life. But before we look at this section in some detail, I would like to mention a couple of things by way of background information. First, as an apostle, Paul had an ongoing problem in that everywhere he went there were people who said of him, "You don't count because you are not one of the original twelve apostles. You have a weird history, you are a little bit peculiar, so we are not going to listen to what you have to say." Throughout his ministry he had to constantly face these charges that he was not an apostle. That is part of the argument here, the background we need to know about as we look at what Paul has to say.

It is fascinating to look at how Paul dealt with that problem. He did not do what I would be tempted to do, which is to say, "Don't listen to those people who are unimpressed with me. I have a whole list of reasons why you ought to listen to me. I actually am much weightier than they are giving me credit for. I was trained in the right schools. I am a brilliant scholar. I have always been nice to my mother. There are a whole lot of really solid qualities about me that ought to contradict whatever negative things they are saying." Paul never does that. In fact, he always makes the case against him worse. He agrees with his enemies. He calls himself "the foremost of sinners." He said of himself, "I was born as one untimely born"--too late to follow the Lord in the days of his flesh. The best descriptions we have of Paul's life as a persecutor of Christians are given by Paul himself. He does not disagree with or contradict his enemies. Rather he turns their entire argument on its head by saying, "It is precisely because I was this kind of person--the chief of sinners and a persecutor of

Christians--that what I now am must be of God. There is no other way to account for it. We must conclude that that God has taken a broken vessel and made something useful out of it."

That is the hallmark of God's work always. God does not recruit heroes. Christianity is not attractive, true or commendable because most of the nice people in the world gravitate toward it, because most of the effective, brilliant, capable, powerful, positive winners in life find their way to the Christian faith. What is commendable about the church of Jesus Christ is that God attracts his enemies, losers, those who have learned to hate themselves, those who are, as Paul once described Christian leaders, "the off--scourings of the earth." God makes something useful out of those kind of people. That is what commends our faith to us, and that is where we see the sign of God at work over and over again--in taking hurting people, sinners, sad people, and finding a way to make something glorious and useful out of them. That is Paul's argument. "They say I am a bad guy. I agree, I am. They say I have a bad history. I have. You have no idea how terrible my history is, but that is all the more evidence that this whole thing is of God, because there is no other way to account for what I have become in Christ. It is a miracle."

Secondly, by way of background information, we ought to try and understand what the Galatian controversy was all about. What was happening to these people in the churches of Galatia? This is an early book. What we are hearing about here are the very beginning events of the church. We know from the book of Acts and other places that most of the earliest Gentile Christians were what Luke and others called, "God--fearers." That term describes those who had stood outside the synagogues of the Jews in order to hear the message of the God of the Jews. Before they became Christians these people were attracted to Judaism. They had long since grown sick and tired of their own fatuous religion, polytheism, with its bloody mystery rites. They had had an amoral religious heritage. They had long since realized that the pretensions about spiritual truth in the world in which they grew up was meaningless. They began to find themselves attracted to the words of Israel's prophets, the declaration that God was transcendent and holy and loving, and he deserved to be both feared and loved. As they became familiar with the moral code of the Jews they realized that that was what they had been searching for. So neither the brilliant Greek philosophers nor the magnificent Roman statesmen knew anything about the living God of the Jews. But such were to become the "God fearers," the Gentiles who were first attracted to Judaism. These were the first converts to Christianity among the Gentiles. As Paul preached in the synagogue the Gentiles, those who could not enter the synagogue, heard his message and were converted.

The result of this was that Judaism was held in high esteem by early Gentile Christians. We all know what it is like to respect and to want to associate with important people. Some Jewish Christians who came from Jerusalem to Galatia were, in effect, saying, "We are now all one in Christ. The barriers have been broken down, and that is terrific. But if you really want to be aristocratic in your faith you will be a Jewish Christian. Being a mere Christian is OK in its own way, but if you could be a Christian who has the accouterments of Judaism, a Christian who quotes the Old Testament with a Hebrew accent, who is circumcised (Gal.5:2) like a Jew, who keeps the festivals of the Jews (the days, the months and seasons and years, Gal.4:1-10), then you have gained standing. You will feel better about yourself, and you will be more accepted by God as a result."

These Galatian Christians were prone to believe all that because they had for some time already been impressed with the prophets of Jerusalem, with the temple service, with the words of teaching and the Scriptures that had proceeded from this nation. Now they were being offered the opportunity to become like the Jews, in Christ--but like the Jews. Paul realized that something deadly was happening, as that distortion that said one's sense of personal wellbeing--and even more so, standing before God--depended upon what one looked like. These Gentile Christians were beginning to believe that outward appearances, keeping the rules and cultural heritage of the Jews gave them standing before God. We can almost see the apostle in tears as he writes these words, "If righteousness comes through the Law, Christ died for nothing." We are trampling on the sacrifice of our Lord if we believe that.

With that background in mind let us look at verses 13 and following. There are two parts to this. Paul speaks of two periods in his life and says, first, "You have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism"; and then, secondly, in verse 15, he says, "But when He . . . called me." Verses 13 and 14 describe his former life:

For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism

beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

I would like to highlight two points in Paul's word about his former life in Judaism. First, he once had everything the Galatians were now attracted to. You can see how savvy are these words from a formerly out-of-control persecutor of God's church, how to the point is his argument. "You want to be like the Jews? You want to have about you the bearing of the ancestral traditions of the Jews? You want to join the aristocracy among Christians, to sound like Jews, look like Jews and carry yourselves like Jews? Well, I used to be like that myself once, and I was particularly good at it. I was better than everyone else around me, in fact. I was outstripping my contemporaries in my pharasaical zeal to succeed. I was also a persecutor of the church of God. At the very time I was being good at the things you want to be right now, I was 'beyond measure', out of control, 'without bounds' in my desire to persecute Christians." That combination ought to have chilled his readers. They could have the very things they wanted but then they would be enemies of the purposes of God. They could have all the outward advantages they were seeking and inside be killers.

Secondly, Paul says, he was a competitor. This should perhaps ring a bell with us also. This longing for observable standing, this longing for outward appearance to grant us success produces competition. "I was advancing beyond many of my contemporaries," Paul says. He is talking about spiritual one-upmanship. That is when we trample on or elbow out of the way anyone whom we think looks better than we; when we measure our appearance and grade ourselves by taking our temperature relative to how others are doing. That is how Paul regarded his former life in Judaism.

Religion based on outward appearances is always competitive. The good news of the gospel is that we are in this whole thing together. Either we all grow together or we don't grow at all. It is not possible to advance beyond somebody in Christianity. We are members of one another. We cannot be better at it than anybody else. Everything we have is by the grace of God--a gift. It is not anything we get any credit for anyway. Whatever maturity, whatever opportunity we have been granted is to the glory of God. Paul says that an outwardly-measured faith is competitive.

Both of these elements that Paul highlights about his former manner of life in Judaism are all too familiar to us. Too many of us have seen that a love of standing among men, a desire to be impressive for God's sake among our brothers and sisters leads to persecution of real Christians, to competition, and to one-upmanship among us. Paul says, "That was part of my former manner of life in Judaism when I had all the very things you are now seeking." He frankly admits that that life was horrible and vile; he had to be saved from it.

That is where we come to now, in verse 15:

But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood,

Paul is saying that God's granting to him of his station and his gifts as a preacher and an apostle came through a calling that existed before he was even born. He was called from his mother's womb, before he had a chance to do anything good, before he had any chance to compete with anybody, impress anybody, learn anything, pass any quizzes. Before he had done anything to deserve it his calling from God had taken place. He contributed nothing.

God had called him "through his grace," Paul declares. That refers us back to a word that has been used through the first ten verses, to the magnificent "giving" of God that is unearned--and cannot be earned-- a grace that is utterly apart from the value of the recipient. "He called me through grace, not through accomplishments." Paul says.

Christ was "revealed" in him, Paul writes. He was a vessel through whom the Lord would be revealed as he preached the message of salvation to the Gentiles. Even then Paul did not go back to Jerusalem, to the place where he had been successful once in his persecution of the church. He did not go back and learn anything from other people, for God gave him a special revelation. The Lord Jesus appeared to him and taught him what

he needed to know without benefit of any human teacher. Paul began to live in a way that was utterly different than his former manner of life. As to outward appearances he had formerly been a persecutor, a competitor and a winner. Following his conversion he came to see that nothing from his past life--his ability, his training, his genius, his genealogy--could add anything to what he now was in Christ.

To summarize, in these verses Paul declares that the gospel message came by means of a breakthrough by God. It is truth that could not be discovered by man left to his own devices. And the gospel is "not according to man." Its first teachers were not taught the gospel message by any human instrument. God's revelation is a mysterious process in which he says things we need to know, things we can have confidence in, but he says them by his own choice, by a sovereign breakthrough on his part.

Then Paul goes on to deal with his own conversion experience. He shares who he was before his encounter with Christ and who he had become now that he was a Christian. Nothing in his past qualified him to be an apostle. Rather, he was a violent persecutor of everything God was committed to. But at the very height of his career as a persecutor of the church, God intervened in his life, and turned his whole world upside--down, changing him from persecutor to preacher, from antagonist to apostle.

The Christmas season brings to mind what is perhaps the most remarkable upside--down occurrence in all of human history. It points to the gospel message as being a miracle, as being accomplished through the most unexpected ways and means. God himself became a man, the Saviour of the world, the Leader of the remaking of Adam's race. And where would he be born if not in the greatest of palaces, among the most remarkable people? And where would he be trained except among the most learned? God would become a man. It is an absolute scandal to have Messiah be born of an unmarried Galilean teenager in a stable. He was unwelcome in the town, the city of David, let alone the whole world. It is precisely because it is so unexpected that we see it as the hand of God. It is precisely because we would never have done it that way that we recognize this is not a human endeavor. God did it in an unexpected way. He took the worst conditions and made the greatest miracle out of them.

God takes sinners and makes vessels of service out of them. He takes what humanity could never discover on its own and communicates it to us. It is a miracle. It is this powerful hand of God stirring things that ought to be the hallmark of our faith. We ought to look for it, to expect it in our own lives. We should not settle for anything that we are merely capable of doing because of our human ability.

Our Lord, we are humbled by what you did with an enemy of yours. We are strengthened that the message we have is a breakthrough from you, a truth that we can count on and believe even though we could never discover it on our own. We pray that now and always we will expect our own lives to be more than we could ever accomplish alone, that you will fill our experience. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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