

## **Galatians 1:11-24**

*I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*

*You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.*

*Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.*

There was a spot just north of Israel in the ancient world. It sits along the Mediterranean coast just as it bends to the west. It was once the haven of pirates who found safe harbor in the bays and the inlets and from there preyed on shipping that tended to hug the coast as they traveled from place to place. At least, they did so until General Pompey of Rome showed up to eliminate the problem, which he did very effectively. After the pirates were handled, the area was taken for Rome and re-named Cilicia. You have probably heard of that place in the Bible. This was all taking place around the first century BC.

There was a Jewish family that lived in Cilicia, not along the shore, but inland a bit. In that first century BC, they had provided valuable services in the form of a particular product which they sold to Pompey for his army. They made mobile enclosures that would house the troops. It was a good product that they provided, well made and fairly traded, which resulted in not just a financial gain for the family but, eventually, they were further rewarded by being officially made citizens of Rome. One more thing...along with his trade, the head of the family was also a Pharisee.

Well, the family prospered and grew. Early in the first century AD, around the same time that a young boy named Jesus was growing up in Nazareth, another boy was born in Cilicia into this Jewish family, descendants within the Tribe of Benjamin. He was a gifted boy. Smart as a whip with a confidence and assuredness that could not go un-noticed. Everyone knew that this one, this boy, was going places. They named him after an ancestor, another clansman from the Tribe of Benjamin, who happened to also be the first King of Israel.

As Saul of Tarsus in Cilicia grew, he mastered the family trade of tent making. He also studied diligently and listened carefully to the rabbis and Pharisees that he was surrounded by. As he did, he moved up the ranks of the learned people of Israel and was recognized as a rising star within all of Israel. Finally, he was accepted to train under Rabban Gamaliel, President of the Sanhedrin, one of the greatest teachers in all of Judaism.

Saul had it all. Gifted from birth, raised in a successful and devout family, trained by the very best to take his place among the leaders of Israel. He probably already had the layout of the invitation to his installation as the head of the Sanhedrin formed in his head. If anyone had the right to be a confident of himself, even a bit arrogant, it was Saul of Tarsus, the tent making Pharisee.

Then came the road to Damascus. Then came Paul, the Apostle. Then came transformation.

We hear a lot about transformation, but understanding it remains somewhat elusive. I think Paul give us a way to get a better glimpse of what it looks like.

Transformation re-orient things. Motivations change. Desired outcomes shift. Saul had been born into an environment of personal achievement...of individual accomplishment. In work, in his vocation, he became a master tent maker. In his faith he became a Jew's Jew, rising up through the leadership structure...a Pharisee trained under the great Gamaliel...a zealous defender of the law commissioned by the Chief Priest himself to suppress the annoying followers of that even more annoying Jesus. That was Saul. Driven. Learned. Accomplished. Taking his place in the power structure. A world success story to be envied by most human measures.

Paul, however, was a different man, with a different motivation. A new perspective had been given to him on the way to Damascus. Unlike Saul, Paul was not following a human-led path like Saul had most of his life. And he didn't want others to follow that path either. How do we know? Well, the transformed Saul, now Paul, was warning them against that very thing. He was not uplifting himself. He was telling them that, if they come up against a gospel devised by man, even if that man was Paul himself, run for your lives. The only truth worth embracing was from God, through Christ.

Did you hear that in his letter? So often it gets missed. For so many, it is hidden between the words. In the context of the whole letter here is what he was telling them. He told them that the fact that he had advanced beyond others of his same age within Judaism was meaningless. His zealousness for the traditions of his ancestors was unimportant. His mission to destroy the church of God not a badge of honor but rather a shame to bear. Did you hear that? Meaningless, unimportant, a shame to bear. The only thing that mattered was that Jesus came to him along the way, knocked him off his

horse, revealed himself as the Son of God, and now people glorified Christ because of him...because of his humbling transformation. I know that we don't hear all those words, but go back and read it carefully. Transformation re-orient things.

And transformation frees up your gifts. It frees up your God-given gifts. It doesn't remove them. Transformation does not change who you were meant to be. It brings it out...it brings YOU out. It gives the Spirit access to your true self and empowers you to be who God has already made you to be.

Saul used his God given gifts to empower himself. Paul, however, through the transforming Grace of God, used his God-given gifts, the same God-given gifts present in Saul, to change and empower the world.

God had set him apart before he was even born and called him to great things. That is what Paul wrote. God created him and set him apart before he was born and called him to great things. With those gifts, as Saul, he elevated himself in order to simply occupy the seat of the Chief Priest for a time, but, as Paul, the transformed Saul, he humbled himself in order to lift up Christ and the Gospel *for all time*.

So often people read the passage that we read from Galatians this morning, and others like them, and think they hear an arrogant and self-possessed Paul saying, "Look at me! Look at me!" And I suppose he was saying that, but he wasn't saying look how great I am. He was saying, "Look how foolish I was until Christ came into my life. Look how foolish I was when I thought it was all about human learning, and human power, and human effort; when I thought that it was all about me; while Jesus was trying to teach me that it was all about Godly Love and divine sacrifice, and a servant's humility. Look at me... now! It is not about controlling people. It is about leading people into a transformative relationship with our living God, through Christ. Look at me now and understand transformation!"

And that is Paul's underlying message, or at least a big part of it, to the people in Galatia, and to us today, and for all time. It is not one of arrogance and self-focus. It is one of surrender to God. Don't place your trust in human things. I have been there, Paul would say; done that and got the tee shirt, and I count all of that as refuse in light of what I have gained from my relationship with Jesus.

Paul was not saying that we should put our trust in him. What he was telling us, through his example, is that we should rely on the revelation that comes from Christ through the Spirit of God. We each should rely on the revelation that comes from Christ through the Spirit of God and be renewed into who you already are, who you were sent to be. Then watch **God** renew the world, through us.

Amen