November 1, 2026

THE GOSPEL'S ORIGIN AND TRANSFORMING POWER

Galatians 1:11-24

(3 of 19 in a series through Galatians)

I had lunch with a student earlier this week telling me that he'd had a professor who spent the week in one of their classes presenting what theologians refer to as "inclusivism." Inclusivism is the teaching that though people are ultimately only saved through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, people do not actually have to place their faith in Jesus in this life to be saved. As long as they're attempting to honor and trust in the god they believe exists, that's enough. Certainly, on the day of judgment they'll see that they were wrong to worship Buddha or Allah or whatever god they chose to worship, and they'll recognize that the one true God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ is the only God. But the Lord will deliver a very comforting message on that day, saying to them, "Well, you worshiped the one you thought was god, and I'm going to count that for you. Had you been raised in a home with believing parents, you would have no doubt worshiped Jesus, and so, though you were worshiping a false god, you did so in ignorance. So, good news, welcome into my kingdom."

Now, there are a hundred biblical problems with that, especially the fact that man doesn't worship any false god out of the sincere goodness of his heart but because of his rebellion against the one true God he knows exists and refuses to acknowledge and worship, according to Romans 1:18-32. But, man, can't you feel the appeal of the teaching of inclusivism? I've mentioned before a few years ago with Pastor Tom and I were in Botswana, and we went to tour a Hindu temple, where we met a man who was a Brahman, and he was one of the nicest guys in the world. He was devoting his life to a false god (or, I guess, many false gods), but he was so sweet, kind, and gentle. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just tell him, "Sir, you keep on doing what you're doing. Keep on worshiping these false gods, and don't worry, Jesus will save you in the end"?

Do you feel the appeal of that? And if that's on the one end of the scale (i.e. the appeal of inclusivism), on the other end of the scale is Paul saying, "If anyone preaches another gospel than the one I preached to you, he's condemned before God." I mean, can't that feel arrogant? Where does Paul get off saying that the only true gospel, the only true message of salvation is the one he's preaching?

Well, if we've asked those kinds of questions, Galatians 1:11-24 is written for us. I think this text we're looking at this morning answers both of those questions. It shows why we can't alter the gospel to conform to the message of inclusivism. And it also shows us why Paul is not only not arrogant to say that no one can preach a different gospel but is actually humble in stating that.

Galatians 1:11-24 is quite autobiographical. We'll see that Paul talks about some of the early years of his Chrisitan life in greater detail than we find elsewhere. But his aim isn't simply to make sure the Galatian believers to know more about his life. He speaks of his life because no

doubt the Judaizers were claiming that Paul had gotten the gospel wrong. They're likely saying that he heard it from the apostles and confused some of the details or dropped elements like the need to obey the law (as the Judaizers were teaching) because he wanted to appeal to Gentiles like the Galatians. And so, Paul spends these verses telling the Galatians how it is that he got the gospel and, therefore, why it is that the gospel he preaches is true and cannot be altered in any way. And I think that as we hear Paul explain these details in regard to his own life and conversion, we'll understand why Paul isn't arrogant to say that the gospel he preaches is the only gospel, and we'll understand why we can in no way alter the gospel to something like inclusivism. What then does Paul say about himself and the gospel he preaches in these verses? First, he tells us that he received the gospel through divine revelation, not human instruction.

Paul received his gospel through divine revelation, not human instruction

As Paul opens this next section of the letter, he writes, "For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (vv. 11-12). So, Paul's claim is that the gospel he preached—specifically that Christ lived a perfect life, died on the cross, was buried, was raised on the third day, and that forgiveness of sins and eternal life comes solely through faith in him—was not given to him by any man nor did any man teach it to him, but he received it through Jesus Christ himself. What does Paul mean?

Well, if you remember from Acts 9 and 26, Paul was on the road to Damascus when the risen Christ appeared to him in the sky and began speaking to him, asking why Paul was persecuting him by persecuting the church. In other world, Paul saw the risen Christ and the glorious gospel of grace—the gospel that Paul preached—was given to him then, by Jesus himself.

So, just to be clear, Paul isn't saying that he simply had an experience and then went to the other apostles to see what it could mean (at which point they explained to him the gospel). He's saying that he received the gospel directly from the Lord. In fact, Paul says in verse 16 that after God was pleased to reveal his Son to him, "I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I got up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus" (vv. 16-17). Now, yes, he'll add that after three years he took a quick trip to Jerusalem and saw Peter and James (the Lord's brother), but that was brief, and even then it was three years after Jesus revealed himself and his gospel to Paul.

Therefore, if the Judaizers were claiming that Paul just got the message from the apostles and then distorted it—whether unintentionally or intentionally (to make it appeal to Gentiles)—that claim simply doesn't hold. Paul was given the gospel through the revelation of Jesus Christ himself and immediately started preaching that good news, without consulting with any of the apostles.

Now, why does that point matter for us? Well, because it reminds us that the gospel message doesn't belong to us. It's not ours to mess with. We're mere ambassadors to speak on behalf of our Lord. In other words, it doesn't matter what you and I think might be a more appealing

message to mankind. We might reason that if we add a few works in there as the basis for our righteous standing before God, it might make more sense to people and appeal more to individuals who by nature want to be able to say we have earned what we have. But the message isn't ours. It didn't come from us and doesn't belong to us. Sure, if we made it up, then let's change it as we need to in order to appeal to more. But if the gospel is God's gospel, and he grants us the privilege of speaking his gospel to others, then we're under obligation only to speak what God commissions us to speak. That's why Paul can say that if anyone preaches a different gospel than the one Paul preached, that man is accursed. It's not because Paul is arrogant about a message he created and doesn't think can be improved. It's because he's proclaiming God's gospel, delivered to him by Jesus himself, and he doesn't have permission to change it but simply to proclaim it. And that's where we are as well. We are ambassadors, simply proclaiming what the one who sent us in the world has given us to proclaim. Our sinful preferences to please man or get man's approval must not move us to alter it in any way.

But now, if you're a sceptic, you could say, "Did Paul really have a revelation from Jesus Christ? Did the risen Christ really appear to him in the sky that day and reveal to him the gospel?" Now, obviously, we have a high view of Scripture, so it is enough for us to say, "If the Bible says it, it happened." And that's true. But I think the way Paul writes here gives us even more evidence to add to the certainty that Jesus appeared to him, especially as Paul writes of his conversion. I think we can sum up the second element Paul writes about in these verses by noting that Paul's conversion can only be explained by this divine revelation.

Paul's conversion can only be explained by this divine revelation

Again, here's what I mean. If someone were to say, "I don't think the risen Jesus Christ really appeared to Paul in the sky that day when he was on the road to Damascus," one response we could make is, "Well, nothing else explains Paul's conversion." Let me see if I can explain why we can say this from the text.

Starting in verse 13, Paul begins talking about how he was living before he met Christ. He says in verses 13-14, "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers."

Before Paul met the risen Christ that day, he was a rising star in Judaism. Among the Jews, he was making a name for himself, over and above his peers, he says. He was an up-and-comer, on track to be the next big thing in Judaism. He was probably seen as one of the most righteous young men in all of Judaism.

Now, here, we might want to push back and say, "It doesn't look like he was living a righteous life." After all, Paul acknowledges in verse 13 that he was violently persecuting people and trying to destroy the church. And we know from the book of Acts that he held the coats of those who stoned Steven (Acts 7), while Acts 9 begins with Luke saying that Paul was "breathing threats and

murder against the disciples of the Lord." That doesn't sound like he was trying to obey the Lord, does it? Surely that's not the behavior of a righteous man, even in Judaism, right?

Well, consider the Old Testament for a second. Just a few weeks ago we listened to Aaron preach to us from 1 Kings 18 about Elijah calling down fire from heaven on Mount Carmel. Now, remember what Elijah did after the fire came down, even consuming the altar? We read in 1 Kings 18:40, "And Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal: let not one of them escape.' And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the book Kishon and slaughtered them there." Or remember the scene in Numbers 25. The people of Israel were involved in idolatry, yoking themselves to foreign peoples who worshiped Baal. And one man brought a Midianite woman into his home in front of everyone—flaunting his idolatry and immorality—and the Scripture says, "When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped" (Num 25:7-8).

So, under the Old Covenant, the people of God bore the sword, and certain sins were to be answered with execution, as we see with Elijah and Phinehas. Those two men were examples of godly zeal. And so, imagine you're Paul. You want to be zealous for holiness among the Lord's people, and then you have this guy come along, claiming he's the Messiah, claiming he's equal to God, and a bunch of people follow him, worshiping him as if he's God. From Paul's perspective—who at this point doesn't believe Jesus is the Messiah or rose from the dead—this feels like a Phinehas or Elijah on Mount Carmel situation. Paul is jealous for the Lord, wanting no one but God to be worshiped and honored as God. From Paul's perspective, this behavior isn't weird but is what is required of one who is determined to honor the God of Israel.

So, here you have one who is advancing in Judaism, mastering the Scriptures, and is so zealous for God's name to be honored, that he's willing to lend his hand in the execution of anyone who would commit idolatry. Paul might have even said prior to meeting Jesus in the sky that he hated Jesus of Nazareth with perfect hatred—as the psalmists often say of themselves toward God's enemies.

Now, fast-forward. The Paul who is writing this letter to the Galatians loves Jesus more than anything. He's passionate to make sure that people bow the knee to Jesus. He believes so fervently that Jesus rose from the grave that he's willing to stake his life on it. He says to the Roman believers that he longs for his fellow Israelites to come to know the Jesus Christ as their Lord that if he could be condemned and they come to know Jesus as Lord, he could wish that would happen. He's going to give himself to the point of death in order to love and obey Jesus. Paul went from a rising star, heading toward honor and prestige to one who was thought of as scum by many and would be murdered for being a follower of Jesus. What explains that change? What accounts for that transformation of his life?

Here's the answer—he really did meet Jesus that day. The risen Jesus Christ really did appear to him in the sky that day and show him the glorious realities of the gospel. Nothing else explains the transformation of Paul's life.

Therefore, Paul has made clear that the gospel he preaches is the gospel that God himself gave him as Jesus Christ was revealed to him in the sky, and one piece of supporting evidence that this really happened is that nothing else explains Paul's transformation from one who hated and persecuted Jesus to one who was willing to suffer and die for him. But there's one more element I think we can note here, namely, that Paul's conversion and calling testifies to the gospel of grace he preached.

Paul's conversion and calling testifies to the gospel of grace he preached

Let me show you what I mean by that. When Paul is describing his life in Judaism, before he met Jesus, notice that Paul takes center stage. Paul says, "*I* persecuted the church . . . *I* was advancing in Judaism . . . so extremely zealous was *I* for the traditions of *my* fathers" (vv. 13-14). But then notice the difference when he moves to talking about his conversion and calling. He doesn't say, "But then *I* decided to do something different" or "*I* realized *I* needed to change *my* direction of life." Rather, when he speaks of his conversion and calling, the focus is on God. He writes, "But when he who set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (vv. 15-16a).

Now, the vibe has shifted substantially. *God* set him apart before he was born. *God* called him. *God* revealed his Son to him. But it's not just that Paul now focuses on the work of God in Paul's conversion and calling, he specifically stresses the *grace* God shows him. And by "grace," I mean the pure unmerited favor God showed Paul.

God set Paul apart not because he'd looked at Paul and said, "Man, he's a rockstar in Judaism. Imagine how powerful he'd be if he were preaching Jesus." Rather, Paul says that God set him apart before he was even born. In other words, Paul's role doesn't testify to Paul's worth and the fact that he earned and deserved his role as the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul's role testifies to God's grace, who set Paul apart before Paul had produced any works.

And we know that the God who sets his people apart before they're born calls them to himself in time, even as God called Paul to himself on the road to Damascus and called us to himself at the point we believed. But even when discussing the moment in time when God called Paul to himself, he writes, "God called me *by his grace*." Again, Paul didn't deserve to be called to Christ and called to be an apostle. He was called by grace.

And, finally, Paul doesn't say, "I figured out who Jesus was by exercising my genius ability to think through matters." No, the reason he recognized that Jesus really had been raised from the grave is because—to use Paul's words—God was pleased to reveal his Son to him. It's all the work of God's grace.

And let me note one other element here. Paul held onto this understanding as a truth that pertained to all believers throughout the whole of his ministry. Think, for example, how he writes to the believers in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing." The Thessalonian believers were growing in their faith and in their love for one another, but Paul doesn't thank them for this. He thanks God. Why? It is *their* faith and *their* love growing? Well, it's because he knows all of this is true in them solely because of God's grace to them. And that was clear to him because he knew it to be true in his own life.

Is it any wonder, then, why Paul was so driven to proclaim a gospel of grace? Is it any wonder why he'd write to the Ephesian believers, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9)? He'd seen it to be true in his own life as the God of grace set him apart before he was born, called him to himself by grace, and was pleased to graciously reveal his own Son to him. Paul's conversion and calling testified to the gospel of grace he preached. And this was so clear even to the believers who'd heard the report of what had happened with Paul that they didn't marvel at Paul for his conversion but—as Paul says—"glorified God because of me" (v. 24).

The reason Paul preached the gospel he preached and demanded no other gospel be accepted isn't because he was arrogant and simply thought the gospel he'd come up with was better than everyone else's. It was because it wasn't his gospel at all. Nor was the gospel created by any other man. Paul received it from God as the risen Christ appeared to him in the sky. In other words, the gospel Paul preached was the gospel he was given (which is why when Paul clearly spells out the gospel to the Corinthians, for example, he says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also *received*"). The gospel was given to him by a revelation from God. And as crazy as that sounds, the reality is that nothing else explains Paul's conversion. He met the Lord Jesus Christ. And as he reflected on that encounter with Jesus, it was clear to him that there was nothing he could boast of. His salvation had been entirely the work of God, not the work of Paul.

Therefore, when these Judaizers began to add the element of works to the gospel of grace, it not only stood against the gospel he'd been given from God, but what he'd experienced as well from the hand of a gracious God who had transformed Paul's life. So, let's make sure that we never alter this gospel of grace in any way, not matter how tempting it might be to a culture that demands we adjust to it because the gospel is not ours to mess with. It is the gospel of our gracious God who graciously invites us to the table this morning to remember that our Lord lived, died, and was raised for us. Amen.