

‘From legalism to grace.’ (3)

A solicitor defending a man accused of burglary tried this creative defence. ‘My client merely inserted his arm into the window and removed a few trivial articles. His arm is not himself, and I fail to see how you can punish the whole individual for an offense committed by his limb.’ ‘Well put,’ the judge replied. ‘Using your logic, I sentence the defendant’s arm to one year’s imprisonment. He can accompany it or not, as he chooses.’ The defendant smiled and with his solicitor’s assistance he detached his artificial limb, laid it on the bench, and walked out.

There are many people who have been accused of many things and the apostle Paul was no exception. The Jews time and time again accused Paul of not being a true apostle. And so, time and time again Paul had to defend his apostleship. Galatians 1:11+12 “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”

Now when it comes to legalism and legalists, they always use the same tactics. And very often they will deny God’s authority in order to promote their own authority. And if they can’t discredit the message you’re preaching, they will try and discredit you.

I’ve had personal experience with this mind-set and because they couldn’t argue their case from God’s Word, they sent a letter to my supporting congregation, accusing me of all sorts of false teaching and tried to discredit me as a Christian.

But you see loved ones, when you’re preaching truth, no one can argue. These Judaizers were questioning Paul and his apostleship and when they failed, they went on to try and discredit Paul the Christian. And so, Paul says, ‘listen, my message to you was not invented by men, I didn’t receive it from any man, and it wasn’t taught to him by men’.

In other words, the Gospel Paul preached wasn’t the invention of Paul or any man. It wasn’t the accumulated theology of men who put together their ideas to formulate a religious teaching. And Paul says, contrary to what these Judaizing teachers were doing, Paul preached what was revealed to Him from God. The true Gospel didn’t originate from the oral proclamation of myths and fables, doctrines and teachings of Jewish rabbis or story tellers. It was revealed from God to man through Jesus and the apostles.

The true Gospel came to Paul through a direct revelation from God. That word ‘revelation’ is the Greek word ‘apokalupsis’ and it means an ‘uncovering, a removal of the veil, a disclosure of what was previously unknown’. In other words, the Gospel was previously unknown to Paul, until God unveiled it directly to him. And so, for Paul, this revelation ‘began’ by Jesus’ personal revelation to him on the road to Damascus. And it continued as more truth was revealed to Paul, possibly while he was in Arabia.

Yes, the Galatian letter was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but loved ones, it contains no new revelations to the Galatians. The Galatians had been taught the revelation Paul had received concerning the truth of the Gospel. And through Paul, the Holy Spirit is now rebuking them not to forsake what they already know.

Galatians 1:13-17 “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.”

Paul’s former way of life, was a life in the Jewish religion. And if you remember when the church was first established in Jerusalem and Judea, Paul’s way of life was to destroy the church. Acts 8:1-3 “And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.”

And so, Paul’s former way of life was something he wasn’t proud of, but with the Gospel comes power, the power to change lives. And it was through divine intervention, that Paul’s former way of life changed. His sincerity and the Gospel took him from being the persecutor, to becoming the persecuted. He understood that power of the Gospel can change people’s lives.

He wrote to Timothy and said in 1 Timothy 1:15 “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”

A man purchased a white mouse to use as food for his pet snake. He dropped the unsuspecting mouse into the snake’s glass cage, where the snake was sleeping in a bed of sawdust. The tiny mouse had a serious problem on his hands. At any moment, he could be swallowed alive. Obviously, the mouse needed to come up with a brilliant plan. What did the terrified creature do? He quickly set up work covering the snake with sawdust chips until it was completely buried. With that, the mouse apparently thought he had solved his problem. The solution, however, came from outside. The man took pity on the silly little mouse and removed him from the cage.

You see loved ones, no matter how hard we try to cover or deny our sinful nature, its fool’s work. Sin will eventually awake from its sleep and shake off its cover. Were it not for the saving grace of the Master’s hand, sin would eat us alive. Paul understood that and says this is trustworthy and if you want proof of its trustworthiness, then just look at his former life.

You see, by the time of the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the early church, the Jews had moved away from the true faith that was based on the law of the Old Testament. By the addition of Jewish religious traditions, the Jews thought that their covenant relationship with God was based on the conditions that they had created after their own traditions. And so, when the church was established, a new confrontation came on the scene.

The confrontation was between those of the legal works-oriented religion of Judaism, and those who trusted in God through faith. It was those of the Jewish religion that put Jesus on the cross and persecuted the Christians who had accepted the grace of God through faith. The Jews of Judaism persecuted the Jews who were sons of God by faith. The Jews who were sons of God by faith were considered liberal by the Jews who were in the bondage of their own religious institutions.

Now remember where Paul came from in terms of his Jewishness, Paul says he was advancing. Paul was excelling way beyond his peers in learning the religious customs and laws of the Jewish religion. **Philippians 3:5+6** “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” Paul says he wasn’t some ‘Johnny come lately’ to the Jewish religion. He was growing in his studies and he was growing in his work of Judaism, he was climbing the cooperate ladder and going places.

As many Jews of his time, he was fanatical about maintaining the purity of Judaism and his growth in this religious system. **Acts 9:1+2** “Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.”

Not anyone could just walk in and see the high priest and ask for letters, Paul was respected enough to be able to speak to the people in authority. In other words, when Paul is writing to these Galatians he’s telling them, ‘listen, I know what I’m talking about.’

In contrast to the two commands of Christ, to love God with everything you’ve got and love your neighbour as yourself. The Pharisees had developed a system of **613 laws, 365 negative commands and 248 positive laws**. By the time Christ came, it had produced a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of righteousness. As someone once said, ‘**New laws continually need to be invented for new situations**’.

Accountability to God was replaced by accountability to men. These laws reduced a person’s ability to personally discern and it created a judgmental spirit. The Pharisees had confused personal preferences with divine law. Their law was full of inconsistencies and they created a false standard of righteousness. It became a burden to the Jews and it was strictly external.

Paul says, ‘I’ve been there, I’ve done that, I’ve got the graduation papers to prove it.’ But he also says, he repented of that way of life a long time ago. He repented from following after a religion that had been formed after the traditions of men, a religion that assumed that obedience to law in and of itself would justify a person before God. **1 Corinthians 15:10** “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me”.

Even though Paul worked hard, even though he was driven by the legal obedience of the law to get to where he was in Judaism. He says he works even harder now, not because he has too but because he's driven by grace.

And so, Paul says he now believed that before his birth, **'God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles'**. In other words, Paul is saying my life has been transformed so much, it could only happen by the fact that he had a divine encounter with the Lord Jesus.

How else could his life be changed so dramatically? How can he be creating havoc for the churches one day because of the Gospel they were preaching and then a few days later, he's preaching the very Gospel he was once persecuting?

His conversion was the result of the direct hand of God. The change in Paul's life wasn't the result of his work. God knew what He was going to do with Paul before he was even born. Now remember that predestination isn't God taking over man's will. Predestination is God determining certain things to occur ahead of time. When you read your Bible, you'll read about **'predestination'**, it's always in relation to works which God has prepared in advanced.

Paul had a choice and he could have declined God's plan but God never predestines anyone for salvation. And so, Paul says the Father specifically and uniquely revealed Jesus to Paul in order to call him to his apostleship for the Gentiles. **2 Corinthians 4:6 "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."**

His call was the work of God, not man, it was by grace, not by Paul's work. Paul's argument here was to confirm the divine origin of his message. He was not, as the Judaizing teachers, promoting a man-made system of religion that was invented and broadcasted by a group of teachers who demanded conformity to a system of belief. Since God had directly revealed what he preached, he had no need to conform to the whims of those who sought to bind where God had not bound. And in order to prove his point, Paul says that he went into Arabia.

Now **Acts 9:22+23** tells us that, **"Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. After many days, had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him."** You see if Paul had confided immediately with those in Jerusalem, then there would be the accusation that he received his appointment from either the apostles or false brethren who were influential Judaizers in Jerusalem. That's why later he will say in **Galatians 2:4 "This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves."**

But the point is Paul was kept by God, from the influence of the Jewish-oriented church in Jerusalem by going to Arabia. He didn't go to Jerusalem until three years after his conversion, during which time he was already preaching the Gospel of grace. We aren't told what part of Arabia he went to, or exactly why he went and we don't know how long he stayed in the actual region of Arabia. It's possible that he went there for personal solitude and consultation by God.

The point is that Paul wants the Galatian brethren to know that he isn't proclaiming an invented religion after the traditions of men, as is the case with the former religion of Judaism that he promoted. And something else, we need to keep in mind, Paul isn't promoting a Jewish influenced Christianity of Jerusalem.

Galatians 1:18-21 "Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Then I went to Syria and Cilicia". After his time of conversion, three years later Paul goes to Jerusalem. Paul's purpose for going to Jerusalem wasn't to be instructed in the truth of the Gospel. He went to become acquainted with Peter or Cephas as the **NIV** has it.

And it was during his time in Jerusalem according to **Acts 9:28+29** that, **"Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him"**. He visited Jerusalem for fifteen days and moved freely in the city, boldly preaching and disputing with the Hellenists Jews.

The Hellenists Jews were converts among the Jews who had returned to Judea after having lived abroad in the Greek world, and still spoke Greek and had adopted Greek cultural elements.

Paul says whilst he was in Jerusalem, he saw no other apostles except the Lord's physical brother James. And notice what Paul says here, he says, **'what I am writing you is no lie.'** Paul wants to make it very clear that he wasn't commissioned by the Christ-sent apostles or any other man, he was sent forth directly by God.

Now you might be wondering, why Paul is placing so much emphasis on the origin of his apostleship and his message. Well it may be that some in the Jerusalem church had by this time submitted to the onslaught of this Judaic legalism. **Galatians 2:13+14 "The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"**

Paul wants the Galatians to clearly understand that what he has taught and what he was teaching didn't originate from any influence from Jerusalem. And he wants to stop the influence of those who are moving among the churches in an effort to destroy the young churches through their system of legalistic religion. And so, when Paul returned to his homeland on this occasion, he certainly didn't keep silent about what he had experienced during the three years in Damascus and Arabia.

Some believe that he stayed in the area of Cilicia and Tarsus from five to seven years, but again we simply don't know how long he stayed there. But we do know that he went back to his home country in order to announce to friends and family the grace of God that had now been poured out on mankind from a cross outside Jerusalem. It may be that while Paul was in Cilicia he didn't comprehend the extent of his commission to the Gentiles.

But whatever the reason, Barnabas went to get him and bring him to Antioch of Syria according to **Acts 11. Acts 11:25+26 "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch".**

Paul may have been unaware of the tremendous growth of the Gentile church in Antioch. And so, Barnabas took him to a church that reminded Paul of the great things God was doing among the Gentiles. And it was from this church, Paul would be sent forth to the Gentile world, a mission he had received about ten years before in the city of Damascus.

Galatians 1:22-24 "I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me." Now like I said earlier Paul was well-known for his persecution against the Lord's church. But he wasn't personally known by face to the members of the church in the area of Judea outside the city of Jerusalem.

But if anything, at least they now know that Paul is preaching **'the faith'**. He's not just preaching any old kind of faith but **'the faith'**. **'The faith'** that Jude says in **Jude 3, "was once for all entrusted to God's holy people"**. There will be no new revelations from God, despite what some of these modern-day prophets' claim. The faith has been delivered once for all which means we have everything we need from God, to know God and know what His will is for our lives.

As someone once said, "The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognise any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are opposite sides of the same coin."

Now isn't Paul's testimony truly humbling? Here was a man who was going places in Judaism and had a great reputation as a Jew. Here was a man who was so misguidedly zealous for the Lord, to the point where he went all over the place to find Christians and persecute them. He went from being a legalistic Jew to become a grace centred Christian. No wonder the brethren in Judea praised God for Paul. And that's why when anyone becomes a Christian we too should always praise God for another turned around life.

Let me ask you, **if God through the Gospel can turn the Apostle Paul's life around so dramatically, can God through the Gospel not do the same with you and your life?** If you're not a Christian this morning, then I would urge you to speak to any member of this congregation before you leave. And they will tell you about how their lives used to be, up until the point when they too had an encounter with Jesus through His Gospel.