

A transformed life

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[0 : 00] Starting in verse 13. Whoever's doing the slides, could you move it along?! 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. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him 15 days.

I saw none of the other apostles, only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I'm writing to you is no lie. Then I went to Syria and Cilicia.

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.

[1 : 35] And they praise God because of me. Let me pray for us now. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this opportunity to look at your word together.

Father, we pray that your voice would come through very clearly, that your spirit would work now in our hearts, that my voice would fade away, and that your voice would be loud and clear.

Lord, let these words sink deep into our hearts. Let them do the work that your spirit would do. Help us now, in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Let them think about a life transformed by Jesus. Maybe you know the story of a man called Nicky Cruz.

I came across this man when I was a teenager. I read his book called Run Baby Run. Or you might know another book called The Cross and the Switchblade. Well, this man, as a teenager, was one of the leaders of a violent gang in New York.

[2 : 43] And he was stuck in an endless cycle of violence, of anger, arrests, and death. He was told he had no hope.

His life was hopeless. Well, until a man called David Wilkerson came along, and he wanted to share Jesus' love with this man.

It wasn't instant, but Nicky Cruz eventually surrendered to Jesus. And he was transformed.

He went on to live a life not full of anger and violence, but one marked by faith and love. Not reaching out to kill or to destroy, but to bring a message of peace, salvation, and reconciliation.

His life was transformed by Jesus. We come across these dramatic stories in life of lives being utterly transformed.

[3 : 52] And on some level, each of us have that story. We may not have been gang members, or like we've read about the Apostle Paul, persecuting the church.

But our lives have been transformed by Jesus. Well, as stories go, Paul's is pretty dramatic. Paul reminds his readers about his dramatic turnaround in life.

We see in verse 13, You've heard of my previous way of life, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. Paul, who was previously known as Saul, was fully committed to the persecution and destruction of the church of God.

He wanted it squashed, gone, stamped out, and in his eyes, Jesus was not the Messiah that he'd been waiting for. Paul was extremely zealous.

He was extremely accomplished. And he was going beyond those in Judaism of his age. Paul was a force to be reckoned with. He was an enemy of God.

[5 : 08] One amazing quote that I read, and I wanted to read it now, speaking about the state of Saul of Tarsus. He was a bigot, a fanatic, wholehearted in his devotion to Judaism, in his persecution of Christ and the church.

Now a man in that mental and emotional state is in no mood to change his mind, or even to have it changed for him by men. No conditioned reflex or other psychological device could convert a man in such a state.

Only God could reach him. And God did. Paul was determined and dedicated to the cause of destroying the church, and it was only God who could step in and turn things around.

Before Jesus stepped in, Paul was an enemy of God. And we see Paul telling his story, highlighting that he was against God.

He was God's enemy. So let me ask you a question this morning. Are you an enemy of God? And I think there are only two answers available to this question.

[6 : 22] Yes, I am. Or not anymore. Because that question is a pretty scary question.

Let that question sit for a moment. Are you an enemy of God? Each one of us need to own this answer.

Yes, I am. Or not anymore. Being an enemy is not a nice place to be. Where you are against someone.

Or someone is against you. I don't know if we did a show of hands. Don't put up your hands. If you say you have an enemy or you are an enemy to somebody. But it's not a good place to be.

We see this around us in life and around the world all the time, don't we? We have enemies in school. Rivals who just, they want to see us fail. They'd rather see us trip up playing soccer than score a goal.

[7 : 29] We see enemies across the globe as we look on at wars raging. We see Ukraine and Russia being enemies. And we can often look at a situation.

We make a judgment on who is in the wrong, don't we? Take Russia and Ukraine as an example. From looking on to me and to much of the Western world, Russia is in the wrong.

They are the aggressor. They are the more powerful force. And so we've had this horrible war raging between enemies. But think for a moment that you either are or were an enemy of God.

And looking at that situation, we are in the wrong. God is not in the wrong. And God, as the more powerful force, is the one in the right.

And you know, he used that power not to defeat us, not to conquer or oppress us, but to save us.

[8 : 36] Rob mentioned it earlier that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were still enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son.

And Paul owned this reality. That he was committed against God. He was an enemy of God.

But God stepped in. We see in verse 15, But when God.

God stepped in and revealed himself to Paul. And we see that Paul was set apart by God.

Look at verse 15 and 16. 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.

[9 : 40] This had been God's plan all along. God didn't see this enemy Saul attacking his people, trying to squash this new movement, this fledgling church, and think, oh, I'd better get this guy on my side.

Paul explains that God had set him apart from his mother's womb. Before he had even been born, God was planning to use Paul and to call him by his grace.

God is sovereignly working in each of our lives. He knows which way everything will go and is actively in charge of everything.

I was talking to Perrin recently about how God is in control of everything and how he knows everything. This was amazing to Perrin.

We talked about how God knows what's happening on the moon, about the rocks that float around in space. We were on our way to school, and I said, he knows which leaf is going to fall next from that tree.

[10 : 49] But it's not just that he knows. He's actively in control of those craters on the moon, or those rocks in space. Which way they're going to go, God's in control.

And he has decided which leaf is going to fall next. He's actively in control of each tiny detail of our lives.

And he chose to set Paul apart from the beginning of his life, calling him to preach to the Gentiles. And he chose us.

He chose you and me. If you are following the Lord Jesus, you are chosen right from that moment you were formed in your mother's womb.

You are set apart to serve him. And this is all by grace. It's not something we do. It's because God has chosen us and revealed himself to us.

[11:52] Paul highlights this in verse 15. He's called by grace, not by any effort or work in Paul. We are called by grace, not by any effort or work in us.

But why is Paul telling us this story? We've thought already about how there's no other gospel. We've thought that this gospel is authentically from God.

So Paul, why are you telling us your life story? He's telling us his reconstructed biography, as one author puts it. Something happened that meant Paul's life was dramatically changed, and it had to be rewritten, retold.

He met the Lord Jesus, and we heard last week that the gospel Paul received, he received it by revelation from Jesus. And Paul is telling us this story because he wants to highlight the authority that he has.

Paul received the true and unique gospel message from God, not from other men and women, not even from the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul received this message from one place only, and it was from God.

[13:10] Look at verse 16 and 17. The end of 16, 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 wasn't looking for validation. He didn't check, is this message correct? He didn't go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles or with any of the churches in Judea. You see, what was happening, these Judaizers, these people coming along and adding to the gospel, they were saying, Paul, you're just the same as the guys in Jerusalem. That's where you got your message from.

You don't have authority. And he's saying, I received this message from one place only, from the risen Lord Jesus. Paul's gospel was direct from Jesus Christ.

It was genuine and authentic. He even clarifies, just in case someone heard that he had gone to Jerusalem, he clarifies, well, after three years, I did go up.

[14:18] I only saw Peter, only stayed with him a few days, and actually I saw James as well. I bumped into him. The message received by Paul was the absolutely true gospel from God.

I don't know about you, but it's getting harder and harder to know what's real and genuine online today, isn't it? I feel like AI is wreaking havoc with my brain. I don't know if you've seen in that presidential campaign, there's a clip of Catherine Connolly doing some keepy-uppies with a football. I immediately thought, that's AI. It's got to be. I don't think it is. But then I came across some amazing blues music that I had just discovered.

It was incredible. It was so enjoyable to listen to, only to discover, I think it's AI. It's so hard to know what's authentic and what's true, so it's so important we know what the source is.

Paul is saying the source of this gospel is God. It is 100% genuine and authentic, and like we heard earlier in the chapter, it is not to be messed with.

[15:32] We do not add or take away under any circumstances. So for us, on a very practical level, what we have that is written by the Apostle Paul must be listened to because he received this direct revelation from God.

He was given the message and authority from Jesus. About a quarter of the New Testament is written by the Apostle Paul. But as we realize that Paul was uniquely called by Jesus, we can confidently rely on Paul's teachings that are recorded for us.

So as we read them, we don't think, oh, were these just the words of a man from years and years ago? I'm sure he was influenced by other things going on. These are the words of God.

And so what we preach and what we live has to match Paul's teaching. And if it doesn't match, then it's wrong.

We're going the wrong direction. We can't add extra bits or take things away. So Paul was set apart just as we are set apart by God and we can confidently trust in the words he's given.

[16 : 57] And so Paul was transformed from a violent persecutor of the church of God to the one who is given the gospel message to bring to the nations.

Look at the last few verses, 21. I went to Syria and Cilicia. 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 praise God because of me. The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.

Paul was transformed to serve God. God changed his life around. He turned it upside down. Instead of chasing Christians and arresting them, imprisoning them, signing off on their execution, he was preaching the very faith that he was opposed to.

He was spreading the message of Jesus. People might refer these days to having had a Damascus Road experience.

[18 : 12] Finally, something clicks. We realize Jesus is real. Well, Paul was the OG. He was the original one. And he was transformed to serve God.

His life was changed and had a purpose. Look at verse 16. To preach Jesus to the Gentiles. Verse 23.

Preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. Paul was given a mission. To bring this gospel to the Gentiles. That is all who are outside of the Jewish people.

And while we may not have had a blinding light experience shine around us or have heard an audible voice from heaven, you, as a follower of Jesus, have been transformed to serve God. We've been taken from one way of life and changed to live a new way. Maybe it's hard for some of us sometimes to distinguish what the old was and what the new is.

[19 : 25] Well, I think that can be a good thing and a bad thing. I think it can be a good thing if we've been living for Jesus for so long. It's hard to think back what was life like before Jesus.

That's testament to that journey that we've been on with Jesus, walking with him. But it can be a bad thing if we think, well, basically, I'm no different now than when I was before Jesus.

Let me finish with just a few challenges for us. Think about your story.

So Paul told us his story. He had a purpose of telling it. He wanted to demonstrate the authority that he had. But think about your story. What was life like before Jesus?

What was that like? Were you very young? Were you grown up?

[20 : 31] Was it later in life you came to the Lord? What was life like before Jesus? How did he reveal himself to you? How did you come to know that he's real?

And what has he called you to do now? For Paul, his mission was clear.

Go and preach to the Gentiles. And if you don't feel like your mission is clear, that's okay. We can help on that journey.

We can work through with you what your specific calling is in life. We can help you think about what your gift are and how you can serve in those ways.

It's good to think these things through. We may not be clear on our calling or gifts when we come to faith or even for a while afterwards.

[21 : 32] But it helps to think well where has God placed me? And what am I doing now? That's an excellent clue for you of what God wants you to do.

what am I passionate about? What am I good at? And how can I use those things to serve God? God?

If we have been transformed from an old way of life to a new, God takes those passions and desires that we may have had for all different things and He redeems them.

And He takes those gifts that He's given so that we can serve Him. were transformed to serve God. Brought from being enemies of Him to friends, from death to life, from being alienated from God to children of God.

And at the very end people saw this transformation in Paul. And what did they do? Verse 24, they praised God because of me.

[22 : 45] May people see our lives, see the change that God has brought and praise Him for what He has done.

Let's pray together. Father, thank You that You give us Your Word so clearly laid out for us.