

Testimony to God's Amazing Grace

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[0 : 00] we're going to think about Paul's testimony of God's amazing grace. But before we get there, just something that I guess we're all very much aware of when it comes to where we get our information from.

It's important that we find the right kind of sources, that we find reliable sources for information. Now that the school term is in, you find the school playgrounds rife with all kinds of stories, all kinds of crazy exaggerations.

Who do you trust? I still remember being in primary three and being told one particular playtime by a very excited older boy that somebody around the corner had spat in somebody else's eye and that eye was now hanging by a stalk.

I was absolutely traumatized by this piece of absolute nonsense. Who we listen to matters. We know that, you know, university, college, school, where our sources come from, what footnotes we access makes all the difference between good grades and bad grades.

The ideal for us when we're looking for the right kind of information is to find reliable sources, first-hand sources of information, people that we can trust.

[1 : 23] And that's so important when we come to think about the Christian faith. We apply that to Jesus. You think about how many different ideas there are about Jesus going around today.

There are multiple perspectives from those who would say that he's a fiction, those who would say that he is just a wicked imposter leading people astray, to some kind of spiritual guru, to a good teacher, to what the Bible says, the Son of God, Savior of the world.

Where do we find our authority? Which voice do we listen to? And then we apply that to the idea of salvation. And what we see in the book of Galatians is that there's two different views of how a person is saved.

How does a person get right with God? Do we listen to those messages that say that we need to do something for ourselves, we need to attain a certain level, that we need to prove ourselves to God if he is to accept us?

Or the non-religious view of salvation that says that we are only somebody if we have achieved whatever it might be, right job, right relationships, right financial security.

[2 : 33] Or do we believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone? What are we going to trust when it comes to thinking about salvation?

And so we find Paul here continuing to defend his gospel, saying to us very clearly, Jesus is my source. Jesus is my teacher, so you can trust my gospel message.

And as he does that, Paul also continues to highlight for us the good news of God's grace. And he does that through telling his own story.

He uses his personal testimony to speak to others of the grace of the Lord Jesus. And as Roddy was alluding to, the way that we share our stories can be really powerful to other people.

It might help skeptical people who are wondering, does this Christianity thing work? Does knowing Jesus make any difference in life and in experience? And so what we find today in our passage is Paul uses his story and his experience to, first of all, back up the authority of his message.

[3 : 47] You should listen to me because this came from Jesus. But also he's going to show how the gospel of grace has changed his own life. And then that gives us an opportunity for us to think for ourselves, how can we use our stories to highlight, to celebrate God's grace through Jesus with others?

So, first of all, Paul's testimony defends his gospel message. We began reading at verse 10, and verse 10 contains an implied accusation.

So Paul says, So here's the accusation. Paul is a crowd pleaser.

He's more concerned for his own personal glory than he is for God's glory. He's changing the message to make it acceptable to the crowd before him, giving people what they want to hear. Now, we only need to look back a few verses to find Paul's defense against that charge. So in verses 6 through 9, if you were here last week, you'll remember, but just to refresh your memory, Paul effectively says to his readers, If you accept any gospel message other than the one I have given to you, let that person who teaches it or receives it be eternally condemned.

[5 : 15] Now, that's not the kind of language that would be described as people pleasing. And you think about his gospel of grace in verses 3 to 5.

In that, again, we find the language is not that of a people pleaser. He's very clear that people are sinful, sinners before a holy God.

He's very clear that Jesus needed to give himself as a substitute and as a sacrifice in order to rescue people from sin, to bring them to God.

And this gospel of grace is all about God getting glory, not us getting glory for having made our way to God. So this is not a people pleasing message.

And that's the case because, as Paul describes himself in verse 10, he is a servant of Christ. He knows the message he's received. He knows the one whose honor he pursues.

[6 : 11] So he's not going to soften the message. He's not going to lessen the offense of the gospel because he cares for God's glory and the honor of Jesus. Now the danger for us, when we talk about our stories, is that fear of man can be in us.

We can be really worried about how people will hear the truth of sin and judgment and their need of a savior. And so we can maybe try and lessen that, soften the blow somewhat because we don't want to be losing people's approval back.

Or maybe we just really want people to come to believe in Jesus. And so we make it sound quite easy. So maybe we lessen the idea of the cost of discipleship.

We don't think about submitting to Jesus as Lord or that call to obedience. We can make it sound really straightforward. But that's not what Paul does because he wants to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now there is a second accusation against Paul that he defends himself from and that's in verse 11 and 12. So then he says, I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up.

[7 : 34] I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it. Rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. So the second accusation seems to be that Paul's gospel is unreliable.

That either it's a creation of his own imagination and not to be trusted, or that he has borrowed from secondhand sources and that somehow his message is less than that of the other disciples, the other apostles.

Now perhaps there is a reason why the Judaizers, the Jewish people who are coming to Galatia telling them they need to follow the law, perhaps there's a reason why this group of people were suspicious of Paul.

After all, he is now saying that the way to salvation, the way to be acceptable to God does not involve becoming Jewish, does not involve following the Jewish law.

And so there's a level of suspicion, wondering whether his message is credible. And so Paul says to them, again, I received this message by direct revelation from the Lord Jesus.

[8 : 52] And so it has authority. And to back up that claim, he goes to his personal testimony. He goes to his story. And when you look at his timeline, so verse 13 to verse 24 is one of Paul's timelines, one of his accounts of his coming to faith and how Jesus changed him, we'll see that it centers around his conversion to Christ.

That point where he stops being an enemy of Jesus and becomes a friend of Jesus, where he bows the knee to receive Jesus as Lord. But there is in his story a pre-conversion stage, and this is important.

So in verse 13, we're told certain things about Paul before he was a follower of Jesus. For you've 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 Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my father. So there's two things going on in Paul's life.

On the one hand, he's this really strict, zealous Jew trying to keep all the laws of God and wanting to be seen as keeping all those laws, while at the same time, hating Jesus, hating the church, being a determined persecutor of this new faith.

[10:16] And the point is important because he's basically saying to us, look, there's no way that I was hanging around with the disciples. I wasn't spending time with them, receiving the gospel, because I hated them and I would have put them in prison, given the opportunity.

So his pre-conversion defends the fact that his gospel comes from Jesus and then he talks about his conversion, which is very dramatic, like that bottle.

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son in me.

The thing about Paul's testimony is that his transformation was very dramatic. We find him on the Damascus road, Acts chapter 9. He's not looking to find Jesus. In fact, he's looking to find the followers of Jesus so he can throw them in prison.

But Jesus comes to him on the road to Damascus and reveals himself to Paul physically. He sees the risen Lord Jesus and Jesus is revealed to him spiritually.

[11:23] He now sees with the eyes of faith this one who he wanted to persecute as a false Messiah. He now understands this is God's son, God's savior. The spirit worked in him.

Jesus, the son of God, revealed himself to him. And so that conversion wasn't a process where he's talking with the apostles, where he's learning the gospel from anyone else.

He's hearing it directly from Jesus. And then post-conversion, he's very clear again that nobody else gave me this message. So verse 16, second half of it, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia.

So he's saying, there was nobody else teaching me. The gospel message that I received, that I'm bringing to you, came to me directly from the Lord Jesus. So it comes with authority to you as a church, he says to these people.

And he gives three important pieces of evidence to that effect. First of all, we discover that he spent three years in Arabia. No disciples, no apostles around there.

[12:37] We don't know what he was doing, most likely reading the Old Testament, seeing how it pointed to Jesus, reflecting on what Jesus had revealed to him on the road to Damascus, and revealed to him subsequently, thinking about how the historical events of the life, death, and resurrection bring salvation to the world.

But anyway, he spent three years in Arabia, and far away from the apostles. And then in verse 18, he tells us, well, after three years, he did go to Jerusalem, but only for 15 days.

We read about this in Acts chapter 9, verses 26 to 28. And when you read that, those 15 days are largely spent preaching. So he did meet Peter, he did meet James, but he's spending most of his time preaching the gospel that he already knows.

Peter isn't teaching it to him, Peter isn't correcting him. It's not in a time of intensive teaching, because he already has the gospel. And then after those 15 days, in verse number 21, we're told that later, I went to Syria and Cilicia.

So 15 days in the center in Jerusalem, but then he goes straight up to the far north, to Syria and Cilicia. Again, far from the center of faith and power, far from where the apostles are. All of this to say, I'm getting my message from Jesus.

[13:52] Jesus was my teacher. Therefore, the gospel that I brought to you, which is all about grace alone, not needing to convert to Judaism, is the one to listen to.

There is a point for us today. Where do we go to find God's divine revelation? Where do we look for our source of ultimate authority?

We go to God's inspired word. We go to the Bible. With a multitude of perspectives, online and in print, will we let God teach us who he is, what he is like and what he has done?

Will we submit to God's words over anybody else's word? Will the revelation of Jesus as Lord and Savior be at the center of our storyline of faith as it was for Paul?

And if so, we need the word of God to direct us and keep us. So Paul's testimony defends his gospel message, but it does something else as well.

[15:08] Paul's testimony reminds us again of God's amazing grace. Grace was something that we spent a lot of time on last week, and grace is something that we will spend time on this week and in subsequent weeks.

I think I said last week that Martin Luther, the great reformer, talked about the need to beat the gospel into our heads continually, that this message that Jesus suffered and died to deliver us from sin and death is the most important message that we will ever hear, but it's a message we can be so quick to lose hold of, to start trusting in ourselves or thinking there is something else that we need to bring to the table.

So Luther reminds us to beat the gospel into our heads continually. Perhaps we can use a picture or two to help us to think of it. So maybe like me, you're old enough to remember the days before digital television, those days of the big wooden cabinets and the aerials on the top, where sometimes to get the tube to kick in properly, you had to whack it on the side to get that image to come through.

Or maybe we can think of those vending machines that don't quite work the way they're supposed to, where you put your money in and you make the selection and you're waiting for the thing to drop and there's nothing.

And again, sometimes you just need to give it a good pounding on the side and then the penny drops and the goods come out. For us, we need to keep hearing the gospel of grace alone so that the penny drops.

[16:52] And as the penny drops, the spiritual fruit would come from us, that our lives would be marked by joy and worship and security and hope because we understand that we're saved only through what Jesus has done for us and trusting in the cross alone.

So Paul needs to keep coming back to this because we can lose sight of it so quickly. Why does Paul keep highlighting grace in Galatia?

Well, he'll say to them, you are a church that started by grace. You absolutely believe in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. But now some of them are falling back on personal performance. Now, some of them were thinking, oh, hang on a minute. I need to keep up with those dietary laws and be circumcised and keep certain festivals in order to earn acceptance from God. So they started with grace.

They started with the Spirit. They started trusting in Jesus alone. But now they're tempted to be adding works in order to be accepted. Maybe you know this in your personal experience.

[18:00] As Christians, perhaps you know this as your personal experience. You believe, absolutely believe that Jesus paid for your sins. But then you find yourself, and this is my story, easily slipping back into, but staying in God's favor is down to me.

So many times in my teenage years, I felt like I had to have a fresh conversion experience because I messed up so badly. I thought, well, there's no way that God would want anything to do with me. I need to start all over again. Or perhaps you want to believe, you really want to believe that salvation is a gift that you receive by faith alone, and you feel that you've got hold of that, but then you mess up and you find yourself totally devastated.

And instead of going back to the cross and finding hope and forgiveness there, you're just beating up inside and you don't know where to go. And it's a sign of how quickly we can lose hold of the gospel of grace.

I remember reading a number of years ago a heartbreaking story of a Christian family who adopted a child from an abusive background and hearing that story of just the painful process of trying to help the child to understand their place in the family.

[19:21] You know, the child would hoard food and hide it away because they were so used to food being taken away. The child, if it had done something wrong, would run away and go into hiding because they were so used to receiving a beating whenever things went badly in the previous family.

That long, patient, painful process of trying to teach a child you're in this family because of love and because of grace. You've been adopted and you are delighted in is a hard one in personal experience and it can be hard for us spiritually.

Hard for us spiritually to believe, to really believe that we've been adopted by God through grace alone. That even when we sin and fail that God still loves us.

That can be a really hard message to hold on to. And so Paul uses his letter to celebrate grace, to call the church back to grace. And let's see how he uses his story to do this.

Let's look, first of all, at his pre-conversion again, his time before he was a follower of Jesus. So what he clearly does for them, he's very honest about what he was like.

[20 : 40] He'll say, I was incredibly religious. You are trying to be religious, but I was far more religious than you, yet I was not made acceptable to God because of my religious performance.

And he'll also say in verse 13, I was incredibly violent. I was a persecutor. I was happy to see Christians arrested, beaten and killed.

Yet there was grace from God for me. So you get this wonderfully honest picture that he presents. Here is Paul saying, I was unable to save myself.

Here was I undeserving of God's kindness that Jesus came to me and Jesus loved me. And he does that so that God will get glory. Because Paul understands that it's only God's grace that was able to tear down the barriers of resistance in his own heart.

Because as you said, Paul was not looking for Jesus. Paul positively hated Jesus, was determined that Jesus was a liar. And at the same time, Paul was incredibly proud of his own religious performance and felt like that was certain to give him the standing with God that he needed.

[21 : 56] And then we move on to the way Paul talks about his conversion. You see even the way the language shifts. In verse 13 and 14, he says, I, I, I. Verse 15 and 16, he begins to focus on God.

What does God do? What does God's grace do in his life? Well, first of all, we're told that God set him apart from birth. So here he is saying it was God's choice to save him.

It was all about election. Before he was even born, God had decided to save. Why does he do that? To say very clearly, this is all about God's undeserved kindness.

This is God's grace. This is not merit. I was chosen before I was born. And Paul can say some, some wonderful things because of that.

So, so maybe we find ourselves asking the question, if he was chosen before he was born, then why did God wait so long to save him? Why did Paul have this career of, of sort of being a really proud religious person and then persecuting and hating the church?

[23 : 06] Why didn't God save the church some misery? And Paul answers in saying that it's all about God knowing the timing that gives him the most glory.

He knows when is best and what is best for his own glory. And he talks about that in his letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy chapter one, verses 15 to 17, Paul writes to Timothy and effectively says, that Jesus saved me as the very worst of sins.

That part of the reason for that delay was that Paul would have this trajectory so that he could then celebrate this amazing grace. Jesus saved me as the worst of sinners.

And he kind of says to himself, like I'm an example. I'm like a great big neon sign saying, God's grace can save anyone. If God can save me, if Jesus can rescue me, then there is nobody who is beyond the grip of God's grace.

And so he says that he is set apart from birth. And then in verse 15, continuing, he says, and God called me by his grace.

[24 : 15] So there was this eternal election. And then that choice was worked out in time when he was called by God's grace on the Damascus road.

And notice again, he doesn't say, well, Jesus came to me because I was really religious and I was doing really well. And so of course, Jesus would be glad to have me on his team. No, he says, Jesus saved me by grace alone.

And then he goes on to say, continuing in verse 15, God was pleased to reveal his son in me. Why was Paul saved?

Because of God's good pleasure alone. It is grace again. Paul is not contributing anything. None of us contribute anything to our salvation. It's God's good pleasure.

God loves us only because he loves us. And because of that, we can have security. We can have joy in the family of God. And what Paul says is that meeting the risen Lord Jesus changed everything for him.

[25 : 24] As God's son was revealed in him, as those facts of the historical Jesus are now revealed to him to be absolutely true, they hit his heart and they transform his life.

But he doesn't stop there. To make sure that they don't get the impression, well, you're saved by grace, but then after that, you work out your own salvation by blood, sweat and tears.

No, as he talks about his post-conversion, his life after Jesus, there are three truths that stand out that also celebrate and highlight grace for us. First of all, when we think about his new mission, verse 15 again, when God who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.

That's God's mission for Paul to preach Jesus among the Gentiles. And this speaks of grace because before that, what was Paul's relation to the church?
He was trying to destroy the church. And now by God's grace, he'll be used to build the church. The people will hear the good news of Jesus and will be drawn into the church. And connected to that, there's this wonderful new impression that God's people have of Paul.
[26 : 45] So in verse 23, these churches that he hadn't been known to previously, they only heard this report. The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they praised God because of him. So before, if Saul came anywhere, if Paul came anywhere close to a Christian, Christians would scatter in fear. But now there's this word spreading around the Christian community, around this part of the world, about God's amazing transformation that he's worked in Paul, that Christians are being encouraged.
They're praising God because of what's happened in Paul's life. Because now he's preaching to build the church up. The last thing about his post-conversion, his time after meeting and being a follower of Jesus that highlights grace, takes us back to verse 10 and to the new motive and the new center that he has in his life.
It's really significant. You know, he's been accused of being a people pleaser in verse 10. Notice the last sentence in verse 10. If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. What's he saying there? He's saying, yeah, that used to be my story. I used to be a people pleaser. But now, I live for Jesus. Before, I was controlled by the fear of man.
[28 : 15] I wanted to look good to other people. I wanted to be seen to be really religious. But now, I've been set free from that. Now, I'm a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.
Maybe we have that. We talked before the summer about the fear of man, where we have that sense that we just really feel that we need to look good to others.
We have that sense of just wanting to fit in. We want to be accepted. We fear the loss of approval. And Paul is saying that was his center. This is a worship issue.
Jesus has set him free from worshipping other people. from having his identity rooted in what other people thought of him. That there's been this wonderful change in his life.
That the gospel of grace has come to him and now he understands, well, Jesus Christ has done everything I need so that now I am completely accepted by God the Father in heaven.
[29 : 16] Why does it matter what other people feel? And so his life is changed. He knows he's been washed by the blood of the Lord Jesus. The perfect record of Jesus has been credited to his account and now he's got freedom.
And believing this gospel is what gives us freedom. If we understand that we have the approval of God through faith in Jesus Christ then that can set us free from fear.
That can allow us to live for Jesus with courage in a sometimes hostile world. So here is Paul and he's telling his story in order to try and beat the gospel of grace into their hearts so that they might trust Jesus and not in themselves.
One of the reasons why we're making time for testimony, one of the reasons why as elders we're talking more about our faith together is because of the power that there is in personal testimony. When we talk about the difference that Jesus makes to us, we're talking not just to minds but we're talking to hearts. This is what Jesus has done for me. This is what Jesus means to me.
[30 : 31] And Paul uses his testimony in a wonderful way. You know, Paul has a unique testimony but so do we all. Our testimonies are not likely to be perhaps as dramatic as Paul's but each one is a miracle of grace to celebrate.
Each one is a testimony of God's saving grace in our lives and the same truths that are the foundation of Paul's testimony are the foundation of ours too. That by nature we are unable to save ourselves.
That there was a time when we were weak and lost and helpless but by God's grace we were chosen, we were called, we were saved, we were sent out as followers of Jesus.
So just like Paul, we have this wonderful opportunity to share our stories so that we can help people understand who Jesus is.
So that we can help people to find Jesus for themselves. That we can give glory to the God of grace as we tell our stories of what he's done. Thank you.
[31 : 40] Thank you. Thank you.