

Galatians 1:13-24

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] Hey, good evening, everyone. So tonight we're going to continue our sermon series in Galatians. We're looking at Galatians chapter 1, verses 11 through 24.

That's the reading on which the teaching will be based tonight. So if you want to turn there in the Pew Bible, it's page 927. Are we going to have it on the screen, Scott? Oh, Kelly disappeared.

Page 927, Galatians chapter 1. I'll actually start at verse 11 tonight. So turn there with me. Oh, did I say the wrong number?

972, thanks, Dorothy. 972, what did I say, 27? 972, 927 probably put you somewhere in Malachi or something. Great, all right.

Well, as we come before God's word, let's pray together, shall we? Father, we do pray that your spirit would draw us near. Lord, we are amazed by the power of your love that would welcome fallen and sinful creatures like ourselves into your presence through the gift of your son.

[1 : 1 5] Lord, as we open up again to the book of Galatians and, Lord, as we seek to know more about this good news, this good news about Jesus, we pray that you would condescend, Father, and speak to us through your word tonight.

That your spirit would come and move among us and make these words more than just black and white marks on a page, but true and living words that penetrate into our very souls.

Lord, we know that you can make that happen because it is your word, the word that spoke the universe into being, the word that gives us new life in Christ. God, we ask all this in his name. Amen.

So Galatians chapter 1, starting in verse 11. Let me read this for us. Paul writes, Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.

But I saw none of the other apostles 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 in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

[3 : 0 9] They were only hearing it said, He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they glorified God because of me. Well, sometimes you have to set the record straight, right?

Sometimes you have to tell your story and set the record straight. At least that is a pretext for most autobiographies. I was in the bookstore the other day, and I saw this autobiography about someone who was on the little house on the prairie, which I thought was kind of curious.

And it was actually a response to another autobiography that someone had written who was a part of the little house on the prairie. And then I did a little research, and I found that there are not just one, not just two, but there have been three autobiographies written by former cast members of the little house on the prairie, all attempting to set the record straight about what happened behind the scenes of this seemingly idyllic TV show.

Of course, if anyone cares about that, I would be surprised to know, but hey, that's just me. I don't really care about the little house on the prairie, but they're setting the record straight.

But, you know, sometimes it's more than just a simple TV show, right? Beth and I recently watched the HBO miniseries about John Adams that was based on the David McCullough autobiography. Has anyone seen that? It's really good.

[4 : 27] Well, anyway, in that miniseries, they show you that at the end of his career in public office, John Adams set out sort of compiling his own autobiography to set the record straight.

Apparently, he was afraid at the end of his public career that history would remember him as little more than a failed diplomat, that he would be remembered as little more than a not-so-successful president who, you know, just signed into law a controversial bill called the Alien and Sedition Act.

And to make matters worse, actually, in 1805, one of his family friends published a sort of history of the American Revolution that cast him in a really negative light. So here he was at the end of his life. His reputation was just being, you know, getting worse and his friends were turning against him.

So in his old age, he kind of gets to work writing and compiling his story to set the record straight. Now, of course, if you know the story of John Adams, he never did finish his own autobiography. But in fact, those papers that he compiled did a lot to repair his reputation for the coming generations.

Now, in our passage that we're reading tonight, the Apostle Paul is himself setting the record straight. He's telling us his own autobiography, or at least portions of it. And he's doing it for a reason. You see, what's at stake, obviously, in our text tonight is not the truth about a TV show or even the founding of a nation, but what's at stake is something infinitely, infinitely greater.

[5 : 58] Remember that this letter that Paul is writing to these churches of Galatia, and Galatia, by the way, it was a region of present-day Turkey, sort of south-central Turkey. So Paul's writing this letter to these churches. And these are churches that he had founded, that he himself had founded. And what we learn from the letter of Galatians is that shortly after he left, certain teachers had come to Galatia. Certain teachers had showed up, sort of, after Paul had left. And it seems that these teachers were telling the Galatians that Paul hadn't really given them the whole story. They were probably saying something like, oh, well, Paul, Paul told you about Jesus. That's really good. But, you know, Paul actually left something out. You know, to be pleasing to God, you actually have to follow all the Mosaic customs here.

Look at these Bible verses. And they started running a seminar, filling in the supposed blanks in Paul's gospel. And, you know, these false teachers, to sort of defend that assertion that, you know, Paul had left something out, they were actually critiquing Paul's authority. They were actually critiquing Paul's reliability. They were probably saying something like this. They were probably saying, you know, Paul, Paul got all his training in Jerusalem with the apostles. That's where he learned the gospel. And, you know, we, well, we've come from Jerusalem too. We've learned from the apostles.

So you see, we're in a position to actually correct Paul. We can tell you where Paul was wrong, because we too have come from the same source. So trust us. Trust us. We can tell you that Paul didn't give you everything you need to know. And then they went on to tell the Galatians that in order to really have a relationship with God, they didn't have to just trust in Jesus. No, no, no.

You've also got to take upon yourself the ceremonial Mosaic law. You have to get circumcised. You have to abide in obedience to these things. Well, as you can imagine, these young churches in Galatia were thrown into confusion and into doubt. I mean, after all, look at these teachers, right? You know, they had pretty good credentials. They were from Jerusalem. They certainly knew the Bible pretty well. They were always quoting the Old Testament. They even seemed to care about the Galatians. They were probably pretty nice guys. You know, false teachers don't usually walk around with t-shirts that say heretic on it, right? And their story about Paul seemed pretty plausible. At least they sounded pretty confident when they were giving it.

And here was their dilemma. You know, if Paul got his message from Jerusalem and these guys got their message from Jerusalem too, well, who were they to trust? How were they going to decide? What were they going to do? Now, Paul, having received word about these troublemakers in Galatia, takes up his pen and he goes about setting the record straight. Let me tell you how it really happened, Paul says.

[8 : 50] In chapters 1 and 2 of Galatians, if you want a sort of bird's eye view of the structure of Galatians, chapters 1 and 2 are really Paul's autobiography. Chapters 3 and 4 then talk about deep theology.

He's kind of wrangling theologically with them and then 5 and 6 are ethics. But these first two chapters are Paul's biography, setting the record straight. Look back even at verse 1 of the chapter, if you have it there before you. Listen to how Paul even starts the letter. Paul, an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead. Already from the start, he's staking his claim. He's correcting their misunderstandings.

Paul, an apostle, not from man. He's saying that his calling to be an apostle is from Jesus himself, from the risen Lord himself through no intermediary.

Now when you think about being called to ministry, it's true that God calls people to ministry today. He certainly does. But every call to ministry today that God makes is always mediated through human beings. There's always a mediation that God used. It's always indirect. There's a church leadership structure or there's a congregational vote. There's a denominational council. There's a, you know, if some of you go on staff with a parachurch organization, there's a big structure there. I just filled out an application for one of those. It was like three miles long. You know, there's always a mediated process that God uses to call people to ministry. There's always means and intermediaries to confirm and call people into gospel ministry. But that wasn't the case for Paul.

Like the other apostles, he got an immediate, a direct call from the risen Jesus. Jesus himself met Paul in person on the road to Damascus. The passage that I read to start our service tonight was Paul, you know, kind of alluding to that. He appeared to me, Paul says. The same verb that he uses for Jesus' appearing to the other apostles. He appeared to me. Now he does say last of all, right, in that passage from 1 Corinthians, last of all, as to one untimely born. He recognizes that his story is a little different than the other apostles. But qualitatively, it's the same.

[11 : 09] The risen Jesus called me to be an apostle. Now, as we think about this idea of Paul being an apostle, you know, if you read through the New Testament, you'll find that there's two different kinds of apostles in the New Testament, just to make things clear. You know, on the one hand, they're sort of small apostles. Now, this would be guys like Barnabas. If you remember the character of Barnabas from the book of Acts, sometimes he's called an apostle. And what that means, you see, the word apostle just means someone who sent, just a sent one. It was a pretty common word. So someone like Barnabas, he was a small apostle because the church at Antioch had sent him out to do pioneering gospel ministry. He was a messenger. He was their, he was their one that they had sent out to do work.

He was an apostle, small a. But then, and this is the apostles we know, they're the sort of capital A apostles. And this is the small select group of men that Jesus himself had come to in person and called and commissioned for ministry. These guys were irreplaceable, utterly unique, very, they had a special role to play in God's redemptive history. They had been called directly by Jesus himself. And you see, Jesus had called them and commissioned them to do what? To preach and teach in his name. And in his name, in a very unique way, Jesus commissioned them and inspired them by his spirit to teach authoritatively. Now that's why in the New Testament, the apostolic writings that we have collected there, that's why we consider them scripture. Because these are the very words of the people that Jesus himself commissioned to preach and teach in his name with all of his authority, with all of his backing. So when we read the words of the New Testament, we're reading the words that Jesus himself has put forth for the church. Because Jesus himself had authorized the apostles for this task. So okay, verse one, Paul setting the record straight about his ministry. Paul an apostle, not for man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead. But then he goes on in our passage tonight to set the record straight about his message. And this is where we're going to kind of land for the rest of our time together. Starting in verse 11, he says,

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. Okay, bold claim, right? I got my message directly from God, Paul is saying. Now before we sort of unpack that and see the evidence that Paul puts forward to actually substantiate that claim, maybe it's worth asking, okay, why is Paul doing all this? Why is he so adamant to defend his ministry and his message? What is he up to? What's at stake? You know, think about it. Is Paul, as he sort of picks up his pen and starts writing, is he simply out to just defend his ego? You know, is he out to just, you know, kind of heal his wounded pride? Here are these churches that he had started, and now they were turning his back on him, and he was really upset and saying, oh, how could you do that to me?

I'm going to show you. I'm going to write this really nasty letter. Was Paul sort of like John Adams, you know, a grumpy old man at the end of his life, and worried and upset that posterity wasn't going to remember him for all the good things that he'd done? Is that what Paul's up to in Galatians?

No. No, and that's not it at all. You see, he's not writing out of pride. Paul's writing out of love. He's writing all of this because he knows that if the Galatians lose their faith in him, they're going to lose their faith in the gospel that he preached. If they lose their faith in the messenger, they're going to lose their faith in the message. They go down together. And then as verse six in chapter one tells us, if they lose the gospel, if they turn away from the gospel, well then they're turning away from God himself who calls them by his grace.

[15:18] So if they lose their faith in Paul, they lose their faith in his gospel, and they're turning away from God, which means losing all the grace and all the peace and all the freedom that they've come to know in Christ. You see, what's ultimately at stake here in Paul's autobiography and Paul defending his authority and Paul doing all these things, what's ultimately at stake is not really the truth about Paul at all, but the truth about God. The truth about how human beings, how you and I can have a relationship with God. That's what's at stake. What does it take to be pleasing to God? What does it take to be right with God? That's what's on the line in Galatia. And that is the most profound question that you and I could ever ask. And the way that you answer that question will determine the course of your whole life. That's what's on the line in Paul. Paul's setting the record straight.

Now, let's be honest. It's not just the first century when people were trying to undermine Paul's credibility, right? I mean, today, just like in the first century, there are plenty of people willing to sort of spin a different story about Paul, to tell a different sort of narrative about Paul's life, to knock him down, to diminish his role as an apostle. You know, and really, what all that amounts to is simply us not being able to trust him. There's sort of a minor cottage industry in religious publishing that every five or ten years, it seems like there's another book that comes out sort of arguing that Paul sort of got the message of Jesus and botched it all up, or that Paul was the inventor of Christianity, which means he sort of cooked it all up out of his head. You know, or there's also a really great industry sort of making Paul out to be a misogynist or a racist or all these sort of things, you know. But you know, all of this ends up not just besmirching Paul's memory, but more than that, clouding our ability to really hear the gospel that Paul preached. So the issues that we're confronted by in this text are actually very real and relevant for us today. They're still going on.

We need to have the record set straight for us too, and that's what Paul does. And in fact, in this passage, he's actually doing two things at once. He's not just setting the record straight about the origin of his gospel, where it came from, but he's also setting the record straight about the nature of his gospel. What is it? What it's like? So as he's telling this story about how I got it, he's also telling a story about what it is to help them see it in all of its fullness. So let's look at those two things, the origin and the nature. So first, the origin of the gospel. As we read in verse 12, Paul didn't get it from man, nor was he taught it, but he received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Now what evidence could Paul possibly put forward to support that claim? Well, he gives us some data. He gives us some data of his life before his conversion and some data of his life after his conversion to sort of support that pretty bold claim. So think about Paul's life before his conversion. You know, maybe one might think that Christianity and the gospel of free grace was something that was originally appealing to Paul. You know, maybe Paul was sort of culturally or psychologically predisposed to the idea that one could be accepted by God apart from the law. Maybe Paul was a religious seeker who inquired after different life philosophies and sort of weighed them against one another and, you know, spun his own sort of ideas about religion. Maybe Paul was unhappy and dissatisfied with his own religious experience and wanting to find something new and sort of chart out in his own way. You know, maybe Paul came up with his gospel, in other words, off the top of his head. But, you know, when you look at the facts of Paul's life, you see that that couldn't be true and it wasn't true. The picture that Paul gives us in verses 13 and 14 is of a person who knows exactly what he believes, who's completely confident in it.

In fact, Paul wasn't just happy and well-advanced in Judaism. He had utterly rejected Christianity. He had already made up his mind about it and he was persecuting. Now, of course, Paul the persecutor probably knew the basic claims of the Christians. You know, he probably knew that they were claiming Jesus to be the Messiah, that he was crucified, that he was risen from the dead. And, of course, Paul thought that all of that, Paul thought that all of that was utter blasphemy. He knew enough about Christianity to know that he wanted to get rid of it. And Paul's hostile stance towards the Christian was something that everybody knew about. Look again at verse 13. He could say to them, you've heard of my former life in Judaism. You know what I was all about before my conversion. So, if that was Paul's life before his conversion, it's hard to believe that the gospel was something he would have just made up. Why in the world would he concoct a message that basically undermined the whole system of life that he had propped up his identity upon? You know, Paul, the perfectly zealous keeper of the law, Paul the perfectly zealous keeper of the law, deciding one day that to be right with God had nothing to do with keeping the law.

That's an utterly far-fetched thing to think. I mean, that's more far-fetched than thinking that Glenn Beck would wake up one day and just start supporting Barack Obama out of the goodness of his heart. Right? I mean, it would never happen. This is utterly counterintuitive.

[20 : 25] So, Paul reminds us of his life before his conversion as evidence that he got his message by revelation and not from a human being, not from his own head. Okay, well, what about after his conversion?

Maybe that's when Paul sort of got the rest of the details. Maybe he had a religious experience and then learned it all from somebody else. Well, did Paul get the main outlines of his message afterwards? Look again at verses 16 and 17.

At the end of verse 16, after his conversion, Paul says, I didn't immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. You know, after his conversion, Paul didn't sort of trot off to Bible college in Jerusalem. You know, he didn't sign up for correspondence courses, as great as Bible college and correspondence courses are. You know, he didn't do it.

What does he do? He says, I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Now, no one really knows what Paul was up to in Arabia. Luke doesn't mention it in Luke 9. It's not really important to what Luke's trying to do in Acts. Some people think that Paul sort of after meeting the risen Christ goes into Arabia and spends time in scripture study and prayer to sort of come to terms and make sense of Jesus as a crucified and risen Messiah. Some people think that Paul goes away into Arabia to start doing what Jesus told him to do, right? Which is go preach my name to the Gentiles. So Paul goes into the region of Arabia where there were a couple thriving cities and starts doing it. Who knows what he was up to? He was probably doing both. But the point is this, that immediately after his conversion, whether he was in Arabia preaching, meditating, or whether he was back in Damascus preaching in the synagogues, he didn't have any interactions with the other apostles. And then he goes on to tell us that when he finally did go up to Jerusalem, it was three years later, and he only spent 15 days with Peter, and he didn't see any of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. So three years later, he only spent a fortnight with two of the apostles.

Surely that's not enough time for Paul to have been dependent on them for his message. Now as we think about Paul's independence from the other apostles where he got his gospel, it doesn't mean that Paul was a Lone Ranger. I want you to see this. You know, being a Christian isn't about sort of, well, I've got the gospel and poo on everybody else, you know. No, is that what Paul's saying? No, he's not saying that. Paul's clear that he received the gospel independently of the other apostles, but he's also clear to point out that his gospel was in complete agreement with the gospel that Jesus gave to the other apostles.

[22 : 51] That's implicitly what's going on in his meeting with Peter. He's saying that, hey, we were together on this. I didn't get it from him, but it was the same message. And that's what Paul's reinforcing in verse two of chapter one when he says, I'm writing the churches of Galatia and all the brothers who are with me. He's saying that, look, God's family agrees on the gospel. Paul wasn't some Lone Ranger out there sort of pulling away from the herd, doing his own thing. That's going to become more clear in chapter two when we take up the issue of the unity of the gospel. But suffice it to say tonight that Paul, he's not disparaging the other apostles or denying the importance of their unity and their accountability to one another. He's merely saying that his authority is equal to theirs because he too is commissioned by the risen Christ and got his gospel directly through revelation of Jesus.

So there's the evidence. Both before his conversion and after conversion, Paul stacks it up. You know, if you want to sum it up, before his conversion, Paul was too busy murdering Christians and after his conversion, Paul was too busy making Christians to actually have got his message from the other apostles. It's a strong case that he got his gospel through revelation. Okay, well, what does that mean for us today? What are the implications? Well, you know, if the gospel is God's revelation, if it's God's word to us, you know, if that is true, then it must become the criteria by which we judge everything else. If it really is our creator, God's message to us, not bound by culture or time or space, then it has to be the thing by which we use to determine all other things.

You know, whether it's the most ancient church tradition, whether it's the most intense personal experience, everything comes under the criteria of the word. Now, don't get me wrong, tradition and experience can be good things. They're gifts to us. You know, we should value them. We should carefully consider them, but at the end of the day, it's the word of scripture that has to be our final arbiter.

The word critiques and the word reforms our traditions and our experience, not vice versa. You know, it's so easy to say, it's so easy to say, but this just feels right. Or even to take it the next step and say, but God's telling me that this is the way it should be. Or on the other hand, to say, well, this is the way we've always done things. It's so easy to say that. But you see, God in his kindness has given us his revelation so that we don't have to be blown and tossed by our subjective opinions and experiences. And we don't have to be mired and stuck by the dictates of tradition.

In love, God gives us his word to correct us and to direct us and to guide us. So the question is, are you bringing your life? Am I bringing my life, my experience, my tradition? Am I bringing it under God's revelation? Are you willing to ask, what does God's word say? That most profound of questions. Now I get it. That's not an easy task.

[26 : 08] That's not an easy thing to do. You know, there might be something that you're feeling to be right tonight. You might be thinking that there's something you just feel to be right. Something your heart really wants to be right. But you know it runs contrary to God's word. And the Holy Spirit's kind of doing that struggle in your life. You know, maybe you're struggling with it even now in your mind. Should you hold on to it? Should you let it go? If that's you, let me say to you, remember God's promises to you. Remember that you are, in Christ, God's son, God's daughter.

And his word is there not to harm you or to enslave you, but to free you. To free you to live as God created you to live. So let the word be the determining factor in your life. Let it search you and let it be your light. You see, the gospel is not some sort of cold, harsh, white beam in the interrogation room, exposing you, harming you. You know, the light of God's word is like the warm light. It is the warm light of God's gracious presence. It's like the light of the sun. Does it expose everything? Can anything hide from it? No. But it also brings forth life when we turn our face towards it. You know, like flowers, when we bring ourselves into the light of God's word, we open up and we bloom and we become radiant and all our colors come forth and we start to display the glory of the one in whose image we were created. That's what it means to bring ourselves under the criteria of the word. You know, to those who are sleeping, the daylight feels harsh and unforgiving. This morning, when I tried to get out of bed, it was tough. I confess. But you know, you walk out into a day like we had today and you finally know what it's like to be awake and to be alive.

Paul says the origin of his gospel is God's revelation and that means that we can know what our creator has said and bring our lives before it. Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you, Paul writes in another of his letters.

So that's what Paul says about the origin of his gospel. What about the nature of it? Let's bring things to a close. What is this gospel like? Paul sets the record straight here as well. Paul tells his own story to demonstrate what the true gospel is really all about. Look at verse 14.

We're going to see a dual nature here. Look at verse 14 first. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. You know, remember that the false teacher in Galatia were telling them that they had to be circumcised and follow the law to be right with God. And what's Paul telling them? He's telling them that he knew exactly what it was like to live in accordance with the Mosaic law. He followed it, excuse me, with precision. He was the shining star of his generation, Paul says. He won all the sword drills and went to all the Bible studies and served in every ministry and gave generously of all his income and practiced all the spiritual disciplines. He was the religious all-star of his age. There was no commitment he didn't make. There was no rule he didn't sort of take up with the utmost zeal.

[29 : 23] You couldn't find a flaw in his devotion or his performance. And what's Paul telling us? It didn't work.

No matter what they tell you to do, he said, I've done it a hundred times more and it won't make you acceptable to God. And here's the point that Paul's trying to make. Here's the point that, you know, it comes crashing through our windows like a brick.

In essence, what verse 14 means is that the more religious Paul got, the further he actually got away from God. The more ceremonies he performed, the deeper he sank.

The more moral he strove to be, the more lost he became. And of course, in the moment, he wouldn't have said that. He wouldn't have realized that at the time. He thought he was right on target. He was quite proud of how he advanced beyond many of his own age among his people.

Thank you very much. But the spiritual reality was utterly different than what he had thought. He was just as lost as ever, even in the midst of all his devotion.

[30 : 28] Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that religion is not, as is frequently supposed, a fundamentally virtuous human quest for God. It is rather the final battleground in the struggle between God and human self-esteem.

What Paul called his former life wasn't some virtuous human quest towards God, but in reality, a battle against God. Paul thought he could make himself acceptable, but it couldn't be done.

He thought he could overcome God's standard with his moral performance, but he could never be good enough to be right with God, and it was a fight. No matter how good he became, he still needed God's grace.

Now, at the same time, look at verse 13. Verse 13, Paul says, I was a persecutor.

He reminds us that he was a terrorist. He was a religious zealot filled with hatred and rage. Innocent people had been killed because of Paul. Families had been torn apart.

[31 : 36] What greater crimes could someone commit than to kill someone because their beliefs are different than theirs? But what's Paul saying here in this verse?

God's grace extended even to me. Grace, God's totally unmerited, undeserved favor, was given to Paul, the terrorist, the persecutor.

You see, no matter how wicked Paul had become, he was never so bad that God couldn't forgive him. No matter how bad he became, he could still receive God's grace. So now you see the dual nature of the gospel of Jesus.

The gospel shows us that our good deeds are always too few, and our bad deeds are never too many. We could never have enough good deeds.

We can never have too many bad deeds. Which side do you find yourself on tonight? Are you putting so much time into religious activity, into virtuous activity, that you are sure that God must be pleased with you?

[32 : 43] Friend, realize that it can never be enough. The distance is always too far. You must realize that you need grace. And you need to repent, not just of your bad deeds, because you do that, right?

That's part of your good works, repenting of your bad deeds. What you need to do is repent of the reason why you did your good deeds. Acknowledge that your religion hasn't been a virtuous quest towards God, but a battleground between your self-esteem and a holy God.

Admit that you, yes, you, though you feel as if you've done everything right, and you've followed all the rules, and you've obeyed all the commands, admit that you need the grace of Jesus. But perhaps you find yourself on the other side.

You're the proverbial murderer, the persecutor. There's figurative blood on your hands, and you can't wash them clean. And your conscience condemns you, and you think that there couldn't be a fountain pure enough to cleanse away your sin, and you're killed.

Friend, if that's you, don't despair. Repent of your sin, oh yes, but turn to Christ. Grace was sufficient for Paul, and the cross of Christ washed him clean, and it can wash you as well.

[33 : 58] You too can be forgiven. God welcomes you in through Christ, and he welcomes you in, not as a second-class citizen, not as sort of a third-rate disciple. Look what God did with Paul.

Paul, the prime enemy of Christ, became the prime promoter of Christ. He welcomed him in as an apostle of all things. God welcomes you in through Christ, because the gospel, after all, is about him.

Paul makes that clear. It's a revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul's conversion happened to him when God was pleased to reveal his son to him. So how do you know that the gospel's starting to become real to you? How do you know if it's starting to hit home?

How do you know if you too are undergoing this kind of wild conversion that happened to Paul? How do you know that the gospel's becoming real to you?

It's when you actually start to recede, and it's when Christ starts to fill your vision. Notice verses 13 and 14 are all about Paul. He says, I did this, I did that, I advanced, I was zealous.

[35 : 05] But then verses 15 and 16 are all about God. God set me apart. God called me by his grace. God was pleased to reveal his son to me.

Is it Christ that captures your sight? Even right now, is it Christ that fills your vision as he prays in the garden? As his accusers take him away, as his friends abandon him and forsake him, as the soldiers mock him, as the rulers condemn him, as he makes his way up the hill?

Do you see him crucified even now for you? And do you see Christ there on the cross setting the record straight? Setting the record straight before God, not for his record, but for yours.

Do you see that he's risen for you? Do you see that he's seated at the Father's right hand, interceding for you? Friend, if you see him there as your mediator, as the Lord, then God is calling you to trust in him, to turn from yourself and to trust in him.

And like Paul, the gospel will change your life. The persecutor becomes the preacher and they glorify God because of him.

[36 : 23] That's how the passage ends. Perhaps you've never literally been a persecutor, I get that, and perhaps you're pretty sure you'll never be a preacher, okay. But everyone who comes to know Christ will be changed.

If you have come to know the love of God for you and Jesus, you too will look back and say, my former life, it just wasn't the same before I met Jesus.

And you too have a story to share, just like Paul. A story to share to help people come to grips in a better and clearer way with the grace of Jesus.

That's why Paul's sharing his testimony, right? To help them understand the gospel. And that's why God gives you a story. No matter what it looks like, because they all look different, but they all are the same really at the heart.

A persecutor becomes a preacher, an enemy becomes a friend, the outsider comes in, God's given you a story, friends. He's changed your life. God has set you apart before you were born, if you're trusting in him.

[37 : 29] I realize that blows your mind. It blows my mind too. But he set you apart before you were born. He called you by his grace and he revealed his son to you. No, Christ didn't appear to your physical eyes and he didn't knock you off your horse, onto the ground in a blaze of light, but the spirit opened your spiritual eyes.

Didn't he? And Christ became real, not just to your mind, but to your heart and you put your trust in the living Christ all the same. And God's done all that so he might be glorified in you.

So that people could look at you and glorify God. So that people could look at us as a church and say, what has happened? It must have been God's work.

Can you say that tonight? Can you say that about your life? Do you know people well enough in your Christian fellowships or here at Trinity that you can look at their lives and say, yeah, God's done something great.

That's the kind of community we want to be at Trinity, where we're glorifying God because of his grace towards us that's made us utterly different. Can you say that about yourself? Can you say that about your brothers and sisters?

[38 : 39] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this passage that clarifies both where the gospels come from and what the gospel is and what it does.

Lord, would you make all these truths more real to us, increase our confidence in them, and Lord, would you change us by your grace and mercy? Would you glorify yourself in us as a congregation, as individuals?

Lord, we want people to glorify you because of what you've done in us. Jesus, we want to recede and we want you to become great. Thank you for rescuing us, Lord.

For those who are wrestling tonight with you, for those who are wondering where they stand with you, Lord, I pray that you would reveal yourself to them, make yourself real to them.

God, continue to encourage them to run after you and to seek you. Lord, for those who you have done this great change, Lord, I pray that you would give them persevering grace to keep running the race set before us.

[39 : 47] In Christ's name, amen.