

Gospel Testimony

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Date: 18 January 2026

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[0 : 0 0] You know, after those testimonies, I feel like I can just say, amen, let's pray, and! we can all go home early. No, thank you all for sharing. I really appreciate it. And I know,! please, for those of you who are members, look, keep on lookout for Lindsay and Michelle's as well, because it, there's, it's just a beautiful picture of God's work in people's lives, and it's a joy to hear these testimonies, so just want to encourage you with that. You have made it here.

Well done. The snow has not daunted you, although it's probably still falling, so we'll see how it is going home, but I'm glad you have joined us this morning.

I want to begin this morning as we look at God's Word by asking a question. Why do we think the gospel that we preach is the true gospel?

You know, it's interesting, because in my lifetime, the, the way that this question has been asked, has changed over time. Back in the 1980s, when I came to faith, the question was usually framed along the lines of, is this gospel actually true? Is it actually the content of it? Is there evidence for it that would convince a rational person that the gospel is true? Today, people are less concerned, not unconcerned, but less concerned often with the question of, is it true? And often, they ask a question of, is it real? And by that, they often mean, does it make a difference?

Does it actually produce good in people? Both of these are reasonable and understandable questions. Both of these are things that we ourselves often ask. But one of the interesting things is that they start both of them with a standpoint of, we as humans are the ones sitting in the judgment seat to say, we know what is right. It's a very human-centered worldview, right? Whether God's Word would meet my criteria for truthfulness, or whether the experience that you've had or that I want to have meets my criteria for what it must be right, so that I would know that this is the true gospel.

[2 : 4 4] This human-centered attitude is expressed in many, many different ways. So, for instance, one of the leading people today, Bart Ehrman, who is a theologian, was quoted as saying that he views the Bible, he writes, the Bible is a very human book with human mistakes and biases and culturally conditioned views in it. And realizing that made me begin to wonder if the beliefs in God and Christ that I had held and urged on others were themselves partially biased, culturally conditioned, or even mistaken. Again, that's a reasonable question, question, but what does the Bible actually say in response to that? Now, look, this is a huge question.

I am dipping my toe in the edge of an ocean of understanding and conversation about religious epistemology and how do we know what we know and all sorts of things. And I want to be careful to say that what I'm going to say next is not the whole answer to this question, but it is the question that our text is actually answering this morning. So, we are in the, in our series, we are in the book of Galatians, and we're in chapter 1, starting in verse 11. If you want to turn there, we're going to read it in just a minute.

It will be found in the pew Bibles in page 913. But Paul is arguing for his gospel being the true gospel, right? If you were here last week, you heard Pastor Nick read the words and explain why Paul is defending this idea. He said, I preach to you a gospel, and if I came back later and preach something else, if an angel from heaven came and preached something else other than that core that I first preached to you, it's not the true gospel at all. It's a fake gospel. It's a false gospel, and it's going to disappoint you, and it's going to harm you spiritually if you believe in it. He's writing this because the Galatian church was hearing voices who wanted to dismiss Paul and the gospel that he had originally preached to them. And so, Paul is defending the gospel that he has preached, and that's the purpose of the text. So, we're going to read the text this morning. We're going to pray for God's help, and then we're going to look into it for a few minutes. So, Galatians chapter 1, starting in verse 11.

This is what God's Word says. Verse 12.

So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers, but when He who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by His grace was pleased to reveal His Son to me in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. But I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him 15 days, but I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. In what I'm 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. They only were 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.

[7:17] Let's pray. Lord, we pray for your help this morning. We thank you that this Word is your Word, and we thank you that by your Spirit we are able to understand it. Lord, I pray for us this morning that our hearts would be willing to receive from you this morning, Lord, the truths of your Word. Lord, may we not only understand the truth of it, but may we love and delight in the truth of it, and may it move us to our lives of obedience that glorifies you. And Lord, I pray for your help this morning. You would help me to speak as I ought. Lord, help me to speak your truth. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So, Paul's claim here is actually fairly straightforward. It's actually fascinating. The commentaries on Galatians have said things like, this is the least theologically important passage in the entire book of Galatians. There's not much here. We're going to see what we can find for nuggets this morning. Paul's thesis is this, right? It's in verses 11 and 12. The true gospel was not made by humans, but it was revealed by God. That's the thesis. You can see it very clearly in verses 11 and 12. And then you see that in 12 and 13, they both begin with the four. And so, he's saying, let me explain to you why I say that. And so, he goes on to explain to us how it wasn't received from men, how it was revealed by God to him, and what that means for us. So, that's what we're going to look at this morning. That's our outline for where we're going. And I want us to see that

Paul had a purpose in this. His purpose was to give the early church confidence in the gospel that they had first believed in. The gospel that was just preached up here a few minutes ago by these testimonies, right? The story of God's work for us, that we would have the same confidence that the Galatian church would have. So, point one, why does Paul say this is not from man? Well, one of the things that he does is he turns immediately to his own story and begins by saying, I was a happy Jew.

Not only was I a happy Jew, I was a successful Jew. I was actively involved in my faith, tradition, and community in a way that was bringing me everything that I wanted, right? And he was living a life that had no desire to pursue this gospel of Jesus. Remember what Acts chapter 8 verses 1 through 3 says about Paul. It says, And it arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him, but Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Paul was in this position of power, and he was in this position of influence, and he had all the benefits of his Jewish pedigree. You go on, if you look at what he says in his own testimony in Philippians chapter 3, he says, I was circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

He had every reason to stay, but whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ, he goes on. So, Paul says, one of the reasons I want you to see that this gospel didn't come, because there's no human motivation for me to want to have believed it. I had everything except Christ, and as we'll see, and God intervened. So, just pause there, because there's a second argument that Paul says about why it's not a human thing, right? He said, I didn't...it wasn't even that I wasn't not seeking it, but also, when I did receive it, I didn't receive it from any human authority. His conversion on the road of Damascus, as he tells the story, he says, when I received this, I didn't consult with anyone. I preached the gospel. I went away for three years before I went up to Jerusalem. And even then, I only saw the apostles for, I don't know, like two weeks, you know, minus the Sabbath. So, he didn't...you know, anyway, you know what I mean. He wasn't there long. He didn't go to the

apostles, to Jerusalem, to say, hey, teach me this gospel. Tell me more about [12:35] Jesus. The word there, consult, seems to be more of corroborating rather than instructing. Paul went so that the gospel...so that he would affirm and confirm that the gospel that he was preaching was the gospel that they were preaching, and that together they were preaching the same gospel, right? Now, we know there's some development in the book of Acts. There's a confrontation with Peter that we'll read about next week about maybe the apostles were still figuring out how to apply this gospel right. We'll see in Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council, solving the problem of how do we understand the relationship between the gospel of grace and the Old Testament law, and how is that lived out perfectly? But what Paul is fundamentally saying is, I didn't get this from any human being. Now, stop for a minute. If someone came up to you and said,

God has revealed something to me, and no other human being told me about it, you would be skeptical, wouldn't you? So would I, right? Someone comes to us, and they claim the high ground of religious epistemology. I have a revelation from God. I must be right, you know? And we know the damage that this can do. We know that these claims can be spurious, right? I mean, I'm old enough to remember Jim Jones and the Jonestown cult that ended up in a massacre of people. Or remember the Hale-Bopp comet followers, the people who killed themselves, thinking that the return of the Hale-Bopp comet was going to bring about some new spiritual something or other. I don't even know the details, right? And these were all led by men who said, I have heard from God. But we need to recognize that our skepticism is a skepticism that Paul himself already knew. Because he said in verses 6 through 10, he said, listen, listen, I preach to you the gospel that I received from God. And if I come back and I preach anything else, or if an angel from heaven came and preached something else, right? So he's claiming a uniqueness about what he is sharing about the biblical gospel, the content of Christ crucified for us.

He's saying it's different. He's saying it didn't come from human beings, but it was revealed by God. And this is my second point, because this is Paul's second point, right?

The foundation of this is his own experience. He was on his way to Damascus, as was read earlier by Susan and Ivor. He was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, and God appeared to him in a supernatural encounter that cannot be explained in any other way. The light shone, a voice spoke, and Paul met Jesus. And God revealed in this moment that Jesus was God, the Christ, the appointed Savior of the world. Now, the Acts account doesn't unpack that very clearly in the initial stages. As the story goes on, do you remember, he goes to Ananias, and Ananias was this Jewish man who... and God told him to go and bless this... or he was a believer, and Ananias said, go bless this man. And so... but what it doesn't say is that Paul went to Ananias, and Ananias explained to him the gospel. All Ananias did is pray for his healing and his vision, and he was restored. What we do see, though, is that Paul emphasizes how this was God's initiative. Look with me at verse 15 for a second, right? But when he who had set me apart before I was born... that's God... God who saw him before he was even born... God had a plan, and God was initiating this.

[17:19] And he who called me according to his grace... underscoring the message of grace that it's not by any desert or any works or anything that Paul had done that God called him, but God initiated with him to extend to him undeserved favor in this calling. And then you do see at the end, right?

He was pleased... this is the beginning of verse 16... he was pleased to reveal what? His Son to me. And friends, this is the very core of the answer to the question that we're wrestling with, because what Paul says is, God revealed to me that Jesus is God's Son. That's what I knew. He knew of Jesus, clearly.

He was alive during Jesus' time. He saw people who were following him. It wasn't like he was questioning Jesus' existence, but God revealed to him that Jesus was God's Son. Now, we know that from the very end of the passage that was read in Acts 9, 20 through 22, because when Paul goes to the synagogue, immediately he preaches, Jesus is the Son of God. He proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue saying, He is the Son of God, right? And people said, who is this guy and what's going on here? But it said that he confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. Now, if he hadn't received this from anywhere else, there was content that was passed on. This was the substance of the revelation that God had given to Paul about his gospel. It was about who Jesus was.

And friends, you've got to admit, this is not a story that we ever would have made up on our own, right? I mean, Paul says, this didn't come from man, it came from God. Well, one of the things we can know, we can think about is, would we have ever thought, you know, the way God's going to reconcile us to himself is by becoming a human being, living a life of perfect revelation to ourselves in humility and in weakness, laying down his life for us by dying on the cross and then rising from the dead.

This is how God is going to reveal himself to us so that we can know him. Because we live post-Christ, we're too familiar with it to be shocked by how incredibly odd and amazing the gospel is. We would not have come up with this.

[20 : 27] It's not about what laws to follow, because that's what our hearts love, is rules to keep and rituals to do. It's not about our experiences with God, because we love to pursue experiences that seem to fill our soul in the moment. It's not about finding the right person, the guru, the teacher, whoever it is that we can hitch our wagon to and believe that he's going to take us into glory and perfection and utopia. It's about the person of Jesus who was a historical person, who did historical things. And if you remember from 1 Corinthians 4 15, Paul reminds us that if Christ was not raised from the dead, if he did not, if the historical account that we see in the New Testament is not true, then we're just fools. We've just believed a myth or a happy lie, and we are no better than any other human-made self-help. We hope it makes you feel better for the day.

But Paul here is saying, the answer to the question, how do we know the true gospel, is it's because God has revealed that Jesus is the Son of God. This is what the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 1, 1 and 2. Long ago, at many times, in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, and through whom He also created the world. This is the answer to how do we know God, because God has spoken to us, and the content of that speaking is about who Jesus is.

and this gives us confidence, because it's not about my experience or your experience.

We may have experience. So the question, how do I know which is the true gospel? If it centers on Jesus, the Son of God, this is what it's about.

So Paul tells his story in order to exalt this. And friends, what a wonderful thing it is, this testimony that he gives of an unlikely convert. And friends, you've heard more this morning.

[23 : 14] Tren didn't come looking for Christ, but God came looking for Tren and revealed to him who Jesus was. And the same thing is true for each of those testimonies.

There are great stories of how people have seen and encountered the living God and come to believe that Jesus is the Christ. If you haven't read these stories, Rosaria Butterfield is a professor. She had been a very liberal professor, a lesbian. She lived her life an anti-Christian. She was doing research on what the religious right was doing in attacking the gay, lesbian community.

And she was not looking for Christ. She was looking to understand this. She was happy in her community. She saw good things in what her friends were doing.

But she encountered Jesus as the Son of God through the Scriptures in conversation with a local pastor and his wife who loved her well.

[24 : 36] And she came to faith. And it's a beautiful story of God revealing himself to her by helping her see Jesus is the Son of God.

If you've ever read *The Cross and the Switchblade*, you know the story of Nicky Cruz, who was a Puerto Rican boy sent away by his family from Puerto Rico to New York City to make his own way. To make his own way, he became a warlord of the Mau Mau gang in Brooklyn in the 1960s, early 70s.

But he encountered a country preacher named David Wilkerson who told him that Jesus loved him. Nicky Cruz threatened to kill him.

He said, David Wilkerson replied, You can kill me and chop me into a thousand pieces and each one of those pieces will say to you, Jesus loves you. And the message of Christ's love broke through.

[25 : 42] And his life was changed. And he was transformed. Or to go back just a little bit further, there's this curmudgeonly professor named C.S. Lewis, an atheist who mocked Christianity.

But because of the companionship of Christian friends and the insufficiency of the worldviews that he was espousing and exploring and teaching and the compelling beauty of Christian writing, he was brought face to face with Jesus.

Is he the Son of God or not? And he wrote later, Either he was and is the Son of God or else a madman or something worse.

You can shut him up as a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about him being a great human teacher.

He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. Friends, that's part of my story.

[27 : 00] I read his book, Mere Christianity. And at the beginning, I didn't know what I believed. I was wondering. And at the end, all I knew is that if Jesus really was God, then I needed to respond.

And I was convinced that he was. And that led me to faith in Christ because of that. And friends, this is what Christian testimony is meant to be in this world.

We may not have all the intellectual arguments to Marshall. I spent time this week reading. There's a great book out called The Gagging of God. It's an older one by a professor of mine named D.A. Carson.

It's talking about the intellectual movements of the last 200 years and why it leads us to skepticism about the reality of believing the gospel and the impossibility of saying that the one gospel could be true and why he thinks it's not.

And at the core of that, anyway, I read it all. And I was like, can I try? I can't. I can't explain it to you. It's a whole other seminar or maybe. Anyway, but what I can say is that in wrestling through these questions that we all wrestle with, Paul says, here's my testimony.

[28 : 22] And my testimony points to the fact that God revealed himself to the world in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

And we, as those who bear testimony to what God has done in Christ, are like the trophy cases in my high school gym.

You walk in and there's this big trophy case, right? And it's got, you know, championship and MVP and, right? It's got all these trophies.

This is what we are meant to be, friends. This is what Jesus has done. Trophy cases, not for look what we have done, look what we have won, but trophy cases of this is what Jesus has done.

This is what Jesus has done because he is the Son of God and because he has rescued us. And this is what happened in the early church because they didn't even know Paul, but they heard he who once persecuted this is now proclaiming and defending the very truth that he once tried to destroy.

[29 : 34] And they glorified God. And like the blind man, we can say, I don't know all the answers to all those questions, but all I know is that he came to me and I once was blind, but now I can see.

Now I can see that Jesus is the Son of God. So if you're here this morning, if you're following Christ, if you put Christ in the center of your life, then encourage you, pursue more and more and have confidence.

Have confidence because if Jesus really is the Son of God, it changes everything. And as you grow in telling your story, grow in making it about God, just like Paul did.

Grow in making about God the way we heard this morning from our brothers and sisters. Grow in saying, this is what God has done in my life.

And friends, if you're here today and you're still wrestling with or exploring the question of who is Jesus or how can I believe that this is the true gospel, you're in the right place.

[30 : 56] Pursue him. And if I might be so bold, might even say, receive him. He is God's Son and he died on the cross for you.

Put your faith in him. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this morning. We thank you for this word. We pray that you will, Lord, help us.

Help us to have confidence, not because we have done anything, but because you have done everything. Lord, not only have you worked for our salvation, but you have revealed yourself to us in Jesus in such a way that we can know and we can respond and we can believe and trust in you.

Help us, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.