

*For I would have you know, brothers and sisters, 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 by a revelation of Jesus Christ.
 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.
 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people,
 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 to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.
 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days.
 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. In what I write 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 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.*

Galatians 1:11-24

"Set Apart, Before Birth, Called By Grace"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

Last week, Carl Mende brought us through the stormy opening of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, that curious mix of Greeks and Celts, some of whom were tempted to worship Paul the first time they heard him speak, while others in the crowd quickly turned against him to the point of throwing stones at him, actually trying to kill him because some Jews and their rabbi's from cities nearby had convinced them that Paul was a bad man whose gospel would turn Jews and pagans alike away from what they always knew and what they used to be. But the words I read to you this morning weren't aimed at hostile Jews or unstable, volatile pagans!

Paul's words in this letter were aimed at the people from Lystra and the other Galatian towns who had believed Paul's gospel and had given their lives to Christ, and had organized into congregations like this one, people who wanted to know and love and follow Jesus. But these people were a long way from Galilee where Jesus had walked and talked and worked his miracles, a long way from Jerusalem where Christ had died for our sins and risen from the dead. So Paul was the first they'd heard that God had sent a Savior who could save people from faraway, people who knew little of what Moses had taught on Mt. Sinai, and even less about what Jesus had said and done to bring the teachings of Moses' Law alive in peoples' hearts.

The Galatians were new to the idea of one true God who had called a chosen people and had sent a parade of prophets who preached and taught that one day God would send a Savior who would die for the sins of the whole world, and rise from the dead so that anyone anywhere who believed in him could be free from sin and live forever. All this was new to the Galatian disciples when they heard from Paul who preached it in their city squares. And the situation was complicated by Christians of Jewish descent, Israelites from Judea, who had heard that Paul was winning over Greeks and Celts and Romans to Christ and who imagined that to be a real Christian a person had to be kosher like all the original disciples in Judea were kosher.

So, some months after Paul and Barnabas had founded the Galatian churches and then gone home to report to their own people that there were now new congregations spread throughout western Asia, some months after all that, Jewish believers from Judea showed up in Lystra and Derbe and set out to convince the Galatian disciples that to be real disciples of Jesus they would have to become kosher. "After all," they told the Galatians, "we come from the country where Jesus really lived. Did you know that neither Paul nor Barnabas ever met Jesus in the flesh? They never heard his voice, they didn't become disciples until after Jesus had died and risen and ascended and the Holy Spirit had descended on the apostles Jesus chose in Galilee."

"So surely," these Jewish believers went on, "we are in a better position to know what Jesus really taught than Paul and Barnabas! We learned our gospel from the apostles Jesus chose in Galilee!" It was this talk that evoked from Paul the outrage Carl Mende talked about last week, that no one should listen to these people, that anyone who taught any other gospel than what Paul taught from the get-go should be "accursed," should be treated as God's enemies and not as any sort of believer.

And this morning Paul explains to us why he spoke so forcefully, why he insisted that the Galatians hold to what he had taught them over and against anyone, even angels from heaven, who try to teach them anything else. Paul said, "... *I would have you know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from a man, nor was I taught it, but I received it by a revelation of Jesus Christ.*" Paul couldn't contradict the gospel the Judean evangelists thought they learned from the original apostles. Hundreds of miles away, Paul didn't know what the other apostles had said, and he didn't know whether these jokers had understood what they'd heard back in Judea.

What Paul did know was that, years before, the risen Jesus had knocked him off his pins on the Damascus Road and that Christ had gone on to teach Paul a real gospel face to face, "*revelation*" Paul called it. And that gospel, the one Jesus had taught him, became the foundation for everything Paul did and everything Paul taught in all the years after that. Which matters because what happened to Paul on the Damascus Road was way more than just a personal conversion. Think about it! God brings lots of people to their senses without knocking them off their feet and blinding and terrifying them with sight and sound and fury.

Years ago, in a seminary class, my prof, T. David Gordon stunned me by suggesting that it may be a mistake to describe what happened on the Damascus Road as "The Conversion of Paul". Certainly Paul needed to change. Here in Galatians, Paul confesses that he had "*persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.*" But the whirlwind Paul experienced and the blindness he suffered when Jesus met him on the Damascus Road is how God had always appeared to ordinary, sinful men like Isaiah and Daniel and Ezekiel when he called them to be his messengers, his prophets or apostles to God's people.

And God does this to prophets and apostles because no one speaks for him, no one writes his Word without first learning how ferociously holy God is. When God calls a man to be his messenger, Isaiah in the temple, Daniel on the Ulai canal, the twelve apostles at the Transfiguration, whenever God calls men to speak for him, he puts him on their faces and makes them deal with how small and wrong and powerless they are. So Paul tells the Galatians that it was Jesus himself who shook him out of blind zeal for kosher tradition, not just to convert him, not just to straighten him out, but Jesus called Paul to be what Isaiah and Daniel had been before him, messengers who passed on to their generation visions and teaching from God that were both wonderful and terrifying.

So Paul tells his readers, "*...when he who had set me apart from my mother's womb... called me by his grace, when he, God, was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I might preach him to the nations, I did not immediately consult with anyone.*" The things Paul writes here are a word for word echo of what God had said to Jeremiah some six hundred years before.

Why? Because Jeremiah and Paul's were bookends historically speaking. Jeremiah had preached to and been rejected by old Israel on the eve of the Babylonian Exile, and now 600 years later Paul was living out the same call, preaching the same thing just a few years before Israel would go into exile again. So Paul and Jeremiah both were set apart by God "*before birth*". Both of them were shown grace by God and called to an office they couldn't deserve, "*...to preach...before the nations,*" God said to them both.

So now Paul tells the Galatians that, years before, he hadn't scurried back to Jerusalem to gain the Apostles' approval for the work that Jesus had called him to do. And why not? Because Paul had read Isaiah and Daniel and Ezekiel and Jeremiah, he knew exactly what had happened to him on the Damascus Road. He didn't need to hear it again from Peter or anyone else Jesus had called back years before back in Galilee. And, besides that, we learn from the book of Acts, Paul was running for his life. The Israelite authorities he used to work for wanted him dead before word got out that their rabbi had become Christ's Apostle. So it was three years before it was safe for Paul to go to Jerusalem and explain he was an apostle to Peter and James, the Lord's brother.

And Paul brings us through all this, he tells us this long story to make a single point. And that is that when God sends us an Apostle, when we hear or read a word from a Prophet, we need to take that word to heart and not let anyone distract us from what God's Word says is true, how God's Word teaches us to live. It's why this Bible is the biggest book in this room today. We don't hear and see Apostles and Prophets today because the prophets God called, the apostles Jesus disciplined put to paper everything we need to know to find God and follow Christ in the world today. It's not a matter of whether God can be found, it matter of whether we're willing to read what he tells us and go where he points us.