

Freedom from Our Past **Galatians 1:11-24**

We are continuing in our sermon series through Galatians. This is just our third week, so let me invite you to find your way in your Bibles or apps to Galatians chapter 1. And as you do that let me give you a quick review of the context of this letter and what Paul has said so far.

Paul is writing here to a group of churches in an area called Galatia. And since his departure from there, false teachers have come into these churches and caused problems, confusing the believers there. The main culprits were a group called Judaizers, who basically would come in and say, “your faith in Jesus is good but it is not enough for you Gentiles (or you non-Jews). You also need to follow Jewish law to be heirs of God’s promise to Abraham. In other words, they were saying that salvation is achieved by some kind of cooperation between God’s grace and our works.

And so Paul gets report of this and is furious. This is strongest worded letter of the 13 we have written by him in the New Testament. So, he writes this letter to correct them in pretty strong language but also to remind them that they don’t need to be caught up in the slavery of religion, because the gospel brings with it freedom.

In fact, probably the key verse in the letter is Galatians 5:1...

Galatians 5:1

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

So, again, the gospel brings with it freedom, and we’ve seen so far that it brings with it freedom from having to earn our own salvation, freedom from having to justify ourselves before God, freedom from having to present our own righteousness to the Lord. Salvation is a gift of grace, freely given to us, so we are free from the crushing weight of any legalistic religion that would say otherwise.

Well, in our next passage we will see that because the gospel frees us from self-righteousness, it also brings with it freedom from our pasts, BOTH those parts of our past that look religious and look righteous but have no standing before a perfectly righteous God AND those parts of our past that look anything but religious and righteous.

One of the beauties of the local church is that it is made up by people with very different backgrounds and experiences and yet we can come together in the gospel. We all have different stories, however, the one thing our stories have in common is that they all include a past.

And our pasts have real influence on who we are today, what we think today, and what we expect today. And for you, your past might even shape how you view God, salvation, and grace.

You might be here this morning and you would not consider yourself a Christian, *per se*, but you like the sound of it. But deep in your heart what is keeping you from coming to Christ by faith is this nagging belief that He would never accept you because of the things you have done, or things you have not done but should've.

Or you might be here this morning and even though you have come to faith in Christ and *intellectually* you know the Gospel has covered all of your sins, you still struggle with guilt for your past. Again, we all have a past and for many of us it can be hard to break from them.

This morning I want to encourage you from Galatians chapter 1 and we will see and be reminded that ***the Gospel brings freedom from our pasts***. In fact we will be reminded, very powerfully, that ***the work of God in the Gospel is both abundantly gracious and is infinitely powerful*** which brings with it some incredible implications for our lives today.

THE DIVINE GOSPEL

Galatians 1:11-12

11 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. **12** For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

In order for the false teachers to build up credibility for themselves and their false gospel message, they needed to discredit Paul and his gospel message. So, Paul here begins to defend himself and his message from these attacks.

He is basically saying, I didn't make this stuff up. I didn't just think one day, this would make a nice message or I think this might be true or I hope this might be true. He says, I didn't make this up, in fact, no other person made this up, I actually received this message from the resurrected Jesus himself.

We'll look at this encounter in a moment but first, this reminds us that the gospel has a *divine* origin. The good news of God's work through Jesus for the redemption of his people is a message that transcends human wisdom. And since that is the case we shouldn't be surprised when the rest of the world sees it as a foolish message. We shouldn't be stunned when Christianity is mocked and the Church is ridiculed.

Paul reminds the church of Corinth of this in his first letter to them...

1 Cor. 1:18

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Again, the gospel is folly, or foolish, for those who don't see their need for it. And this is more than just an intellectual denial of the truths of the gospel, there is a spiritual condition that underlies it all...

1 Cor. 2:14-16

14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

15 The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. **16** "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

This is really important for us to understand, because it might be tempting to think that if only I could explain it just right, or if I could only answer all the objections that others have, then people would turn in faith to Jesus. But the Bible says, people mock the gospel not because they don't understand it, but because they are hardened to it.

And if there was ever a person who fit that description, it was Paul before his encounter with Jesus, which he goes on to describe to the Galatian believers...

PAUL'S PAST

Galatians 1:13-14

13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. **14** 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.

So, Paul describes his past, his life before coming to faith in Christ.

He says he "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." Paul, or Saul in the early chapters of Acts, absolutely hated Christians and he hated Christianity. In the book of Acts we read about some of this actions. In Acts 8, Paul approved of the execution of Stephen, a Christian who was stoned to death for his faith in Christ. Paul dragged Christians, both men and women to prison for their faith. In Acts 26, Paul explains that whenever Christians stood on trial for their faith, he would cast his vote for the death penalty.

Paul wanted to do everything in his power to stamp out Christianity. And he did this because he thought he was doing what was right.

Again, he says in verse 14...

Galatians 1:14

14 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.

Paul was a rising superstar in the Pharisee world. So, not only was he persecuting Christians, he was doing it in the name of religion. He thought what he was doing was good. He thought what he was doing was actually holy and righteous.

But then, something radically changed in him.

CONVERSION AS INTERVENTION**Galatians 1:15-17**

15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, **16** 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; **17** 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.

He's again arguing for his credibility, saying I heard the gospel for myself, no one taught it to me, in fact, even after I saw Jesus I didn't go up to Jerusalem where the apostles were to check in with them and see if they could discern what happened to me. His life was completely changed. He now knew the Jesus he hated. He now experienced the grace that he didn't think he needed. He was a very different person.

But, notice his phrasing in verse 15, "But when he (God)..." It's a short phrase that reminds us that conversion is an act of intervention. It is like saying, "I was leading my life in a certain way, heading this direction, I was on a certain path in life, but God intervened."

And he intervened in Paul's life in a spectacular, dramatic way...

Acts 9:1-9

1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest **2** and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. **3** Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. **4** And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" **5** And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. **6** But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." **7** The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. **8** Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. **9** And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

God then calls a man named Ananias to go find him and pray with him to restore his vision...

Acts 9:17-19

17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; **19** and taking food, he was strengthened.

For Paul on the way to Damascus, his conversion was very much a real, literal intervention by Jesus. He is confronted by the risen Christ and sees both his own brokenness but he also Christ's beauty. **And this is always the case with conversion.**

Paul would describe it like this in 2 Corinthians 4...

2 Corinthians 4:6

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

In other words, just as God at creation spoke into the void of darkness to bring about light, God at every new creation speaks in the darkness of our hearts to bring about the light of new life. When he shines in our hearts we see ourselves, we see our brokenness, we see our sin, but we also see Jesus invites us to come to him and bring with us all of our brokenness and sin.

On the road to Damascus Paul not only saw Jesus with his eyes, he saw Jesus with his heart. All who have come to faith in Jesus have had a similar experience.

Before, in your life, the things of God were dull. They were boring. Jesus was irrelevant or perhaps just a myth.

But one day God, opened the eyes of your heart and you finally saw the beauty of God's work in Jesus not just for the world but for you. God intervened in your life. And all of a sudden there was light in what had been a darkness that you didn't even realize you were in.

Understand, Christians might not all have a Damascus road experience as dramatic as Paul's, but they will have a 2 Cor. 4 experience. Eyes are opened, and the beauty of God is finally realized in the face of Jesus Christ...and this will have massive ramifications.

So, Paul has lined out in these verses the gospel's origin, his past, God's intervention, but finally he points them to the results of that intervention...

THE RESULT OF INTERVENTION: GOD'S GLORY

Galatians 1:18-24

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. **19** But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. **20** (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) **21** Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. **22** And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. **23** They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." **24** And they glorified God because of me.

Imagine, in a time before social media, before TV, before online news, Paul was so frightening that Christians who had never met him or seen him knew about him. But God who had lavished his grace on Paul was now using him to spread the very message he was trying to destroy. Though he once killed God's children, he became one of God's children. And the result was that the church "glorified God because of me," notice not "glorified me because of God." Why? Because only God can change a heart. Only God can bring light into darkness.

The gospel takes our past sin which is the source of our shame and transforms it into the means of God's glory. It is against the black backdrop of our old lives that the beauty of Christ's work shines forth.

So, we don't cower away from our stories and past sin. We don't boast in them. However, we own them and in our willingness to speak of them we are boasting in Christ, the One who has forgiven us, saved us, and redeemed us.

Ultimately this section of Galatians is Paul trying to say to the churches, I didn't make this up, I heard it from Jesus, and it has radically changed me.

But for us this morning we are reminded that The work of God in the Gospel is both abundantly gracious and it is infinitely powerful. And this has profound implications for our lives!

1.) Because the work of God in the gospel is abundantly gracious... There really is freedom from your past...

[ILLUSTRATION] Asterisk in Baseball Records

In the sports world, especially in baseball, there has been for some time controversy about the legacy of players who are caught using performance enhancing drugs to gain an unfair advantage, because some of them were breaking records. So there has been talk for a long time about what to do with them (HOF? Records list?) One solution was to go ahead and put their names on the list but along with their name put an asterisk, to let everyone know that this player though he did some great things has a tainted past. It is a way of telling others their standing is not equal to the others on the list. That their accomplishment should be questioned in some way.

And I think it might be tempting to think of our standing with God in the same way because of our pasts.

It might feel like God sees you as His child but there is a little asterisk by your name because of your past. Your name is in the book of life that the Bible talks about, but an asterisk exists there.

One sportswriter described our questioning the legitimacy of a player or team as using “mental typography,” and we might do the same with others in the church. You might look around the room and because you know the stories of those here, you might see an asterisk by their name in your mind.

Regardless of your past, there is no sin in your life that is too great that it cannot be covered by the blood of Jesus. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. You will never out-sin God’s grace. Paul rejoices with the Galatian believers that despite his very dark past because of God’s work in the Gospel, he will no longer have to be held accountable for it. He is very much free. And you can be too, and if you’ve put your faith in Christ you really are now.

Listen to how Paul describes this in his letter to the Colossians believers...

Col. 2:13-15

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, **14** by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. **15** He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Paul gives us this incredible mental picture of the results of the atonement, that when Jesus was nailed to the cross our sins were nailed there as well.

Know that the gospel changes the conversation about our sin. Before, we might only say, “he did that,” or “she said that,” or “I thought that.” But now we also say, “Yes but Jesus died for that.” “Christ’s blood covers that.” “God’s grace is sufficient for that.”

Again, the the work of God in the gospel is abundantly gracious but secondly, **because the work of God in the gospel is infinitely powerful - which means that there is hope for anyone.**

[ILLUSTRATION] Prospect Lists

Many of my very early jobs in high school and college were in sales, everything from vacuums, to long distance phone service, to vacation packages. One of the most common things we had to do was put together lists of people we thought might be

able and willing to buy what we were selling. These would become our prospects who we would eventually contact, and then we would ask them to give us references of other prospects (more people that were perceived as likely to buy). If you are in sales you probably do this as well.

And so often we do the very same thing when we think about sharing the gospel with people in our lives. We tend to make up a prospect list because for whatever reason we feel like only certain persons, or certain kinds of people, will actually be saved. And then there are others we look at and say, there is no way I can see him/her ever loving Jesus. But I can guarantee you that we would have looked at Paul and said, there is no hope for him. He will never get it, he will never come to Christ, but obviously we would have been wrong.

This ought to bring you hope for those in your life that you desperately want to see transformed from living in darkness to seeing and enjoying the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This ought to bring us hope in this world as well. If you believe that God can save **anyone**, why wouldn't you pray for those you might see as *unsaveable*?

- terrorists, whose greatest goal in life is to kill you?
- politicians, whose views and rhetoric radically different from biblical Christianity (which is true of either side of the aisle)?
- false teachers/cult leaders?
- estranged, angry family member?
- apathetic teenager/young adult?
- bitter, hardened senior citizen?

The work of God in the Gospel is infinitely powerful. Paul is one example, but in reality we all are examples. None of us sought God. None of us loved Him. But now, by His grace, we do.

God, in the Gospel, is abundantly gracious and infinitely powerful, therefore we can walk in freedom. Freedom from our past, freedom from our own rebellious hearts which if it weren't for the grace of God would still be utterly rebellious.

CHALLENGE

Do you feel like God would never accept you? That you need to clean up your life before you come to Him? You don't. God does the transforming, just come to Him, no matter what you've done or haven't done in your life, His grace is more than sufficient.

Christian, are you still troubled with guilt from your past? Do you still tend to believe the lie that your standing before God is determined by your efforts? The slightest mistake and all mistakes are rehashed before Him? You do not have to deal with your sin any longer because they were dealt with on the cross. Walk in freedom this morning...

COMMUNION

One of the greatest gifts Jesus gave to the Church is communion because it offers us a tangible reminder of these truths. When we eat the bread we are reminded that Jesus took on flesh to be the sacrificial lamb that we desperately needed. When we drink the juice we are reminded that Jesus shed his blood to atone for our sins, so now we don't have to.

We are reminded that, if you've put your faith in Jesus, all of your sin, past, present, and future has been dealt with and now you have new, enduring relationship with God that will never be lost. It is good that we remind ourselves of these things, and we have the opportunity to do that today.

After I pray, anyone who has confessed their sin and trusted in Christ is welcome to partake of the elements anytime they would like during our last two songs, however, this is only for Christians who have trusted in Christ and have confessed their known sin.

So, with heads bowed and eyes closed, let's take just a moment for silent confession, pray silently where you are, and I will pray for us and we will continue...

CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Well, again, the gospel frees us from the bondage of works based religion and it frees us from our past. Dealt with on the cross, they are never to be dredged up for us to answer for ever again.

Psalm 103:11-12

11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; **12** as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Let's stand and continue in worship this morning...

VERSES

Galatians 5:1
Galatians 1:11-12
1 Corinthians 1:18
1 Corinthians 2:14-16
Galatians 1:13-14
Galatians 1:14
Galatians 1:15-17
Acts 9:1-9
Acts 9:17-19
2 Corinthians 4:6
Galatians 1:18-24
Colossians 2:13-15
Psalm 103:11-12

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does the gospel offer us freedom?
2. Why is it important for us to remember that the gospel is foolish to the world?
3. How did God intervene in your life to bring you to himself?
4. Has your past kept you from fully walking in joy in Christ?
5. How does the gospel speak to that?
6. Is there anyone in your life that you have been tempted to believe is too far gone for the Lord to save them? Pray for them as a group.