

Message #3  
Galatians

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PAUL AND THE POWER OF A PERSONAL TESTIMONY  
GALATIANS 1:11-24

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

William Murray is a most unlikely follower of Jesus. His dad was a married Catholic army officer serving in Italy during WW II. His mom was also serving in the military in Italy. Her husband was back in the States. William was the product of the affair of these two people in Italy. His mom divorced her husband. But his dad was unwilling to break up his marriage.

So mom brought William back to Baltimore. She raised him alone. She had what today might be called very progressive views. She was also an activist. She hosted meetings of the Socialist Labor Party in her home. She brought William along to other meetings. Mom was also a vocal atheist.

In 1960 she brought William to Paris. There she visited the embassy of the Soviet Union, where she sought a visa to go to Russia. She was turned down. So mom and William returned to Baltimore.

William was enrolled in the public school system. Mom was very unhappy to learn that William was exposed there to Bible readings and prayers led by the teachers. She made a big fuss about it at the school. William became the object of harassment and scorn. Mom filed a lawsuit against the school district, where young William was listed as the plaintiff. The lawsuit complained that prayers and Bible readings led by public school teachers violated the First Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits the government from making an establishment of religion. In 1963 the lawsuit was combined with another legal case and was heard before the US Supreme Court as *Abington vs. Schempp*. The Supreme Court ruled that Bible reading led by public school teachers was a violation of the US Constitution. It was a case that I studied ten years later in a constitutional law class in college.

William later wrote about his mom: **“Her actual, original reason for bringing this lawsuit was to get God out of the picture because she thought that the church was one of the three legged pillars that supported capitalism. And by eliminating prayer out of schools, getting God out of the public, that that would eliminate the capitalist system.”** He also added, **“I was raised in that atheist and Marxist existence primarily because our family was so dysfunctional nobody could hold down a job.”**

Today William Murray is a Baptist pastor and the leader of a Christian lobbying organization in Washington, DC. How in the world does a Christian leader arise out of that kind of background? It strikes me that William Murray's life has parallels with that of

the Apostle Paul. That early Christian leader had a religious upbringing, but he, like William Murray, was trained to hate Christians.

We have seen that Paul was dramatically changed by the direct intervention of God. We have also seen that ten years later he was involved in a missionary trip to bring the gospel to Gentiles. (PROJECTOR ON--- FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) He and Barnabas left from Antioch in Syria and traveled to the island of Cyprus and then to south central Asia Minor. The cities in which they planted churches were in the Roman province of Galatia.

Upon their return to Antioch in Syria Paul received news that Jewish influencers were presenting a different gospel. The new Christians were told that they had to believe in Jesus, but they also had to follow the Old Testament law. They questioned Paul's authority and integrity. This letter was Paul's response. (PROJECTOR OFF) We have seen in these beginning verses that the apostle talked about the true gospel and its theme of grace. In the passage today he feels that it is necessary to defend his authority.

Since the time of the early church Paul's message and authority have been attacked by critics. Thomas Jefferson, who once described himself as not a total follower of Jesus Christ, wrote in a letter to one Mr. Short, **"Of this band of dupes and impostors, Paul was the First Corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus."** Thomas Jefferson was skeptical about the stories of miracles in Jesus and Paul. Today there are liberal scholars who question the Biblical accounts of the life of Paul. William Murray has critics who question his story. We may have critics who question our belief in Jesus. How are we to respond? Our passage today describes the power of a personal testimony.

I.

We are going to pick up the story in vv. 11 & 12 of #1 as we consider THE FOCUS OF OUR TESTIMONY (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE FOCUS OF OUR TESTIMONY) Paul writes in vv. 11 & 12, **"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."**

Last week we saw that the word "gospel" means "good news." Paul's good news was that people can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life by simply believing in Jesus. Paul's opponents criticized Paul on two counts. First, they attacked his message. These Jewish critics claimed that the Galatians, who were largely Gentiles, had to not only believe in Jesus, but also to follow the Old Testament law. Second, they attacked Paul's authority. He may be some kind of apostle. But his authority was not on the same level as the original twelve disciples. These critics were apparently from Jerusalem or places nearby, and they claimed to be closer to the original apostles.

So Paul's response is that the source of his authority and message does not come from him. It does not come from any of the other apostles. He got it from Jesus Himself by direct revelation. Paul was not looking for Jesus. He opposed Christians and their

gospel. He was like William Murray, who grew up hating Christians. He was like some of us who once opposed Christianity and its message.

We are exposed to many messages in our world which claim to have good news. We are told that good news comes in buying a certain product. It comes from having sexual freedom, from changing our gender if we want. It comes from having a successful career and lots of money. It comes from being popular. It comes from a bottle or a syringe.

The focus of the good news for us who are Christians should be the gospel. It is the promise of eternal life and meaning in life and a connection with the God who is there. The focus of our testimony, our life story should be Jesus and what He offers to us.

II.

If we could look at our passage today as a model for telling our personal testimony, our spiritual story, then vv. 13 & 14 could be labeled THE PAST LIFE OF OUR TESTIMONY. (II. THE PAST LIFE OF OUR TESTIMONY) The apostle says in v. 13, **“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.”** Notice here that Paul uses the word “church” to refer to Christians collectively. Usually in the New Testament “church” is used of a local gathering of Christians.

So Paul begins his testimony by talking about his religious past in Judaism. He was a very religious guy. Sometimes religious people get a certain amount of respect by virtue of their religiosity. But religiosity does not get us to heaven. The Muslim terrorists who led the attack on 9/11 were religious people. Religion is only as good as the object of its faith.

The object of Paul's faith was a certain interpretation of Judaism. In his training as a rabbi, these Christians were seen as not just wrong in their understanding of the Bible. They were a threat to Judaism. They needed to be eliminated. Paul's enthusiasm for persecuting the Christians won the approval of his teachers.

According to v. 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.”** Some Bible scholars suggest that Paul was being modest. He was probably the top student of the famous rabbi Gamaliel. He was a rising star among the rabbis, who pretty much all belonged to the party of the Pharisees.

He describes himself as “extremely zealous.” This enthusiasm related to the traditional interpretation of Judaism as understood by the rabbis. This zealousness was reflected in his persecution of Christians.

Where did Paul and the Pharisees get this zealousness? There were a couple of sources in their Biblical background. For one, the leaders of the Christians were following a crucified criminal. According to Deuteronomy #21 v. 23 (DEUTERONOMY

21:23), “...a hanged man is cursed by God.” Jesus had been crucified. That was hanging on a tree. Clearly he was cursed. How could some of these Jews follow this Jesus? The Messiah which the Jews should be looking for was a conquering hero. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then, second, there was a tradition in Judaism which had Biblical roots in which God blessed those who destroyed the enemies of God. In Numbers #25 the children of Israel in their flight from slavery in Egypt encountered the Moabites. The Moabites invited the Israelites to the sacrifices of their gods. Many of the Israelites participated in this false worship. Also some of the men began fooling around with the Moabite women. When one of the Israelite men brought a Moabite woman back to the camp, the son of a Jewish priest killed both of them. The good guy was named Phinehas. God says that He specifically approved of the actions of Phinehas.

In our recent study of the Book of Daniel we looked at prophecies written there concerning a Syrian Greek king by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes. This Greek king took over Jerusalem in the second century before Christ, and ordered all Jewish worship to be stopped. He also killed a pig on the altar in the temple and set up an idol of the Greek god Zeus. A Jewish guy by the name of Mattathias led a rebellion against Antiochus Epiphanes. He started it by killing a fellow Jew who came to sacrifice an animal to an idol to a Greek god. In this Jewish history book called 1 Maccabees (1 MACCABEES 2:26) the author says approvingly about Mattathias, “**Then he burned with zeal for the law, just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu.**” My point is that Paul saw himself as following in this tradition of fighting for God and defending Judaism in his persecution of Christians.

Paul in our passage is speaking to Galatian Christians about Jews who are trying to convince Gentile Christians to follow the Old Testament law and Jewish traditions. Paul is explaining how his adherence to these Jewish traditions led him to persecute Christians. He has been down that road, and it did not have a good ending.

For our purposes we can benefit from the model which Paul provides for us about how to tell our Christian story, A good Christian testimony will explain what our life was like before Jesus. It may have been not so great. It may have been pretty bad. It may have been just a life where something was missing.

III.

In vv. 15 & 16 we encounter what I have labeled THE TIPPING POINT OF OUR TESTIMONY. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE TIPPING POINT OF OUR TESTIMONY) Paul writes, “**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...**”

The apostle provides us with a summary of his actual conversion experience. In our personal faith story it is good to explain exactly how it was that we came to believe in Jesus. The Galatian Christians had no doubt heard that story from Paul himself. He is

just summarizing it here. We looked at his account of how he became a Christian in one of our earlier sermons. There are three times when that story appears in the Book of Acts. We looked at Paul's own account in #22.

In Acts #26 Paul gives another version of that story as he speaks to a Jewish king by the name of Agrippa. In vv. 12-18 of #26 his testimony reads like this: **“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ 15 And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’”**

Such are the specifics we have about how Paul became a Christian. Back in v. 16 of our passage, the more literal rendering of the first part of v. 16 is **“[He] was pleased to reveal his Son IN me [not to me].”** Some of the Bible scholars suggest that Paul is making reference to the internal work of the Holy Spirit. Not only did Jesus dramatically reveal Himself externally to Paul. God was also working on Paul on the inside to point him to Jesus.

We also need to see that Paul is describing God's initiative in this whole deal. He says that God set him apart when he was in his mom's womb. According to v. 15 God also called him. It is almost as if Paul had no choice in the matter. We could be skeptical about whether this is the normal way that God works with people. Perhaps Paul was special and unique in that he became an apostle of Jesus and key leader in the early church.

But then we find in other parts of the Scripture where there are indications that God always takes the lead in the salvation of every Christian. For example, consider John #6 v. 44. (JOHN 6:44) Jesus is speaking, and he says, **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”**

Some find statements like that troubling. It can be regarded as comforting. Our salvation is based primarily upon what God has done. The gospel message still also stands. If we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be saved. (PROJECTOR OFF)

For Paul, his reception of the gospel message was also accompanied by a commission to a particular job. That doesn't happen for most of us. I had no inkling when I became a Christian that I would one day become a pastor.

For our application purposes we find here again a model for how to tell others about our spiritual story. After we talk about our past life, we should explain exactly how it was that we became a Christian. Paul gives us just a summary in our passage. But we have these fuller explanations in the Book of Acts.

It is often an encouraging thing to hear about how our fellow Christians became believers. If you would like to do that in a church service sometime, let me know. The important thing here would be to distill that story down into a few minutes. The other option is to share that story on my pod cast sometime. I have done that with a couple of people in the church. There is more time in that setting to tell the story. I would also help out in doing that by asking questions and moving the story along. Let me know if you are interested.

IV.

We come then to THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TESTIMONY, for which we find an example in vv. 17-24. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TESTIMONY) We pick up Paul's story at the end of v. 16 and in v. 17: **"... 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."**

Thus begins Paul's story about life after his conversion experience. The background of his statement here is that false teachers seeking to influence Christians in Galatia have been saying that Paul was not on the same level spiritually as the first Christians who appeared in and around Jerusalem. This Paul character must have received direction from others, maybe from one or more of the first disciples.

But here Paul says that he did not even go to Jerusalem after his conversion. He was not commissioned by anyone but Jesus Himself. After his conversion Paul went to Arabia. Why did he go there? What did he do there? We are given no direct information by the New Testament about this period in his life.

(NABATEA) Arabia was the term that was used to describe Nabatea, which was to the east and south of the Roman province of Judea. It was not part of the Roman Empire. It was mostly desert territory. Damascus was right on the edge of Nabatea. The capital of this kingdom was Petra, which was to the south of the Dead Sea.

We can only speculate about why Paul went to this region. My suspicion is that he needed some time to rethink his theology. This budding Jewish rabbi knew the Hebrew Scriptures well, but he had been educated in a certain interpretation of them. He could not have instantly had a new Christian understanding of them. It would have taken some time for him to rethink the meaning of the Hebrew Bible in light of his sudden realization that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. It is good for any new Christian to study the Bible in light of the realization that Jesus is the Savior of the

world. It is especially good for Christians who go into some kind of vocational Christian ministry to do some study of the Bible.

It is my suspicion, again it is speculation, that after a while Paul began to preach and do evangelism in Nabatea. This caused a stir and a negative reaction from the king of Nabatea, whose name was Aretas. We find this reference to the situation in 2 Corinthians #11 vv. 32 & 33 (2 CORINTHIANS 11:32-33): **“At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.”**

Why would the king of this Arabian kingdom care about Paul? Paul had to have been doing something which got his attention in a negative way. I suspect that it was preaching the gospel. As we see later in Paul’s ministry, the apostle’s preaching often produces a negative reaction. People get worked up about it. Paul sometimes gets thrown into prison. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in v. 18 of our text Paul continues his story: **“Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.”** I take it that Paul means that it was three years after his conversion that he went up to Jerusalem, which means that he spent perhaps a little less than that in Arabia, with a return to Damascus also fitting into that time frame. Cephas is another name for Peter. Probably Paul spent that time learning from Peter his first hand stories about Jesus. But it was certainly not enough time for Paul to be regarded as a student of Peter or one under Peter’s authority.

Verse 19: **“But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.”** The other men among the original apostles had spread out into the world by this time. James was not one of the original twelve. He was the half brother of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians #15 vv. 6 & 7 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 15:6-7) Paul makes reference to him: **“Then he [the resurrected Jesus] appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time.... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”** So this James was recognized as a leader in the early church. Paul met him, but only briefly. Again it could not be rightly claimed that Paul was under the authority of any of these men.

Verse 20: **“(In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)”** Paul’s making an oath here about his story implies that there was another story going around in Galatia about his history and about the source of his authority.

According to v. 21, **“Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.”** (PROJECTOR ON--- SYRIA AND CILICIA) Syria and Cilicia were both Roman provinces. Cilicia in Asia Minor was the province in which Paul’s home town of Tarsus was located. Barnabas would later bring Paul from Tarsus to Antioch in Syria. It was from this Antioch that the two of them would undertake their first missionary journey. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verses 22 & 23: **“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.’”** Word gets around about the changed life of Paul. This is the power of a personal testimony at work. In these verses Paul is describing his changed life. His specific purpose is to counter the wrong narrative of false teachers. But he also is providing us with a basic model for how to tell our own personal spiritual story.

He concludes in v. 24: **“And they glorified God because of me.”** Here is the test of an effective personal testimony. It is possible to tell our story in such a way as to bring glory to ourselves. But the right way to do it is to tell it in such a way as to bring glory to God who is truly the One who has changed us.

William Murray gives his personal testimony in a book that he wrote entitled *My Life Without God*. (PROJECTOR ON--- MY LIFE WITHOUT GOD) His mother was Madalyn Murray O’Hare, the famous atheist who founded the organization American Atheists. The first part of his mother’s world view which William rejected was her socialism. William struck out into the world and became involved in various business pursuits. He described himself as a libertarian atheist.

He writes that he **“lived that libertarian lifestyle of thinking the only thing that is important is me and that everybody that can’t make it should just starve to death. The problem with that is that that lifestyle is destructive and nearly destroyed me, and when you get down to the point of destruction there is that one who is willing to lift you up out of your muck and that one is Jesus Christ.”** William had to go through difficult times before he got to that point.

He goes on to describe the tipping point where he finally became a Christian. He says, **“Going back to that horrible lifestyle of thinking that you’re the centre of the universe and that the only thing important to you is booze, food and sex, that led to near self-destruction. Finally I turned to a 12 step programme in order to get out of it and I was getting out of it, and there was this mysterious God getting me out of it, and I wanted to know who that God was. I went on a search for him but there is that eternal resistance [saying] that it cannot be that God my mother hated so badly, but the reality was that that is who that God was, and that is who that God is. It was he who was willing to reach down and grasp me up.”**

When William’s mother found out about this she declared, **“One could call this a postnatal abortion on the part of a mother, I guess; I repudiate him entirely and completely for now and all times... He is beyond human forgiveness.”**

In 1980 William Murray wrote a letter to the *Baltimore Sun*. In his letter he wrote this: **“First, I would like to apologize to the people of the City of Baltimore for whatever part I played in the removal of Bible reading and praying from the public schools of that city. I now realize the value of this great tradition and the importance it has**



**played in the past in keeping America a moral and lawful country. I can now see the damage this removal has caused to our nation in the form of loss of faith and moral decline.**

**“Being raised as an atheist in the home of Madalyn O’Hair, I was not aware of faith or even the existence of God. As I now look back over 33 years of life wasted without faith in God, I pray only that I can, with His help, right some of the wrong and evil I have caused through my lack of faith.**

**“Our nation, our people, now face a trying time in this world of chaos. It is only with a return to our traditional values and our faith in God that we will be able to survive as a people. If it were within my personal power to help to return this nation to its rightful place by placing God back in the classroom, I would do so.”**

Few, if any, of us will ever have the stage and audience which the Apostle Paul and William Murray had. But all of us have a certain sphere of influence, and there will be those around us who will be skeptical about our Christian faith. Our best defense will probably always be our personal story. People may argue about the claims of the gospel and the nature of Christianity. But it will be difficult to deny our personal spiritual stories. So be on the lookout for opportunities to share that story. Be careful in the process to give God the glory.