



The Transformative Power of the Gospel: From Persecutor to Proclaimer

March 5, 2023

Text

Galatians 1:21-24 (KJV) (Focus on V 23)

²¹ Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia; ²² And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: ²³ But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. ²⁴ And they glorified God in me.

¹A Definition:

*Webster's 1828 Dictionary*² defines 'Transform' as: To change the form of; to change the shape or appearance; to metamorphose; as a caterpillar transformed into a butterfly.

2. To change one substance into another; to transmute. The alchemists sought to *transform* lead into gold.

3. In theology, to change the natural disposition and temper of man from a state of enmity to God and his law, into the image of God, or into a disposition and temper conformed to the will of God.

Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. [Romans 12:2](#).

A Firsthand Account

Just as sure as any parent can expect to experience the *joys* of an infant transforming into a toddler who wants independence; Christians can expect REAL transformation in our own lives along with the lives of those we disciple.

Unfortunately, there are many who believe something different. Have you ever heard things like...

- Jesus accepts me the way I am, so there is no need to change.
- I was born this way.

Please do not take statements like these lightly. A gospel that solely possesses the ability to save from the wrath of God but lacks the power to transform the life of an individual to look more like Jesus, is NOT the gospel modeled for us in Scripture.

The Book of Galatians

The primary purpose of Apostle Paul's letter to Galatian Church was to address a 'false' gospel making it's rounds through the churches there. These false teachers were teaching that to be a true follower of Christ, one must Judaize (live like a Jew.)

- Paul established the Galatian Churches during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:13 – 14:28)
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- After Paul left the region, a group of Jewish-Christian teachers arrived and began to preach a message that challenged Paul's gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. (Galatians 1:6-9)
 - o Galatians 1:6-9 (KJV) 6 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto ***another*** gospel: 7 Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. 9 As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.
- This was not simply a different person preaching... These preachers preached ANOTHER gospel.

In the ***Evangelical Dictionary of Theology***, in the section under 'Judaizers', I learned:

In Galatians 2:14, Paul relates how he opposed Peter at Antioch because Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles in the church there. By practicing social separation Peter was in effect saying to these Gentile Christians, "Unless you conform to Jewish dietary laws and a Jewish lifestyle we cannot maintain fellowship with you." By his withdrawal Peter was compelling these Gentiles to "judaize."

Christ, however, had already instituted a change in regard to OT regulations on clean and unclean foods (Mark 7:1-23.) As an "apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13), Paul was against imposing a Jewish dietary code on non-Jews. Such might imply that the belief of Gentile Christians was defective in comparison with that of Jewish Christians; something else (i.e., conformity to Jewish custom) must be added to faith in Christ (Acts 15:1,5). Paul thus was opposed to Judaizing. It had the potential to distort salvation by grace alone...

Are you aware of any 'other' gospels?

- Jehovah's Witnesses teach that salvation is achieved by faith in Jesus and adherence to God's laws and commandments.
- Roman Catholics believe that salvation is a lifelong process that includes faith, good works, and participation in the sacraments.
- Individuals have their own beliefs about their good works outweighing their bad.

Any gospel that does not line up with the gospel modeled for us in Scripture, is a gospel that cannot truly save anyone from the wrath reserved for sinners. Jesus + Nothing = Everything!

- Galatians 2:16 (KJV) ¹⁶ Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.
- Ephesians 2:8-9 (KJV) ⁸ For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: ⁹ Not of works, lest any man should boast
- Romans 3:21-24 (KJV) ²¹ But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; ²² Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: ²³ For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; ²⁴ Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:



Saul, the persecutor

- Acts 8:1-3 (KJV)** – And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³ As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.
 - This passage describes how Saul (Paul) approved of the stoning of Stephen and began to persecute the church in Jerusalem, dragging off men and women to put them in prison.
- Acts 9:1-2 (KJV)** - ¹ And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, ² And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.
 - This passage states that Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples and had obtained letters from the high priest to arrest any Christians he found in Damascus.
- Acts 22:3-5 (KJV)** - I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day. ⁴ And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. ⁵ As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.
 - In his defense before a crowd in Jerusalem, Paul describes himself as a Pharisee who persecuted the followers of "the Way" (a term used to describe early Christians) to the point of imprisoning and voting for their deaths.
- Galatians 1:13-14 (KJV)** - ³ For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: ¹⁴ And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.
 - In this letter, Paul writes that he was "advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" and that he persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

These passages show us that Paul was indeed a persecutor of the early church. Like us sitting here today, He didn't have a squeaky-clean past.... But God!

A summary of Apostle Paul's Conversion

- Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians when he had a vision of the resurrected Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1-9; 22:6-11; 26:12-18).
- Saul was blinded by the light and fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14).
- Saul asked who was speaking to him, and the voice replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15).



4. Saul was led into Damascus, where he fasted for three days and was visited by a disciple named Ananias (Acts 9:9-19).
5. Ananias prayed for Saul, and his sight was restored. He was baptized and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:18).
6. Saul's conversion was immediately evident to those around him, as he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues (Acts 9:20-22).
7. Saul went on to become one of the most important figures in the early Christian church, traveling extensively to spread the gospel and writing 13 letters included in the New Testament.

A wonderful Change

Paul's life was completely transformed after his encounter with Jesus.

1. **Changed beliefs:** He became a dedicated follower of Christ and spent the rest of his life spreading the gospel message.
 1. Acts 9:1-22; Galatians 1:11-16
2. **Humility:** Despite his reputation as a respected Pharisee before his conversion, Paul was humbled by his encounter with Jesus. He realized that he was not as righteous as he had believed and that he needed the forgiveness and grace of God.
 1. Philippians 3:4-11; 1 Corinthians 15:9-10
3. **Repentance:** Paul publicly repented of his previous persecution of Christians and acknowledged that he had been wrong in his actions.
 1. Acts 26:12-18
4. **Changed behavior:** He stopped persecuting Christians and began preaching the gospel message himself. He also showed great love and concern for the churches he founded, often staying in touch with them and providing guidance and support.
 1. Acts 9:19-31; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12
5. **Courage:** Paul's conversion gave him a boldness and courage that he had not previously possessed. Despite facing opposition and persecution, he continued to preach the gospel message and was willing to suffer and even die for his faith.
 1. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28; Philippians 1:20-21

The Bible is full of examples of individuals being changed after an encounter with God!

1. **Zacchaeus:** After encountering Jesus, Zacchaeus repented of his sins and promised to make restitution to those he had wronged. His encounter with Jesus transformed him from a greedy tax collector into a generous and just person (Luke 19:1-10).
2. **The woman at the well:** After encountering Jesus at a well in Samaria, the woman's life was transformed. She left her water jar behind and went into the town to tell others about Jesus. Many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of her testimony (John 4:1-42).



3. **Peter:** After denying Jesus three times, Peter was restored by Jesus and transformed into a bold and effective witness for Christ. He preached with power and authority, and many people were saved through his ministry (Acts 2:14-41; 10:1-48).
4. **Mary Magdalene:** Mary Magdalene was a woman who had been possessed by seven demons. However, after encountering Jesus and witnessing His crucifixion and resurrection, she became a devoted follower and witness of Christ. She was transformed from a tormented and oppressed woman to a woman of great faith and courage (Luke 8:1-3; John 20:11-18).
5. **Nicodemus:** Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council who came to Jesus by night seeking to understand His teachings. After encountering Jesus, Nicodemus was transformed and became a secret follower of Christ. He later publicly defended Jesus before the council (John 3:1-21; 7:45-52; 19:38-42).
6. **The thief on the cross:** One of the thieves who was crucified alongside Jesus was transformed after encountering Him. Initially, he joined the other thief in mocking Jesus, but then had a change of heart and acknowledged Jesus as Lord. Jesus promised him that he would be with Him in paradise, and the thief's life was forever transformed (Luke 23:39-43).
7. **Isaiah:** Isaiah was a prophet who had a vision of the Lord in the temple, surrounded by seraphim. He was overcome by his own sinfulness and the holiness of God, but he was cleansed by a burning coal and commissioned to be a prophet to his people. Isaiah was transformed from a man of unclean lips to a faithful messenger of God (Isaiah 6).

Are You Transforming?

1. **New beliefs:** An encounter with Jesus should lead to a new understanding of God's holiness, love, grace, and mercy. This should transform a person's beliefs about God, themselves, and the world around them. (John 3:16; Romans 12:2)
2. **Repentance:** An encounter with Jesus should lead to a recognition of one's sinfulness and a turning away from sinful behavior. This means making a conscious effort to change one's thoughts and actions, and to live a life that is pleasing to God. (Acts 3:19; 1 John 1:9)
3. **New priorities:** An encounter with Jesus should lead to a new set of priorities, with a focus on serving God and others, rather than pursuing worldly success or personal gain. This may involve making sacrifices or taking risks in order to follow God's will. (Matthew 6:33; Luke 9:23)
4. **New relationships:** An encounter with Jesus should lead to new relationships, both with other believers and with non-believers. This means loving others as Jesus loved, and sharing the good news of salvation with those who have not yet believed. (John 13:34-35; Matthew 28:19-20)
5. **New perspective:** An encounter with Jesus should lead to a new perspective on life, with a focus on eternal values rather than temporary ones. This means trusting in God's plan, even in difficult circumstances, and living with hope and joy, knowing that Jesus has overcome the world. (John 16:33; Romans 8:28)



A paraphrase from a similar story I heard years ago.

Imagine a person coming into a church service and claiming to have been hit by an 18-wheeler on the way to church. They're limping and bruised, and they say that the truck just kept driving and didn't stop to help. They're seeking sympathy and support from the congregation, but there's no evidence of the accident. No one saw the truck hit them, there are no tire marks on the road, and there's no damage to their clothing or personal belongings.

In a similar way, some people claim to have had an encounter with Jesus, but there's no evidence of transformation in their lives. They may talk about feeling a sense of peace or joy, but their actions and attitudes don't reflect a genuine change. They may continue to lie, cheat, and hurt others, showing no evidence of the love and compassion that Jesus teaches.

As Christians, we are called to be transformed by the power of the gospel. When we encounter Jesus, we will be changed from the inside out, showing evidence of our faith in our words and deeds. Just as a true accident leaves behind evidence of its occurrence, a true encounter with Jesus leaves behind evidence of transformation in our lives. Let us strive to be living testimonies of the grace and love of our Savior, and may our lives bear witness to the power of his transforming love.

Conclusion

As we come to the end of this sermon, I want to urge each and every one of you to respond to the transformative power of the Gospel in your life. The Gospel is not just a story to be heard, but a message to be lived out.

If you have never put your trust in Jesus Christ, I encourage you to do so today. Admit your need for a Savior and believe in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead to give you new life.

For those of us who have already placed our faith in Jesus, let us not forget that the Gospel is not just for salvation, but for daily transformation. Let us make a commitment to live out the Gospel in our thoughts, words, and actions, and to share this transformative message with others.

Remember, the power of the Gospel is not just for a select few, but for all who believe. So let us respond to this message today, and let the transformative power of the Gospel change us from the inside out.