

## Galatians | The Grace Manifesto

### This Is My Story (and It's Stickin' To Me!)"

1.10ff

6.16.19

*For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.*

<sup>11</sup> *For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.* <sup>12</sup> *For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*

<sup>13</sup> *For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it;* <sup>14</sup> *and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.* <sup>15</sup> *But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased* <sup>16</sup> *to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood,* <sup>17</sup> *nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.*

<sup>18</sup> *Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.* <sup>19</sup> *But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.* <sup>20</sup> *(Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)* <sup>21</sup> *Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.* <sup>22</sup> *I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ;* <sup>23</sup> *but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy."* <sup>24</sup> *And they were glorifying God because of me.*

We're looking at this revolutionary document, a letter written in the first century by the Apostle Paul to a group of churches in what we today call Turkey.

The Letter is an argument that pits the Way of Jesus against religion as if to say, "these are two ways and are in fact incompatible." IF religion (in all its various forms) if religion/spirituality is our way of appeasing God or pleasing God THEN Christianity isn't THAT – it's God's way of relating to US! It's upside-down: it's not a ladder WE build to Heaven – it's Heaven coming down to us (John 1.51) ... the direction is all-important!

Today, Paul tells his story.

You may have told a story or listened to someone tell his/her story and at some point you wonder, “Um...where is this going? Is there a point to this?”

And you may have found yourself sort of apologizing for your pointless story, like, “Hmmm...I don’t really know WHY I just told you that... I ...uh...” (“apropos of nothing”) – BUT that is NOT what Paul is doing here!

This is an argument (a defense of a position) and Paul tells his story as another line of evidence for his argument that Christianity isn’t religion (as we think of religion) “and my story confirms this”.

This is a story...supporting an argument...embedded in a letter... and the story of Paul’s conversion to this upside-down, un-religion (the Gospel) also tells us something about how the Gospel WORKS to deal with TWO issues confronting all people and they are 1) how to deal with a difficult past and 2) how to deal with my longing for approval/acceptance from people – the issues of my painful past and my people-pleasing.

Let’s look at:

- 1) The Primary Argument
- 2) The Secondary (but important!) Issues

St. Paul continues what we saw last week – (11) “For I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Again – as we saw last week – THIS GOOD NEWS is radically different from all spirituality, religion, morality and self-help in that IT COMES DOWN; it’s “extra nos” – from outside ourselves.

And Paul’s story confirms that: “I was doing my thing in religion – I was working the program and I was really good at it! A young man in a prestigious center of learning and very devoutly religious – my fellow students were all... in AWE OF ME! I was all that!”

He was at the head of his class, “was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.”

“If you were looking for someone who was succeeding at ‘this-for-that’ religion, I WAS YOUR MAN! I was getting’ it done! People were impressed and I was pretty sure that GOD WAS IMPRESSED!”

“I was so zealous, enthusiastic, sold-out, disciplined and orthodox... that when this CULT arose from within Judaism... these liberated, free-thinkers who called themselves, ‘The Way of Jesus’ – well, I was so devout that I set out to STAMP THEM OUT! I saw these Jesus People as a contagion that had to be stopped because NO GOOD CAN COME OF THIS!”

This is the story recorded in the Book of Acts (5<sup>th</sup> book in NT) how Saul of Tarsus reported for service and formed (with permission of the clergymen in Jerusalem) Saul formed a posse! And he organized the persecution and arrest of men, women and children who were believers in this faker, Jesus of Nazareth – “I went after them – VIOLENTLY because that’s what they deserved! I had holy hatred for them!”

And that’s when God stepped in and revealed Himself to Saul of Tarsus. It was a revelation (v. 15) “But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me...”

“I was using religion to keep God out of my life. I did everything I was supposed to do so that God would be appeased and would leave me ALONE! I kept telling myself I loved God but in fact all my efforts were to insure that God would have no reason to bug me and people would respect me and fear me...”

“And while I was running as fast as I could away from God...and while I was getting more and more hateful and violent, God gave me an infinitely valuable Gift because God helps those that help themselves...”

“NO! Just to really demonstrate how (what would later be called “a New and Living Way” – Heb 10.20) to show how grace is not for the qualified and the kind...NOT for good people... but for BAD PEOPLE – bad secular people and bad religious people.”

What Jesus Christ accomplished in His life, death and resurrection and what God’s Spirit does by giving bad people eyes to see and hearts to believe – it’s NOT US CLIMBING UP – it’s God coming down.

And that is the basic thrust of Paul’s story. He goes on to say, “People didn’t teach me this as if they came up with it in a conference room – it never came from US TO GOD – this is different: it comes down.”

Now, how did this Core Argument work on the two issues I raised earlier, i.e. dealing with our painful past and our craving acceptance/approval from people (our painful past and our people-pleasing)?

Paul had a painful past. Paul remembered the people he had arrested. Paul – I’m sure – when he went to bed sometimes, heard the screams of children whose parents were taken away for

believing in Jesus Christ. Paul would have remembered Stephen (Acts 7.60 - "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.")

And as Paul remembered that he had been complicit in this good man's death...and that the man had prayed for Paul and the other murderers – I'm sure that was unimaginably difficult for Paul – it made him think of himself as the worst human being that ever lived (1 Tim 1.15) and yet... the way the Gospel works...and the way it worked for Paul had amazing power to not only neutralize that painful past but to make it REDEMPITIVE in Paul's life.

"But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me..." Paul could say that even the most painful things in his life were somehow purposed by God for some greater and beautiful good. Difficult stuff that was imposed on me by others... and even my own failings and guilt are all going to be woven together for good.

Beauty will come out of the ashes. God has a plan for my life that cannot be thwarted or resisted or ultimately opposed. Paul could say here, "from my mother's womb" (15) and in other places he would write, "from before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1.4)

This tangled mess of a past that sometimes haunts me in the middle of the night – it's all a part of the "all things God is working together for good" (Rom 8.28) in the lives of His people.

Paul had confidence that IF the very worst event that ever took place in the entire history of the human race – if the rejection and crucifixion of the only truly righteous Man was actually planned by God and if out of that ultimate EVIL – if God could bring good and bring salvation out of the death of Jesus Christ then God can and will bring good even out of my worst failures. And Paul would later write, "Because this is true doesn't mean we should sin more so God can work it all out" (Rom 6.1)... but God will indeed work it all out... On the grand scale it will be "felix culpa" – "Happy Guilt" – the Fall and all human evil will somehow have a happy ending...and on a smaller, individual scale – even in my puny life (final words), "they were glorifying God because of me..."

This is the teaching or doctrine of providence...that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – because good came out of that worst moment in history we know that ultimate good will come even from our worst failings and hurts...a special providence that God has for the Church, for everyone who believes. This is how we USE the Gospel on our past...and it even enables us (like it did for Paul) to use "appropriate vulnerability" by sharing our failings (once a source of anguish and shame) but God may have a purpose for you to share those things with others who are struggling.

This week I revisited a book that compares the life and thought of two great thinkers. One had a strong belief in providence, C.S. Lewis. The other rejected the idea that the God of grace is in total control of everything that takes place, Sigmund Freud. (*The Question of God*, Armand M. Nicholi, 2002)

And because Freud wouldn't or couldn't believe in the God of sovereign grace – he died bitter and deeply broken...and also raging angry against the God in whom he didn't believe... If only Freud had seen that this God came down (Isa 64.1) in Jesus Christ in order to redeem our failings/hurts and make all things new.

The second SECONDARY ISSUE, we hope to see again next week but just to introduce it now and that is the way the Gospel is meant to be USED on our lust for human approval/acceptance. Paul, when he'd clung to basic religion – using our efforts to appease God or please God and to become whole by our labors – THEN it was all about competition, comparison and getting approval and acceptance from other people.

BUT NOW, in the un-religion, in the way of grace, Paul could say, "I don't have to be a people-pleaser any more!...In fact, I NOW have the joyous obligation of being FREE from human opinion!"

"For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."

Paul wasn't a people-hater – he deeply loved people and lived in very close community WITH people. He says it from the start – Paul an Apostle... along with all the brethren who are with me" (1.2).

Paul saw with crystal clarity that God meant for us to be together – that the Church is a Body and we are the organs in the Body...limbs...members.

But our acceptance doesn't come from "besting" or outshining one another so that we get recognition and applause... We already have the "applause of heaven" and when we're believing that and resting in it we're saved from being people-pleasers.

We lose that neediness that has to get approval and acceptance from others – because others can never give us that recognition and approval in the quality and quantity we need it – only God can do that...and the gospel says that God HAS done that in Jesus Christ... grace and acceptance and approval and glory HAS COME DOWN!

"So", says Paul, "if you want to live for the applause of others (that will NEVER be enough – just ask the rock stars!) – then go back to religion and competition/comparison. But if you want to be free to really love other people but not be a kind of "approval parasite" waiting for them to

thank you and appreciate/recognize you... then take God's approval that Jesus Christ gives by grace to everyone desperate enough to believe.

Painful Past and People-Pleasing – much more to be said and we will (God willing) for now I hope your coming week finds you believing and resting in God's sovereign grace and providence. Amen.