

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Galatians 1:10-24

"The Testimony of a Changed Man"

THE APOSTLE PAUL

If someone were to ask you, "After our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the most influential person in the New Testament what would your answer be?" Well, it would have to be the Apostle Paul. In fact, one could make the case that after the Lord he is probably the most influential figure in human history. St. Paul wrote 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament and in his letters there is the clearest presentation of the Christian Gospel, its implications for mankind, as well as the first systematic theology of the Christian Church. Moreover, most of the book of Acts deals with his ministry.

Recall that Paul was originally named Saul, he was a Pharisee, a strict Jew, he took the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, very seriously, and he was so zealous that he persecuted Jews who claimed Jesus was their Messiah and Lord. In fact, he even had some Christians killed for their faith; the first deacon Stephen being one of them (see Acts 7).

And yet, the rabbi Saul came to Christ. Remember the account found in Acts 9. Christ appeared to him in a vision and asked Saul, "Why are you persecuting Me?" Christ said that he would be blind for days and then his sight would be restored. This was enough to convince Saul that he was doing wrong. The Lord then told him that he was to take the name Paul and that he would of all things, be an apostle to non-Jews - Gentiles. And the rest, as they say is history. What began as a Jewish sect grew into a Christian Church of both Jews and Gentiles.

Not much is known about the years between Paul's conversion and his missionary journeys. One thing is clear, the Lord prepared him for ministry. What we do know about that preparation time is found in our second lesson - Paul's letter to the Galatians. Please turn back to that reading on the back of your bulletins.

"A FALSE GOSPEL"

Paul is writing to the churches of Galatia, a Roman Province that contained many cities and numerous churches. It is today found in modern day Turkey. The Galatians were Gentile believers who came to faith in Christ. What developed however, was a group of Jewish Christians who were calling on the Galatians to become Jewish in addition to faith in Christ. This group is often given the name of the *Judaizers*. Paul writes the Galatian believers to let them know that if they fall into this trap they will have missed the whole point of the Gospel. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ not by religious

ceremonies and rites and the demands of a special group. That is legalism. Legalism. It is when our distinctives become more important than the very fundamentals of our faith itself.

Now turn for a moment to **Galatians 1:6-10**. *Paul says, "6I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; 7which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! 9As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! 10For 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."*

Now before Paul writes anything further about the problem, he shares how he came to the Lord. And I want you to notice three things that are present in this passage. First, there is revelation. Second, there is transformation. Third, there is testimony. The beauty of the Scriptures is that everything is included for a purpose. Not only does this give us a little background on Paul but it provides the model for Christian evangelism and discipleship.

REVELATION

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

How did Paul come to Christ? through a Revelation of Jesus Christ. To reveal means to uncover that which is hidden. God gives two witnesses to mankind - an outer witness - the Creation, and an inner witness - our conscience. But if I am to know who God really is, it only comes from a special witness - a supernatural one. We call this special revelation. And so Paul is saying that what he has been preaching is not something that was from this world. Christianity is unique of all the world religions that there is a God who becomes flesh, has compassion on the lowly, forgives sins, serves others and then dies on a cross. Moreover, Paul adds that he didn't get it from a human being or that he was taught it. No, he got it from God, Himself.

This is important to highlight for two reasons. First, what we believe as Christians is not man's creation or something we or someone came up with. And second, when we come to Christ it is either the result of one or two things - because of what God did to show himself to us and because someone took the time to share the truth of the Gospel. It is why as Christians it is so important to defend the authority and truth of God's Word.

It also reminds us that God is in control. If some really wants to follow Him He will reveal Himself to them. I think of Joel Rosenberg's book which speaks of Moslem villages coming to Christ because they have actually seen Jesus in visions! So when Christian aid workers arrived the people were waiting for them! I am also reminded of what Pastor Church Whited of First Trinity Lutheran on Niagara Falls Boulevard said about his recent trip to China. There were a number of pastors who had come to Christ in communist China years ago. Why? Jesus appeared to them in their dreams! And they began to seek Him out in His Word.

We follow a supernatural God who reveals His will and ways to us in specific and special ways.

TRANSFORMATION

But after God reveals Himself to us, if it really takes root, there will be transformation. Do you remember Jesus' Parable of the Sower? The farmer goes out to sow seed and some falls on rocky ground, and is snatched away by birds, other seed falls on shallow ground and the plants wither and die because they never take root deep in the soil and still other seed grew but those plants were choked by weeds. Only the seed that grew and bore fruit was the seed that really took root.

When we come to Christ there must be a transformation in how we think and how we act - not always how we feel because feelings come and go and are primarily based on outward circumstances. Paul shares about his transformation: *¹³For 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; ¹⁴and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. ¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles(I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, ¹⁷nor 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. ¹⁸Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰(Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) ²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²²I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; ²³but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." ²⁴And they were glorifying God because of me."*

There was an incredible transformation in Paul's life. So much so that he spent time in prayer and study and waited for the direction of the Lord and then he made himself known to the Apostles Peter and James? What else would turn a man who was persecuting and killing Christians in the name of God to not only embrace them but to go and preach Christ crucified and risen to the whole Roman Empire! Only the work of the Holy Spirit.

TESTIMONY

But now notice what Paul has just been doing. He has been sharing his personal testimony. There is nothing more powerful than the personal witness of how Christ has changed our lives. It is our experience, an experience that includes our own struggles and disappointment but then how Christ changed all that. I encourage everyone to think about their own personal testimony. One of the things that the folks who went on the mission trip to the Dominican Republic in April had to do was put together their personal testimony. It can be intimidating at first, but after you have spent some time reflecting and writing it down and then sharing it, it's a powerful way to share your Christian faith. I know I was encouraged every time I heard one of our members share about how Christ has made a difference in their lives. I learned something about our brothers and sisters in Christ every time one shared. And no matter what culture you are in, such matters of the human heart transcend our differences.

The Apostle Paul shared his testimony and notice what happened? Paul writes in **v. 24**: "*They were glorifying God because of me*" - or in other words because of hearing and seeing what God did through Paul. My challenge to you this morning to ask yourself - have I had a revelation of Jesus directly through a supernatural experience or through another believer sharing His Word with me? Second, am I being transformed? And finally, do I have a personal testimony? Can I share how I came to Christ, and why and what a difference it made? I believe these are questions our Lord wants us to be able to answer. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!