



A Sermon message from Christ Church of Oak Brook

Paul's Mission

The Storyline Series

Texts: Acts 13-14, 16-20; Romans 1, 3-6, 8, 12-15; I Corinthians 1, 3, 5-6, 10-13, 15-16; Galatians 1-3, 6; I Thessalonians 1-5

Did you get all of your reading done this week? As you can see, The Storyline for the week covers a lot of territory. I have the daunting and delightful task this morning of capturing the person, mission and theology of the apostle Paul—all in 30 minutes. That's all. In The Storyline of God's movement in history, Paul could be considered the critical bridge person. He was literally claimed by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles. In others words it was his call to interpret the good news of Jesus in such a way that it went beyond an entrapment to the parochial setting of its Jewish legalist roots to become universally available to the whole world. He was a man of superior intellect. Literally half the books of the New Testament are attributed to his pen. The book of Romans would stand on its own as great literature and should be read in any reputable class on the history of Western civilization. His mind though was matched by the passion of his heart. The theologian F. F. Bruce entitled his biography of Paul: *The Apostle of the Heart Set Free*.

His Passion

As a window into the passion that burned in the heart of this man, let me take us to a dispute that occurred between Paul and Barnabas as they were making plans to set off on their second missionary journey.

A little background is required. Barnabas was the consummate encourager or cheerleader. Literally his name means "son of encouragement." After Paul's conversion, there was suspicion among the apostles in Jerusalem about the genuineness of Paul's transformation. They thought, perhaps, it was simply a ruse to infiltrate the inner core. It was Barnabas who vouched for Paul's genuineness. That was all the stamp of approval the apostles needed. In Acts 11, Barnabas was sent by the mother church in Jerusalem to check out the rumors that Gentiles were coming to Christ in Antioch of Syria. When Barnabas arrived he affirmed the authenticity of their conversion as well. Yet he immediately saw that the task ahead was too big for him. He remembered Paul's call to be an apostle to the Gentiles. So he sought and found him in the town of his birth, Tarsus, where he had been for about 10 years, presumably getting this theology straightened out. It was Barnabas who got him into the game, so to speak, and as they say, "The rest is history."

From Antioch the first missionary enterprise of the church was launched with Paul and Barnabas being set apart by the Holy Spirit for this task. Along with them came the cousin of Barnabas, John Mark. But John Mark left them during this tour of duty and returned to Jerusalem. The strong implication was that he wilted under the heat of battle. He couldn't handle the rigors of this mission work. But as Paul and Barnabas were ready to revisit the cities of their first journey, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance. Here is Paul's response, "But Paul wouldn't have him; he wasn't about to take along a quitter who, as soon as the going got tough, had jumped ship on them" (Acts 15:38— The Message). The Scripture says that Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement so that they went their separate ways.

I was fortunate enough to uncover a manuscript written by an on-the scene-reporter who captured the dialogue between Paul and Barnabas.

Paul: What do you mean, you want to take John Mark along with us! Listen, Barnabas, what is important here is getting the message of the gospel out to as many in the Gentile world as possible. We can't do this if we are slowed down by someone who has already demonstrated he can't be trusted.

Barnabas: But Paul, what good is the cause if in accomplishing it we treat people as objects? People are ends in themselves, not to be discarded in the trash heap because of one mistake.

Paul: It is not a matter of discarding, he has already disqualified himself. He has no stomach for this work as his actions have clearly demonstrated. We are in a battle. We constantly face pressure and opposition from those we are trying to convince. I don't have the time and energy to take care of John Mark while I am engaged in spiritual warfare.

Barnabas: What is the gospel, if it isn't about giving people a second chance? How can we proclaim God's redeeming grace, if we will not encourage someone when they have failed? One chance and that's it? Isn't the gospel about starting over?

Paul: Barnabas, I am not unsympathetic to John Mark. He does seem repentant over his failure. It is a matter of the larger good. The larger good is the call to the whole world. I am sorry that there are casualties along the way, but it's just the price we have to pay.

Barnabas: Well, that price is too high. For me I could not in good conscience proclaim Christ, knowing that I have a bleeding brother back here, and I haven't given him another chance to prove himself. I have to draw the line. Paul, we will have to separate.

Who was right? How many would side with Barnabas? How many would side with Paul? In my experience we all have an opinion about Paul, because he has one of those powerful personalities. Paul was a visionary; a man of passion. The same zealotry that he evidenced in persecuting the church, he brought to his call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. This is how Paul expresses his call to be an apostle, "If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no grounds for boasting, for an obligation (necessity) is laid upon me, and woe to me [he pronounces judgment upon himself] if I do not proclaim the

gospel" (I Cor. 9:16)! This was Paul's "must" or "inner oughtness" in life. To the Colossians he writes what I consider his personal mission statement, "It is he [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me" (Col. 1:28-29). This is why Paul is also called the apostle with the "burning heart."

Paul's Missionary Journeys

It was this passion that caused Paul, (over about a 20 year period from the mid-40's AD to the mid-60's AD) to traverse through the region we call Turkey today and to cross the land bridge over to Europe, known as the Bosphorus. Three missionary journeys are described in the book of Acts chapters 13-21. Paul covered some 6900 miles on foot, horseback, and by boat until his life was finally ended in Rome.

Let me use Paul's own words to describe what he endured for the sake of the gospel. Paul defends himself against false apostles with these words, "Are they servants of Christ? I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move, I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressures of my concern for all the churches" (II Cor. 11:23-28).

What was it that would cause Paul to gladly endure these hardships? I would contend it was the vision of the new life in Christ that was revealed to him that he wanted to share with all who would listen. It was a message that burned in his heart that he had to get out that we see recorded in the 13 letters in the New Testament.

How might we summarize this message? It was the message of salvation. It is salvation in three tenses:

- We have been saved: justification (What has God has done for us)
- We are being saved: sanctification (What God is doing in us)
- We will be saved: glorification (What God will provide for us)

I. We have been saved: Justification

Paul labels salvation the mystery that was revealed to him. Paul came to see salvation as a free gift from God that came through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to be

received by faith. There was nothing we could do to earn our way into God's favor. Christ had done it all. Paul was a very unlikely medium of this message. This was about 180 degrees out of phase from everything Paul had been raised to believe. Prior to his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul believed that he needed to accrue favor with God through his pedigree and performance in order to please God. Again let Paul speak in his own voice, "If anyone has reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the 8th day [the sign of the chosen people], of the people of Israel [favored by God of all the people's on face of the earth]; of the tribe of Benjamin [the kingly tribe]; a Hebrew of Hebrews [pure blood line]; in regard to the law, a Pharisee [the "separated ones" who kept the 636 Jewish laws]; as for zeal, persecuting the church [when the name of God was besmirched by this Jesus sect, he showed how passionate he was to protect the name of Yahweh]; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless [he had declared himself better than everyone else] (Phil. 3:4-6). Paul had relied on his own efforts to please God. If God graded on a curve, he knew that he was at the very top of the 99th percentile. This is what we might call a performance-reward mentality. This is deeply embedded within us from the earliest moments of life. Our parents get us to do what they want through their incentive system.

I remember the chart we had for our daughter. If she accumulated 5 stars by making her bed, getting her homework done, etc. she could cash them in for a McDonald's soft serve ice cream cone. It goes from there to grades in school, to money for a performance, to the one who has the most toys, wins, etc. Then the gospel comes along and nullifies all of this attempted goodness as the leverage for our salvation. Here is how Paul puts it in his classic statement of justification by faith alone in Romans 3:21-22, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known...This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." What! I want to earn it! I want to show God what a prize he has when he got me! Why can't I earn my salvation? This is the offense of the gospel. There is a stain on the human heart that is so egregious that we can't blot it out ourselves. To change the image, we have accumulated an un-repayable debt before the Holy God. This is what the bible calls sin. At its core, the human heart is so turned and twisted, that we can't straighten out ourselves. It got this way because we rebelled against the very One who made us for Himself. We attempted a coup before the King and tried to make ourselves God. This is what is called pride. We think we can compete with God for supremacy. The corruption of the human heart manifests itself in on a societal level in tribalism, ethnic cleansing, the disparity of rich and poor, and on a personal level with broken families, and relationships. We each carry this fatal flaw. We have a rogue gene. The result is that we cannot save ourselves. As Paul says, "For **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The whole human race and we individually stand indicted as sinners before a Holy God.

But God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. We "are justified freely by his [God's] grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as

a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood." (Romans 3:24-25). God did what the law could not do. All the law could do was expose our sin, it cannot make us right before God. Let's look at the words of this verse. We are "justified freely". Justification is a legal concept. The holy God satisfied his demand for justice, by accepting the "redemption" of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Redemption is the price paid to free a slave from bondage. What satisfies God's justice? Christ's "sacrifice of atonement". To atone is what you do to make up for something bad that has been done. Instead of us paying for our own sins which would have meant eternal separation from God, God has offered a stand-in, one who takes our place. Jesus pays our un-payable debt. Jesus blots out the stain of sin on our hearts through his death on the cross. Paul describes Jesus' substitutionary work in II Cor. 5:21: "He who knew no sin became sin for us, so that we might have the righteousness of God."

Perhaps this story captures this concept of justice satisfied by an act of grace. Fiorello LaGuardia was the colorful mayor of New York City during the Great Depression. One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, he turned up at night court in the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge and took his place on the bench. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges. LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail." But as he was pronouncing the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a ten dollar bill and tossed into his famous sombrero saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat." The bewildered old woman walked out with \$47.50 to feed her starving grandchildren.

What a picture of the grace of God! But how does this grace become our grace? By faith in Jesus Christ. The conduit to tap into the generosity of God's salvation for our soul is to put our trust and confidence alone in the free gift offered at the price of God's Son. It is to admit our moral bankruptcy while at the same time receiving God's forgiveness as undeserving sinners. Paul says it in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved [how?] through faith; and this is not your own doing...it is a gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This is the message that burned in Paul's heart that he had to get out to any who would listen. God lavishly has poured out his love through the sacrifice of His Son. Come take and eat! Justification is God's completed past action for those who have placed that trust in the gift of Christ on the cross. When we were headed downhill, the cross intersected us and lifted us up. We have been saved.

Unfortunately this is often where we stop. We time and again preach this as the minimum requirements to get into heaven. What a nice arrangement! I sin; God forgives; what could be better? My future is secure. I can live as I please. No, this is only the beginning. It is the start of a relationship that leads to the next level of salvation.

II. We are being saved: Sanctification

There is a flow in Paul's writing. He first lays out how we can come into a relationship with Christ, which is then followed by the implications. For example, for the first 11 chapters of Romans Paul describes God's mercy, and then in Romans 12:1 he makes the link to the next stage. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

Once we are in Christ, we take on our true vocation or calling. We enter the lifelong process of transformation into Christlikeness that we theologically term sanctification--the process of becoming holy. We are all in need of a makeover.

Dallas Willard defines a disciple as someone who is with Jesus learning to become like Jesus. Paul changes that image somewhat since Jesus is no longer on earth. Jesus is not just with us, he is in us, through the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Jesus. He intends to show through us.

Paul says that a follower of Jesus takes on an attitude of an athlete in training. Here is how Paul says we are to approach the process of our makeover: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training" (I Cor. 9:24-25). John Ortberg describes the training mentality like this, "The need for preparation or training, does not stop when it comes to learning the art of forgiveness, or joy or courage. In other words, it applies to healthy and vibrant spiritual life just as it does to physical and intellectual activity. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano."

Paul says that the training regimen of our present tense salvation has three aspects:

1. We must deal with the stain within. Just because the penalty of sin has been paid, doesn't mean that the power of sin has been broken. Paul uses the image of makeover when he says, "Put off the old nature which belongs to your former way of life...and put on the new nature in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22, 24). This is in the present tense. Everyday put off and put on.

2. We not only must deal with the stuff within, but also the pressures of the world around. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of

your mind” or as J. B. Phillips caught this, “Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold” (Romans 12:2).

3. Finally, we have a **supernatural enemy**, called Satan, who is always looking to exploit our weak spots. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood...but against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Paul urges us to put on the full armor of God for this battle.

In other words, transformation means vigilance toward **the enemy within—our flesh; the enemy around—the world; the enemy without—the devil**. But it is all worth the fight to become like the one who has saved us.

We are on a trajectory, though admittedly with many ups and downs, toward becoming like the one who has taken up residence in us. Here is how C. S. Lewis has captured this transformation process: “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing up a new wing here, putting up an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

III. Finally, we will be saved: Glorification

This is where Paul truly found his freedom. Paul said, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Phil. 4:12). What was Paul’s secret? There were no walls high enough to keep out the love of God. There were no barriers to the ever present companionship of Jesus Christ through His Spirit. So he can write about contentment to the Philippians while he is chained to a member of Caesar’s elite guard.

Paul triumphantly ends the 8th chapter of Romans by saying, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

You get the sense from Paul that he had such a foretaste of this love that he longed to fully enter into it. He sees something we don’t see quite so clearly. “I consider the present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). He considers this life the shadowland with the true substance yet to come. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (II Cor. 4:17-18).

Paul summed up his anticipated glorification by saying, "For me to live is Christ to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). Anything can be endured, for when the glory comes what will it matter.

The apostle Paul paints for us a complete picture from beginning to end of what is the meaning of this life. We start with the assumption that something has gone drastically wrong with human beings.

- We need to be saved: justified, declared right before God because of the completed work of Christ.
- We then move to being saved which is our life's vocation, being transformed into the image of the indwelling Christ.
- We will be saved: our future is secure and glory awaits us. We will shine with the Son.

Martin Luther, the one who rediscovered the biblical truth of justification by faith alone that set off The Reformation, summed it all up with this simple analogy: There is a patient who is mortally ill. The doctor proclaimed that he had medicine that would surely cure him. The instant the medicine was administered, the doctor declared that the patient was well. That is justification. But then there is a process of getting better. That is sanctification. Once the patient is fully healed, that is glorification.

If Paul were here, he would want to know first of all, have you trusted in Christ alone for your salvation, or are you still holding on to your pride that you are a pretty good person? Paul said, "I tried that. When I ran into Jesus, I saw the vileness of my heart. I consider myself the worst of sinners, who has been claimed by Christ." How about you?

If you are assured that you have trusted Christ and him alone, are you just coasting? Or have you fully engaged in the vocation of Christlikeness? Do you need to adopt the training mentality of an athlete and engage in the process of confronting the interior sin, the pressures of the world, and the wiles of the devil? We can't just live a casual Christian life. And finally, what is your vision of the future? Are we longing for the glory to come? Do we have a foretaste of wonder of radiance that is Jesus Christ? Or are we so wedded to this world that we have forgotten the future that awaits us?

The Lord chose Paul to tell us how to bury our past through the grace of Christ. He described a present life free of striving so that we could be free to live. And then he told us to anticipate a wonder-filled eternity with the One who has entered our hearts now.

This message was provided by Christ Church of Oak Brook and Love Changes Life, the broadcast ministry at Christ Church of Oak Brook.

