

“A Revelation of Jesus Christ”

June 21, 2015

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Galatians 1:10–24 (ESV)

¹⁰ For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

¹¹ 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. ¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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.

¹⁵ 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; 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.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother. ²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² 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.”

²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.¹

Last week, something awful happened. A young man walked into a prayer meeting at a church in Charleston, South Carolina and murdered nine people, including the pastor.² Beyond mourning, many people want to know how something like this could happen, and how we can prevent something like this from happening again. Essentially, people want to know how things can change in this world. Because the killer used a gun, many people suggest that it’s a gun problem. There may be wisdom in revisiting gun laws, but the problem is that humans have been rather creative in finding ways to kill others. The Marathon Bombing in Boston two years ago showed us that. All you need is a weapon of any kind, whether it’s a homemade bomb, a vehicle, chemicals, or a more traditional weapon like a gun. Other people suggest that we need to talk about racism more, because the killer is white and the people he killed are black. Obviously,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

² This event happened on the evening of Wednesday, June 17, 2015.

racism is still a problem, but just talking about racism doesn't change hateful hearts. I even saw an article that blamed the murders on anti-intellectualism.³ However, intelligence and education don't prevent violence. There have been many well-educated and intelligent serial killers and genocidal maniacs.

I think we do need to come up with ways of restraining and punishing evil. According to the Bible, that is the main purpose of government.⁴ But government can never provide a lasting, ultimate solution to evil. The only power that can conquer hate and violence is the power of God to transform the hearts of people. In other words, the only true solution is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any other attempts to root out evil are naïve and misguided.

Last week, I began a sermon series on Galatians, which is all about the gospel. We started to look at this letter that the apostle Paul wrote almost two thousand years ago. He wrote this letter because after he had had preached the message of Christianity to people in Galatia and planted churches there, some others came in and proclaimed a different message. So at the beginning of the letter, Paul wants these people to know that there is only one true gospel. There is only one real, ultimate message of good news. Paul is so serious about the importance and exclusivity of the gospel that he says that if he should return to the Galatians and teach them a different message, or even if an angel from heaven comes and teaches them a different message, "let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8-9). In other words, Paul says that if anyone at all should teach these people a different message, "to hell with him."

In the passage that we'll look at this week, Paul tries to show the Galatians that the gospel he received comes directly from God. It's not something he fabricated. It's not something he got from anyone else. It came to him through a direct revelation of Jesus Christ. He also wants them to know that it was this gospel message and the power of God that changed his life. His prior life of zealous adherence to Jewish law didn't transform him. The only power to change lives—permanently and for the better—comes through the gospel of grace, the good news of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel comes to us through God's initiative and it leads us to glorify God.

³ David Niose, "Anti-Intellectualism Is Killing America," Psychology Today, June 20, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/our-humanity-naturally/201506/anti-intellectualism-is-killing-america>

⁴ See my sermon, "Jesus and Politics," May 31, 2015, available at <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

So while Paul's argument may seem a bit distant or obscure to us, he is addressing two questions that we all have: How can we change? And how do we know how we can be changed? It is the gospel that changes, and we can know the gospel because God has revealed it to us.

Let's look at Galatians 1:10. "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." This verse is a bit of a transition from the passage that we looked at last week and the passage that follows. Paul wants his audience to know that his motivation is service to God. He's not preaching his gospel in order to please people.

Last week, I talked about the gospel. The core of it is that we are rebels against God who deserve condemnation, and therefore we must be rescued from this present evil age. Nothing we can do can get us out of the hole we're in. We can't earn our way back to God by obeying a set of rules or performing all kinds of religious rites. The only way to be put back into a right relationship with God is through Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God who became man and lived the perfect life that we don't live. Yet, ironically, he died on the cross to pay the penalty for our rebellion against God. All who put their trust in Jesus are credited with his righteousness and their sins have been paid for. Those who have faith in Jesus and forsake their selfish ways are regarded as Jesus—perfect in the eyes of God.

Now, that's not a message that pleases people. It crushes their pride. It says, "You have a serious problem that you can't fix. You can't rescue yourself. You're not good enough to earn your way to God." But the false teachers that came to Galatia after Paul probably taught that Paul had watered down the message of Christianity. They thought he was trying to please people by teaching them that they didn't have to follow the Jewish law any more. They thought Paul was making things too easy. But Paul insists that his desire isn't to say what people want to hear. Instead, his desire is to please God. He is a slave of Christ. (That's literally what it means in verse 10.⁵)

Then he continues to say that this gospel message didn't come from anyone else. It came directly from Jesus. We see this in verses 11 and 12:

¹¹ 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.

⁵ The Greek word is δούλος (*doulos*).

Paul didn't get the message from the apostles in Jerusalem. He didn't get it from anyone else. And he certainly didn't make it up. It came from Jesus.⁶ It was a message that was revealed to Paul. It wasn't something he could possibly figure out on his own. This message shattered Paul's old life. It was apocalyptic. That's what the word "revelation" here is: apocalypse.⁷ It's an unveiling of God's entry into human history. That's what happened when Jesus came: God broke into the world.

To show how this came about, Paul starts to give us some autobiographical details in verses 13 and 14:

¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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.

Before Paul became a Christian missionary, he was a Pharisee. Pharisees were one sect of Jews who were known as being very conservative in their approach to the Old Testament law. Not only did they observe the written law, but they added oral laws.⁸ That's what Paul means when he refers to the "traditions of my fathers." In Philippians 3, Paul writes this:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:
⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Phil. 3:4b-6).

Paul obeyed all the rules. He was a scholar of the Old Testament. He was so zealous that he persecuted the early church because he thought Christians were blaspheming God.

When we first meet Paul in the Bible, he is called Saul. Saul was his Hebrew or Jewish name. He was born a Roman citizen in Tarsus, a city in a region called Cilicia, which was in

⁶ Some may wonder how this claim squares with what Paul says at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15. There, he writes, "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (vv. 1-2). Paul tells the Corinthians that he preached the gospel that he received. He probably refers to the creedal statement that he relays in verses 3-8, the early statement of Christian belief that he received from the apostles in Jerusalem. He received the basic gospel directly from Christ when he was converted. Upon his first visit to Jerusalem, he received this creedal statement, which is no way contradicts or alters the gospel he was already preaching.

⁷ Greek: ἀποκάλυψις (*apocalypsis*).

⁸ "The Pharisees developed the oral law as a further explication of the written law. It was seen as a 'fence around the Torah,' a means of determining the exact application of the written law to all possible circumstances." John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1999), 29.

what is now known as Turkey. Since he was a Roman citizen, he also had a Latin name: Paul.⁹ When we first meet him, he is standing by as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is killed. The first mention of Paul, or Saul, is chilling: “Then they [the Sanhedrin] cast him [Stephen] out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58). Then, Acts 8 begins with these words:

¹ And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Paul wasn’t just cheering from the sidelines. He was playing in the game, so to speak. He started to “ravage” the church by arresting Christians in Jerusalem. To put it bluntly, Paul was a wicked man.

Yet something incredible happened to Paul. Jesus broke into his life. This is how Paul puts it in Galatians 1:15-17:

¹⁵ 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; 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.

Here, Paul says that God had a plan for him from the time he was in his mother’s womb. This language is very similar to what God says to the prophet Jeremiah when he calls him (Jer. 1:4-5). God’s plan was for Paul to go to preach the message of Jesus to the Gentiles. (In the book of Acts, we also see that he preached to Jews, too.) Paul doesn’t give us all the details of his conversion. If you want to know more, you can read Acts 9. In short order, Paul goes from a man “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (v. 1) to a man preaching in synagogues that Jesus “is the Son of God” (v. 20). This unlikely conversion came about because Paul saw a vision of the risen Lord Jesus. Paul went from being the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15) to the chief of missionaries.

⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

Once again, Paul's point was that he didn't receive this gospel message from anyone. He received it from Jesus. And he didn't confer with the apostles, to check his story against theirs. Instead, he went into Arabia. Arabia was the name of the region northeast, east, and south of Israel. We don't know exactly where he went and what he did, but he was there for some time. He probably preached the gospel there. He may also have taken time to reflect on how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. Some people think Paul may have gone to Mount Sinai to reflect on Jesus' relationship to the Mosaic law, because in Galatians 4:25, Paul says that Sinai is in Arabia. He may have had further revelation from Jesus during this time. We simply don't know the details. Paul's main point is that God revealed Jesus to him personally.

Why does all of this matter? I think the obvious point is that Paul wants the Galatians to know that his message is the true one. It came straight from God. But I think Paul is also hinting at something else. Before Paul became a Christian, he had spent his life trying to acquire righteousness by following Jewish law. He was more zealous than anyone. The problem was, he was wrong. It doesn't matter how sincere, or enthusiastic one's beliefs are. If those beliefs are wrong, they're wrong. And Paul may be saying here, "I tried to follow the law. It didn't bring me closer to God. Instead, God had to come close to me. He had to come get me." Remember, the false teachers, the ones teaching a different gospel, were teaching that you had to follow the law in order to be a Christian. And Paul is saying, "No. I know that's not true because that's not what Jesus revealed to me. And I know it's not true because it didn't work for me."

All of this has tremendous implications for us, but before I tell us what those are, I want to finish walking us through this passage.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² 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."
²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Paul didn't make a visit to Jerusalem until three years after his conversion. And he was only there for a limited amount of time, just fifteen days. He only saw Peter, who is referred to here as Cephas, his Aramaic name, and James. This is probably the trip to Jerusalem described in Acts 9:26-30.

From Jerusalem, Paul went to Syria and Cilicia, regions in modern Turkey. He spent a number of years in Tarsus, his hometown, preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. Though people in Judea, the region where Jerusalem is located, didn't know him personally, they heard about his conversion and his ministry and they responded by worshiping God.

It's understandable why Christians would glorify God after they heard about Paul's transformation. Here was a man who was an enemy of the church. He wanted to kill Christians. And now he's telling everyone about Jesus. This was something that only God can do. Indeed, every time someone comes to faith in Jesus, it's a supernatural transformation.

What does that have to do with us? Well, the big question for us is, how can we know God? Should we expect that God will reveal himself to us personally, the way he revealed himself to Paul? Yes and no. Yes, I think God reveals himself to people. No, because Paul is an exceptional case. Paul was set apart to be an apostle, someone sent by God. As I said last week, he was a capital-A Apostle. He saw Jesus after he rose from the grave and he was commissioned to write Scripture. Neither of those things is true of us. So, I don't expect that God will audibly speak to us or reveal some new, secret information to us. But God has revealed himself in the pages of the Bible.

Think with me for a moment. Imagine all the many ways God could reveal himself to us. One option is that God could have decided not to reveal himself at all. He could have left us all in the dark, trying to figure out who he is. But that option wouldn't fit God's character. He is a God who wants to be known. He is a God who speaks. In fact, his actions are always accompanied by words, and most of the time he acts by speaking.

Another option would be for God to reveal information continually in nature. I imagine he could write words in the sky. Perhaps clouds could spell out new messages every day. But that would be sort of weird, wouldn't it? Also, not everyone in the world can see the same thing at one time. How could we know that what God revealed to us in the sky, or through some other phenomena, would be the same as what he revealed in China?

Perhaps another option would be for God to speak audibly to us. Yet we would encounter the same problem. How could we know that what he spoke to me is the same message that he spoke to you? We could only rely on our subjective experience. But knowing human nature, I imagine we could easily distort what we thought we heard from God. I imagine that if God gave us all individual messages, something like this would happen: You would say something like,

“God told me it was okay not to give any money to the poor.” And I might say, “That’s funny, because God just told me you should give more money to the poor.” And then it would be your word against mine.

Of course, God could just speak audibly to one person (like the Pope). And that one person could tell everyone else what God is like and what God expects of his people. Yet again, I think that could be a real problem given human nature. How could we trust that one person was telling the truth?

Yet another option is the one that God chose. God gave us a book. God worked through people like Paul to write a book that has existed for over nineteen hundred years. That means that since the end of the first century, Christians have been able to go to an objective source of God’s revelation. We all have access to the Bible, and we can come to it to figure out what God has spoken. That takes away a lot of the subjective element of God’s revelation. I can’t say, “Well, God revealed thus and so to me,” while you say the exact opposite. Instead of that mess, we can both go to something that stands outside both of us, and we can read it together and study it and come to conclusions about what it means.

The Bible is different from those other possible modes of revelation. God didn’t reveal himself to just one man, who then wrote down a book of scripture. The Bible didn’t come down from the sky, off a celestial printing press. Instead, God led different men to write different books from different places to different locations at different times.¹⁰ This is particularly true of the New Testament. These people often wrote independently of each other. Sometimes, they even had personal differences. Yet their writings present the same message: that Jesus died on the cross to pay for the sins of his people and he rose from the grave. They present the same gospel of grace. Only God could orchestrate something like the Bible.

In Ephesians 2:20, Paul said that the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” When Paul says that, it seems he’s referring to the content of the New Testament, which has come to us through the apostles and prophets. Timothy Ward, who has written a great book on the importance of the Bible, says, “Paul in effect draws the closest possible link between the church being founded on Christ *and* founded on the words Christ spoke through the apostles, as set down in their writings. It cannot

¹⁰ James R. White calls this “multifocality” in *The King James Only Controversy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009), 307.

be the former without also being the latter.”¹¹ If we want to know Jesus, we have to go to the Bible. Ward writes, “it remains impossible to avoid the fact that our only access to Christ and his words is through the content of the Bible.”¹² And if we come to the Bible to learn about Jesus, we should realize that Jesus viewed the Bible as God’s Word. If you want to know more about that, I would encourage you to find the sermon I gave on that topic. It’s called “Jesus Believed the Old Testament is the Word of God.”¹³

God is gracious to reveal himself in the person of Jesus. If we are to know about Jesus, we have to read the Bible. If we are to know God, we have to hear him speak. We have to listen to him. That’s how you get to know a person. You can’t study him or her from afar. That’s particularly true of God, whom we can’t see or touch, yet whose work we can see all around us. We listen to God by reading his Word.

Here are my questions for you: Are you reading the words of God? Do you know the gospel? Or do you take God’s revelation for granted? God has taken the initiative to reveal himself. This is an amazing thing. Jesus once said to God the Father, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Do you know him?

Well, what about Paul’s transformation? Should every Christian have that kind of radical conversion? Yes and no. I think every time someone comes to faith in Jesus, it is a radical act. Paul says that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). But the process of becoming a new creation isn’t always easy to see. Sometimes that transformation is slow, messy, and ugly. For example, I can’t tell you the day I became a Christian. I used to worry about that, and I mentioned that to one pastor. I said that I didn’t have a Damascus Road experience. He said, “Yeah, but you have to remember that Paul was on his way to kill Christians.” His point was that Paul’s example is pretty extreme. Though my conversion is not as dramatic as Paul’s, I can see evidence of change in my own life.

Still, God is in the transformation business. There have been many stunning examples of conversions. And the gospel of Jesus Christ does change lives. Look at Prison Fellowship, a ministry started by Chuck Colson. The ministry tries to reach inmates through Bible studies and

¹¹ Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³ Presented on March 1, 2015, available at <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

discipleship. This program really works. “Participation by prisoners in multiple in-prison Bible studies conducted by Prison Fellowship reduced their recidivism by 66 percent.”¹⁴ That means that prisoners who go through these programs are two-thirds less likely to fall back into crime once they are released.¹⁵

One of my favorite conversion stories is that of Rosaria Butterfield. She was a very liberal, lesbian English professor at Syracuse University. After she became a Christian she married a pastor! She became a Christian because of two key things: the grace shown to her by a local pastor and careful study of the Bible. This began when she wrote a critique of Promise Keepers, the Christian men’s ministry, in a local newspaper. She received a lot of letters in response. About half of them were hate letters and the other half were letters of support. But there was one letter that was different. It was from a pastor who thoughtfully engaged her. He asked her questions about how she knew she was right. He questioned her presuppositions. Eventually, she went to dinner at this pastor’s home, and he and his wife treated her with kindness. She started to study the Bible with this pastor for two years.

This is how she described her investigation of the Bible: “At the beginning of any project, I read and re-read the book that I am trying to understand. At this point, I read and re-read the Bible. I spent about five hours each day reading the Bible. I read every translation I could acquire.”¹⁶ The pastor she met with helped answer some of her questions about the Bible, and his grace and wisdom were able to convince her of the truth of Christianity.

As she started to realize what a possible conversion might mean for her life, she became somewhat bothered. She knew that if Christianity was true, her life would have to change. She writes,

During this time of struggle, others tried to help. A Methodist pastor and the Dean of the Chapel at Syracuse University believed that I did not have to give up everything to honor God. Indeed, he told me, since God made me a lesbian, I gave

¹⁴ <http://demoss.com/newsrooms/pf/background/prison-fellowship-fact-sheet>. However, the rates are more impressive for those who’ve completed the Prison Fellowship program. Jack Hibbard of Prison Fellowship claims the recidivism rate drops from 70-80 percent down to 8 percent for those who’ve completed the program. He discussed Prison Fellowship with Eric Metaxas on June 5, 2015: <https://soundcloud.com/the-eric-metaxas-show/jack-hibbard-prison-fellowship>

¹⁵ The recidivism rate for all state prisons was 43.3% between 2004 and 2007. That means that 43.3% of prisoners released in 2004 were rearrested in 2007. Shaving two-thirds off of that figure is therefore quite impressive. http://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/Pew_Report_State_of_Recidivism_350337_7.pdf

¹⁶ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2012), 12.

God honor by living an honorable lesbian life. He told me that I could have Jesus and my lesbian lover. This was a very appealing prospect. but I had been reading and rereading scripture, and there are no such marks of postmodern “both/and” in the Bible.¹⁷

Eventually, she came to the point where she realized she had to repent of her sins and start following Jesus. She says, “I’ve discovered that the Lord doesn’t change my feelings until I obey him.”¹⁸ The process was difficult, but she has come to realize God’s power to transform and heal. She says, “[I]n our struggle against sin we cannot undermine God’s power to change lives.”¹⁹ We should praise God for transforming people like her and like Paul and like me and you.

So, have you been transformed by God? You may not have a dramatic transformation like Paul, but still, you should be able to point to some evidence that shows that God has changed you and is still changing you. If you come to faith in Christ and if you’re in the process of being changed, do you glorify God, the way that the Christians in Judea glorified God when they heard about Paul?

And if you are a Christian, are you telling others about this gospel of grace? If you’re not doing that, is it because you fear what people might say or think? Are we trying to please God or man? Whom do we fear? Let us be like Paul, who elsewhere said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 24.