

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!**

#### **Gospel Changes**

(Galatians 1:11-24)

Study #2

#### **Introduction:** A personal do-over...

Hollywood has long recognized that there are a number of “formulas” for movie success. One of the most reliable formulas is “life as a do-over.”

You simply take a character who is bored with life, or who has lived badly, and portray his or her shift to excitement or courage or integrity. Give the bored or boring man or woman a life of excitement and meaning. Make the immoral or foolish man or woman a person with character.

You can probably think of movies that fit this formula as easily as I can. *Family Man* (Nicholas Cage; Tea Leoni), *Finding Forrester* (Sean Connery) and, more recently, *17 Again* (Zac Efron) all rely on this compelling story line.

My favorite books - mostly biographies - tell the same story. I’ve thrilled to read of the life transformations of heroes like Tony Dungee and Chuck Colson, C.S. Lewis, Payne Stewart and Nicky Cruz.

And, then, frankly, what is the compelling vision that fuels my soul for continuing as a pastor at Northwest? The hope for more and more lives changed by the power of God!

Through the years, we’ve seen the Lord do remarkable things in so many people - and like you, I long to see Him perform the miracle of life transformation more and more and more.

This morning, as we open our Bibles to Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia we see that the Gospel certainly made a profound difference in the life of one man. He’s Exhibit A for the idea that believing in Jesus, embracing the truth of Jesus’ Gospel, changes everything.

#### *Review of Galatians’ backstory...*

Last Sunday, we watched as Paul and Barnabas took the message of Jesus to the wild and woolly region of Galatia, establishing four churches in the process.<sup>1</sup>

People in those four cities put their trust in the Lord Jesus, the One who died for their sins and rose again from the dead. Everything was going great - despite persecution!

But then, after Paul left, some teachers from Jerusalem traveled north, bringing with them a mongrelized “*Jesus AND*” gospel. They taught that salvation is not by “faith alone in Christ alone.”

Gone was the freedom of a personal relationship with Jesus. In its place was a complicated Christian life organized around a set of rules.

The Gospel that Paul had brought provided FREEDOM. But this new message brought bondage - and Paul wrote this letter to contradict the “Jesus AND” message.

The first strategy he employs in his fight to re-convince the Galatians of the true Gospel is one of the most powerful forces in the world - the strategy of story.

As we walk through the second half of the first chapter of Galatians, we find some of the most detailed personal biography recorded anywhere in the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> Churches were “planted” in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

To fill out the story, I'll throw in a detail or two from the historical book of Acts. And as we walk through this story we'll see that the life-changing power of the Gospel was unleashed in Paul's life. He was changed, core to crust, as you and I can be, too, as the Gospel's power is unleashed in us.

He starts out by letting us know how he came to understand the message of Jesus.

### **Paul - Recipient of the Gospel (Galatians 1:11-12)**

*[Galatians 1:11] For I would have you know, brethren<sup>2</sup>, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. [12] For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*

The Gospel is a supernatural message that brings untold blessing to the person who embraces it and gives all the credit for any good accomplished to God. I've heard it put this way: The Gospel is not the kind of message a man could - or would! - dream up.

The message Paul had brought to Galatia was not a message he worked hard to come up with. He didn't make the Gospel up. He wasn't taught it in a book. It wasn't handed down by tradition.

Rather, he got the message direct from the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ through special revelation. Here's how it happened...

### **Paul - and the Bad Ol' Days (Galatians 1:13-14; Acts 7:58--8:1)**

#### **Paul, Pre-Jesus (Gal. 1:13-14)**

The Galatians knew Paul well. While establishing a beachhead for Christianity in their region, he had lived with them and spent lots of time with them. But they knew him as Paul the Christian, the Apostle Paul.

They had heard that he hadn't always been the man they had come to know. He had a past. And Paul thinks it is important to remind them of that past.

*[Galatians 1:13] 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; [14] and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen<sup>3</sup>, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.*

It's important that you know something about Paul's past, too. And I want to take the next few minutes to lay out the kind of guy Paul was BEFORE the power of the Gospel was unleashed in his life.

The book of Acts (chapter 22) tells us that Paul was educated by one of the most respected Jewish rabbis of the first century, a man named Gamaliel.<sup>4</sup>

It may have been from Gamaliel that he had acquired that deep patriotic zeal for orthodox Judaism which so marked him as a young man.

There is nothing wrong with patriotism, of course. But patriotic zeal can quickly turn toxic when it is divorced from faith and love, which, in Paul's case, it was.

Paul (or "Saul" as he was known in those days) was an up-and-coming young Pharisee<sup>5</sup> when we first meet him in Acts, chapter 7. He was advancing rapidly through the ranks of the Jewish power ladder when, one day in Jerusalem, he heard a young man preaching about Jesus. The man's name was Stephen.

<sup>3</sup> Paul's use of the phrase "*among my countrymen*" implies that he was writing to a largely Gentile audience.

<sup>4</sup> We also read in Acts, chapter 5, about Gamaliel handling a difficult situation with great wisdom.

<sup>5</sup> Note the Pharisees in the Gospels, who opposed Jesus at every turn. It is certainly conceivable that Saul could have been among these at some point.

<sup>2</sup> This is very significant, for we will be tempted at some points to question the salvation of his readers. But Paul assumes throughout that they were Christians.

## Saul's/Paul's Opposition to Christianity (see Acts 7:58-8:3)

### *The launch of Saul's persecuting ways - Stephen's sermon*

Stephen preached about Jesus with tremendous conviction and hard-hitting exhortation. The result is that the crowd to which he was speaking was deeply offended - so offended that they rushed at him to stone him to death!

The Bible tells us that they removed their coats before throwing rocks (the better to aim and fire) and laid those coats at the feet of a young man named Saul (that's Saul of Tarsus, the future "Paul").

Then we read, *[Acts 8:1] Saul was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death.*

Now, at this exact moment, you might not have tagged Saul for future service in the church. Indeed, from that day forward, Saul was obsessed with destroying the fledgling church of Jesus.

*Saul: #1 Enemy of the Church (8:1-3)*

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul says that he *[Galatians 1:13]...persecuted the church of God beyond measure.*

We don't know all that "*beyond measure*" means. But it certainly implied a willingness to use whatever degree of violence was necessary to stop the church's progress.

Luke fills in some blanks about what "*beyond measure*" might look like.

*[Acts 8:1b] And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...[3] But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Saul's efforts at stamping out Christianity were perfectly unsuccessful, as verse 4 records, *[4] Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the*

The pre-conversion Saul of Tarsus violently persecuted Christians. He was the one to fetch if you wanted harm done to the people who were following Jesus. He was famous for destroying churches and the lives and livelihoods of people who - like you and I do - followed Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Along with some buddies, he would travel from city to city, in Israel and outside of Israel, looking for Christ-followers. They would haul them back to Jerusalem to stand trial before the Jewish Supreme Court (the Sanhedrin, the same court that had tried and convicted Jesus).

The determinative chapter in the story of Paul's life is recorded in the ninth chapter of the book of Acts. He was on a seek-and-destroy-Christians mission.

### **Paul - Apprehended By Gospel!! (Acts 9:1-19)**

#### **Saul - Meet the Lord Jesus! (vv. 1-19)**

Luke tells us that a few short months after the stoning of Stephen, which had led to the dispersion of many of the Christians to points outside of Jerusalem, Saul was *[Acts 9:1] still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*

He and his friends were wrecking havoc wherever they could find Christians. Here's what happened as they traveled to the city of Damascus, an ancient city even in the first century.

*Blinded by the light! (vv. 3-9)*

*[Acts 9:3] As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; [4] and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'<sup>8</sup> [5] And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,*

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*word."* Rather than put out the fire, persecution just spread the glowing embers of the spread of the Gospel.

<sup>7</sup> Read Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:9-11 for further details on Saul's life before coming to Christ. Also, see Philippians 3:1-11.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 26:14 adds more detail - "*And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"*

**[6] but get up and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do.' [7] The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. [8] Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. [9] And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.**

Wow - what a shocking confrontation! Blinded - blindsided! - by Jesus. Well the story's not over. In fact, the drama builds.

*Welcomed by a courageous brother (vv. 13-17)*

In the city of Damascus there was a Christian named Ananias. He was likely one of the Christians Saul was intent on arresting and killing.

Well, God told Ananias to find Saul and lay his hands on him. No, not THAT way! Ananias might have wanted to get his hands on Saul THAT way, but the purpose of this laying on of hands was so that Saul would regain his sight.

Clearly, Ananias wasn't so sure that this was a good idea.

What he said was, **[Acts 9:13b] "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; [14] and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Your name."**

What he probably thought was, "Lord, have You really thought this one all the way through?"

Yes, the Lord had.

And He further told Ananias, **[Acts 9:15b] "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; [16] for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."**

Well, Ananias didn't have to be told a third time. He left his home, found the house of a man named Judas who lived on Straight Street in Damascus (Acts 9:11), located Saul within, laid his hands on Saul, and spoke -

**[Acts 9:17b] "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit."**

I think it is significant that Ananias called Saul "brother" here. He recognized Saul as a fellow Christian. By the time Ananias got to him, he was already a believer in Jesus!

*Saved - NOW growing!! (vv. 18-19)*

**[Acts 9:18] And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; [19] and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus.**

How was it that Saul had become a brother in Christ by the time Ananias got to him?

Well, Saul had spent three days and three nights with nothing but his thoughts. Over the course of those three food-less, water-less and sight-less days he would have had nothing to do but think and pray. So, he thought and he prayed.

Over a lifetime of study, Saul had come to possess an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible (the "Old Testament" to us, *tanach*<sup>9</sup> to him and all Jews).

I believe that during those three dark days Saul was processing all that he knew about Jesus. After all, they had been contemporaries. He had heard all the stories about Jesus' teachings and miracles. These two might have even crossed paths.

Saul then sent that knowledge about Jesus through the grid of his knowledge of God's Word.

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<sup>9</sup> *Tanach* is shorthand for "torah" (law) "nebiim" (prophets) and "ketubim" (writings). When speaking with a Jewish person, it is important to not refer to the "Old Testament." For the Jew, the Old Testament (tanach) IS the Bible.

He put a lot of two's and two's together, and concluded that the Jesus who had spoken to him on the road to Damascus was the Jesus who had been killed in Jerusalem some years earlier, and was also the One of whom the prophets had spoken!

Saul's mind was opened to understand that Jesus, whom he had been persecuting by persecuting His followers, was the Lamb of God who had died for the sins of the world!

As a result of these meditations, Saul came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He had not been out looking for mercy; mercy found Him. He wasn't out looking for Jesus; but Jesus was lovingly laying for him.

And the upshot of the Damascus Road confrontation was that Saul's sins were forgiven, he became a child of God, and was brought into a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ.

AND because of his belief in Jesus and his whole-hearted embrace of the message of the Gospel, Saul's life was turned upside down, inside out, and about face. He changed from being the first century's chief persecutor of Christianity to the prime spokesman for the faith!

Saul didn't ease into his newfound life in Christ. The truth of the Gospel was unleashed in his life and he began spreading the Gospel immediately!

### **Paul - Serve the Lord Jesus! (vv. 19b-22)**

*An immediate witness for Jesus! (v. 20)*

Upon receiving sight and sustenance, Saul *[Acts 9:20] began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."*

Isn't this wonderful (and hilarious!)! It had been to the synagogue of Damascus that Saul had been sent by the High Priest - and it was to the synagogues that he went! Only now, he is not arresting Christians - he is preaching Christ.

*Growing in Christ - in Damascus (vv. 21-22)*

***[Acts 9:21] All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" [22] But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.***

That is how the book of Acts records the events of the first few days after Saul's conversion. Other places in the New Testament fill in details of his post-conversion activities.

*Off to Arabia! (Galatians 1)*

After he placed his trust in Christ for salvation, Paul stayed in the region where he had been saved, to the north of Israel. He tells us in the first chapter of Galatians that he went to Arabia.

***[Galatians 1:15] But when God, who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased [16] to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, [17] nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me;<sup>10</sup> but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.***

In the ancient world, "Arabia" was the loose-fitting name given to the area of desert to the east of Palestine. It was a vast region bordered by the Tigris/Euphrates river valley to the north, the Persian Gulf to the east, the Arabian Sea to the south and the Red Sea to the west.<sup>11</sup>

Some believe that when Saul was in the deserts of Arabia, Christ appeared to him, and that he, like the other apostles, had the benefit of enjoying personal fellowship with Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> The word Paul used in verse 16 for "consult" was a Greek word used of consulting with mediums and soothsayers. By this usage he seems to be dismissing the need for him to have "checked in" with the Jerusalem apostles to see if he was correct in His Gospel. He knew he was right because Jesus had revealed it to him.

<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Arabia is sometimes referred to as "the Arabian island."

That may be true - and that may be what he was speaking of when he mentioned “*visions and revelations*” in 2 Corinthians 13.<sup>12</sup>

But it also appears that when he went to Arabia, he engaged in an aggressive evangelistic ministry.

The region of Arabia is generally a desert, but it was by no means deserted. People traveled through Arabia and people lived in Arabia. And Saul found an audience in Arabia, and preached the good news of Jesus to the people there.

That’s no doubt why the governor of the Arabians under King Aretas tried to arrest him! (see 2 Corinthians 11)!

Evidently what happened was this: For two or three years after his conversion he traveled around northern Arabia, proclaiming the Gospel.<sup>13</sup>

After some time (in Galatians, Paul says, “*many days*”) the ruler of the Arabians, who was headquartered in Damascus, had simply had enough of Paul and decided to shut him up!

By this time, though, the Christians in Damascus had completed accepted Saul as one of their own and had become quite loyal to him.

So, they provided for his escape by lowering him from the city’s wall in a basket under cover of night (see Acts 9:23-25; 2 Corinthians 11:32-33)!<sup>14</sup>

*Out of the frying pan, into the fire!*

Then, leaving the region of Damascus, Saul traveled south to Jerusalem.

***[Galatians 1:18] Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.***

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<sup>12</sup> However, it is doubtful that Paul went into the Arabian desert for a relaxing time of meditation. I believe that the evidence says that he went there to tell others about Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> Damascus was actually on the border of the northern Arabian desert.

<sup>14</sup> As has been noted by many people before now, Saul became a “basket case” for Jesus in Damascus.

***[19] But 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.)***

Here, for the first time since his conversion, Saul went to the Jewish capitol. He didn’t stay there long on this trip - only 15 days - just long enough to become acquainted with Peter (Cephas) and James, the half brother of Jesus.

This visit is also recorded for us in Acts 9 and the uneasiness of the visit comes through loud and clear in Acts!

The Christians in Jerusalem didn’t know Saul - except by reputation as the one who had been making a living arresting and persecuting Christians!

But Barnabas (with whom Saul would later join forces for a Gospel trip through Galatia!) took a giant step of faith and became Saul’s “sponsor.” He extended the right hand of fellowship to this former persecutor, and welcomed him into the church. (Acts 9:26-27)

Thus welcomed, Saul mingled freely with the believers. And he did in Jerusalem what he had begun to do in Damascus and Arabia - evangelize!

Luke tells us in Acts 9 that “***[28] he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.***”

But, just as had happened in Damascus, trouble followed Saul’s bold witness. The Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) Jews in Jerusalem wanted to kill Saul, as they had killed Stephen.<sup>15</sup> So the Christians in Jerusalem sent him off to regions north and west of the Holy Land (Galatians 1:21; Acts 9:30).

He eventually made his way back to his hometown of Tarsus in Cilicia.<sup>16</sup> If we understand the chronology correctly, Saul spent a number of years there in Tarsus, living quietly, serving the Lord, and growing as a Christian.

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<sup>15</sup> It seems that these were the ones who had stoned Stephen to death (Acts 7).

<sup>16</sup> He stayed here, we believe, for some years, until Barnabas sent for him to join him in team-ministry in Antioch.

The story, as he has told it to this point, comes to a conclusion at the end of Galatians 1.

*To God be the glory!*

*[Galatians 1:22] I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; [23] but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." [24] And they were glorifying God because of ME.*<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Jesus' Gospel is so powerful that, when it is believed, God saves that believing person's soul, forgives that believing person's sin, and grants that believing person eternal life!

We believe that the Gospel is powerful enough to affect the invisible and the great by and by. But, is it powerful enough to impact the very visible and the not so great here and now?

Does faith in Christ equip us with the wherewithal to break bad habits? Is it powerful enough to change character?

Well, it was powerful enough to change the church's Public Enemy #1 (Saul of Tarsus) into the most powerful witness for Christ the world has ever seen (the Apostle Paul).

Saul's was a life changed by the power of God. In terms of basic motivation, inner drive, passions, and worldview, he became a different man. He was transformed. REALLY changed.

Are you tempted to say, "Well, give me a Damascus Road experience and I'll change, too!"?

Not so fast...

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<sup>17</sup> Jesus said, *"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they will see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven."* (Mt. 5:16). In a totally un-self-conscious way, Paul fulfilled this charge from Jesus, as the believers in Syria and Cilicia didn't praise or marvel at Paul, but at God!

I'm not at all convinced that the miraculous guarantees a changed life.

After all, thousands and thousands of people ate loaves and fishes multiplied by Jesus at the Sea of Galilee and weeks later cried out, "Crucify Him!" in Jerusalem.

No, I think that the explanation for the changes in Saul's life is FAITH. He believed in Jesus - and changes followed.

So, what am I saying about us who believe in Jesus and are not changed as radically as Saul? Am I saying that our faith is not genuine?

NO!!

But I am saying that, if, at the moment of temptation, we bring FAITH to the fight, we will successfully navigate every attack.

If, when challenged to live as Jesus calls us to live, we believe:

- that Jesus is Lord;
- that we are eternally secure;
- that God is good; and
- that He is for us -  
we will be equipped with everything we need to love, to serve, and to worship.

Faith is the victory! Faith in Jesus is the victory!!

The Gospel is powerful enough to REALLY transform you, too. When it is believed the Gospel brings increasing:

- **freedom** from sin's shackles; (addictions...)
- **capacity** to love; (spouse, friends, boss, enemies...)
- **passion** for service;
- **willingness** to suffer; and

Do you long to see ever deepening changes - Gospel changes! - in your life?

If so, you will find those changes as you BELIEVE the powerful, liberating truths of that Gospel!