

3. Apostle Paul's personal testimony

October 31, 2012

John 9:25 But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!

Very few Christians are great theologians, and none of them whom I know have every verse of the Bible memorized, but we all have a testimony. We all have the story of how Christ came into our lives. We may not be experts in Scripture, but like the blind man whom Jesus healed in this verse, we can all say, "Once I was blind, and now I can see!" Our testimony is a great place to start to tell others about Jesus.

The Apostle Paul, who was a great intellectual and a brilliant theologian, would often begin with his testimony when presenting the message of the Gospel. Why would Paul start with his testimony? It built common ground between him and the people to whom he was preaching.

When you share the story of how you came to Christ, you are in a sense saying, "I have been where you are. And let me tell you about the way I used to think, the way I used to be – the way that my life was. Now let me tell you about what Christ has done for me."

A testimony helps a person to understand that you weren't born a Christian. It helps them to see that there is a bridge for them, a way for them to come to Christ. Testimonies prove that anyone can change through the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

A word of caution for your testimony, though, do not emphasize how bad and how sinful you were, rather emphasize on how the Lord has changed you. It is not about our ugly and filthy past, but only for His glory. We should not be sucked into the silly battle of testimonies.

Apostle Paul is giving us his own personal testimony and shed a rare insight on the things that were not mentioned in other epistles. I find three stages: the Persecutor in v13-14; the Believer in v15-16b; and the Preacher in v16c-24.

A. CALL TO APOSTLESHIP

Galatians 1:11-12 But I make known to you, brethren, 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 it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

In these two verses, Paul gives us the theme of this section of the letter.

Did Paul's message – the message of the Bible – really come from God, or is it an achievement of man's spiritual and moral search for God? If it really came from God, then it is the most important fact in the world. If it is just a human invention or achievement, then it is the most dangerous lie in the world.

There isn't any shortage of people who claim that they have a revelation from God. But we have to be careful to not regard a message as being from God if it isn't. How can we know that the Bible is really from God and not man?

Because we learned that the Bible text itself has proved itself to be reliable spiritually, prophetically, historically, archaeologically, and scientifically like no other document

ever written – ancient or modern. We know this from our extensive nine week study in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 a couple of years ago.

The best way for Paul to prove his point is to reach into his past and remind the Galatian Christians of the way God had dealt with him. So, Paul flashes on the screen three pictures from his past as evidence that his apostleship and his Gospel are truly of God. Thus, here comes his testimony.

B. THE PERSECUTOR

Galatians 1:13-14 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Like some movies show a flashback as the movie character describes, apostle Paul tells the Galatian believers about his past as an unconverted Jewish rabbi / persecutor against Christianity.

By persecuting the Christian believers, he was profiting and progressing in the Jewish religion as a fast rising young next generation spiritual leader. According to Acts chapter 8, Paul consented to the murder of Stephen and proceeded to make havoc of the church by breaking up families and putting believers in prison.

He even volunteered to go and bring the Christians back from Damascus to Jerusalem so that he could put them to prison, even to death in Acts chapter 9. Paul sincerely believed that he was doing what God wanted him to do, because he thought that Jesus was none other than another impostor and His message of salvation was nothing more than another lie.

Then something happened: Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the church, became Paul the Apostle, the preacher of the Gospel. This change was not gradual; it happened suddenly and without warning. Saul was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians; a few days later he was in Damascus preaching to the Jews that the Christians are right, and Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God.

He mentions these facts in his letters, 1 Corinthians 15; Philippians 3; 1 Timothy 1, marveling that God could save such a sinner as he.

1 Timothy 1:15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

C. THE BELIEVER

Galatians 1:15-16b But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,

Did you notice one common thing from these verses? It is God who chose Paul before his birth; it is God who brought him through His grace; it is God who revealed Jesus to him so that Paul could preach Jesus to the Gentiles; and it is God who received the glory from the Gentiles. Paul had nothing to do with the salvation in Christ Jesus.

In the Book of Philippians chapter 3, Paul mentioned that he had plenty to boast about his accomplishment when he was an unbeliever, but when he met Jesus on the way to Damascus, he realized that his righteousness was nothing more than a filthy rag in comparison with the righteousness of Christ.

Philippians 3:7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.

The Judaism and all the other religions around the world have been an experience of outward rituals and practices even though many of them talk about getting in touch with their inner person. But faith in Christ brings about an inward experience of reality with the Lord. That is the reason all the other religions cannot fill the void we had before Christ came into our heart.

God chose Paul, not only to save him, but also to use him to win others. The Lord chose Paul to preach among the Gentiles the same grace that he had experienced. This, in itself, was evidence that Paul's conversion was of God. Because no prejudiced Jewish Rabbi would ever decide of himself to minister to the despised Gentiles.

D. THE PREACHER

Galatians 1:16c-24 I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) 21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. 23 But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy." 24 And they glorified God in me.

We get to have a rare glimpse of Paul's private life in this section of the Scripture that you will not find anywhere else in the Bible, especially in the second half of v17.

Originally Paul didn't have any personal contacts with the apostles right after his conversion to Christianity since he was their persecutor. If it was you or me, we probably would have gone up to Jerusalem to get an approval from the original apostles and some guidance. If he did, Paul would have never gone out to the Gentile world with the Gospel of Jesus since they pretty much concentrated in the Jewish ministry at that time.

Rather than following his instinct or his own logic, Paul waited upon the Lord and went to Arabia. The apostle did not travel to what we would call Saudi Arabia. The area known in that day as Arabia extended all the way to the city of Damascus. Paul probably lived in some quiet desert place outside of Damascus.

Then, what did he do? There is no record of what he did, but there are plenty of guesses from many theologians. What did I teach you guys to do when the Bible is silent about a certain thing? Be silent. I wouldn't be surprised if he received three years of teaching from the Lord Jesus through the OT Scriptures before his three missionary journeys.

When Paul went back to Damascus, but this time as a Christian, not as a persecutor, he was not welcomed by the Jewish leaders of Damascus.

Acts 9:23-25 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.

You can say that Paul was totally basket case.

When Paul finally went up to Jerusalem, he only encountered Peter and James, the half brother of the Lord Jesus, and stayed in Jerusalem only fifteen days.

Later, Paul stayed in his home area, Tarsus until he was recruited by Barnabas for the work in Antioch according to Acts 11. A few believers in Jerusalem knew Paul, but the believers in the churches of Judea did not know him, though they heard that he was now preaching the very faith he had once tried to destroy.

Though Christianity has never started by men with fancy credentials, but only by the grace, mercy, and love of God, through the power of death and resurrection of Christ, many people still look toward men with those credentials with favors while they ignore the ones who were called by God.

Some critical scholars have accused Paul of “corrupting the simple Gospel”, because he was not one of the original apostles, but the evidence is against this accusation. The same Christ who taught on earth also taught through Paul from heaven. Paul did not invent his teaching; he “received” it.

The Judaizers who were poisoning the minds of the believers of the Galatian churches during Paul’s day insisted on “the Gospel plus Moses.” Nothing has changed. We still have modern-day Judaizers who insist, “You cannot be saved by the grace of God alone unless you follow what we teach...” usually includes joining their group and obeying their rules. Don’t listen to them.

E. APPLICATIONS

- 1) **Unbelievers can choose to ignore what the Bible says, but they cannot ignore what God has done in your life. Let your life reflect Jesus in you.**
- 2) **Have your brief testimony at all times – how Jesus Christ changed your life – not emphasizing on how bad you were, rather how wonderful He is.**