

THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GRACE IS THE ONLY WAY TO KNOW GOD: PART 2

Galatians 1:11-24

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet anyone new after last Sunday's worship service?

INTRODUCTION

Every "salvation story" contains a description of the misery from which people must be saved, the "saved" condition that is promised and the means by which this salvation is to be carried out. Brainstorm various examples of "salvation stories" that you are aware of in our culture/world. Which salvation stories are most attractive to you?

In Galatians 1:6-10 Paul has asserted that the only true "salvation story" is the gospel he preached to the churches of Galatia when he first visited them. In those verses he described the negative consequences that would come to all who refused to embrace that message as the only gospel of Christ. In vv. 11-24 his goal is to give positive reasons as to why we can trust that the message that he delivered to the Galatians is the only message of salvation in the world.

STUDY

1. What's Paul's point in vv. 11-12?

The gospel he preaches did not originate with any man, either himself or anyone else. He wants the Galatians to know that the gospel he preached to them and that they believed came straight from God. That's the main point of vv. 11-12. The gospel Paul preaches is not a contrivance of men.

2. Are you aware of any other "salvation stories" that claim to come straight from God and did not originate with human beings?

Judaism, Islam and Mormonism are three other salvation stories that claim to not have originated with men but with God.

3. It is one thing to say your message does not originate with men, it is another thing to prove it. How do we know that the gospel of Christ is from God and these other "stories" are not? Trace out the flow of Paul's argument in vv. 13-24 by examining the following units of thought. How does he seek to prove that his message did not come from men?

vv. 13-14:

The first piece of evidence that Paul brings forward is his former way of life as a Jew. He was so convinced that keeping the Jewish law as taught by Moses was the only way to know God and be accepted by him that he sought to destroy the Christian church. He viewed the Christian story of salvation as a lie and a deception and thus it was God's will that the church of Christ be destroyed. He was serving God by killing Christians. Paul was not in any way predisposed to believe the gospel of Christ but was completely opposed to accepting it as the message of salvation given by God. You could not find a person more opposed to Jesus Christ and to his gospel than Paul. Therefore, the fact that he now preaches that Jesus is the Messiah and savior cannot be attributed to any human factor for there was no human way for him to be persuaded to abandon Judaism and embrace Christianity.

vv. 15-16:

In vv. 15-16 Paul, in a very succinct manner, describes exactly the divine activity that took place in order to persuade him to believe that the gospel of Christ as he preached it is the only message from God by which humans can be saved. This brief statement is his explanation of what happened to him on the road to Damascus. Here he was, on his way to arrest, torture and imprison any Christians he found in Damascus when, contrary to everything he deserved and against every expectation, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him and spoke to him. He saw with spiritual eyes what he was blind prior to this, Jesus is the Messiah and it is only through faith in him and not by any works of

the law that humans can be made right with God. The only rational explanation as to how a guy who was going to Damascus to kill Christians arrived in Damascus and began to preach what Christians were teaching is that God himself confronted him and changed him on the road to Damascus. Only sovereign grace can explain what happened to Paul. There is no other explanation.

vv. 16b-21:

Upon being converted and told by Jesus that he was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, what did Paul do? He went immediately into Arabia, which is the land of the Gentiles east of the Jordan River and south towards Egypt and he preached the gospel there for three years. He left behind all the power and authority he had as an emissary of the Jewish ruling council and went to live as an exile and an itinerant preacher among non-Jewish people. What did Paul gain for his abandoning Judaism for Christ? Did he get money? Did he gain power and prestige? No, he lost everything for the sake of Christ. This message has to be from God because he gained nothing but God as a result of his radical departure from Judaism to being the chief spokesperson of Christianity to the non-Jews. He adds that he did not consult with any human being prior to going to preach the gospel in Arabia. He didn't go to Jerusalem to find out if the gospel he was preaching was the same one the original apostles preached. He was absolutely confident that this message was straight from the Lord Jesus himself and therefore he knew the gospel they preached and the one he preached was the same, without going to see them as both they and he had received the gospel from the same source.

He preached the gospel for three years in Arabia and then he went up to Jerusalem to visit Peter, to make his acquaintance. He didn't go in order to check out his gospel but simply to establish a relationship with one who shared in the apostolic work. Paul now utters an oath. What he's doing is like what we ask people to do before they get on the witness stand in a court of law. "Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" The point of an oath is to say, "If I am lying then may God see and punish me accordingly." Serious people do not make oaths except under the most extreme need. Paul feels the need to take such an oath because the false teachers have been spreading lies about him. They have been

saying that he got his gospel from men and that the apostles were in complete disagreement with his gospel. Paul is giving his evidence to contradict what these false teachers are saying about him. His oath is another confirmation that the gospel he preached came from God, not men.

vv. 22-24:

Finally, he calls another witness in his behalf. He calls all the churches in Judea from which these false teachers claim to have come. His point is that even though he never met any of those churches and they never heard him preach, yet they acknowledged that the gospel he preached was the same one they believed and preached. These churches, whom he at one time persecuted, admitted that he was preaching the same faith he had tried to destroy, which is the faith they had because they were the ones he sought to destroy. They even praised God for his conversion and preaching of the gospel. How did he have the same faith as they if the apostles and other Christians never taught him that gospel? It can only be because God himself revealed Christ to him on the road to Damascus. The gospel that Paul preached could not have come from men but could only have come from God.

4. To sum up, if we asked Paul, "how is it that you are so certain that the gospel you are preaching is the only gospel that can save people?"—what would he answer?

First, he would say, I know that this is the only way of salvation because God himself, opened my blind eyes and enabled me to see the glory of Christ as the Savior of the world. I believe because God himself enabled me to believe. He would say that the only way that anyone will ever trust that Christ alone can save them is by the gracious work of God through his Holy Spirit giving new hearts and the gift of repentance and faith. However, he would also say that there are some reasons to believe. He would describe what happened to him and ask you to explain his experience apart from God. He would argue that his conversion is evidence of the truthfulness of the gospel. He would argue that the only explanation as to what happened to him has to be that he received this message straight from God, from the resurrected Jesus.

5. Does Paul's argument help you to believe that the gospel he preached is the only true gospel of salvation from God? Why or why not?

Only the good news of Jesus Christ can save you because it's the only message that comes directly from God.

6. Based on Paul's description of himself in vv. 13-14, what are some ways you would describe the "lostness" of his condition? What was he like prior to his conversion?

He was a completely sincere person and absolutely convinced that he was right. He was a man who claimed to love God. He claimed that his passion in life was to please God by obeying the law. He knew the OT backwards and forwards. Yet he was completely blind to reality. He was actually fighting against the God whom he claimed to serve. He was dead to God when he thought he was alive to God. He could not see that his religion was worthless; that the righteousness that he thought he had was nothing before the righteousness of God. While he said he loved God he actually hated the God who exists. He hated humans who opposed him and what he thought was right. He was willing to use violence and intimidation to oppress those who merely disagreed with him.

7. What are some ways that Paul's particular experience reveals things that are universally true for all human beings?

Paul's experience is the experience of every human being apart from the gospel. We are self-deceived and self-righteous and blindly opposed to the God whom we claim to serve. The vast majority of human beings claim to know God and to serve him in the various religions of the world, just like Paul. However, the majority of humans are blind to reality and merely using "God talk" to justify their own preferences and likes. We are by nature God-haters even while most of us say that we are God lovers, just like Paul. We are not interested in knowing the truth. We are only looking for ways to justify our version of reality. But not only are we blind, dead haters of God but we are haters of men as well. We naturally love those who love us

and agree with us but we naturally hate those who don't love us or don't agree with us. This is the cause of all the anger and fighting in our lives. This is the cause of racism and wars and slavery. We are happy to love those who make us happy but we refuse to love those who harm us and seek to harm them in return. When humans are given power to carry out the passions that are in their hearts, as Paul was given, then we do what Paul did, torture and kill innocent people.

8. How is Paul's life proof positive that what humans need is not within our power to give ourselves? How does his life prior to conversion prove that human effort cannot be the key to human salvation?

What kind of religion can help a person like Paul? What will you tell him he must do? He just needs to try harder to be good? He needs to keep a different set of rules than the ones he is keeping? This man was more religious than you and I can ever hope to be. He read the Bible and prayed and memorized the Bible and went to temple and kept lists of religious rules. He spent his time thinking about God and talking about God. There is no human solution to this man's problem. As far as he was concerned, he was completely justified in arresting Christians. There was no possible line of argument that could convince him he was wrong. It is only in the gospel of Jesus that the enemies of God are offered salvation. Christianity is the only religion that has a solution to the real problem of human beings: hearts that hate the true and living God and those made in his image. Only Christianity has the power to forgive its enemies because only Christianity has a savior who suffered the just punishment due to such violent, evil people as Paul and us. Paul's life shows that our problem is not outside of us but within us. We are hard, dead and blind to who we really are and what we really are capable of. Salvation must come from outside of us.

9. How does it make you feel to know there is nothing you can do to save yourself?

Only the good news of Jesus Christ can save you because it's the only message that confronts our real problem.

10. How does Paul describe what God did to him in vv. 15-16?

First, God, before Paul was born, set him apart for salvation and for apostleship. Before Paul was born and had done anything good or bad, God determined to save Paul and commission him as his messenger to the Gentiles. God's determination to save Paul was not conditioned on anything Paul did but in spite of all that Paul did. God freely, sovereignly with no reason other than it pleased him to do so set Paul apart from before his birth to be saved and to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Second, God accomplished what he had decided by calling Paul to himself by his grace. This is not just referring to the voice of the resurrected Christ speaking to Paul on the road to Damascus. This means that God, when he spoke to Paul changed Paul's heart and effectually called him out of the deadness and blindness of his sin and gave him a heart of flesh and eyes that could see. God gave him the power to believe what God commanded him to believe and to do what God commanded him to do.

Finally, the result of God's predestining and calling of Paul was Jesus being revealed to him as the Savior of sinners. If you were to ask Paul, "what was the primary thing that occurred to you on the road to Damascus?" He would say, "I saw that Jesus Christ was the glorious God-man who alone can save sinners by his life, death and resurrection. What God's effectual calling did in my heart was enable me to see the blazing beauty and glory of Christ so that I trusted in him alone as my wisdom, righteousness and sanctification." In another place Paul says, "For God who made light shine out of darkness has also made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Paul would say, "I saw in that moment that all of my obedience to the law was nothing but that Christ's obedience to the law was everything. I saw how righteous God would be to destroy me for my stubborn, proud rebellion against him and how Christ had born God's just judgment against me by his death. Christ became everything to me as he was revealed to me in all of his divine, saving glory."

11. According to v. 16 what is it that Paul preached?

What he preaches is Christ. The gospel is Jesus in his entire divine, saving glory. The good news of God's grace is Christ himself, not the benefits that Christ gives to his people. Faith is in Christ, not in being forgiven, not in going to heaven, not in being part of the church. What Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, seeing Christ as the glorious Savior, is what he then went on to preach, Christ is a glorious savior. Christ is the good news for sinners.

12. What reason is there for God to forgive your sins and take you to live with him in heaven forever?

You do nothing to contribute to your salvation. Christ has done it all. He is the only hope for sinners like Paul and us. Upon what basis could anyone argue that Paul should be forgiven by God in light of his open hatred of God and murderous violence against God's people? This goes for all of us. What have we done that can be any argument for God forgiving us? Why should God care about you at all? Your halfhearted religious observances are nothing compared to the righteousness of God. Your anemic prayers and miserly acts of kindness are nothing in view of your enormous rebellion against the God who made you. Your pledges to follow Christ, your supposed decisions to accept Jesus, how are any of these things an argument for God to be kind to you? Your only hope is that God would consider your sins born by Christ and count you righteous with the righteousness of Christ. Your only hope is that God would call you by his grace and so reveal the glory of Jesus Christ as a Savior for sinners like you. You have no other hope but him.

13. How does God's saving of Paul affect you? How does it affect your view of God's power and grace?

14. Why should God forgive you and take you to live with him in heaven forever?

Only the good news of Jesus Christ can save you because it's the only message that reveals Jesus Christ.