

God's Calling

Galatians 1:11–24

Key Verses: 1:23-24

“They only heard the report: ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’”²⁴ And they praised God because of me.”

It was the year 1430 and France and England were at war. The historian Stephen W. Richey recounts, “After years of one humiliating defeat after another, both the military and civil leadership of France were demoralized and discredited.(1) It was then that Dauphin (Dauphin = the heir apparent to the throne of France) Charles granted Joan of Arc’s urgent request to be equipped for war and placed at the head of his army. His decision must have been based in large part on the knowledge that every orthodox, rational option had been tried and had failed. Only a regime in the final straits of desperation would pay any heed to an illiterate farm girl who claimed that the voice of God was instructing her to take charge of her country’s army and lead it to victory.” Richey continues, “She proceeded to lead the army in an astounding series of victories that reversed the tide of the war.” Historians agree that the army enjoyed remarkable success during her brief career.”

As [Joan of Arc](#) was leaving Vaucouleurs to begin her mission to save France she was asked: "How can you make such a journey when on all sides are soldiers?" to which Joan responded: "I do not fear the soldiers, for my road is made open to me; and if the soldiers come, I have God, my Lord, who will know how to clear the route that leads to messire the Dauphin. It was for this that I was born!" It was clear to Joan that she received her calling from God. This gave her incredible courage and clarity of purpose in a time when there was neither. And when she accepted and followed God's call, God blessed her and made her a blessing and people praised God because of her. This leads us to the topic of the passage today. What were you born to do? What is God's call for you? In today's passage we'll hear Paul's story of how & why God called him.

We must always keep in mind when we are studying Galatians the context in which Paul is writing this letter. Paul talks about his calling because the Judaizers are attacking him and trying to trash his credibility. They were saying that he doesn't have the authority to teach the gospel because he wasn't one of the original disciples of Jesus. So Paul wanted to remind the Galatians of who he was. Take a look at verses 11-12. “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up.”¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.” The first thing we notice in Paul's proclamation is that he maintains that the gospel is not a man made story. It was not something that he, or any other man, had made up. When I was younger I used to wonder if a couple guys sitting on the beach decided to make up a wild story and ended up writing the Bible. These days there are many people would like you to believe that was the case. They would like you to believe that it's a fairy tale. However they, and the younger me, would be wrong. How do I know? How does anyone know for that matter? Well, for one Paul proclaims that the gospel is not man made here. Paul says that no one taught him about the gospel. He never received it from

any man. In fact, after Paul accepted the gospel, he didn't even meet one of the original apostles until 3 years later. (v18) And when he met them, Paul says that none of them added anything to his message (v2:6) and he wasn't missing even one part. This means Paul had the complete Gospel. Paul was an independent witness of the gospel.

So if no one taught Paul the gospel how did he get it? Jesus revealed it to him personally. That's how Paul's message coincided with the apostle's message exactly because Paul had the best teacher possible, Jesus himself. The apostles may have had group Bible study with Jesus, but Paul had one to one with him – which do you think is better? In Acts 9:1-7 we catch a glimpse of what happened to him. While Paul was on his way to Damascus to catch and imprison any Christian he could find, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. This was so intense that it knocked him off his horse and sent him to the ground. It was as if Jesus gave him a right hook from heaven. As he was on the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul asked, "Who's talking to me?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Paul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. This was how Paul met Jesus. And this was how he received the gospel. (The apostles also corroborate his story.) Paul did not formulate a theory from his Jewish education. He was not taught it by some guru. It was revealed to him directly by Jesus Christ. He met the risen Christ first hand so there was absolutely no doubt in his mind. And Christ revealed to Paul what he could never have figured out by himself. As with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus taught Paul how everything in the Old Testament pointed to Jesus being the Messiah. Paul simply received the revelation and passed it on.

Still why should we believe what Paul is saying is true? Let's forget for a moment the fact that Paul's message matches exactly to the apostles even though no one taught him, it was divine inspiration. Why should we believe him? Paul says later, "I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie." (v20) What would Paul gain from lying? Maybe Paul was in it for the money? That's a big motivator for people. Maybe that's Paul's motive in doing this. And actually back then churches would support the itinerant preachers when they came into town. "Ah ha, that must be it, that's why Paul is doing it, for the money," you say. But in reality, by proclaiming the gospel, Paul loses more than he gains. (if we exclude the spiritual things – that is) Paul was a fiery, passionate, intelligent, well educated young Pharisee. He was at the top of the next generation's up and coming leaders. He was like Barak Obama, who was running for the Senate, when he gave his famous speech at the 2004 DNC, "We are not a collection of Red States and Blue States — We are the United States of America." Paul didn't need the money, or the fame, he actually was well on his way of gaining all those. But after he began to preach the gospel he lost all that. The Jews began to hate him as much as they hated Jesus and in an instant Paul's promising career as a Pharisee was gone. And as a result he went through trial after trial. Paul says, "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one."²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.²⁷ I have labored and

toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." (2 Cor 11:24-27) What benefit would Paul get if he were lying about the gospel?

Still, we shouldn't believe someone just because they assure us no matter how much they suffer or how sincere they may be. We need to check it against God's word and see if it's in line with what God says. We need to look at the fruit and ultimately, the evidence comes from Paul's life.

Let's take a closer look at Paul's life to see what changed him so much. In Paul's former life, he was called Saul, which means greater, while Paul means smaller, and that gives you a little indication of what he thought of himself. Take a look at verses 13-14. "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it."¹⁴ I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." Paul shares his personal testimony. Like I said earlier, Paul was once a zealous Jew who was crazy for Moses' law. Paul once said, "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put 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; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; "⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." (Php 3:4-6) In this respect he was just like the Judaizers. But he was much more zealous because he wanted to destroy the church of God, thinking it was a dangerous cult. Luther said, "Paul used his own case as an example. I'll paraphrase what he says, "I have at one time defended the traditions of the Pharisees more fiercely than any of your false apostles. Now, if the righteousness of the Law had been worth anything I would never have forsaken it. So carefully did I live up to the Law that I excelled past many of my colleagues. So zealous was I in defense of the Law that I wasted the church of God." It was Paul's extreme zeal for the traditions of his fathers that drove him. Paul took this zealousness to the extreme and used it to attack everyone that went against the traditions of his fathers. He saw the way to rise up the Pharisee power ladder was to persecute Christians and he was doing that even breathing out murderous threats against them.

It was completely unthinkable that Paul would ever change and become a gospel preacher. What could change a person so dramatically that it makes them a different person? Take a look at verses 15-16. "But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased "¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man." It was the grace of God. The grace of God completely changed Paul. We have prisons full of convicted criminals that try to change their hearts, but instead of changing their hearts, they only make them better criminals. Only the grace of God, only the love of God can truly change a person's heart. God called him by grace and revealed his Son in Paul. Paul became the most prominent gospel preacher. Only God could do this. Paul had been a murderer; he participated in the murder of Stephen and was on his way to Damascus for more. He had blood on his hands, it was only by God's grace that he was called. It would be like Hitler or Bin Laden one day holding a press conference and saying, "I repent. Everything I did was wrong. I am a sinner and I have taken Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." Paul's change was a miracle. It was the amazing work of the Holy Spirit that is alive today changing people's hearts and making them new creations. This is also confirmation that the gospel is not a man made story.

It's interesting to note that Paul said that God set him apart from birth when he called him. So we might wonder, if God set him apart from birth, why did he let him be so zealous and murderous?

Why not make him good from the beginning? God gives us freedom to live our life as we want. And this was the path that Paul's sinful nature led him down. This is the nature of sin, it's destructive. It was at Paul's lowest point that God called him. This shows that God uses the lowly things of the world so that they don't have any room to brag that it was because of their deeds. 1 Corinthians 1:27-28 tells us, "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before him." and Jesus himself said, "For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."(Mt 9:13) God called the greatest persecutor around to come and serve him so that all the glory would go to God and not to Paul. Knowing this, when we begin to think that we have done something great, we shouldn't think to highly of ourselves, because God doesn't call the great, he call the lowest. So don't get too proud.

After meeting Christ, Paul did not seek confirmation of the gospel or of his calling from the established apostles. Rather, he went to Arabia and stayed there for three years. He must have spent time in prayer and deep Bible study to harmonize his overwhelming experience of Christ with the Scriptures. He came to know the gospel by Christ's revelation, without help from the other apostles. He stood purely on faith in Christ's revelation to him. This emphasizes that his authority to preach came directly from Christ, not through the other apostles or the Jerusalem Church. From this Paul had a clear calling from God. It was God who called him, not men. It was God that equipped him so that he could preach among the Gentiles. Since Paul's calling came from God, this is who Paul was accountable to. Paul didn't have to depend upon other men, his strength came from God. He didn't need to seek approval from men, he sought approval from God. This helped him to keep away from being a people pleaser for his deep desire was to please God.

So one would ask, for what purpose did God call Paul? Of course God called Paul to carry out his mission to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles but the real reason can be found in verses 23-24. Let's read them. "They only heard the report: 'The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.'"²⁴ And they praised God because of me." Ultimately God calls us for his own glory. God called Paul so that God would be praised and glorified. When we first read this it sounds as if Paul is boasting – "I am better than you because they praised God because of me." We praise God for the work that God has done in Paul and through him. It's not that we bring glory to Paul, while we are thankful for using Paul, the glory should go to God. God calls us for his glory not our own. Do you remember what happened in the old testament with Saul? God called him, but in the end Saul did not live to glorify God and so God replaced him with David saying, "David will be a man after my own heart." Although David was not perfect, he lived to please God. Those who are called by God, are called to live for his glory so that people will praise God.

Throughout history people have been called by God. God called Noah to build an ark. God called Abraham to become the father of a nation. God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. God called Samuel to be a priest and judge. God called David to be a shepherd of his people. God called prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel to proclaim his word. God called Peter to be the foundation of his church and God called Paul to be a light to the Gentiles. Not all those who were called accepted his call at first. Moses tried everything to get out of his calling but God

removed each of his excuses one by one. However all of them had clear conviction that they were called by God for a purpose. So now I come back to the question: What were you born to do? What has God called you to do? Do you feel as if God has even called you? How do you know that God is calling you? You're here right? And you're listening to this message right? Then God is calling you. We don't have to make it more complicated than it is. It can be that simple, I don't believe in consequences. I believe that everything happens for a reason, that is how God works.

Each of us has to receive our own personal calling from God. We can't borrow someone else's. Because it's our calling that we fall back upon when times get tough. And if we don't have a personal calling, it's hard to stick around. What is God's call to you? I believe that God called me. I would never have imagined in a million years that I would be standing before you talking about Jesus. That was simply not in my future plans. All I wanted to do was live to enjoy life. The rock band "Poison" had a song that expressed my life's motto perfectly. It went something like this, "Don't need nothing, but a good time, how can I resist, don't need nothing but a good time and it don't get better than this." However that all changed after I met M. Paul Y. Kim. Although we didn't always see eye to eye, he taught me about Jesus who died for my sins and rose again to give me eternal life in heaven. Over the course of time, God worked in my heart convicting me of my sin and revealing his grace to me. I never asked to be a leader in God's ministry. When M. Paul passed away, I never asked to lead our fellowship, it just came upon me. In actuality I never wanted to lead IIT ministry. It was not my idea to start a worship service on this campus. That idea came from our Wright College coworkers who had greater vision for this campus than I did, and I was supposed to be the one serving this campus. And so out of self-righteous pride and the thinking, "how dare they intrude upon our territory," we appealed to our main chapter to start a new chapter. And after a couple of years IIT UBF was established.

And from time to time actually I struggle a lot wondering about what is God's call for me. Not that he called me, I know that, but it's more like what does God want me to do. Like Paul who was called to the Gentiles, or all the others who had a specific calling. One reason I struggle is because I feel that I suck as a leader. I don't have many leadership skills, I am not very smart, I'm not outgoing, I procrastinate a lot, I have difficulty making decisions, and I generally feel that I do many half way and not one thing fully. But through this passage I realize how important our calling is to our life of faith. Our calling is the foundation upon which everything else is built. So it is crucial for each of us to know what our calling from God is. What's yours? If you don't have one, ask God to reveal it to you. He is faithful and gives to those who ask. And for those of us who already know God's call, I ask, are you giving your whole heart to follow and serve God's call for your life? If so great and I praise God because of you. But if you're not, why aren't you? When Paul heard God's call, and accepted and followed it, God blessed him and made him a blessing. Just like with Joan of Arc. When they heard God's call, God used them to make an impact in their generation and as a result people praised God and he was glorified.