

Acts 9:1-19a

Galatians 1:1-24

September 4, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE
The Gospel Truth

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Flannery O'Connor was a great Southern novelist and short-story writer in the first half of the 20th century. She died in 1964 at the age of 39 from complications associated with lupus. She was a devout Roman Catholic and many of her stories contain religious themes. In one of her letters, Flannery O'Connor comments on the apostle Paul, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse."

Three-hundred fifty years before O'Connor described the scene on the road to Damascus, the renowned Italian painter Michelangelo de Caravaggio completed the 8' x 6' painting called *The Conversion of Saint Paul*. This was one of two paintings Caravaggio made of the story from Acts 9. You can see the painting on the screen:



Notice the horse! Not to take anything away from the great artist Caravaggio and the great writer Flannery O'Connor, but neither of them got the story right – at least, not if they were trying to illustrate the Damascus Road story literally. After all, Acts 9:4 merely says, “He fell to the ground...” and Acts 9:8 tells us, “Saul got up from the ground.” Luke, the author of Acts, doesn't tell us Saul fell off a horse. But that detail makes the story more dramatic, doesn't it?

Of course, that assumes that this “conversion” story of the man who was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” becoming the “instrument God chose to bring God's name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” wasn't already dramatic enough! You don't even have to be religious or a believer to understand how dramatic a “Damascus Road experience” can be. The phrase has entered into our language to mean a life-changing experience that gives you an entirely new perspective. In the life of faith, it's that experience when you realize, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

The Damascus Road story is often referred to as the Pharisee Saul's conversion to the apostle Paul. Before we get to what that encounter meant for Paul's life, let's think about what did not happen:

- Paul was not converted from **no** religion to **a** religion. Paul himself tells us that he was “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the Law a Pharisee; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Philippians 3:4b-6)
- Paul was not converted from **one** religion to **another** religion, say from Judaism to Christianity, nor was Paul converted from believing in one god to believing in another God.
- And, at the risk of bursting your bubble and ruining what you probably learned in Sunday School, Saul's name was **not** changed to Paul on the Damascus Road. Acts 13:9 tells us that Saul (his Hebrew name) was also known as Paul (his Roman name). About halfway through the book of Acts, as Saul leaves Antioch to begin his missionary journeys into Gentile country, he is referred to as Paul from that point forward.

So, even though many of us were taught Saul's Damascus Road experience as one of the greatest “conversion” stories ever told, it's really more accurate to call this story Saul's “commissioning” to bring God's name to the Gentiles.

What exactly happened to Saul/Paul on the Damascus Road that day? The Acts story tells us that “as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a great light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” (Acts 9:3-5)

Remember! The book of Acts was written maybe thirty years or so after Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian believers. Why not hear what Paul himself has to say about what happened on the Damascus Road that day? “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But. . . God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.” (Galatians 1:13-16)

And that’s exactly what Paul did – he proclaimed God’s name among the Gentiles by preaching about Jesus Christ. In one of his letters to other Gentile Christians in Corinth, Paul reminded them, “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2) In a nutshell, that describes Saul’s/Paul’s life changing event on the Damascus Road. God revealed to him that the very same Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and nailed to a cross is the resurrected Son of God and Lord of all. Next Sunday, we’ll hear Paul expand on that idea when he writes, “yet we know that a person is justified, not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 2:16)

But all was not hunky-dory in the churches in Galatia. Paul is not happy with the Gentile believers. Listen to what he says: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel . . . You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (Galatians 1:6; 3:1)

What’s got Paul so riled up? Apparently, some preachers came behind Paul and convinced some of the Galatians that Paul had preached an “incomplete” gospel to them. Here’s how one writer describes the problem: “The new preachers were apparently saying something like this: ‘You Galatians have taken an important first step by coming to faith in Christ. Now complete what you have begun by observing the Mosaic law (3:3). Become circumcised (5:2), celebrate the Jewish festivals (4:10), and observe the kosher food laws (cf. 2:12). Only by assuming these

responsibilities will you share fully in the inheritance promised to God's people. Think of Abraham, who "believed in God," and became circumcised. Like Abraham, you too believe. Now do what Abraham did: acceptcircumcision and your covenant obligations."

This week I read about a man who went into a Christian bookstore and saw a T-shirt that said, "Jesus did his best. . . now you do the rest!" That pretty well describes the problem Paul was facing in the Galatian churches and the reason for his letter. Paul might put it this way: "We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. If you preach, 'Jesus Christ + ANYTHING else' is necessary to be part of God's family, you are preaching a different gospel." Actually, Paul goes so far as to say, "If you preach, 'Jesus Christ + ANYTHING else' is necessary to be part of God's family, may you be cursed!" Strong language, indeed!

But, then, there's a lot at stake. . . in the 1st century A.D. and the 21st century A.D. Lest we think some ancient controversy about a religious ritual has nothing to do with us as Christian believers today, think of it this way. How often do churches add that "+ SOMETHING else" to faith in Jesus Christ in order to define what "the gospel truth" is, or true faith, or genuine membership and inclusion in the body of Christ?

- If you have faith in Jesus Christ + are baptized in a certain manner;
- If you have faith in Jesus Christ + consent to a particular set of doctrines that is the only acceptable set;
- If you have faith in Jesus Christ + conform to the traditions and the practices (spoken and unspoken) of the church;
- and the list can go on and on.

Remember, Paul's opponents weren't trying to convince the GentileGalatianbelievers to quit believing in Jesus Christ. No, they were trying to convince the Galatian believers that "the gospel truth" included them becoming Jews before they could be considered true Christians. Here's how the blogger Dan Clendenin describes the issue (and see if this doesn't describe the ongoing challenge of living out the faith today): "The 'perverted gospel' that Paul condemns (*sic*)in Galatians is one that restricts, narrows, or limits the love of God to an exclusive few — in his time and place, those believers who wanted to force Gentiles to live like Jews.

"The 'true gospel' that Paul defends is one that expands the love of God in Christ to all people without exception and subverts our spiritual hierarchies. In Galatians, Paul says that his gospel bursts our normal

boundaries of exclusion, like race, religion, gender, and class — “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.”¹

Over the next six Sundays, we are going to read the rest of Paul’s letter to the Galatians and hear about what it means to live “the cross-shaped life.” In a sense, that’s what God revealed to Saul on the Damascus Road when he met the risen Lord who was the same Jesus of Nazareth who had been nailed to the cross. At our Monday night Bible study, I said the overarching theme of this sermon series is “The Cross-Shaped Life.” A college friend who has been Zooming with us asked me, “Why not ‘The Resurrection-Shaped Life’”? Good question! It’s not that Paul didn’t know about or value the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Of course he did, and that promise is vital to our Christian lives. But, for Paul, the cross of Jesus Christ is central to everything we believe about who Jesus was, what God did for us through Jesus Christ, and how we are to live our lives as believers (in the first century A.D. and in the 21st century A.D.) when there are so many claims upon our lives and our beliefs and our loyalties.

Here’s how another Bible commentator frames it: “There is something about the very cross itself that tells us that what needed to happen for the atonement to be real is absolutely not something any human being could ever hope to achieve on his own. The cross itself—not as decoration, not as a piece of jewelry, not as some inspiring symbol of hope—tells us that if we think for one moment that we human beings have something to chip in to getting ourselves saved, we are deluded. And if we try to get other people to believe this same delusion, well, we come under the curse of God.”²

I encourage you to read through the letter to the Galatians during the next six weeks and think about these things:

- What does the cross of Jesus Christ mean to you?
- What does it mean to live the cross-shaped life?
- How and when and why does our church restrict, narrow, or limit the love of God to an exclusive few?

I began this sermon with a quote from Flannery O’Connor and I’ll end with a quote from another of her letters. This is some food for thought as we seek to live the cross-shaped life. She wrote, “What people don’t

realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.”³

Let us pray: Transform us, O Lord. Grant us the grace so we can represent the Christ you have sent that the world might receive your glorious gospel, obey your great commandment, and worship your holy name; through the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins and freed us according to your will. Amen.

NOTES

¹Dan Clendenin, “No Other Gospel,” Posted 22 May 2016 at www.journeywithjesus.net.

²Scott Hoezee, “Sermon Commentary for Sunday, May 29, 2016: Galatians 1:1-12 Commentary,” at www.cepreaching.org.

³Both Flannery O’Connor quotes are from Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).