

Paul, the Lion of God
Galatians 1:11-24
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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There are two dominant personalities in the New Testament. The first is Jesus. The second is the Apostle Paul. Our knowledge of Jesus comes from the four Gospels. Our knowledge of Paul comes from reading the Book of Acts.

In the opening chapters of Acts, it initially appears St. Peter was assuming the role of Jesus' hand-picked successor. Then, quite suddenly, we meet a new comer in the story.

Saul of Tarsus, a fanatical Pharisee was dedicated to the faith of his fathers. When he heard about a growing number of Jews accepting Jesus as their messiah, he was outraged. He knew in his bones Jesus of Nazareth was a faker. So he zealously took on the role of chief persecutor of the Christians, rounding them up and throwing them into prison.

When Saul learned a new church of Christians was forming in Damascus, with the blessings of the temple priests, he jumped at the chance to close them down. However, by the time he reached Damascus, his mission radically changed. On the road he was confronted by the Risen Christ who cried out, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" From that moment on, Saul was a changed man. No longer Saul of Tarsus he was given a new identity, Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Unlike the twelve disciples who were hand-picked by Christ, Paul was branded as a Johnny-come-lately. He wasn't with Jesus during his three year ministry and he wasn't there to witness the resurrection and receive the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room. Even so, Paul insisted he was a full fledged apostle because he too received his calling directly from Christ.

As it turned out, Paul did more than any other apostles to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. We know about Paul's life and ministry by reading the Book of Acts but we get a definite sense of Paul's character by reading his letters to the churches. Especially in his letter to the Galatians, we see Paul as a ferocious defender of Christ's gospel, as well as his calling to be Christ's apostle.

Following the dictates of contemporary etiquette, he opened his letter with a gracious salutation to the Galatians. Then, Paul jumped in full force to the meat of his letter.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ (Paul is referring to himself) and are turning to a different gospel... but even if we or an

angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! (The more accurate translation from the original Greek should read, "Let him be damned!")

In the very next line, Paul justified his harsh rhetoric. "Am I now seeking human approval or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)

As I said earlier, after his conversion Paul was a changed man but not totally. He was still by nature a ferocious fighter.

After Paul left Galatia to continue his mission elsewhere, new teachers called the Judaizers came to town. They taught that before a Gentile could become a Christian, the Gentile first had to become a full fledged Jew. That meant circumcision and scrupulously following the laws and traditions of the Pharisees. The Judaizers were turning back the clock, preaching salvation through works. This is precisely what Jesus fought against and now Paul found himself fighting the same battle.

When the time and situation is right, God comes through for us and calls the right person to step into the breach to fight the good fight. Most of these individuals seem unlikely candidates. Think of Moses, the step grandson of Pharaoh or Jeremiah a temple priest turned reluctant prophet. There was David, the youngest son of Jesse, whose older burly brothers were passed over to be the next king of Israel. Of course, we can't forget Mary, who was told by the angel Gabriel, "blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Then there was Paul, the thirteenth apostle. Like these earlier heroes of the faith, Saul was chosen because God saw in him the right stuff. At his conception, God planted in Paul's DNA all the necessary character traits needed to bring Christ to the Gentiles. Paul alluded to this in his letter to the Galatians, "but when God who had sent me, set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I may proclaim him among the Gentiles..." (Galatians 1:15)

Paul insisted his authority came directly from God through revelation. Simply put, God revealed himself to Paul.

Critics of Christianity argue Christian doctrines are made up. They say God is a human invention and the prophets and the apostles created God in their own image for their own purposes. As far as these critics are concerned theology is no different than philosophy.

Philosophers base their worldview on what they can see or think. Theologians believe everything we could ever know about God can only come from God showing himself through nature, human experience and above all, the Scriptures.

Paul reaffirmed his apostleship when he wrote, "For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (Galatians 1:11)

Paul first needed to address, and then set aside, these questions about his authority before addressing his growing concern over the news he received about the Galatian Church.

The Galatian Christians were Gentiles and therefore not raised in the Jewish faith. Their ignorance of matters dealing with the Jewish faith and practice made them vulnerable to trouble makers. When the Judaizers, arrived after Paul left Galatia, the Judaizers convinced the Galatians Paul was a heretic and successfully imposed on them a strain of Phariseeism in opposition to Paul's gospel of salvation through grace and not works.

For the past two thousand years there's always been heretics distorting Christ's gospel. In the early days, besides the Judaizers, Paul also fought the Gnostics who tried to blend eastern pagan mysticism with the emerging Christian faith. More recently, contemporary heretics continue to reinvent the Christian gospel to suit their own ends.

One heresy is the prosperity gospel, promising wealth and good health to true believers. Thousands fill stadiums and watch television programs to hear this gospel of cheap grace promising all their wants will be satisfied if only they'd believe. This flies in the face of Christ's call to the servant lifestyle of self sacrifice.

Then there's the gospel of hyper nationalism, promoting ethnic superiority and righteousness. This heresy drives wedges between nations and races. Jesus becomes the nation's mascot instead of its sovereign Lord. An extreme case can be seen in the history of Nazi Germany. Hitler successfully manipulated the church in Germany to further his racial agenda. His supporters who called themselves "German Christians" advocated what they called "Positive Christianity." Their long term goal was to eventually replace the cross and the Bible with the swastika and Hitler's political manifesto Mein Kampf.

I've been reading Eric Metaxas's biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who died a martyr's death for opposing Hitler. Like Paul, Bonhoeffer was enraged by mediocrities who rejected Christ's Sermon on the Mount in favor of the Nazi's Will to Power. Like the Apostle Paul, Bonhoeffer spoke out and preached Christ is at the center of everything, not only your personal life but also at the center of the nation's politics and policies.

He also believed, "that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions. We need only to ask repeatedly and humbly in order to receive this answer. One cannot simply read the Bible like other books, one must be prepared to inquire about it. Only then will it reveal itself. That is because though the Bible God speaks to us.... Only if we seek him will he answer us...

On the other hand, if it is I who determines where God is to be found, then I shall always find a God who...is obliging...with my own nature. But if God determines where he is to

be found, then it will be in a place which is not immediately pleasing... This place is the cross of Christ. Whoever would find him must go to the foot of the cross, as the Sermon on the Mount commands. This is not according to our nature at all, it is entirely contrary to it.”

In just a few minutes we will be standing at the foot of the cross as we approach our Lord’s Table and be met by the apostles and saints who made the pilgrimage before us, submitting and sacrificing themselves for Christ and God’s Kingdom. Be in awe of them, but above all, be in awe of Christ calling us to submit and follow him while he holds us together as members of his Church.

After you hear the words, “Take and eat, this is my body, Take and drink, this is my blood,” taste and see that the Lord is good. Then, go and be likewise.