

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Leaving the Chains Behind

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

The Story Strategy

(Galatians 1:11-24)

Study #2

Introduction: The power of a good story...

Last Sunday we opened a letter the Apostle Paul wrote two thousand years ago to the churches in the region of Galatia (present-day Turkey).

The reason he wrote was to refute a false message about Jesus that was being taught by some troublemakers *and* to re-affirm the true message of Christianity. This could have been a really short letter.

All Paul really needed to do was re-state the simple Gospel and then re-affirm the central them of life in Christ.

He could have simply written, *"Dear Galatians. Remember: Faith alone in Christ alone saves. Hold fast to the themes of faith, grace, love and freedom. What you've been hearing is wrong. Love, Paul."*

But he didn't write a short letter.

Galatians is six chapters long and it's filled with logical argument, references to the Old Testament, scolding and rebuke. And one more thing: STORY.

Because when you're trying to make a point about how things really are, nothing communicates like a good story.

Whether you're telling children a "Once upon a time..." story, or telling your friends, a "So, there I was..." story, we all love story.

I love to get lost in a great novel or in the biography of someone I've long admired. We enjoy films that tell a good story well.

And, of course, a big part of the Bible is story.

Scripture gives us the stories of the exploits and the failures of people who are just like us. The Bible's stories teach us God's ways and shows us how to lead a life that honors the Lord.

And, the teaching ministry of Jesus was filled with stories (we call them parables) of farmers and merchants and fathers and sons and weddings and pearls and wheat and leaven.

Right out of the chute, at the very beginning of Galatians, Paul gives us story.

It's his first-chosen strategy to convince his readers that the Gospel he and Barnabas brought to Galatia was the true Gospel. Paul's story validates the Gospel's truth and its power.¹

He knew that the true Gospel was the only message that could break the chains that bind people in sin and brokenness - because it broke the chains that bound him.

He knew that the true Gospel releases people from the bonds of lovelessness, joylessness, and hopelessness - because it released him.

Jesus set Paul free and Paul wanted the Galatians - and he wants us! - to know that freedom. So, he tells his story and we'll learn something of his story today.

Review...

¹ In Galatians, Paul gives some of the most detailed personal biography we find anywhere in the New Testament.

Before moving on, though, here's a quick review of the essential backstory to Galatians we saw last week.

- Paul and Barnabas established at least four churches in the region of Galatia on the First Missionary Journey.²
- The people in those churches heard the Gospel and put their trust for eternal life in Jesus, the One who died for their sins and rose from the dead. Spiritual liberation came through the true Gospel.
- Then, troublemaking teachers came to Galatia with a "Jesus and ____" message, a message that brought bondage rather than liberty.
 - So, Paul wrote Galatians to contradict the false message. He wrote it to show how the "Jesus and ____" message is wrong, and to show just how wrong it is.³

So, here's Paul's story,

Paul, Gifted with the Gospel, Direct from God (Galatians 1:11-12)

[11] For I would have you know, brethren⁴, 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 I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel message isn't the kind of message anyone could make up. And it's not the kind someone would even if they could. Paul sure didn't make up the Christian Gospel.

So, how did he learn the truth about Jesus?

Well, he didn't read it in a book and it wasn't handed down by oral tradition.

Rather, he got his message direct from the resurrected Jesus through special revelation. This is what happened.

Paul, BC (Galatians 1:13-14)

² Churches were "planted" in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

³ Today, we'll look at the second half of the first chapter of Galatians, throwing in a few details from the historical record found in the book of Acts.

⁴ This is very significant, for we will be tempted at some points to question the salvation of his readers. But Paul assumes throughout that they are Christians.

The Pre-Jesus Paul and Judaism

Paul, well-known to the Galatians

The people in the churches of Galatia knew Paul well. He had spent a lot of time with them. He lived with them. He introduced them to Jesus. They knew him as Paul, the Christian. Paul, the Apostle.

But, they knew that he hadn't always been the man they met when he came to Galatia. They didn't know *that* Paul, but they knew there was a pre-Jesus Paul.

[13] For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it...

So, Paul wants us to think of the man he was BC (Before Christ). And, maybe the Galatians had forgotten that part of Paul's story, and some of them probably didn't know that part of his story. Maybe you don't know that part of the story, either.⁵

If not, you should know that Paul was quite the Jewish patriot.

Paul, super-patriot

Not that there's anything wrong with patriotism, in and of itself. But, zeal for country or zeal for a cause can turn toxic when it is divorced from love. Sadly, Paul's zeal for the Jewish faith had little to do with love.

Paul (his given name was Saul, but since we know him better as Paul, I'll refer to him throughout today as Paul) was an up-and-coming young Pharisee⁶ when we first meet him in Acts, chapter 7.

⁵ Late in the book of Acts (Acts 22), we discover that Saul of Tarsus (Paul's name before he became a Christian) was educated by one of the most revered and widely respected Jewish rabbis of the first century, a man named Gamaliel. Gamaliel handled a difficult situation with great wisdom in Acts 5. Perhaps it was from Gamaliel that he had acquired that deep sense of patriotic zeal for orthodox Judaism that marked Paul as a young man.

⁶ Note the Pharisees in the Gospels, who opposed Jesus as every turn. It is certainly conceivable that Saul could have been among these at some point.

He was, in his own words, **[14]...advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen⁷, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.**

Now, we get our first look at the pre-Jesus Paul.

The Pre-Jesus Paul and Jesus (see Acts 7, 8, 9)

The beginning of his opposition - Stephen's sermon

One day, Paul was in the city of Jerusalem and he heard a young man, Stephen, speak about Jesus.

Stephen spoke about the recently crucified and resurrected Jesus with great passion. His words convicted and offended his audience. They were so offended that they dragged Stephen out of the city, picked up stones, and stoned him to death.

The Bible tells us that they removed their coats before stoning Stephen and that they laid their coats - for safe-keeping - at the feet of a young man named Saul (that's Saul of Tarsus, the future Apostle Paul).

Then we read, **[Acts 8:1] Saul** (i.e. - Paul) **was in hearty agreement with putting [Stephen] to death.**

At that moment, none of us would have tagged Saul / Paul for future service as an apostle of Jesus, because, from that moment forward, Paul was obsessed with a mission to destroy the fledgling church of Jesus.

The church's Enemy #1 (Acts 8:1-3)

Paul says that he **[Galatians 1:13] persecuted the church of God beyond measure.**

⁷ Paul's use of the phrase "**among my countrymen**" implies that he was writing to a Galatian readership that was largely Gentile.

I don't know what you think when you hear the words, "**beyond measure**", but to me, it implies a willingness to use whatever force and violence is necessary to put an end to the church.

The book of Acts fills in some details of what "**beyond measure**" meant to Paul.

Luke tells us that the church (the followers of Jesus) had to leave Jerusalem because of a great persecution that started against them right after Stephen's stoning.

And Paul? He **[Acts 8:3]...began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.**⁸

This was Paul, Before Christ. He violently attacked Christians.⁹ He was famous for his church-destroying ways. Paul was the one to call if you wanted harm done to the people who were following Jesus.¹⁰

So, Paul and his buddies would go traveling from city to city, in Israel and outside of Israel, looking for any disciples of Jesus they could find, bring back to Jerusalem to stand trial before the Jewish Supreme Court (called the Sanhedrin).

This went on for some time, with Paul doing great damage to the cause of Christ. But the hinge chapter of Paul's life - the crux of his life - is recorded in the 9th chapter of the book of Acts.

Paul and his friends were on their way to Damascus, about one hundred and fifty miles north of Jerusalem. They were going to Damascus to arrest Christians.¹¹

Paul, AD (Acts 9; Galatians 1:15-24)

⁸ The efforts at stamping out Christianity were unsuccessful, as verse 4 records, **[4] Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.** Rather than put out the fire, persecution just spread the glowing embers of the Gospel.

⁹ Paul is the one who used the word *persecuted* in Galatians.

¹⁰ Read Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:9-11 for further details on Paul's life before coming to Christ.

¹¹ Damascus was a very ancient city even by the time of the New Testament.

Paul - Meeting the Lord Jesus

Blinded by rage (Acts 9:1)

In the account we read in Acts, Luke tells us that ever since the stoning of Stephen, Paul had been **[Acts 9:1]...breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.**

He and his friends were wreaking havoc wherever they could find Christians.

They even went so far as to ask for letters from the high priest that would give them permission to go to Jewish synagogues in far-away Damascus to bring anyone belonging to “the Way” (referring to Christianity) back to Jerusalem to stand trial and be punished for following Jesus.

And then, this happened.

Blinded by the light. (Acts 9:3-9)

[Acts 9:3] As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; [4] and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”¹² [5] And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, [6] but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” [7] The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

[8] Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. [9] And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Welcomed by a courageous brother (vv. 10-17)

¹² Acts 26:14 adds some more details - *And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”*

Saul is now where he had been aiming to be, in the city of Damascus. He went there to arrest and to apprehend Christians - and has been apprehended by Christ. He considered Christians his bitter enemies - and is about to be befriended by one of the people he had come to abuse.

In the city of Damascus, there was a Christ-follower named Ananias. God told Ananias to find Paul and lay his hands on him so that Saul might regain his sight.

Ananias wasn't so sure.

[Acts 9:13] “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; [14] and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

Or, “Lord, have you thought this one all the way through?”

Yes. The Lord had.

He told Ananias, **[Acts 9:15] “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; [16] for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”**

To his credit, Ananias didn't have to be told again. He left his home, found the house of a man named Judas who lived on Straight Street in Damascus, located Paul within, laid his hands on Paul, and spoke.

[Acts 9:17] “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

The next few words in Paul's story are very important.

[Acts 9:18] And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized (implication - by this time, he had already believed and was saved.); **[19] and he took food and was strengthened.**

During those three food-less, water-less and sight-less days, Paul had nothing better to do than to think, pray, and reflect. So, that is exactly what he did.

Through years and years of intense study, Paul possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible (the “Old Testament” to us).

And, while we can’t get inside the explosions that must have been going off in his head during those three days, I’ve got to assume that the Holy Spirit was guiding Paul through Scripture - Genesis to Malachi - to understand it now through a Jesus filter, a Jesus grid.¹³

Paul applied his biblical knowledge to his new understanding of Jesus and put a lot of two’s and two’s together. He concluded that the Jesus who had spoken to him on the road to Damascus was the Jesus who had been killed in Jerusalem, and was also the One of whom the prophets had spoken.

Saul’s mind was opened to understand that this Jesus, whom he had been persecuting by persecuting His followers, was the Lamb of God who had died to take away the sins of the world.

In the Damascus Road encounter, Jesus got a ball rolling that resulted in Paul’s conversion.

Paul came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. He trusted Jesus for eternal life, and the upshot of the meeting was that Paul’s life was turned upside down, inside out, and about face.

He changed in a flash from being the first century’s chief persecutor of Christianity to the prime spokesman for the faith.

And he didn’t waste a moment of his newfound life in Christ.

Paul - Serving the Lord Jesus

¹³ He now would have seen Isaiah 53, with its focus on a “Suffering Servant”, as a Messianic text fulfilled in the passion and death of Jesus. Many other Old Testament passages would have come to have new significance as he viewed them through the lens of Jesus.

An instant witness for Jesus.

As soon as he regained his sight, the newly baptized Paul **[Acts 9:20] began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”**

The whole thing is a wonder.

It had been to the synagogues that he had been sent by the High Priest - and it was to the synagogues that he went. Only now, he is not arresting Christians - he has joined them in preaching Christ to the Jews who don’t yet believe.

[Acts 9:21] All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” [22] But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

He is an instant evangelist, witness, missionary. That’s Paul, post-conversion.

That’s the story we have in Acts. We find out what happened next in, of all places, the first chapter of Galatians.

Off to Arabia. (Galatians 1; 2 Corinthians 11)

[Galatians 1:15] But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased [16] to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, [17] nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; ¹⁴ but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.

¹⁴ The word Paul used in verse 16 for “consult” was a Greek word used of consulting with mediums and soothsayers. By this usage he seems to be dismissing the need for him to have “checked in” with the Jerusalem apostles to see if he was correct in His Gospel. He knew he was right because Jesus had revealed it to him.

So, Paul stayed in Damascus for a short while (I would guess a few weeks at most), spreading the Gospel. But he soon went away to an area he calls “Arabia”.

In the ancient world, that term referred to the vast area of desert (The Hebrew word “arabah” means *desert*) to the east of Palestine, south to the Arabian Peninsula and reaching north even beyond Damascus.

So, Paul is not saying that he went to Yemen or to what we think of as Saudi Arabia. He went to the desert region around Damascus. He went there to nurture his new-found faith in Jesus.

Some believe that when Paul was in the deserts, Christ appeared to him, so that he, like the other apostles, had the benefit of enjoying personal fellowship with Jesus.

That may be true. That may be what he was speaking of when he wrote about “**visions and revelations**” in 2 Corinthians 12.

Whether that is exactly what happened or not, we really don’t know. But we do know that when he returned from the desert (after spending as much as a couple of years there) to Damascus, he returned as an even more powerful witness for Jesus than he had been before.¹⁵

By this time, the Christians in Damascus - those Paul had gone to arrest three years earlier - were thoroughly convinced of the genuineness of Paul’s faith and had become quite loyal to him.

But the governor (ethnarch) of the Arabians in Damascus, acting on behalf of King Aretas, tried to arrest Paul.¹⁶

And, for the ultimate in irony, Paul was rescued by the Christians (!), who provided for his escape by lowering him from the city’s wall in a basket under cover of night.¹⁷

¹⁵ Damascus was actually on the border of the northern Arabian desert.

¹⁶ I assume that this was because he was tired of Paul talking about Jesus all the time.

¹⁷ See Acts 9:23-25; 2 Corinthians 11:32-33.

Then, safe and sound, outside of Damascus, Paul left, traveling south to Jerusalem.

Out of the frying pan; into the fire

[Galatians 1:18] Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. [19] But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord’s brother. [20] (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)¹⁸

This was the first time Paul had been to Jerusalem since he had become a Christian. It was a short stay (15 days), just long enough to get to know a couple of the early church’s main leaders a bit.

From there he made his way back to his hometown of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia.¹⁹ And, if we understand the chronology right, Paul spent a few years there in Tarsus, living quietly, serving the Lord, and growing as a Christian.

Paul’s story, as he has told it to this point, comes to a conclusion at the end of Galatians 1.

Paul - Glorifying the Lord Jesus (Galatians 1:22-24)

[Galatians 1:22] And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; [23] but only, they kept hearing, “He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.” [24] And they were glorifying God because of me.²⁰

¹⁸ Well, the Christians in Jerusalem didn’t know Saul - except by reputation as the one who had been making a living arresting and persecuting Christians. The story of his welcome in Jerusalem and the part played in that by Barnabas (the Son of Encouragement) is found in Acts 9.

¹⁹ He stayed here, we believe, for some years, until Barnabas sent for him to join him in team-ministry in Antioch.

²⁰ Jesus said, ***[Matthew 5:16] “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they will see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.”*** In a totally un-self-conscious way, Paul fulfilled this charge from Jesus, as the believers in Syria and Cilicia didn’t praise or marvel at Paul, but at God.

Conclusion:

What a story! But, while Paul's story is a great story, it isn't the greatest story. The greatest story ever, of course, is the story of Jesus.

Nothing compares to the story of his towering life of courage and service, love and sacrifice. His is the one story everybody in the world needs to hear, because to hear and to believe His story is to know God.

The greatest privilege for anyone who knows Jesus' story is to tell that story to someone who doesn't know or believe it. We are called to be God's story-tellers.

And, while Jesus' story is the greatest story, the second greatest story is the story of anyone whose life has been touched by Jesus.

Today, we've listened as Paul has told some of his second-greatest-story. His story validates the truth and the power of Jesus because only a true and powerful Jesus could have produced the changes that we've seen in Paul.

Think about Paul's story and what we've heard.

His story includes details of sin and failures, God's work of convincing him of the truth of the Gospel, the changes that took place in his life as he walked by faith, and the impact on those around him.

It's a great story, and every time I rehearse Paul's story, I join with the first-century people who saw the life-changing effects of the true Gospel and glorify God for what He did in Paul's life.

That's the power of "the story strategy."

Over the past several months, the Care Group that Kathy and I are a part of has been telling stories - and it's been delightful.

At Jeff's suggestion, each person is getting a chance to share his or her "spiritual life story." Some have taken a few minutes and others have taken a few minutes longer.

Not one of the stories have ended. All of us are works in progress, glorious messes. And all the stories have been riveting and impactful. Just like Paul's story...

- ...every story has included admissions of sin and failure.
- ...all the stories have told about how God uniquely worked to open eyes to the truth of the Gospel.
- ...there have been stories of the changes God has brought about with respect to attitudes, perspectives, priorities, and habits.
- ...every story, without exception, has brought praise to the Lord for His saving and life-changing ways.

I love that we are a church that champions taking next steps with Jesus. And the idea of each one of us helping others take next steps with Jesus motivates me every single day.

I firmly believe that one of the most compelling ways to help those around us take those next steps is by becoming story-tellers. What if we became known as the church that told stories?

You tell your friends the greatest story ever, the story of Jesus.

You tell the story of His amazing life, His sacrificial love, His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

You tell the story of how you learned about Jesus, grew to know more about Jesus, came to faith in Jesus.

You tell your friends the story of what it means to you to be God's daughter or son, what it means that you know Almighty God as Father, to not fear Him, but to love Him who loves you best.

And then, you tell them your second-greatest-story about the changes Jesus is making in your life.

You never paint an overly rosy picture. You're always being real about being a mess, and you never tell your story with an arm twist or to manipulate. But you tell your God story because it's the best part of your story.

It's the story of forgiveness, of changes to attitudes and habits, of growth into love and service.

You have a story to tell and you're the only one who can tell it.

Your next-step story is a priceless tale of redemption God will use to help your friends take their next steps with Jesus.

Tell your story!