

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Growing a Culture of Grace**

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

### **Storying As We Go**

(Galatians 1:10-24; Acts 7:58--8:3; 9:1-31)

Study #2

#### **Introduction: Tell me a story...**

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

The big-picture reason he wrote was to refute a false message about Jesus and the Gospel that some troublemakers were teaching. He re-affirmed the true message of Christianity.

So, Galatians could have been a very short letter. All Paul had to do was re-state the Gospel and then re-affirm the central themes of life in Christ.

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

Paul could have written that short note. But he didn't. He wrote a six chapter long, very involved treatise, filled with theological reasoning, biblical metaphor, logical argument, scolding and sharp rebuke. And one more thing...

Paul included that "one more thing" because he was out to do more than urge his readers to affirm a few truths about life and God.

His aim was to write in such a way that the churches of Galatia would grow a grace culture, a *tov-shalom* (= good-wholesome) culture<sup>1</sup> that would shine like a beacon to the outside culture.

Paul wrote to the Galatian churches to create a sea-change in the culture of those churches. So, of course, he told his story.

God has planted in our hearts a love for story.

Whether you're telling a child a *"Once upon a time..."* story, or regaling your friends with some, *"So there I was..."* story, story-telling draws the listener in.

I love to get lost in a great novel or in the biography of someone I admire. I love a film that tells a good story well.

Stories inspire, warn, and instruct us. Stories connect us.

Jesus was the Master of story. He told great stories about farmers, merchants, fathers and sons, weddings, pearls, salt, and leaven (parables) to illustrate truths about life and God.

The whole Bible is filled with story. In the Bible we read of the exploits and the failures of people just like us. The Bible shows us how to lead lives that honor God by telling stories.

Story-telling is a big part of culture-making. That's true for families and for nations.

And, as I'm going to argue today, both telling and listening to each other's life-with-Jesus stories is key to growing a *tov-shalom* culture here at church.

Paul wanted to write a letter so winsome that lots and lots of people who didn't know Jesus would want to know Him. So, of course, he told his own life-with-Jesus story.

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<sup>1</sup> Last Sunday, I defined a *tov-shalom* church culture as one in which things that ought to happen can happen, and where nothing that shouldn't happen can happen.

Here, at the beginning of Galatians, Paul gives us the story we'll hear today.

The *tov-shalom* culture marker that surfaced last Sunday from the first few verses of Galatians was simple: Be loyal to Jesus' Gospel.

This morning we're going to see another one: Tell personal stories about the life-changing power of Jesus.

*Paul received the Gospel via revelation ...*

We listen as Paul reminds his readers of what they already knew about Paul and the Gospel of Jesus: **[12a] For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it...**

The Gospel message isn't the kind of message anyone could make up. And it really isn't the kind of message someone would make up even make up if they could. Paul sure didn't make up the Christian Gospel. So, how did Paul learn about Jesus and His message?

**[12b]...I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.**

So, now it's story-time. This is how it happened.

### **Paul, Before Christ (Galatians 1:13-14)**

#### **The Pre-Jesus Paul, and His Jewishness (Galatians 1:13-14)**

*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 was the one who introduced them to Jesus. They knew him as Paul, the Christian. Paul, the apostle.

But they knew that he had a past and that he hadn't always been the man they met when he came to Galatia.

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

Paul wants the Galatians - and us! - to know about the man he was prior to becoming a Christian. Some of them might have forgotten that part of Paul's story. Maybe you don't know that part of his story.<sup>2</sup>

If not, you should know that Paul was a zealous Jewish patriot.

*Paul, super-patriot*

Not that there's anything wrong with patriotism. But zeal for and love of country or for any cause can turn toxic when it becomes more important than zeal for and love for God.

Sadly, that had happened with Paul's zealous Jewish faith.

Paul (I'll refer to him as Paul, not Saul, today) was an up-and-coming young Pharisee<sup>3</sup> when we first meet him in Acts, chapter 7.

He was, in his own words, **[14]...advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen<sup>4</sup>, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.**

See, there's nothing there about God. Only zeal for "**Judaism**" and for "**ancestral traditions.**"

We get our first look at the pre-Jesus Paul as a young man named Stephen was just wrapping up a fiery sermon in Jerusalem. **The Pre-Jesus Paul, and Jesus (see Acts 7:58--8:3)**

*The beginning of his opposition - Stephen's sermon*

Jesus had only recently been crucified and resurrected right there in Jerusalem. And Stephen spoke about Jesus with great passion.

<sup>2</sup> In Acts 22, we learn that Saul of Tarsus (Paul's Roman name) was educated by a highly respected first century rabbi, Gamaliel. He dealt with a difficult situation with wisdom. (Acts 5) Perhaps it was from Gamaliel that Paul had acquired that deep sense of patriotic zeal for orthodox Judaism that marked him as a young man.

<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees in the Gospels opposed Jesus as every turn. It is certainly conceivable that Saul could have been among these at some point.

<sup>4</sup> Paul's use of the phrase "**among my countrymen**" implies that he was writing to a Galatian readership that was largely Gentile.

Stephen's words hit their mark. His message both convicted and offended his audience.

They were so offended that they dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death.

The Bible tells us that they removed their coats before stoning Stephen and stored their coats at Paul's (Saul's) feet.

Then we read, **[Acts 8:1]...Saul approved of putting Stephen to death.**

At that moment, none of us would have tagged Saul / Paul for future service as Jesus' apostle. From that moment, Paul was obsessed with destroying the whole Jesus movement.

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

Paul just told us that he **[Galatians 1:13] used to persecute the church of God beyond measure.**

What comes to your mind when you hear the words, "**beyond measure**"? Maybe, "*Whatever it takes to put an end to the church!*"?

Well, the book of Acts fills in some details of what "**beyond measure**" meant to Paul.<sup>5</sup>

He **[Acts 8:3]...began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and he would drag away men and women, and put them in prison.**<sup>6</sup>

That's Paul, before Christ. He violently attacked Christians.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Luke tells us that the followers of Jesus had to leave Jerusalem because of a great persecution that started against them right after Stephen's stoning.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

Paul and others who had this same mindset would go traveling from city to city looking for disciples of Jesus. Then, they would bring these disciples to Jerusalem to stand trial before the Jewish Supreme Court (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 Acts chapter 9.

Paul and some friends were on their way to Damascus, an ancient city located about one hundred and fifty miles north of Jerusalem.

And, yes, they were going to Damascus to arrest Christians.<sup>9</sup>

### **Paul, the Christian (Acts 9; Galatians 1:15-24)**

#### **Paul - Meeting the Lord Jesus**

*Blinded by rage (Acts 9:1); then by the light (Acts 9:3-9)*

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 was wreaking havoc wherever he could find Christians.

On this trip, he had asked for letters from the high priest that would give him permission to go to Jewish synagogues in far-away Damascus.

These letters allowed him to bring anyone belonging to THE WAY (referring to Christianity) back to Jerusalem to stand trial and be punished for following Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul is the one who used the word *persecuted* in Galatians.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Damascus was a very ancient city even by the time of the New Testament.

And then, this happened.

***[Acts 9:3] Now 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?"<sup>10</sup> [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 to 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)*

Paul had been approaching the city where he was aiming to be, Damascus. He went there to apprehend Christians - and was apprehended by Christ.

He considered Christians his bitter enemies - and he is about to be "friended" by one of the people he had come to abuse.

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

Ananias wasn't so sure about the Lord's plan.

***[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 arrest all who call on Your name."***

Which, being translated, was, "Lord, have you thought this one all the way through?"

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<sup>10</sup> 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."*

Sure enough. The Lord had.

The Lord 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 in behalf of My name."***

To his credit, Ananias didn't have to be told again.

He left his home, found the house where Paul was, located Paul within, laid his hands on Paul (gently, I'm sure), 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."***

We picture Paul - blinded, hungry, thirsty - processing what this unseen man, Ananias, was saying.

After Ananias finished speaking, ***[Acts 9:18] And immediately something like fish scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized*** (meaning that he now believed and was saved); ***[19] and he took food and was strengthened.***

During those three days of no food, water, or sight, Paul had lots of time to think, pray, and reflect. So, that is exactly what he did.

Over the course of a lifetime of intense study, Paul possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible (the "Old Testament" to us).

And, while we can't get inside Paul's head to see and to hear the explosions that must have been going off during those three days, I've got to assume that the Holy Spirit was guiding Paul through Scripture.

During the three days of darkness, Paul was enlightened. At the end of those three days, he understood all of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings through a Jesus filter, a Jesus grid.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> He would have seen Isaiah 53, with its focus on a "Suffering Servant", as a Messianic text fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus. Other Old Testament texts would have had new significance as Paul viewed them through the lens of Jesus.

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 and resurrected in Jerusalem.

This Jesus was also the One of whom the prophets had spoken. And this Jesus was the One of whom Stephen spoke, the man whose stoning Paul had applauded.

Paul'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 believed Jesus was the Messiah. He trusted Jesus for eternal life, and Paul's present life was forever turned upside down, inside out, and about face.

Just like that, he changed from being the first century church's chief persecutor to being the prime spokesman for the faith.

He didn't waste a moment of his newfound life in Christ. Here are his first "next steps" in serving Jesus.

### **Paul - Serving the Lord 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 the High Priest had sent him to arrest Christians. It was to the synagogues that he now went, preaching Jesus!

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

He became an instant evangelist, witness, and missionary. That's Paul, post-conversion.

That's the story we have in Acts. We find out what happened next back in the first chapter of Galatians.

*Off to Arabia. (Galatians 1; 2 Corinthians 12)*

***[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, so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles (This is what we just read in Acts 9:1-19), I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, [17] nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.***

Paul remained in Damascus for a short while (a few weeks?), serving Jesus and spreading the Gospel. But he soon went away from Damascus to a region he calls *Arabia*.

In the ancient world, that term - *arabah* - referred to the vast area of desert<sup>12</sup> to the east of Palestine.

Paul is not saying that he went to Yemen or to what we know as Saudi Arabia. He went to the deserted, wilderness area around Damascus. And he went there to learn more about 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.

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<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew word "*arabah*" (from which we get our word Arabia) means *desert*.

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

We really don’t know all that went on in the desert.

We do know that when he returned to Damascus (spending as much as two years in the desert), he returned as an even more powerful witness for Jesus than he had been before.<sup>13</sup>

By this time, the Christians in Damascus were thoroughly convinced of the genuineness of Paul’s faith. They had become loyal to Paul. Even protective of him.

So, when the officials of the Arabians in Damascus tried to arrest Paul, to “*do away with him*” (v. 23), and to “*put him to death.*” (v. 24), His fellow Christians came to his aid.

For the ultimate irony, we read that 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.<sup>14</sup>

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

*Out of the frying pan...*

***[Galatians 1:18] Then three years later*** (i.e., three years after his conversion) ***I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas*** (Simon Peter), ***and stayed with him for fifteen days. [19] But I did not see another one 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.)***<sup>15</sup>

This visit marked the first time Paul had been to Jerusalem since becoming a Christian.

It was only a stay of a couple of weeks, just long enough to get to know some of the early church’s leaders a bit.

(It was during this visit that Barnabas served as his sponsor, confirming Paul’s story about the Damascus road experience, affirming Paul’s conversion, and telling everyone about how Paul had been a bold spokesman for the Lord in Damascus. See Acts 9:26-28.)

And there in Jerusalem, just like in Damascus, the people Paul was trying to persuade to believe in Jesus “*were attempting to put him to death.*” (Acts 9:29).

So, the believers in Jerusalem escorted him to the city of Caesarea and sent him on to Tarsus, his hometown, for his own safety. (Acts 9:30; Galatians 1:21)<sup>16</sup>

Paul’s story, as he told it to the Galatians, concludes with this:

#### **Paul - Bringing Glory to the Lord Jesus (Galatians 1:22-24)**

***[Galatians 1:22] And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which are in Christ; [23] but they only kept hearing, “The man who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.” [24] And they were glorifying God because of me.***<sup>17</sup>

#### **Conclusion:**

We’re thinking today about story, and the story of Paul is a great story. But it isn’t the greatest story. The greatest story ever is the story of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> Damascus was actually on the border of the northern Arabian desert.

<sup>14</sup> See Acts 9:23-25; 2 Corinthians 11:32-33.

<sup>15</sup> The Christians in Jerusalem didn’t know Saul, except as the man who had made a living arresting and persecuting Christians. The story of his welcome in Jerusalem and the part played in that by Barnabas is found in Acts 9.

<sup>16</sup> Somewhat comically, Luke records that after Paul left Jerusalem, ***[Acts 9:31] So the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed peace...***

<sup>17</sup> 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.

Nothing compares to what we know about Jesus' courage, love, and sacrifice, His life, death and resurrection.

Jesus' story is the one story everyone needs to hear, because to hear and to believe His story is to know God. It's to have eternal LIFE!

For us, who know Jesus, our greatest privilege is to tell Jesus' story to someone who doesn't yet know or believe. God calls us to be His story-tellers.

Jesus' story is the greatest story. But coming in second place is our own life-with-Jesus story.

Paul's second greatest story, which we have heard today, includes the details of his sin and failure. It includes the event that convinced him of who Jesus was.

His story validates the power of Jesus, because only a powerful Jesus could have produced the changes that took place in Paul.

It's a great story, and every time I hear Paul's story, I join with the people who glorified God for what He did in Paul's life.

But, as I have reflected on our passage from the Bible for today, I noticed something.

I noticed that even though ink and papyrus were expensive and sending a letter was hard, Paul thought that telling his story was so important that he included it in this very important letter.

Remember, Paul wrote to create a sea-change of grace in the culture of the Galatian churches. He included his story to contribute to that culture shift.

So, I'm going to wrap up by adding another mark to our list of the marks of a *tov-shalom* church. The mark we highlighted last Sunday was loyalty to Jesus' Gospel.

Based on what we've seen today, another mark of a *tov-shalom* church is that we tell our life-with-Jesus stories, and we listen to the stories others tell us.

### *Story-telling*

You give a priceless gift when you tell your friend your story.

When telling your story, you are inviting him or her into your world. Story-telling builds a connection between you and your friend.

You could tell your friend...

- ...the story of your journey to Jesus.<sup>18</sup>
- ...about the changes Jesus has made and is making in you.
- ...about the times you have forgiven someone.
- ...about the times you have needed forgiveness.

When you tell your story, there is no need to paint an overly rosy picture. Paul told the Galatians that he killed Christians. You can tell your story, warts and all.

As you tell your story you should admit to being a work in progress. You don't have to pretend that you've got this life-with-Jesus thing all figured out. If you are in a mess, you can tell your friend that.

You will inspire and encourage your friend when you honestly tell him or her about the changes Jesus is making in your life.

Told as a God-sighting, your story will bring glory to God.

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

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

I urge you to come to church on Sunday on the lookout for connection by way of story-telling.

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<sup>18</sup> When I've been in Kenya, Africa, I have been struck by how central it is to relationship building to tell how each one tells how he or she came to faith in Jesus.

Pray before going to your ABF or Care Group that God will open a door for you to share a part of your life-with-Jesus story.

And, on the flip side, listen. Pay attention to the stories others have to tell you.

### *Story-listening*

Do you remember the response of the churches to Paul's story? ***[Galatians 1:24] And they were glorifying God because of me.***

The body of Christ, to which the pre-conversion Paul had done so much harm, listened and watched and paid attention to what God was doing in and through Paul - and they rejoiced!

They didn't fixate on his past sins, didn't hold a grudge against Paul for his former persecuting ways, didn't keep Paul in the box of who he had been. They paid attention to the man Jesus was making.

When you listen to someone's story, whether they are currently believing in Jesus or not, listen for the work that God might want to do in them.

Listen prayerfully and carefully as they tell their story. Don't focus on how far they still have to go. Focus on the steps they have taken, or the next step they might take.

Celebrate every step. Encourage them to take their next step toward Jesus, or with Jesus.

Listening well unlocks the door to connection.

Northwest's growth of a culture of grace will hasten as we tell and listen to each other's life-with-Jesus stories.

So, today, I urge everyone here to pursue a life of storying.

Go out of your way to listen well to the stories of others. Be open to honestly telling your story to others.

And as we become known as the church that tells the story of Jesus AND the church that tells our own life-with-Jesus stories, may it be said of us as it was said of the Apostle Paul, *"They were glorifying God because of [us]."*