

The Transforming Power of Faith

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Galatians 1:11-24

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I Googled an old seminary friend last week. I haven't seen him in over thirty years. We had several doctoral seminars together, and some of us referred to him as the sliver tongued orator. He was indeed a gifted preacher. When we graduated, my friend and I both faced a dilemma. Would we spend our careers in the Southern Baptist Convention, a denomination where we feared we would be increasingly marginalized? Or would we move to a denomination where we felt we would be more compatible? I decided to stay with the Baptists and am very grateful to have found a church like Weatherly, but my friend decided that the United Methodist Church was a better fit for him.

I'll never forget the day he shared his story to one of our classes. We were in Atlanta. There were maybe ten or twelve students in this seminar, and we were riveted as he spoke. He grew up on a large farm in south Alabama. His father, he said, was a hard man and ran the farm and all its workers with an iron fist. Most of the workers were African Americans, whom his father despised. One day when my friend was just a boy, his father had to discipline an African American worker who had violated some rule of the farm. The father had other workers bring in the violator and tie him up. He then ordered one of the workers to take off one of the shoes of the offending farm worker. With his young son watching, the father used a pair of farming shears to cut off one of the worker's toes. That, he believed, would teach him and all the other workers a lesson. Of course, it taught his young son a powerful lesson too.

My seminary class sat spell bound as he ended his story. This is what he said:

Everything in my life prepared me to be just like my father. I too should have been a hard man. I too should have hated blacks. There's only one reason I didn't turn out just like my father. I met Jesus. I studied the teachings of Jesus. I wrestled with them. I struggled. And I finally surrendered.

He ended by saying, “I was saved by Jesus.”

Some of us can relate to his story. We too grew up in a culture that hated someone, a culture of bigotry, abuse, and maybe even violence. If we had been shaped only by our immediate culture, if there had been no other influences shaping us, how different we might be today! Many of us can say, along with my friend, that we too in the deepest and most profound way have been saved by Jesus.

Do you know what they used to call the apostle Paul? They called him “the one who formerly persecuted us.” That’s who he was to the early church, the one who persecuted them and tried to destroy them. In his early years, he was driven by a passion to eradicate the church. But something happened to him. He met a great power, and it transformed into a new person. He met the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

Here’s his story. Paul’s name was originally Saul, and at a young age he had risen through the ranks to become a Pharisee, a highly respected position in their day. He rose to such a prominent position so quickly because he was extraordinarily *zealous*, he says in our text from Galatians. The word zealot was applied to an extreme group of Pharisees who were bitterly antagonistic toward the Roman Empire. They “nursed the fires of revolt,” one writer says, which finally led to the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. (W.E. Vines, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 1261)

Saul nursed this zealous bitterness toward the followers of Jesus, breathing threats and murder against them, Luke says in the book of Acts. One day young, zealous Saul requested permission to go to the city of Damascus in order to arrest and bind both men and women who belonged to the Way, an early reference to the followers of Jesus.

As he and his companions approached Damascus, the most amazing thing occurred. A light from heaven flashed around Saul. He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?”

Pause a moment. Who was Saul persecuting? According to the book of Acts, Saul persecuted the *followers* of Jesus. So who was this voice asking, “Why do you persecute *me*?” We will find out in a moment that it

was Jesus, an indication that when someone persecutes the followers of Jesus they persecute Jesus.

Saul responded to the voice, “Who are you, Lord?” That could probably be translated as “sir” because Saul did not know yet to whom the voice belonged. “Who are you, Sir?”

The voice told Saul, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Jesus then instructed Saul to go into the city of Damascus, and there he would be told what to do. When Saul stood, he was blind. The zealot, the one who rose quickly to prominence by persecuting the followers of Jesus, was led by the hand, like a little child.

In Damascus, a brave disciple named Ananias visited Saul. He laid his hands upon him and called him Brother Saul. The text says that immediately something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. Saul the zealot, who was breathing threats and murder against the followers of Jesus, became Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ, who took the gospel to the Gentiles.

What a powerful story! So let me ask, what happened to Saul that so reoriented his life? What happened to him that day on the road to Damascus that transformed him from someone who was trying to destroy the church to someone who was preaching the message of the church? It was this: Saul met Jesus and was transformed into Paul by the power of faith.

In our text from Galatians, Paul was bearing witness to this power of the gospel that had transformed him. He wrote,

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.

Of course, that was all true. He wrote about rising up through the ranks quickly. That was true. Then, he notes, “God...was pleased to reveal his son to me...” That was true too, and that’s what made the difference for him. Like my friend from seminary, Saul met Jesus. He wrestled. He struggled. He surrendered. He went from being “the one who formerly was persecuting” the followers of Jesus to “proclaiming the faith he once tried to

destroy.” In the deepest and most profound way, Saul was saved by Jesus. It takes a great power to accomplish that. That, I tell you, is the transforming power of faith.

Let me read you a brief comment from a New Testament theologian named Charles Cousar. He’s a professor of New Testament at Columbia Seminary over in Decatur, Georgia. He notes that Paul’s writing here is autobiographical. Paul was not laying out a theological treatise, like the book of Romans. He was not helping the church resolve a problem, like I John. He was writing about his own experience. We could say that he was sharing his story. This is what Cousar writes:

Paul’s own life manifests the power of the gospel. At the heart of his apostleship lies the action of the message which transforms him from the zealous Pharisee who persecutes the church to the preacher to the Gentiles. He takes no credit for the change; his mention of it indicates no egotistical mania. It is the work of God’s grace. (Cousar, Interpretation, “Galatians,” p. 27)

We could do the same thing today. We could go around this room and share our stories, and we would hear story after story of the transforming power of faith. Everything in our life prepared us to be something. And there’s only one reason we turned out differently. We met Jesus. We studied his teachings, wrestled, struggled, and finally surrendered. And now we can bear witness that we too, in the deepest and most profound way, have been saved by Jesus. We take no credit. It has been the work of God’s grace. We say only, “Thanks be to God!”

Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the testimony of our brother, Paul. And we thank you for the power of the gospel that has touched and transformed us. Amen.