

Galatians 1:11-24

¹¹But I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. ¹²For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation from Jesus Christ.

¹³Certainly you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God to an extraordinary degree and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my own people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵However, God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son in me, so that I would preach him among the Gentiles. At that time, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, ¹⁷and I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. Instead I went away into Arabia, and then I returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸Next, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to meet Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹But I saw none of the other apostles, except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰(Now about the things I am writing to you—look, I assure you in the presence of God that I am not lying.) ²¹Then I went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²²I was still personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³They heard only: "The one who was once persecuting us is now preaching the faith that he once tried to destroy." ²⁴And they were praising God for what happened to me.

Necessary Changes Revealed

I.

Change is inevitable, isn't it? *You* have changed—you have not stayed the same. Even today there have already been changes. I would assume you didn't just roll out of bed and come to church, you changed clothing, you got ready to leave the house.

However long your life has been, you can chronicle all kinds of changes. You have grown. You have gained new skills. As people get older, sometimes they *lose* certain skills and abilities. These are all changes, are they not?

"The more things change, the more they stay the same." So wrote Alphonse Karr in 1849. There had just been a revolution in France—again. A man named Napoleon had taken control—again. Napoleon III was promising to free French peasants, just as his uncle Napoleon Bonaparte had done a half-century or so earlier. It was a situation dripping with irony. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Thousands of years earlier, Solomon said the same thing. "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NIV84).

On the other hand, change can be profound.

The Apostle Paul in this lesson lays bare his life's history to speak about important changes—necessary changes.

"Certainly you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God to an extraordinary degree and tried to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13, EHV). Paul had once been known as Saul. Saul persecuted the church of Jesus Christ.

"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my own people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:14, EHV). Saul was just doing the right thing, as he saw it. There was an upstart group of people following this Rabbi named Jesus. The teachings of this group were not in line with the Judaism he had grown up with. In fact, Jewish people for hundreds and hundreds of years

had believed basically the same as Saul did. These new teachings threatened what had been well-established for centuries. Eliminating a threat to godliness was just the right thing to do.

II.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.” “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NIV84).

Long before Saul the Persecutor, people were born with a sinful nature. No matter how much progress has been made in the world, sin still exists—the sinful nature still reigns supreme in society. One of those things that has never changed is the fact that every human being is still born sinful. No matter what kind of gadgets we have developed, no matter how advanced medicine has become, when a human being is born, he or she is born with a sinful human nature—he or she is born an enemy of God.

Saul the Persecutor was born into a culture of people who tried desperately to follow the Law of God—the Old Testament Law of Moses. Tradition required certain dietary restrictions, work restrictions, and all kinds of minute details as they followed what God had set forth as part of the way they were to worship him.

Raised in such a culture, Saul excelled. “I used to persecute the church of God to an extraordinary degree and tried to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13, EHV). He didn’t just despise the small group calling themselves Christians and following the Rabbi, Jesus, he actively pursued them. He tried to destroy the threat to the Law of God as he saw it.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. In some parts of the world Christians are brutalized and killed for their faith. In our part of the world, Christians are mocked and ridiculed for their faith—marginalized as kooks who really are not to be taken seriously.

Maybe you remember a time when you were like Saul the Persecutor. Perhaps you joined in with a venomous hatred for Christians. Maybe you don’t think of yourself as quite as extreme as Saul. You didn’t exude venomous hatred—just silence. You were afraid to stick up for Christians, or for Christ. Fearful of being branded with whatever phobic term was being applied to Christians at the time, you let the words and actions of others stand as you shrunk into the background, as if with silent approval.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

III.

But change is necessary.

The change was dramatic. The change was profound. Saul was on the road to Damascus, ready to continue his life’s work of persecuting the Christian Church. “Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” (Acts 9:3-4, EHV). He could not see for three days, until Ananias was sent to him to restore his sight. And then, “He got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ And after taking some food, he regained his strength” (Acts 9:18-19, EHV).

All the details about these events, Paul eliminates in his Letter to the Galatians, but his readers knew the story. “However, God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son in me, so that I would preach him among the Gentiles” (Galatians 1:15-16, EHV). Saul the Persecutor had a name change and became Paul the Apostle—the very Paul who was writing this letter to them.

Perhaps Paul’s change seems unusual, but the fact is that conversion is something that happened *to* Paul, not something he chose. If it was all left to him and his human nature,

he would have gone on persecuting the Lord Jesus Christ. He really could do nothing else on his own. From a human perspective, persecution of Christians who threatened his Judaism seemed to make logical sense.

Humanly speaking, every sinner can and would find an excuse to go on in the way human nature leads us. Humanly speaking, it is impossible for us to chose any other way. That's why the first words he speaks in our text are these: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. ¹²For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12, EHV).

What the Lord Jesus did was done for you. Jesus hung on the cross to pay for your sins. Even before that, he lived perfectly in your place—keeping the Law of God in a way no human being has ever been able to do. At his resurrection, he was able to show you definitively that when he said on the cross "It is finished!" it really was. In fact, that phrase "It is finished" in Greek was the way a bill was marked paid in full. The bill for your sins before the Heavenly Father has been paid in full by Jesus.

This gospel is not of human origin. It doesn't make sense from a human perspective. It could, and did, only come from God.

While *your* conversion was probably not as dramatic a tale as Paul on the road to Damascus, the more things change, the more they stay the same. It might not *seem* as dramatic, but *every* conversion of a sinner to a follower of Christ is dramatic. It is *God* working in you that makes you a believer. Jesus said: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16, EHV). Just as it was for Paul, so it is for you. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

IV.

It is not the individual Christian who is so praiseworthy after the necessary changes made in us by the Holy Spirit. Paul says: "I was still personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³They heard only: 'The one who was once persecuting us is now preaching the faith that he once tried to destroy.' ²⁴And they were praising God for what happened to me" (Galatians 1:22-24, EHV). What happened *to* Paul was evident *in* Paul in his life after Jesus appeared to him. His life reflected God's glory.

When people see *you* and your life as a Christian, they won't *really* be noticing *you*, but a reflection of Christ. God will work in you and through you, just as he worked in and through the Apostle Paul.

You may not be the greatest missionary of all time, but don't sell yourself short. Teaching Bible stories to your children is just as important. Bringing your children to church, even when they are distracting *you* from worship, teaches them how important you find it to be at the feet of Jesus, hearing his Word. Living your Christian faith in such a way that your co-workers realize that there is something different about you preserves your Christian dignity, and gives you a reputation that others will seek out in their times of crisis. You will be given opportunities to share the reason for the sure hope you have in Christ Jesus. You have undergone the necessary change—from sinner to saint in God's eyes.

Your changes have been far more profound than just to grow in the wisdom and knowledge of the world. Your changes have been more profound than just growing another year older. The change the Lord God has worked in you has eternal consequences. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Your Savior God will preserve you in the changes *he* has made in you until the time he brings you to your eternal home. May God continue to bless that change. Amen.