

God's Amazing Grace Gal 1:10-24

Tim Anderson 9/6/2019

I was at an event this week,

and someone said to me,

"How are you?"

"Good." I said.

She said,

"You mean well."

"No. Good." I said.

"Tim, there is no one good except God alone."

She thought she had me there.

"I've been made good by the blood of Jesus."

It's true, isn't it?

Who cares whether I've succumbed to the winter coughs and colds?

I've been made good by the blood of Jesus.

How are you, Tim?

I'm good!

Have you ever noticed how many bad people God has used mightily?

The guy who wrote 'Amazing Grace', John Newton.

Wonderful Christian leader.

Didn't just write beautiful hymns.

He mentored some of the finest Christian leaders in England

who followed him in the next generation.

But he was a slave trader.

He was a very bad man before Jesus made him good.

You might have heard of Prison Fellowship.

We had a man from Prison Fellowship come and talk

to a men's breakfast a couple of months back.

Prison Fellowship does wonderful ministry reaching out to prisoners

with the good news that can transform their lives.

It was started by a man named Charles Colson.

He was a bad man,

did time in jail for obstructing justice in the Watergate scandal.

But God took him.
And used him to be a blessing to millions of others.
I met a guy called Peter Schultz when I was in Fiji earlier in the year.
He's running a remarkable ministry that is transforming people,
mostly young men, in Fiji's prisons.
The thing that motivated him
was spending 2 years in prison in Australia.
He was a financial planner and he ripped off his clients.
He was a bad man that Jesus made good by giving his life at Calvary.
I'm doing my best in Christian ministry.
I can tell you right now,
I won't ever make the kind of difference for the gospel
that Peter Schultz is making.
God uses bad people powerfully.
Why does he do that?
Because when God uses bad people,
it makes it obvious that it's God at work.

Well there's an outstanding example of all that.
It's the apostle Paul.
Paul was a bad man.
But he was used mightily by God.
So let's see what he has to tell us about that.
Here's what he tells the Galatians about his past.
1:13 "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism,
how intensely I tried to persecute the church of God
and tried to destroy it."
He's not exaggerating.
He was there holding the cloaks
of those who stoned the first martyr, Stephen.
He wanted to wipe out the church.
Why? Because he believed it was offensive to God.
He thought it was twisting and perverting the truth about God.
But he was wrong.
God had sent his Son to become a man.

Jesus was God in the flesh.
And Paul had just got the wrong idea about that.
And so, God in his kindness chose Paul
to be the one who would take the good news about Jesus
to those who were not Jewish.
It's a remarkable choice, isn't it?
Jesus had disciples
who were not particularly attached to their Jewish roots.
Matthew, who wrote Matthew's gospel, was a tax collector.
Tax collectors were traitors to the Jewish nation.
They were in league with the Roman overlords.
Why not choose Matthew to take the gospel to the Gentiles?
Matthew at least had a track record
of being able to work productively with Gentiles.
But no, God chose someone who hated Gentiles,
someone who would never go near a Gentile by choice,
to take the gospel to the Gentiles.
It a bit like suppose we wanted to choose someone from our church
to go and take the gospel to the people from South Asia
moving into Cranbourne West.
There's a whole new suburb going in
where most of the people are from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
So who are we going to choose to do it?
Would we choose a person
who had been working as a translator for Centrelink,
or a person who before becoming a Christian
had been a candidate for the One Nation political party?
Every piece of human wisdom tells you
to choose the person with the track record
of working cross culturally with success.
Not the person who has been committed to racism and xenophobia.
But God in his wisdom goes the other way.
Why?
Because that way, the person bringing the gospel
becomes a living example of the transforming power

of the gospel they preach.

Can you imagine the power of a person going into Cranbourne West and saying, "I used to protest about Asians coming to Australia.

But then I become a Christian.

God has powerfully changed my heart.

Now all I want to do is show God's love to Asians.

The gospel has transformed me and it can transform you too."

The gospel can never be proclaimed effectively from a position on cultural superiority.

This message doesn't cut it:

"Become a good person like me."

That's not the gospel.

The gospel has to be preached from a position of humility.

"I am a bad person

who God has transformed through the death of Jesus."

And what better way of being reminded

of the life you have been rescued from,

than being given the job of preaching to the people you used to hate.

Well that's a bit about God's wisdom

in choosing Paul to preach to the Gentiles.

But why is Paul telling the Galatians about it now?

We found out last week that Paul is an apostle.

That means he's personally chosen and appointed by God.

His authority to preach to the Galatians is beyond question

because it has been given to him personally by God.

But now Paul wants to tell them that that's not just about him,

that's also about his message.

Listen to verses 11 and 12 again,

"I want you to know brothers and sisters,

that the gospel I preached to you is not of human origin.

I did not receive it from any man,

nor was I taught it;

rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

Well there are a couple of ways that a message can be of human origin.

You can sit down and nut it out.
Buddhists believe that Buddha sat for 7 weeks under a bodhi tree
while he thought about the message of Buddhism.
Once he had nuted it out,
he shared it with his followers.
The other way a message can be of human origin
is if someone tells it to you.
That is in essence what you are listening to right now.
I first heard the Christian gospel from my parents.
They taught it to me.
I've read it in the Scriptures.
I first heard Galatians preached
by Colin Kruse when I was 17 years old.
I've studied for 4 years at Ridley College
learning from well taught teachers
who learned themselves from well taught teachers.
I've read books on Galatians by John Stott and Tim Keller
to prepare to preach on it.
This message is of human origin.
I'm passing on to you as best I can what has been passed on to me.
But Paul's message is neither of those two options.
His message is a revelation to him directly from God.
"I did not receive it from any man,
nor was I taught it;
rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."
You know the story.
Paul was on his way to Damascus to persecute the church.
The risen Lord Jesus appeared to him.
He spoke to him and told him the truth.
And what happened immediately after that?
1:16 "My immediate response was not to consult any human being."
Paul didn't just see a vision of the risen Jesus.
The risen Jesus spoke to him
and told him what to believe and what to do.
He didn't go and find the leaders of the Christian church

and enrol in a Theology degree.

He went to Arabia.

What's with Arabia?

Well there were no Christians there.

Whatever Paul was doing while he was there, whether it was a period of reflection on what Jesus had revealed to him, or whether it was more direct teaching from Jesus, we don't know.

This period of time is not recorded in detail in the Bible.

What we do know is this,

Paul was not being schooled in the Christian faith by those who were already believers.

When he finally did get to Jerusalem, it was three years later.

Paul's gospel that he was preaching was fully worked out by then.

You can read about Paul's visit to Jerusalem in Acts 9.

He spent most of his time preaching.

He wasn't sitting down to learn from the apostles.

And it was only for a couple of weeks anyway.

There was no time for his thinking to have been shaped by someone else in that time.

In any case, he only met Peter and James.

He didn't even meet the other apostles.

The whole point of Paul's recounting this chapter of his earlier life is to underline this one point:

Paul's gospel is a revelation from Jesus.

He did not get it from people.

Why is this important?

Well the situation of the Galatian church

is that Paul is under attack

and the gospel he preached is under attack.

People have come up from Jerusalem

and have thrown the Galatians into confusion.

They've told them that they ought to be following the Jewish law.

But Paul never told them that.
So who should they believe?
Well if Paul had got his message
by consultation with the apostles in Jerusalem,
well maybe he missed out a bit.
Maybe these other folk who have come up from Jerusalem
are filling in the blanks.
But no.
It's not that.
Paul got his message directly from Jesus.
Do you think that Jesus left a bit out?
Do you think that Jesus muddled up his teaching at some point?
No way.
The message Paul preached is the truth and the whole truth.
Nothing has been left out.
Nothing that's there needs modification.

How is this helpful for us?
Well first, I mentioned last week and I'll say it again.
It underlines for us the authority of what Paul has written down for us.
Galatians is in the Bible because this letter is God's word to us.
Yes it was for them in Galatia,
but it's also God's word for us in Hastings.
It's tremendously important that we read it
as those who sit under the word, we don't stand over the word.
You know,
sometimes people read Paul's letters and want to critique them.
"What he was really trying to say is ...
insert what I would like to be true
which bears no resemblance to what he was trying to say actually."
That's not sitting under God's word.
"Well Paul was a product of his time and place,
and if he had the understanding that we have today
then what he would say is
insert what I would like to say."

That's not sitting under God's word.

Yes I understand that Paul was a product of a certain time and place.

But the risen Lord Jesus who gave him gospel message was not.

He is God the Son and created every time and place.

And it's his message that he revealed to Paul

which has been faithfully passed down to us.

And so need to read this letter as we read all Scripture

humbly, praying that God would change us by what we read,

not presuming that we can modify what we read to suit ourselves.

Ok that's the first thing for us.

The second thing for us is about being people pleasers.

1:10 "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings or of God?"

Or am I trying to please people?

If I were still trying to please people,

I would not be a servant of Christ."

You'd be surprised by how much of what we say every day

is about trying to please the people around us.

And look there's nothing wrong with being easy to get along with.

That's a virtue!

But Paul is not talking about being easy to get along with.

He's talking about telling people what they want to hear

irrespective of whether it is true.

Or, not speaking about certain subjects

because people don't want to hear about those subjects.

You know the story,

you can't talk to Uncle Fred at the Christmas party

about global warming

because he will get angry,

he thinks it's a conspiracy.

So everyone has whispered instructions that they are to avoid this topic.

Well that's OK with Uncle Fred at the Christmas party.

No one's life depends on Uncle Fred

being convinced of global warming.

Even if you think it's the biggest moral issue of our generation,

well you can go up and protest at the Adani coal mine,
you don't need to engage with Uncle Fred.
But we don't have that freedom
when it comes to a revelation from Jesus.
If someone is happy to hear about Jesus loving them,
but they are offended by the thought
that he will send those who don't follow him to hell
we don't have the freedom to leave that bit out.
If someone is happy to hear about loving their neighbour
but they are offended by the idea
that the good news needs to be preached,
we don't have the freedom to leave that bit out.
If someone is happy to hear that stealing is an offense against God
but they are offended by the idea
that sexual immorality is an offense against God,
we don't have the freedom to leave that bit out.
We are not to be people pleasers.
We have a message by revelation from Jesus
and as custodians of that message
we are to give the whole message.
That means the bits people like and the bits they don't like.

Now the usual comeback you get when you say that is this.
"We want people to accept the message.
If you put in the bits that offend people,
you are driving them away from Jesus."
But it's not true.
It's not true at the level of Christian experience.
Tell me which churches are growing?
Which churches have people being converted in them?
Is it the churches that obscure the difficult bits
or the churches that teach the difficult bits?
It's the churches that teach the difficult bits.
However much it goes against your intuition,
teaching the tough bits actually attracts people to Jesus.

How could that be?

Because the people who are genuine converted
want to worship in churches that teach the truth.

And it's those people who share the gospel with others.

The people who want to worship in churches that skip the hard bits
don't share the gospel with their friends,
and so those churches never grow.

"We want people to accept the message.

If you put in the bits that offend people,
you are driving them away from Jesus."

It's not true at the level of Christian experience.

It's also not true at the level of theology.

You see Jesus is in the hard bits.

The bits that we struggle with
are precisely the bits that will transform us.

Jesus presented without the hard bits is not the real Jesus.

It's some limp wristed caricature of Jesus.

If you present the gospel without the hard bits,
you are driving people away from the real Jesus
and towards a fake Jesus.

We have a gospel that comes by revelation from Jesus.

And so when we present that gospel,
we must just tell people what Jesus told people.

We don't change it based on feedback.

There's no customer satisfaction survey.

There's just a Lord and Saviour who has entrusted us with a message.

Let's pray that we might be faithful to the task!