

0302

The last apostle

Galatians 1:13-24

Announcement

Text

¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Prayer

Introduction

Andrew was a lost soul.

He had been born to a poor family in Holland in 1928. As a teenager, Hitler's armies had invaded and occupied the country. After the war, in a free Holland, Andrew had become a soldier himself and joined the special forces of the Dutch military. He had wanted a sense of adventure and to experience war.

But he would be involved and witness brutal events in Indonesia. He would suffer a terrible leg injury from a gunshot wound which would bring his combat tours to their end.

In a letter to a girl he had hoped to marry, Andrew talked of his despair: "You wrote me once that I should pray. Well, I haven't. Instead I curse. I know words I never even heard in Holland. I tell filthy jokes. The worse I feel the harder I can get the guys laughing. I'm not the person you think I am. This war used to bother me. But it doesn't anymore. When I see dead people, I shrug. People we have killed, not just soldiers, but ordinary working men, and women, and children.

I have no desire for God. I don't want to pray. Instead of going to church I go to the pub and drink until I don't give a hoot."

While he was still in the hospital, one day a pretty girl came to invite Andrew and the other patients to a church service. Andrew still had little interest in God but it would be an excuse to get out of the hospital for an evening.

Andrew and a buddy took seats in the back. They were drunk and were having a raucous time. The pastor noticed them and prayed for Andrew and his friend. All the two wounded soldiers could do was laugh.

Series context

We're continuing our series in the Book of Galatians this morning.

When I preached two weeks ago, we just started to touch on Paul's conversion story. The part of the passage we're in today continues that story and Paul will transition from talking about his conversion to talking about his ministry and how people responded to him.

Bridge

But this passage is not ultimately about Paul. It's ultimately about the Lord. Paul's testimony, his salvation, his call, his ministry, and his interactions are about a good God who cares about individuals and cares about his world and who has a gospel that is meant to be shared throughout the world.

And so the main idea of this passage is that God makes disciples who make disciples.

And through Paul's testimony, we're going to see a progression between his salvation, his being sent, and him serving Jesus by sharing the gospel with others during his ministry.

And those three words: saved, sent, serving will give us our three main points today.

First point - saved. Salvation through the gospel

This first scene will have a little bit of overlap with my previous sermon. But I do this because it's helpful to remember where Paul was coming from. He's the greatest missionary who ever lived but he started off as far away from Jesus as a person could be.

Paul had been a ruthless opponent of the church who had persecuted the church.

Verses 13-14:

¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

I want to return to Andrew's story.

He sat in the back of that church service. Drunk. Whooping and hollering. Laughing.

The pastor finished praying for Andrew and his friend and the service concluded with the hymn “Go down Moses.”

You might be unfamiliar with that song. It’s not in our hymnal. But that song keeps repeating the refrain “Let my people go.”

As Andrew left that service, all he could hear were the words “let my people go. Let my people go. Let my people go.”

The next day, the song continued to echo through his mind. He decided to pick up a Bible and read it, and to his astonishment, passages that had never made sense to him were suddenly clear.

Andrew had never been a churchgoer but suddenly he started going to church every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday morning.

He found churches in nearby villages that had services on other days of the week and started attending those too. He was a changed man.

¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace,

Many centuries before, Paul had also wanted nothing to do with the gospel but then he was saved by the grace of God.

That’s the power of the gospel.

It can save a person who doesn’t want to be saved.

I talk often about C.S. Lewis. Obviously he’s best known for being the author of the Chronicles of Narnia and Mere Christianity. But before coming to faith, he had been a hard-lined atheist. But through reading and conversations, Lewis began to change.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis said:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my

work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”

Lewis goes on to say:

“The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?”

We come to a second point.

Second point - sent. Being sent to share the gospel

¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

The language Paul uses of being set apart for a divine task before birth is very reminiscent of the call of Old Testament prophets.

In Isaiah 49:1, the prophet talks of having been set apart before birth:

**Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The Lord called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.**

We see this idea of being set apart before birth in Jeremiah as well.

Jeremiah 1:4-5:

⁴ Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

**⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”**

As prophets of old were set apart to proclaim the Word of the Lord in their generation, Paul was set apart to preach the good news of the gospel.

Jonah was sent to Nineveh.

Paul was sent to preach to the gentile world.

Just a reminder: gentile means someone who is not Jewish.

Paul never refers to himself as a prophet but there are other places where he uses similarly prophetic language in referring to himself. But his bigger emphasis is that he was an apostle.

In the gospels, we see Jesus interacting with the apostles. We see Jesus calling several of them. We see the call of Peter and Andrew. Fisherman who were told that they would become fishers of men. We see the call of James and John. We see the call of Philip and that of Matthew.

And here we see the call of Paul, the last apostle.

The apostles were the first to proclaim the gospel and to make disciples. They were the ones through whom Jesus founded His church.

And for the Apostle Paul, his call was to preach the gospel to the gentiles.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are indicators pointing to God's salvation extending beyond Israel. We see that going back to God's promises with Abraham and that through him, all the nations would be blessed.

We see examples in the Old Testament of people coming to faith and serving the Lord who were not Israelites. Melchizedek, Caleb, Rahab, and Ruth.

In the New Testament, we see the gospel being a worldwide message.

We see pictures of it in the gospels, most notably in the Great Commission where the risen Jesus tells his apostles, and ultimately his church to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:20).

And we see it in the call of Paul. It's a reminder of God's passion for his gospel and that it's a message that was meant for people of every tribe, and tongue, and nation.

A Jewish man who had hated the gospel is to be a herald of that message.

Paul's ministry to the gentiles did not mean that he had no dealings in sharing the gospel with Jewish people but that his primary focus was non-Jews.

Meditation

Why did God call Paul for this ministry?

While we can't know the mind of the Lord, there are several things that are revealed in his call of Paul.

First, it's a picture of God's forgiveness.

If God can forgive a violent prosecutor of the church, he can forgive you. Because the forgiveness is not about the cost of the sins but it's about the grace of the savior. And no sin is too great that Jesus cannot forgive.

Second, we see how God uses our entire story for his glory. The ministry that was given to Paul could have been given to a more loving person. God could have called a kid who would have never dreamed of doing the terrible things Paul had done. God could have chosen a gentile to share the gospel with the gentile people.

But all of Paul's background, training, his knowledge of the Old Testament was put to use for God's kingdom. Paul's personality, his devotion was put to use. Paul had gone to war with the church but when Christ called him, he used that same intensity to become a defender and proclaimer of the gospel.

If you're looking for a way to serve in the church, I think a good question to ask yourself is "what am I already good at?" The Bible says that God equips us and gifts with different Spiritual gifts. And when those things are coupled with the talents we have, the personality we have, everyone one of us is a unique person with unique skills and abilities which God can use for his glory.

Third, it is a reminder of the sovereignty of God. Paul didn't call himself. He didn't decide to be an apostle.

God had called him. God knew the life Paul would have, the things he would do, even the sins he would commit and still called him.

I think of Andrew and of C.S. Lewis. They hadn't sought out God, but the Lord found them nevertheless.

God cares about the spread of his own gospel. And he cares about his disciples making disciples.

Sinners who become saints sharing the message of salvation to make sinners into saints.

It's a beautiful thing.

We come to our third section.

Third point - Serving

Once again, we'll begin in verse 15:

when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Paul was sent and so he went.

He had encountered the risen Lord Jesus on the road, and in an instant, his whole life, his whole trajectory changed.

Paul says he did not consult with anyone. This is starting to get at the independence of his apostolic calling.

Paul wasn't an apostle because the other apostles said so. Though they did affirm him. But he was ultimately an apostle because he had been called by Christ.

If you're a Christian, is there a moment when the gospel became real to you?

Paul knew the gospel because he saw the risen Jesus gloriously appear to him.

He did not believe the gospel because it was preached to him.

And it's interesting. The more I've thought about this passage, the more I've thought how crazy it would be for Paul to lie about this.

If his story wasn't true, he could have just said that he heard the gospel preached and believed. That's plausible.

But Paul says that Jesus had appeared to him and that he then spent years independent from the rest of the apostles.

It's a crazy story.

But then you look at Paul and look at how radically his life changed and that points to the power of the gospel and what he had seen on that road to Damascus.

He says that he had not gone to Jerusalem at first. Jerusalem would have been the most obvious place to go. That was really the cultural and theological center of the church at that time.

End of verse 17, Paul says he went into Arabia and Damascus. There's some debate about why he did that. Some think that Paul had some sort of Spiritual retreat to ponder what he had just experienced.

Many scholars, and I would agree with this view, think Paul pretty much got to work spreading the gospel. It's amazing the fervor a new convert to the faith can have.

Paul was able to teach. He was called as an apostle, and so he gets to work.

Verses 18-20, Paul is giving a broad overview of the events which happened in his life and ministry.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)

Paul says he visited Cephas. That's the Apostle Peter. And Paul says that he remained with him 15 days.

Now Peter is one of the leaders of the apostles, he was in the inner circle of Jesus.

But when Paul goes to meet with him, he is coequal. He is a full fledged apostle. In the U.S. senate, each state has two senators. The one who's newer is sometimes called the junior senator.

But that's unofficial. The senior senator is not more of a senator. His or her vote doesn't count for more.

Paul might have been the newest apostle but he's one of the group.

So Paul has emphasized his independence. But when he spent 15 days with Peter, surely Peter would have told Paul some stories about traveling with Jesus for three years.

So Paul meets Peter but further interactions with the other apostles are pretty limited.

In verse 19, Paul also does make reference to having seen James:

¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.

James the brother of Jesus is also the same man who wrote the Epistle of James. He was a son of Mary and Joseph. James hadn't believed that Jesus was the savior of the world during his ministry but came to faith after the resurrection. He was also a leader in the Jerusalem church and we see Paul mention that he had interacted with him.

But he did not interact with any of the other apostles.

Several commentators have noted that part of the reason for this might also be attributed to the fact that Paul had been a violent persecutor and so some of the apostles might have wanted to keep their distance or been weary as to the sincerity of Paul's conversion.

Verse 20:

²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)

That's almost courtroom language. Paul is giving a sworn testimony to what he's said.

After his brief 15 day stay in Jerusalem, Paul was back on the road.

Verses 21-24:

²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

We don't know all of the fruit that this ministry bore in these places.

But we see glimpses of Paul's early apostolic ministry and travels.

A man who had once been growing in stature in the Jewish community started to become renowned in Christian circles. His testimony was just striking to these early churches, as it is to us today. That a man who opposed the gospel became a minister of the gospel.

In one sense, that should be the testimony of every Christian. Again, we aren't Paul. But the world is dead in sin. Apart from Christ, the world is in rebellion against God. And then salvation comes. And God desires us to share the good news.

God makes disciples who make disciples.

Paul was a sinner saved by grace who shared the message with others. We are sinners saved by grace who are called to do that as well.

People glorified God because of Paul. They glorified God because he had changed Paul's life. They glorified God because he had used Paul for great purpose.

As Paul says in Ephesians 3:20:

God is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us

And then Paul adds:

²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Conclusion

Saved. Sent. Serving.

Saved by grace.

Sent into the world with a purpose and to share the gospel.

And serving God. Using the gifts God has given us, the skills and personality we have, the experiences that we have, all of that can be used for serving the Lord and advancing the kingdom.

It's easy to sit back. It's easy to get complacent. It's easy to want what's comfortable. But that isn't what God has called us to.

I'll be honest. I found this to be a hard passage to preach on. And I say that because so much is happening in these verses. Because on the one hand, it's a story that's hard to relate to. Paul was an apostle who was directly called by Christ through a divine revelation. That's not relatable.

But in another way it is in the sense that Paul was saved by grace and was called to share the good news with others. And that is not unique. That isn't just for the really spiritual Christians. That isn't for the really gifted or holy. It's something that all are called to.

The man I talked about in the beginning. The one who laughed through a church service and tried to make a mockery of what he was hearing before the Lord got hold of his heart was named Andrew Van Der Bijl.

He would go on to become a missionary himself and have decades of fruitful ministry. In 1955, he founded a ministry called Open Doors, which serves Christians who face persecution across the world.

During the Cold War, Andrew would personally smuggle Bibles and other Christian literature into communist countries where they were forbidden.

And there are some amazing stories from his life. One day, he was at a checkpoint getting into Romania with a car full of Bibles. He had been at the checkpoint for hours because they were doing thorough searches of cars. Taking out seats, taking off hub caps, really searching in depth for contraband.

All Andrew could do was pray. He knew he couldn't talk himself out of this. When his turn came, the guards waved him through. In his rearview mirror, he could see the next car being pulled over to be searched.

He would take many more trips where the Bible was forbidden. Amazingly, he was never caught.

In 1967, some of his stories and his testimony were recorded in the best selling book *God's Smuggler*, which has sold over 10 million copies and been printed in more than 35 languages. Not wanting to give his full name to the book, the book was published under the pen name: Brother Andrew,

and that was the name by which he became known to people throughout the world.

It's remarkable what can be accomplished by a person who knows that they've been saved by grace.

Brother Andrew died at the end of September at the age of 94.

In an interview with Christianity Today, he said "If I could live my life over again, I would be a lot more radical."