

**+ Galatians 1:11-24 + Jesus Changes Lives +
+ 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany: Conversion of St. Paul + 25 January 2015 +**

What's your story? Every one of us has one—young and old, big and little, rich and poor, single and married. From a single question, every one of us has a story. That question? How did you get here? It's not a question about your vehicle or who you happened to ride with, but how did you get here?

For many, including me, your story starts at infancy. Perhaps even moments after your birth, if not days or weeks. Your parents were so excited to see you and loved you so very much that they brought you to the One whom they loved most. They brought you to Jesus through the water and the Word of Holy Baptism. Your story with Jesus began there and continued as you were raised in the Christian faith. So now you're here.

For others, your story doesn't start so early. You may even remember how it started. You were a child. Someone invited you or your family to come and visit a place called church. Perhaps they invited you to a kids' event where you learned about Jesus. Perhaps you came first and your parents and family came later. Perhaps the pastor came to visit you and your family at home. Was it a friend or a classmate or a neighbor who wanted you to meet Jesus? Your story with Jesus started and now you're here.

For still others, your story didn't start at infancy. Your story didn't start during childhood. Your story with Jesus—the story that brought you here—started later in life. Were you a teen or an adult? You can clearly remember what your life was like and where your story was headed before Jesus entered your life. What happened? Was it a loved one or a friend inviting you to "Come and see"? Was it an invitation in the mail or a knock on the door? Was it a pesky pastor who just wouldn't give up until you visited his church? How did you get here? What's your story? Because you're here.

The Apostle Paul never shied away from telling his story. To be honest, it doesn't start out well. You could even argue that Paul would be the last person you'd expect to see here, but in Galatians 1, we find Paul telling the story of how he got here because Jesus changed his life.

Paul would describe his earlier self as a "rising star" among the Jews, specifically the Pharisees—the most orthodox and conservative of Jews. They valued the traditions of their forefathers. They expertly studied the Scriptures, especially God's moral and ceremonial laws revealed through Moses—and prided themselves on their holy living. They zealously enforced the Law of Moses and added hundreds of their own commands. Among these Pharisees, Paul was rising rapidly above the rest.

Saul, as he was known back then, was a scholar, having sat at the feet of the greatest teacher of his time. He could trace his family line back to the tribe of Benjamin. He was **"a Hebrew of Hebrews."** (Philippians 3:5) As a Pharisee, he followed the strictest sect in the strictest possible way. **"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers."** He had a future that could've made him one of the greatest Jewish rabbis of all time.

Yet his extreme zeal for the Law and the traditions of his fathers filled his heart with self-righteousness. He became so legalistic, so focused on making himself righteous before God that his only savior was really himself. Oh, Saul knew about the Messiah, but who needs a Savior when you can try to save yourself with such "holy" living? Surely God would see how zealous he had been for the Law, for the Jewish faith, and for God himself.

When Saul first heard about Jesus of Nazareth, he was appalled. How could a human being identify himself as the Son of God, as Messiah, as Yahweh—the great I AM? Surely this Jesus was a blasphemer, who dishonored and disgraced the true God with his awful claims of divinity. When the followers of this Jesus were spreading the news that Jesus had lived and died and rose again for the forgiveness of sins, that this Jesus was the promised Messiah now ruling over all things, that this Jesus condemned Pharisees like himself for their self-righteousness while teaching forgiveness and grace from God, it was too much for him.

When a Christian named Stephen was brought before the Jewish leaders and stood firm as a follower of Jesus, Saul watched with approval as they stoned him to death. Then Saul's intense zeal turned him into something he would regret for the rest of his life. **"I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it."** Years later Paul would explain what happened, **"I...was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of**

the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.” (Acts 26:9-11) Saul’s hatred for Jesus was going to end badly. Eternal condemnation was coming, but that’s when Jesus showed up.

In Acts 9, we heard in dramatic fashion how Jesus appeared to Saul in a glorious light as he was traveling to Damascus. This man who was obsessed with wiping out the name of Jesus would become obsessed with taking that saving name to the nations. In the years that followed, Paul saw that dramatic turn in his story as nothing less than God’s grace and mercy. ***“...God, who set me apart from birth, and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles...”*** Soon many believers were saying about Paul, ***“The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.”*** They praised God because this Paul was proclaiming Jesus.

Jesus had changed Paul’s life forever. Paul’s story was changed forever. God in his grace saved Paul through his Savior Jesus in spite of Paul’s rejection. God had known that he was going to use Paul for the purpose of serving him, but it wasn’t until he was an adult that God called Paul by his grace and revealed to him the good news of his Savior that he was now going to proclaim to the nations.

Countless people would see Jesus through Paul and his life, and Jesus would change their lives through Paul’s message. He once told young Timothy, ***“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”*** (1 Timothy 1:15-16) Countless people praised their glorious Savior as Paul preached ***“the faith he once tried to destroy”*** and Jesus changed their lives.

Look back on your story. How did Jesus change your life? He did it no matter when your story with him started. If it started when you were an infant or a little child, the gracious Savior changed your life. From conception you were a condemned sinner corrupted with the sin inherited from your parents. Left to yourself, you would’ve followed the path that so many have traveled to eternal death, but Jesus changed your life. God in his grace had chosen you before you were born to be his own, to serve him as his beloved child. Through water and the Word, God called you by his grace so that faith would be planted in your heart. He rescued you through Jesus and he revealed that Savior to you through his Gospel—through his Word and Sacrament. That’s why you’re here. Jesus changed your life.

If your story with him started when you were a child, the plot’s really no different even if the details are. Left to yourself, you were heading down the path to eternal condemnation, but Jesus changed your life. He came into your life. He called you through his Gospel even as you and your family were invited to go to a church where you had not gone before. With the same Gospel of word and water and meal, Jesus saved your life, made you his beloved child, and brought you here. Jesus really did change your life.

Now if you’re an adult and your story with Jesus started not all that long ago, then perhaps you can relate to the Apostle Paul a little more. Perhaps it’s a little easier for you to see how Jesus has changed your life since he came into your life. In the end, even if the details are different, the plot is still the same. God in his grace really did choose you to be his own before you were born and guided the events of your life to bring you into his family. He called you by his grace through his Gospel—that good news of a Savior who lived the perfect life that you know you’ve failed to do, who gave his life as the payment price for all that guilt in your past and what you’re still wrestling with in your present, and who rose again to assure you that your sins are forgiven, to give you peace the world cannot give, and to give you the confident hope that you will enjoy the glories of heaven someday. Jesus changed your life too, didn’t he? That’s why you’re here.

Yet no matter when your story with Jesus started, it doesn’t end with you just sitting here. It didn’t end with Paul just sitting in that home on Straight Street in Damascus either. Jesus changed his life so that Paul ***“might preach him among the Gentiles”***. Now Jesus didn’t change your life to make you an apostle like Paul, but he did make you his witness who would bring glory to his name. Jesus did rescue you that you might live with him in heaven for eternity, but before you do that, before you go there, he has something for you to do here and now. Don’t forget that you’re not in heaven yet, and it’s not time to rest from all your labors.

Jesus changed your life so he could change the lives of others around you. How is he going to do that? He changes lives as you simply share the good news of what he's done for you. It really isn't complicated. It doesn't require a theological degree. It simply requires you being whom Jesus has made you to be—his faithful witness, his beloved child—as you tell others the story of how Jesus changed your life by his grace and forgiveness. So go and tell the story of how Jesus changed your life. May the Lord lead many to praise him for you, his witness. Amen.