

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“ACCIDENTAL SAINTS”

3. Paul

(Philippians 3:2-11)

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“Paul writes, ‘All I want to know is Christ’. He has already lived with the knowledge of Christ for many years, but he finds in Christ an inexhaustible fullness – there was always more of Christ to know.” (F.F. Bruce)

During the first three years at our church in New Jersey, Becky and I ran the youth group program. There hadn’t been any youth ministry before we arrived, and we didn’t have the budget to hire someone, so on Wednesday evenings Becky and I would reach into our old bag of tricks from our days in college leading a Young Life club as we led the middle school and high school youth groups.

On any given Wednesday, some 12-20 kids would show up, so it was possible to take them off campus for the occasional outing. And our favorite off-campus event was called “Bigger and Better”. Bigger and Better. We broke into teams of 4 kids plus a leader. Then we would hand each team a cheap, everyday item: a ruler, a set of plastic measuring spoons, a screwdriver. Their objective was to spend the next hour driving around town, knocking on the doors of random houses, and exchanging what they had for something “bigger and better”.

For example: Let’s say you were the team with the set of measuring spoons. Maybe you could trade the measuring spoons for one of those bank promotional drinking glasses embossed with a New York Jets logo. And then you could trade the Jets drinking glass for one of those big coffee table art books that lie around but no one ever reads. And then you could trade the art book for an old bicycle that the family never used but still has stashed in their garage.

Groups would arrive back at the church an hour later with all kinds of improbable items – an old neon sign from a restaurant, a full-size, decorated, artificial Christmas tree, a 6’ x 3’ poster of Elvis. But the Bigger & Better winner of all time was when one group showed up with one of the kids’ grandmother – Esther! Which was cool, because now, for the first time in my life, Becky and I had live-in help! (I’m just kidding – we traded Esther in for a pair of La-Z-Boy recliners).

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Today we look at the life of the Apostle Paul, one of our accidental saints. But Paul is actually a special case.

The more you read your Bible, the more you realize that hardly any of the great Bible heroes – not Abraham or Jacob or Moses or David or any of the 12 disciples

– ever came close to measuring up to being “worthy” of the calling to be a saint. That’s why they all – that’s why *we* all – are “accidental” saints.

But the Apostle Paul is the exception to this Biblical pattern. Because Paul was very worthy of being chosen by God to be His servant. You see, from his very first days through his very last days, Paul lived his life for God. Every day of his life, Paul made God the center of his life. Of course, Paul wasn’t perfect – he made mistakes, he sinned. But if you were in a “Fantasy Saints” league and were looking to draft someone on your team who was committed and gifted and valuable, Paul of Tarsus would be one of your top picks.

Paul tells us so himself. Listen to God’s Word from Paul’s *Letter to the Philippians*, chapter 3:

I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin — a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the law. ... And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

Paul has the golden resume. He was born into membership of God’s chosen people. His parents had Paul circumcised – the mark of being one of God’s people – when he was eight days old, exactly as it’s prescribed in God’s Law. Not only was Paul a pure-blooded Jew, he was a Benjamite – one of the two tribes that stayed loyal to the David-Solomon line when the ten other tribes rebelled and started a rival kingdom in 930 B.C. And the tribe of Benjamin also owned the land which included Jerusalem, the holy city.

And Paul was a Pharisee. It’s a word we always hear as describing someone who is narrow-minded, legalistic, judgmental and hypocritical. But that’s not at all what it meant to the Jews of Paul’s day. No. The Pharisees were the serious Jews, the devout Jews, the Jews who received the Law of Moses for what it was – the very words of God, God’s great blessing to His people in order to bring them into life. Paul believed that from the bottom of his heart and he dedicated himself to living out God’s blessing in full by following God’s law in full – “as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault”. Paul doesn’t pretend that he is perfect, someone who didn’t need to trust in God’s mercy when Judgment Day came. No. What he’s saying is this: “God gave His people rules for living, and I followed them fully and faithfully and joyfully.” Paul was a man who had completely signed up for the program.

In other words, Paul is no accidental saint. He is the *crème de la crème*, the spiritual elite, the kind of person we can only admire and say, “There goes a spiritual man, a man whose life is God-centered, a man who lives to bring God glory in all that he says and does.”

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But there is an “accidental” part. Because this devout and faithful follower of the Lord God ends up being a *persecutor* of the church! From one angle, this is all of one piece – in Paul’s devotion to God, in his desire that God be lifted up in all of Israel’s life, of course he’s going to oppose heresy – weird beliefs, deviant practices, people who claim to be faithful Jews but are doing and saying things that are just plain wrong, that desecrate God’s good name. Like the Christians, this new sect of Galilean Judaism that believes not only that their crucified leader is the Messiah, but that to be a faithful Jew means to worship Jesus. Worship a human being?! It’s the epitome of idolatry, which has always been Israel’s fundamental temptation and failure. And so – out of his dedication to God, out of his devotion for the integrity of Israel in the holy land – Paul steps up and volunteers to help squash this new movement. He’s deputized by the governing council in Jerusalem and heads off to Damascus to arrest some of these Christians so they could be brought to account for heresy.

But then something happened. Here’s how Paul describes it *Acts 26*:

“My opponents are fully aware of the way I lived, from when I was a child in Tarsus and more recently in Jerusalem. They also fully know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion. ... Just like them, I was convinced that I ought to do everything possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is precisely what I did. Authorized by the chief priests in Jerusalem, I caused many Christians there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities.

“One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the chief priests. Around noon, as I was traveling on the road, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Hebrew, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will.’

“‘Who are you, lord?’ I asked.

“And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. Tell people that you have seen me, and tell them what I will show you in the future. ... I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God’s people, who are set apart by faith in me.’”

Talk about being stopped dead in your tracks! Talk about having the rug pulled out from underneath you! Paul is a man who is truly and sincerely trying to do the best he can for God, as faithfully as he can, only to find out on the road to Damascus that his sincerity is misguided, that his obedience is disobedience, that his faithfulness is persecution. It turns out the God doesn’t want Paul to persecute Jesus, to arrest the new Christians, to exterminate the church. No. God wants Paul to worship Jesus, to make new Christians, to start churches all around the Mediterranean world – churches specifically designed to be made up of Gentile converts.

And, immediately, Paul gets with the new program. Very quickly, Paul comes to the realization that in Jesus, God has done something that is “bigger and better”:

- That the God who has always loved the world, the God who has always been faithful to His covenant with His people – this God has upped His game in Jesus.
- That all of God’s promises and blessings are now concentrated in Jesus.
- That God has come closer than ever to us by coming to us in Jesus.
- That Jesus is nothing but Good News, through and through.

And the closer Paul draws to Christ in faith, the more Paul’s life is filled with Jesus, the more he’s like that guy in Jesus’ parable who stumbles across a stunning pearl while plowing his field and sells everything he has to buy it because of its surpassing value. Paul falls in love with Jesus, to the depths of his heart. Here’s how Paul describes it:

I once thought these things [being born a Jew, circumcised, a Benjamite, a Pharisee] were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of Christ. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. (3:7-9)

For Paul, God has done something extraordinarily bigger and better in Jesus. And so – with the same devotion and commitment and sincerity with which he has always tried to serve God – Paul now lives his life for Jesus, to obtain “the infinite value of knowing Christ”, to “gain Christ and become one with him.”

* * *

That’s the story of the accidental saint we know as the Apostle Paul. In many ways, our lives couldn’t be more different from his. But I believe his story still speaks to us.

Because most of us – we’re with the program. We try to do the right thing for God in our lives. That’s why we’re here in church. That’s why we put our kids in Church School. Most of us have kept the Ten Commandments, and least in their literal sense. And we’ve behaved this way not because we’re trying to impress others or to impress ourselves, but because living a good life is a good thing in itself. Sure, we may not be Pauls – “as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault” – but we’re doing better than a lot of other folks.

But here’s the thing – that’s not really the program God wants us to sign up for. Because God has something bigger and better for us. And it’s this – that we might experience, in the depths of our hearts, “the infinite value of knowing Christ”; that we might “gain Christ and become one with him.”

Some of us have experienced this – an encounter with the living Jesus, the closeness and comfort of His presence, the surprising way he enables us to live

beyond our expectations, the sense we live our lives standing on rock-solid ground, the inexpressible joy of knowing we are loved to the core of our being.

But for some of us, that all seems a bit much. We're not sure that's the program we want to sign up for. We prefer to deal with God in measured doses; there, but not too close; someone we can call on when we need him but who doesn't butt into our day-to-day business.

Which is all fine and well. No one wants to become a fanatic. But God has something bigger and better for us. And his name is Jesus. That was the last thing in the world Paul ever expected to hear. But when he heard it, and embraced it, and opened himself up to it, he discovered life, eternal life – extraordinarily bigger and better. And he can hardly put words to it:

- I seek “the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”
- “All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection” (3:10)
- “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to lies ahead, I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above.” (3:14)

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Friends – God is good, all the time; all the time, God is good. And in Jesus, God has done something extraordinarily bigger and better. So open your eyes, open your arms, open your hearts to receive all that God has for you in Jesus Christ. AMEN

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