

Last week the Sunday School class listened to a man “tell” Galatians. Dr. David Rhodes is a storyteller. He recites the whole letter, as if he were Paul talking to the people he was writing to. After hearing the whole letter recited in its entirety, spoken with the emotion of the message, people remarked about the huge change in world view that is required to become a Christian.

Paul says this: (Galatians 1:11-12 read)

Galatians is a book that reflects the gospel given to Paul. He lived by a promise, the promise given to Abraham. That promise was a covenant between God and Israel, which was solidified through law-keeping. Joan read that Scriptural admonition earlier. Paul lived by the law. He related to God through following the rules. He wasn't centered on God. He was centered on living right.

Then Paul had this life-changing event. Galatians is about Paul's life-changing event. He sees the promise, the covenant between God and Israel – God and all people – in a whole new light. The promise would come to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It became a new covenant. Because of this one event in his life, his entire world view changed.

Have you ever had a life-changing event that gives you a new world view?

Perhaps marriage might give you a new world view. When we marry we change our world view from “it's all about me” to there's someone else that I better think about making happy.

Or maybe the birth of a child might give you a new world view. I now have the view that I will never again get enough sleep.

Or perhaps retiring from your job. Remember the emotional crisis of Jack Nicholson's character in the movie “About Schmidt?” Schmidt world view was centered on his career. But that ended. He thought he would travel and he bought an RV. Then his wife died. When that was taken away, a crisis ensued. Nothing worked, until he began supporting a little boy in Africa. Eventually, that was the only thing that brought him hope. Doing something meaningful for someone else was a new world view for him.

Or winning the lottery – Do you ever buy a lottery ticket, thinking, if I could only win the lottery. It would solve all my problems. But ask Jack Whittaker¹ if it's worth it. He won \$315 million in the powerball lottery jackpot in 2002. He centered his life on that event. But his life became a nightmare. He tithed the money to the church, but he centered his life on the money. He bought everything money could buy for himself, his wife, and his granddaughter. Hundreds of people showed up asking for money. Others stole from him. He became an alcoholic and a carouser, and finally lost his wife to divorce and his granddaughter died from a drug overdose, until he finally said, “It was an event that actually destroyed my life.” His money-centered world view had devastated his life.

¹www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A36338-2005Jan25.html , accessed 6/26/08.

Paul had a life-changing event, just as dramatic. But it was centered in Jesus Christ and it had a much better outcome.

It will help us as we study Galatians to know a little about Paul. A Hebrew of Hebrews, he advanced in Judaism beyond many of his peers. You might describe him as committed to success. He attended the best schools and made A's. Legal regulations drove him and he worked himself to the bone. But Paul's crusade of religious dedication to the Jewish faith played itself out in brutal gate-keeping. His persecution of believers expressed itself in "threats and murderous intentions." He was a terrible person. And he was powerful.

It was religion out of control. We've seen it nowadays, right? Not just Christianity, but other religions also. Throughout history we have sadly seen religion out of control.

The year Saul encountered Jesus was probably about 33 A.D., one year after Jesus' death. Believing in Jesus was a dangerous proposition, It was not politically correct, yet people still believed. Do you remember? Stephen had been stoned. Great persecution arose against the church and believers scattered. Saul was seeking out believers to destroy them.

It is easy to be committed to the wrong thing. I imagine if we look back into our lives, we would see that at one time or another we've lived for many things that are a distraction at best, and perhaps even downright unfaithful. Saul was doing what he thought was right, yet he was totally wrong. Lucky for him, God loves us enough to intervene. God is never far away, and those who seek Him, no matter how misguided, God promises that they will find Him. Then, when we behold Him, everything changes. That's what happened to Saul.

Was it like getting married? Retirement? Winning the lottery? Yes, in a way. It was that kind of event. Jesus, who had been this myth – a dead man that people followed, appeared to Saul in his glorified state. Jesus, the crucified, became a real live person to Saul.

When commenting about it later, Paul said, "Jesus, who was raised, appeared to Peter and the 12, to 500 other people, and then last of all to me" (1 Cor 15:5-8). Jesus' appearance was as real to him as it was to the disciples after the resurrection. He saw a bright light from heaven brighter than the sun. It was blinding. He heard the voice of Jesus.

Let's listen: READ Act 9:1-9

Interesting, isn't it that God's not far away. God's not unaware of Saul's attitude toward Jesus. In fact, Jesus Christ confronts Saul and addresses it – Why are you persecuting me? Why are you hunting me down? What's your life all about? That was the meaning of the question. Saul thought he was doing good. That day he found out he was doing quite the opposite.

Do you think that people like you and I can be in the church, thinking we are doing good work for God and then find out we are actually doing quite the opposite? Do you think we can wander far into the dark side, far away from our faith, without really being aware of it? Do you think the church can become misguided?

The good news is that no matter how far we stray, God is not far away. In fact, God is close. Jesus spoke directly to Saul, face to face. It wasn't a hallucination. Saul wasn't on drugs. Others heard the voice of Jesus breaking into Saul's life. It was an act of grace that spoke a message of freedom.

Jesus initiated their relationship by asking him a question. That's interesting because when it comes to talking with God, usually we do all the talking.

Is that the way it is for you when you pray? Do you do the talking? Do you simply think of prayer as telling God what you want today? Have you ever thought of allowing him to break into your life through prayer by giving him time to speak? Do you think part of prayer is listening? Jesus still speaks today, as he spoke to Saul. The Jesus on the road to Damascus is just as alive today and has something to say.

Saul was stopped cold on the road and he had to listen. He had to face the truth of his life. *What are you doing with your life, Saul?* He had to respond to this mysterious question. A magnificent light flashes around him; he's thrown to the ground. He sees a vision and hears a voice. All he could think of as he lay there in a heap on the ground is, *Who are you, Lord?*

I've asked that. Haven't you? When Saul heard the answer, "I am Jesus," he was obliged in that moment to acknowledge that the man who was crucified, the One whom the Christians believed in, was real and risen. There Jesus stood. He was who he said he was!

Jesus said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." In hearing the truth about himself, Saul realized he was living according to his own ideas about what was good, not God's ideas.

Saul was living for something which he thought was the truth. But a new revelation occurred when Jesus appeared. That event changed everything. It changed what he lived for. If you want to live for something that is true, believe in Jesus completely. When Saul encountered him, Saul, the Jew, became Paul a Christian. Suddenly there was a complete turnaround as the persecutor became the disciple. It was a dramatic conversion that Paul claims came out of that supernatural revelation. Jesus took this really bad person and reached out to him and changed his life.

The way Saul was living before was like many Christians live – disconnected from the living God. What event defines your life? Is it a personal encounter with the living Jesus Christ?

To say that we believe Jesus is alive today is seen as naïve and laughable by the world. Before he met the living Jesus, Saul thought Christians were naïve, laughable, and just plain wrong. Then he learned the truth. It didn't matter any more what others thought.

Do you want to live for something that is completely true and someone who is completely alive? This morning are you willing to give yourself to Jesus? Paul gave himself to the truth instantaneously. He was compelled by what he saw and heard to believe that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, was alive after his passion, vindicated and exalted by God, and was conscripting him into his service. He was instantly engaged.

Jesus didn't say too many words. He simply concluded the conversation with, "I will show you the way. You will be told what to do." And Paul got up. Remember? He had been heading into Damascus full of power and venom against people who believed. Now, helpless, he was led by others, blinded by more light than he could handle. Alone for three days he remained blind, neither eating nor drinking.

And we leave him there this morning; deep in thought and prayer about this most fantastic event. If you want to know what happens, you will have to come back next week!

The Book of Galatians tells that message. It tells the theology of grace that met Paul, a man who persecuted Jesus Christ, and then Jesus changed his life. The Book of Galatians is the outgrowth of this event in Paul's life.

When you give yourself to Jesus, He commissions you too to revolve your life around him. Do you want to live for something that's true? Then believe Jesus with all your heart. I do. That one message is the whole reason for the church.

Paul was set on a new path of hope and given a new world view. Jesus is alive. At First Presbyterian Church, Duncanville we invite you to adopt this life-changing world view.

AMEN