

**Thursday, October 8, 2020**

**SERIES: WE ARE FREE (A Study of Galatians)**

**SPEAKER: NAT CRAWFORD**

**TITLE: Walk or Run? Pt. 1 of 2**

How many of you have been told that you should walk before you try to run? I think we all have. But the Apostle Paul did anything but that. The question is why?

We know from Scripture that to be an elder there are some qualifications. For example: They are to be the husband of one wife; they are to be above reproach; they are to be teachers; not addicted to alcohol; not a recent convert. There are other qualifications as well. But just to hone in on that idea of not a recent convert - it's almost to say, walk before you run. You are to know the faith - to study the faith - to be disciplined – to be prepared.

But if there's one thing we know about the Apostle Paul - he was *passionate* in his conversion, and he ran before he even learned to walk. Again the question is why? That's what we want to talk about today as we continue our study in the book of Galatians. Today we are picking it back up in Galatians Chapter One, beginning in verse 15.

In the previous few verses, Paul has reminded the Galatians that the Gospel message he has always preached was not created by man. It was not associated to religious tradition or a famous teacher. It had nothing to do with his training in Judaism. We have to remember, Paul wanted nothing to do with the Gospel message. Before meeting Christ, he wanted nothing to do with it - he hated it. He wanted to destroy it. But then something happened. That's where we pick it up in verse 15 (ESV):

<sup>15</sup> But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, <sup>16</sup> was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles,

When considering the truth claims of Christianity, there are very few pieces of evidence more compelling than the conversion of Paul. In Philippians 3, Paul lays out an impressive list of reasons why he should brag. Paul was a religious zealot. He was a Pharisee. He was from the tribe of Benjamin. In other words, he had the right ancestry, the right name, the right training. He was trained under Gamaliel – a famous and respected teacher. According to Galatians 1, he was an up-and-comer. He was committed to the law. He was committed to the traditions of Judaism. He was passionate to a fault. His influence was increasing. His stock value was increasing, in the opinions of others. But then something happened! He would trade his prestige, his influence, his growth track to success. Why? Verse 15 gives us the answer: *But when he who had set me apart*

before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me. That's the answer! I don't want us to miss what Paul just said. Before the foundation of the world, and when Paul was in his mother's womb, God had a plan for Paul. He was set apart before he was even born for this purpose of preaching the Good News.

Paul says this in Ephesians 1:3-6 (NIV), "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. <sup>4</sup>For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love <sup>5</sup>he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."

Here we find one of those divine mysteries in Christianity. Somehow, we have true free will, and yet God chooses us before the foundation of the world. Before time and space began, God knew we would be born, and He chose us for Salvation, and also has a plan for us. That plan is ultimately for redemption, but we also know that God uses us intentionally. And like so many people, Paul thought he knew the plan. He was in the right job, he had the right training, and he had the right people around him. But God intervened and put him on the right path.

A friend of mine and mentor often reminds me that we are all on the same path. As followers of Christ, God picks us up and places us on the same path. The question is, at what pace will we walk or run? Will we be running with a business suit on, or will we be running with a jumpsuit? Will we be on the path in a pulpit, or will we be in a bullpen?

At times, I guess I kind of feel like Paul. I remember when being asked as a child, what do I hope to be when I grow up? I said, "I want to be a business executive, wearing a suit and a tie, climbing the corporate ladder." I don't know what kid says that. I don't even know where I got that idea from. But that was my vision. And as a young man, I started my own company. Eventually, I got into executive coaching and business consulting as well. But God had a different plan. If you were to ask me 10 or 15 years ago, would I become a pastor, I would have probably said, "No way". But God, before the foundation of the world, chose me - He had a plan!

## **DISCUSSION:**

N: Let's talk with Arne Cole and Cara Whitney - two people who have been placed on God's path of Salvation. But like all of you, they have a very unique walk. Arnie and Cara, thirty years ago - would you have imagined that God would place you where you are today? I'd love for each of you to share a bit of your story with us.

C: Well, thirty years ago, I didn't even know that Easter had anything to do with Jesus. [Big shock there]. So, just rolling secular.

N: But I mean, think about that: thirty years ago - I mean, if someone said, "Hey, you're going

to be a Christian, you're going to be an author. You're going to be involved with ministry at a global level". I mean, what would you have you said to yourself? If you were able to talk to yourself, would you have just laughed, or just, I mean, what would have been the reaction to that?

C: I think I would have been excited about it, Nat. [Oh, wow]. Because I, at an early age, struggled with the feeling that I wasn't enough - that I was created as a mistake, an accident, or maybe even created for evil. So it would have given me hope. It would have motivated me, I think. I would have been excited about it.

N: Wow. I think that's really encouraging for people, to remember the message of the Gospel is really radical, and it really does redeem people's perspectives on their lives. I think that's really cool. Arnie, what about you? Thirty years ago - I mean, you were just a baby - but I mean, can you imagine a few years after that, knowing like where you'd be today?

A: You know, it's so funny how these questions come about, and all of that. Just today, we were talking, you know - we're kind of in a crisis here at Back to the Bible with funding. And just today, we were talking about Pastor Nat - and I believe we're 30 years apart. [Really?] Aren't you 38? [39]. We are 30 years apart. [Wow]. And the conversation was, "Well, how would you handle this if you were Pastor Nat's age?" And that's 30 years ago. "Oh man, this would be embarrassing". It would be like, "Whoa". And it's just, not only as a nonbeliever is your perspective different, but also your age and experience makes things different. And you combine the two together, and some of us are train wrecks 30 years ago. Because not only did we not believe in Jesus, but we were pretty self-motivated and stupid, and doing a lot of things to try to end up well, if you will. So when you find somebody who's young, and I know young is a relative word, but who is trying to do the right things, and maybe doesn't have the experience, but certainly spiritually is far more mature, it warms the heart. So even though you're asking me, I'm just saying the focus on younger people doing the right thing is amazing. And if you don't believe it, put yourself back 30 years ago, and how would you handle that same situation? And at least for me, it would have been totally ungodly, and it would have been embarrassing - I can't say for the Kingdom, because I wasn't a believer, but I was a pretty selfish businessman, certainly, to say the least.

N: Well then, I guess we can say, you've come a long way, but it's neat to see the path that God has put us all on. Again, different backgrounds, different experiences, different upbringings, different trainings. But yet God has put us on this path to run the race with intentionality, with passion, to live for the things that really matter. And I am convinced, as you are as well - God has you right where He wants you. And where you are today, you may not be there in five years, 10 years, 15 years from now, but you're there on purpose. God does not want you to miss the opportunity. Your age doesn't matter. Your background doesn't matter. Your future outlook, frankly, doesn't matter either, where you think you might go - because God wants to use you mightily, wherever you're at. So we'd challenge you: get out there, get moving, get sharing the Gospel, and let God do the work.

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Many people ask, what is God's will for my life? What is His plan for me? I don't know the answer. Or let me say - I don't know the specific answer, but I know the general answer. God's plan for your life is to glorify Him, truly loving Him, obeying Him and living on mission for Him. Chances are, God's not going to call you into the pastorate. Chances are, He's not going to call you overseas to be a missionary. But He's calling each one of us to live on mission for Him, wherever we're at: To preach the Good News to everyone that God puts in our path.

I truly believe God has you right where He wants you. You are on the right path, if you are His child. Today you may be in the teacher role, or a stay-at-home parent role. You might be a business owner, or you might be a student, or you might even be unemployed. That's right where God wants you to live on mission. You can reach people that I will never reach. You will reach people that your pastor will never reach, that the person listening to this program in Washington, or in Florida, or in Jamaica, or in South America will never reach. God has you right where He wants you. You are on the path - lean into it, and live on purpose. That's what Paul did - while going, he preached the Gospel. When God wanted him to move, He moved him.

But as it says here in Galatians 1, he was called before the foundation of the world, in his own mother's womb. God had this plan for him to preach the Good news to the Gentiles. Does that mean he wasn't called to preach to the Jews as well? No. In fact, we know that he did so, according to Romans 11. He was under obligation to preach the Good News to everyone, just like you and I are today. But the fact that this Jewish zealot would give up everything, to pursue a life of persecution and trouble, means something significant happened. And we know from Acts 9, that he would meet a risen Christ. This is one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the truth of Christianity. But remember what I said earlier? Paul ran before he learned to walk in his faith. Listen to what he says at the end of verse 16 (ESV):

I did not immediately consult with anyone; <sup>17</sup> 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, after encountering a risen Christ realized his call. He realized he was picked up and put on a new path. Again, we have to realize the fact, that something incredible must have happened, for him to change from being a persecutor of the church to a church planter. And as soon as he experienced the Risen Christ, that's exactly what happened.

And as soon as he got that revelation, he was running. He was so convinced, and so transformed, that he had to immediately go and preach the Gospel. That's why he says he did not go and consult with flesh and blood. In other words, he didn't go and corroborate the story. He didn't go verify that what he had received was true. He didn't have to, because he had heard and received the message from the God-man, Jesus Christ Himself. There was no greater authority than Christ. He says he didn't consult with anyone. He didn't even go to Jerusalem to go meet with the Jerusalem Apostles. If there was anyone that he could have, and maybe should have, talked to - it would have been the Jerusalem Apostles. But again, since he received his Gospel by Jesus

Christ Himself, he did not need anyone else to confirm the message. Instead, it says he went away to Arabia, and then he returned again to Damascus.

When I observe Paul, I see that he was truly a soul saved and a life changed. There is no reasonable explanation for the conversion of Paul, other than seeing and hearing a Risen Christ. For that matter, there is no other reason why his brother James, a Jerusalem Apostle, would believe, except for a Risen Christ. We know from Scripture that Jesus' own brothers denied His divinity. They did not believe He was the Messiah, and the Son of God. They didn't buy it! However, once James encountered a Risen Christ, that changed his perspective.

James and Paul are two of the greatest reasons why the resurrection of Christ should be believed. And as soon as Paul could see Jesus, he was off running down the path that God had put him on. He didn't know everything, but he knew the most important thing - the long-awaited Messiah had come. Jesus, the Messiah, died, was buried and rose again. That changed everything.

So what about you? Have you experienced life transformation and soul saving through Jesus Christ? If not, I encourage you – do not delay. Tomorrow is promised to no one. Salvation doesn't come down to a prayer. Salvation doesn't come by asking Jesus into your heart. Salvation comes by recognizing who you are: A sinner in need of a Savior. Salvation comes by turning from your sin, and turning to Jesus Christ, as your only hope for forgiveness of sins. If you believe the Gospel, the true Gospel - that Jesus Christ came, He died, He was buried, and He rose again - then you will experience a relationship with the God of the Universe, and a destiny forever changed. But what if you're listening today, and you have experienced Salvation, but you've decided to crawl on the path? I encourage you - crawl no longer. Hunger for true, rich spiritual milk. Nourish yourself as you walk, jog and sprint down the pathway, preaching the Good News to all who you encounter.

You may not be thrilled about your job, or the home you live in, but let me tell you – God has you right where He wants you. We have the privilege to share the Gospel, that is God's message of forgiveness and true life, in a world full of darkness. By God's grace, not only do we get to live the reality of who we are in Christ, but we get to share the Gospel message in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, and wherever we go.

It is true we are not called to beat people down with the Gospel, but we cannot cling to a social gospel either. We must declare the true Gospel message, because it is the power of Salvation to all who believe.

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N: I think this is a great opportunity to bring in my discussion partners, Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. Arnie, what is the one thing on your heart today, that you want to use to fire up believers; to get us focused, and ready to do our jobs as disciplers?

A: It's a tremendous opportunity for the Kingdom like never before, because it's no longer comfortable being a Christ follower. It's not even comfortable being a cultural Christian anymore. It's a tremendous opportunity. So it's not natural to sit on the bench - to be a pew sitter. And I'm not talking about diving into the political mess; I'm just talking about - this is a tremendous opportunity to stand up for Jesus. There's just - look around the corner: there's people hurting everywhere that need Jesus. [Yeah]. Like never before. I mean, before they still needed it, but it was comfortable. And so, you know, it was almost - we were a culture, if you've got a Mercedes-Benz, you know, making a hundred thousand - it's like, you're comfortable. It's okay that you're going to Hell, you know? But now you've got all - from all walks of life - people really, really suffering. It's a great opportunity for Jesus, like there never has been, I think, at least in my lifetime.

N: Right. Yeah. I think the opportunity is greater than ever. The question is, are we going to capitalize? And one of the things I love about Back to the Bible is, we are not for bench sitting. We are not for being idle in this race. We are challenging each other. Arnie, you are constantly challenging us as a staff, to not just enjoy the ride, but get out there, and be part of the ride. Go out there and make a difference with the Gospel. God did not call us to be notional Christians. He did not call for us to be cultural Christians, but get out there and make disciples. I love that about you. And I love that about Back to the Bible. Now, Cara, yesterday, we touched on this, but we talked about the difference between working *for* God's approval, and working *from* God's approval. How has that changed your approach to life?

C: Well, I think our works are more pure when we're not working for approval. So if I have to do something to earn my way to approval, then I really don't care about the soul of that person, or whom I'm serving. They're just a task, or a project done. So I think our love - it sort of siphons that out. It becomes more pure, you know - we don't really have a motive. It's just, we really want to serve someone, because we love them.

N: Right. Well, and the motive is pure. I mean, you know, we're parents - and Arnie, you know, you've got grandkids - but there is a difference when we receive a hug from a child or a grandchild, that comes when they run in, and they put their arms around us, and say, "I love you, Papa. I love you, Grandpa. I love you, Mom. I love you Dad" versus, "Hey, get over here squirt and give me a hug." That feels different, because their motivation is different. They're not doing it just to please you; they're not doing it just because you told them to - which is great, that they're so obedient - but their motivation is just because they love you. And so they are displaying that with you. And I have to think that that is what God experiences with us - when we work from our love, and not for His love, it changes everything. Now, something that I thought about, as I worked through this message, was the idea that Paul had heard directly from Christ. And I think some might think, hey, that gave Paul an advantage. And if we had that: if we had that message directly from Christ Himself, we would be motivated just like Paul - if we had that same experience. But I don't know if that holds water. What do you guys think?

C: I think about that. Because I've gone back to that - to what it would have been like to walk with Jesus, and to see Him, and to see the nail holes in His hands. But it doesn't matter. The

response of those who are redeemed in Christ, or by Christ, is the same. It's, "What do you want me to do?" When God truly touches our hearts, that's our only response. So it's the same – "Lord, may your will be done, and may you use me to do it."

A: I know for me, when I start feeling that way, and like, you know, "Wow, I wish I could have been there," it's like - you've got something even better, and that's God's Word. And I hear from God - maybe not directly - but I certainly hear and see God working on a daily basis. Approaching this question too, I just kind of chuckled, because there are times when I'd say, "Man, that just really makes me mad, because I'm just as stupid as anybody else. And if He would have spoken to me, like He spoke to somebody - Moses or Paul on the road - of course I would have listened." But really you have His Word. And His Word speaks - between what you're studying, and what you're looking at, and what you're experiencing in the Holy Spirit. To me, it's maybe a little subtle, but oftentimes not even. So these are not subtle times. I think God does speak to us, just like He did back in the day - maybe even stronger.

N: I'm so glad you said that, because you're exactly right. The Bible we hold is God's Word. When we read those red letters, guess what? Those are Christ's words. We can be confident. We can be sure of it. I mean, studies show that the Bible we hold today is the Bible that was written 2000 years ago. We can be sure of it. So we do have God's Word. Would it have been great to see Jesus on the Damascus Road? Absolutely. Would it have been great to be able to put our hands in His side, and touch those wounds? Yeah, absolutely. It would have, but because God is so faithful to His people, and wanted His Word preserved, we have it there in our hands and of this, we can be sure.