

The Gospel of Change

(Acts 8:1-4)

I. Introduction

- A. After celebrated victories in Gaul, Julius Caesar became a “rock star” in Rome
 - 1. His popularity meant that he threatened the power base of the Roman Senate
 - a. So the Senate ordered Caesar to disband his army and to return to Rome
 - b. Caesar decided to return to Rome with his army and become, well, Caesar
 - 2. The Rubicon River in the north marked the border between Gaul and Italy
 - a. Roman law forbade any general from leading a legion across that border.
 - b. When Caesar took his army across the Rubicon, it was point of no return.
 - c. So “*crossing the Rubicon*” is still used today as a point of no return.
 - 1) Caesar gave us another expression at the crossing of the Rubicon.
 - 2) Caesar said, “*The die has been cast.*” (from backgammon-like game)
- B. Church crossed something of a Rubicon in Wednesday’s reading (**Acts 8:1-3**)
 - 1. Stephen was killed by what amounted to mob violence at the end of **Acts 7**.
 - a. The unofficial opposition of the Jewish leaders had become very official
 - 1) Text says that persecution broke out “*on that day*” (Stephen’s death)
 - 2) It was as if the mob that killed Stephen emboldened the Jews to act
 - b. Saul of Tarsus “*began to destroy*” or “*was ravaging*” (NET) the church
 - c. Time of church “*enjoying the favor of all the people*” (**2:47**) was over
 - 2. Christians reached point where they had to decide **how much** they believed
 - a. When church first experienced opposition, it prayed to be bold (**4:29-30**)
Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.
 - b. Now that boldness would show itself the way the church retreated (**8:4**)
Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went
 - c. Churches now have men’s/ladies/youth “*advances*” rather than “*retreats*”
 - 1) Here the church does retreat... with Jesus’ name on everyone’s lips
 - 2) People went back home to their land of origin... and took Jesus
 - 3. They crossed the Rubicon, point of no return—and took Jesus to the world

II. The Gospel of Change

A. As the original megachurch was scattered, things changed dramatically at home

1. The first persecution (or *ravaging*) of the church was led by Saul of Tarsus
 - a. I don't guess I'm ruining the surprise—Saul becomes the Apostle Paul
 - b. We read about Saul's persecution in [Acts 8](#) and His conversion in [Acts 9](#)
 - c. **God's Irony:** First great persecutor becomes the first great missionary
 - 1) Paul travelled all the way to Syria to arrest and persecute Christians
 - 2) But Paul met Jesus on Damascus and came to see Him as risen Christ
 - d. Paul went everywhere preaching Jesus... like church he once persecuted!

B. Apostle Paul often reflected on his former days as a persecutor of Christians

1. Paul found grace, and it was that grace that drove him ([1 Cor 15:9-10](#))

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

- a. Did Paul feel guilty because of his past? *Don't deserve to be apostle*
 - b. Guilt didn't cripple him; gratitude for grace drove him to serve
 - c. Remembering from what God saved him motivated Paul's serve
2. Paul never forgot his past life in Judaism as a persecutor ([Gal 1:13-16](#))

“For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when 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

 - a. Paul was uniquely qualified to face the false doctrine of the Judaizers
 - b. But he rejected that past as he accepted the grace of Jesus Christ
 3. Paul saw his persecution as part of the past he rejected ([Phil 3:5-6](#))

circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless

 - a. Paul saw his past as a persecutor as a product of his zeal for Judaism
 - b. But since Christ, he counted his legalistic past as “*loss*” and “*rubbish*”
 4. Paul had acted in ignorance, but it doesn't let him off hook ([1 Tim 1:13-14](#))

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

 - a. I once went to a seminar called “*The Testimony of the Blasphemer.*”
 - b. Guy had been in weird cult... and he wondered if he was really forgiven
 - c. Paul's “*testimony of blasphemer*” is precisely because he was forgiven

C. Paul would argue that if God could save him, God can save anyone

1. Not only would Paul say that; it's precisely what he says (**1 Tim 1:15-16**)

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: 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.

a. Paul's point in bringing up his past is to demonstrate what God can do

1) He was dialed in to stamping out the church, he went to another town

2) Weren't enough Christians in Jerusalem— he went on a road trip!

b. The next thing we know, Paul is travelling the world preaching Jesus

c. This rabid Jewish rabbi becomes the apostle to Gentiles... amazing God

2. This radical transformation was too radical and rapid for the church

a. God told Ananias to preach to Saul, Ananias said, "Saul?" (**Acts 9:13-14**)

I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name

b. When he tried to place membership at Jerusalem, they said "Saul?" (**9:26**)

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

c. We understand the reluctance; it must've been shocking to see him there!

D. But it is precisely this kind of radical transformation that the gospel is all about

1. Paul sees this transformation as being raised from the dead (**Rom 6: 12-13**)

Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

a. We have gone from death to life—that's the kind of change God makes

b. Of course, Paul's point here is that we can be satisfied with nothing less

1) We can't accept the gospel without accepting total transformation

2) We're tempted to hold to Christ with one hand and to world with other

c. The constant call of scripture is to live out this total transformation

2. Paul says that our transformation is that of death to life (**Col 3:3-4**)

³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

a. This means ridding ourselves of sexual immorality, lust, and greed (**3:5**)

b. It also means getting rid of anger, malice, slander and bad language (**3:7**)

c. Gospel means "you have taken off your old self with its practices" (**3:8**)

III. Conclusion

- A. The radical change to which the gospel calls us can be unsettling and scary
1. The last time I was at FHC, I ran into two guys I went to school with
 - a. I talked with both and I didn't recognize either— until I placed the voices
 - 1) One had gained almost 200 pounds; other lost more than 200 pounds
 - 2) I was so startled by the radical change that I physically flinched
 - b. Radical change is disquieting and unsettling... even when its good change
 2. We've heard radical conversion stories (*some of you are those radical stories*)
 - a. **Chuck Colson**: Nixon's hatchet man → Christian writer/leader
 - b. **Mosab Yousef**: Son of the founder of terrorist group Hamas → Christian
 - c. **David Berkowitz**: Son of Sam killer → Christian ministry from prison
 3. OK, maybe that last example pushes the envelop—serial killer changed?
 - a. Sure, many in prison "*find religion*" in an effort to seem more reformed
 - 1) Read his reflections (*forgivenforlife.org*) and see if it doesn't ring true
 - 2) Do you really think it may be possible for a murder to be transformed
 - b. If not, then how do you explain Saul's transformation into Apostle Paul?
 - c. If God can change THEM, then God can also change YOU and ME
 - 1) Maybe that is our problem—we'd like to think that we can't change
 - 2) Maybe we'd rather hide behind the excuse "this is just the way I am"
- B. When Jerusalem church lifted up the name of Jesus, they crossed the Rubicon
1. There was no turning back, no fitting in, no compromising with their world
 - a. It means the same thing for us— we are being changed into His image
 - b. The more we are changed to be like Him, the less we will be like world
 2. This change is not always miraculous or instantaneous, and it's never easy
 - a. It's not even possible until we admit **everything is possible** with God!
 - b. It won't happen until we accept the fact that God **expects** it to happen
 - c. It demands much **prayer**, much **obedience**, and much **fellowship**
 3. The power of the gospel demands change— for Paul and for each of us
- C. That is the call of the gospel for you today... and that is our invitation.