

***Message: My life changed***

**“Do you see yourself in the Bible?”**

Do you ever read about the lives of the people in the Bible and think, “Gosh, that sounds like me and my life?” When I read Philippians 3:1-17, I think that. Please understand, my faith and ministry are in no way comparable to the faith and ministry of the Apostle Paul, but I feel like my life reflects a similar path.

**If you feel a connection to someone when you read the Bible – Paul, Peter, Thomas, David, Joseph or others, don’t ignore it.** Instead, as Paul says in Phil. 3:17, “*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.*”

Rather than looking at the people of the Bible as distant and unrelated to us, we should consider them to be models of faith. After all, they were real people with real families and challenges – each one is authentic in their faith and in their love and devotion to God. We can, and should, learn from them, and imitate those things that made them spiritual giants.

**The material and the spiritual:** Paul spoke about these two realms often. Paul used the words “flesh” or “carnal” to talk about our physical nature. This refers to the outer person and the material needs we have. The material realm includes not only our body, but our emotions and what drives us – security, comfort, sex and control, among others. Matthew 4 records the way Satan tempted Christ with wealth, power and fame. In the 1970s when I was a teenager, you might call the material temptations sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll.

**We have very real physical needs:** we need food, water, sleep and health. But the reason why we need them stems from the spiritual. We are made to be spiritual beings. Why else would more than 80% of people want to have a deeper, more fulfilling spiritual life? We long for fulfillment, for connection. The question is: a connection to what? If we’re starving, it’s hard for our spirit to be open to the Holy Spirit. It’s hard for someone who is oppressed and destitute to commune with God.

**Paul tells us to “*have no confidence in the flesh*”** (Phil. 3:3). If our focus, first and foremost, is on meeting our material needs all the time,

we’re missing the thing that will give us greater long-term fulfillment, our spiritual needs. And our spiritual desires and needs often run counter to our physical desires and needs. That’s why Paul tells us that we can’t have confidence in the flesh. We can’t let our heritage, education, wealth, status and accomplishments dictate our belief (or disbelief) in God, or our faith.

**Paul is a perfect example.** In vv5-6, Paul tells us he had everything going for him. He had the right lineage, education and training, he followed the most strict interpretation of Jewish law, and he enforced that law, zealously persecuting the followers of Jesus. According to Jewish law and custom, Paul was righteous and without blame. Think about that for a minute. Paul is saying that he was justified in pursuing, sentencing and imprisoning the followers of Jesus. He was not to blame. He sought righteousness - to be close to God, by following the laws. Paul followed the letter of the law, but he completely missed it’s intent. His focus was not on God’s love, but on justice and his own ambition.

**Before January 2000, I was like Paul.** I had great parents with strong German and English heritages. My family is filled with CEOs, Ph.Ds, military leaders – people used to wielding power and influence. We also have a practical and creative side, with musicians, farmers, plumbers and other professions. I’m wearing a Ph.D. hood with my new robe today because I have a Ph.D. I also completed the coursework for a second Ph.D, and I have three Master’s degrees. I have been a founder or co-founder of five businesses. I have more than 400 publications and am a member of numerous academic and honorary societies. However, during a 25-year period of time my primary motivator was power and personal ambition. Sadly, I was far from the church.

**Paul sought out Christians to imprison them.** Prior to the year 2000, I made it a point to seek out those who were Christian in order to challenge and put them down, publically. Most of you would not have enjoyed meeting me. My own words, “A Christian is someone who was mentally unable to cope with life.” It’s a harsh, and untrue, thing to say, but that’s how far away I was from the church I grew up in.

**Paul’s life changed on the road to Damascus** when Jesus appeared to him and asked him, “*Why do you persecute me?*” (Acts 9:4). In a flash

of light, God changed Paul from an instrument of terror and fear to one of salvation and hope for the Gentiles. I, too, had an encounter with God and it changed me forever. On January 27, 2000, I was in great mental and emotional pain. My first business was failing and I was losing the money my friends and family had invested. My father had life-threatening health problems and my sister had a tumor on her spine. My Jewish girlfriend and I had broken up before Christmas. I didn't know where to turn. To top things off, some friends had invited me to a Christian conference the next day, of all things! After a night filled with alcohol and grief, I went to my knees at 4:30 am and said, “God, if you're real, help me!”

**The feeling that came over me is almost indescribable.** I felt a great calm, a sense of peace and I felt the words, “*Be still*” come over me. I knew enough of the Bible to recognize the words “*Be still, and know that I am God!*” from Psalm 46:10 – I looked it up later. What was my response? I fell asleep. I woke 30 minutes later, completely refreshed and energized. I felt like I had slept for a week. I was moved to call those friends and asked if I could go to the Christian conference with them. Talk about one surprised group of people!

**What do we make of experiences like that?** There is precedent in the Bible. We have to be careful, for Satan was a child of light and can fool even the best of us. I believe it was a real experience in every fiber of my being. If it was untrue, I would not have made it through life's challenges over the past 15 years. If you see evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life and ministry, then you should not doubt. I have no doubt. Jesus forgave my sins. I am born again. My heart was strangely and wonderfully changed that night fifteen and a half years ago.

**Paul's response is amazing** in vv7-8, “*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*” Saul the persecutor became Paul, the defender of faith and the missionary to the world. The impact of Paul's spiritual transformation couldn't have been more extreme. He was no longer concerned about the material things of the world. He understood the

law, politics, economics and more, but he wasn't a slave to knowledge, intelligence or ambition.

I, too, do not consider my former life and accomplishments to be worth holding on to. I remember them, but I do not hold them up to you for admiration. What I hold up instead is the valuable gift of Jesus' love and forgiving grace. Without it, I would not be here before you today.

**Paul changed.** His sole ambition for the rest of his life: to know Christ and to become like him, even through suffering and death, so he might be resurrected to be with Jesus in heaven. Praise God for Paul's example to us! What could be greater than to imitate the life of Jesus Christ and to live as he did? That's a very high and lofty goal. So lofty, in fact, we can't accomplish it on our own. We are still trapped in physical bodies, under the influence and temptation of the material world. We need help to persevere, to be strong spiritually.

**I, too, changed, but it took many years and the help and prayers of a lot of people.** You see, after a dramatic life change, we may have a different perspective, but we're still living a life that's the culmination of the decisions and choices we made before. I had to unlearn a lot of bad habits and to build up new habits over time. It takes time to learn to use spiritual gifts, to explore, take baby steps and to grow and mature. The process takes a lifetime, but Jesus sent a gift to help us, the gift of the Holy Spirit by God's grace. We can do it. Jesus showed us the way. Paul showed us how. Others will come alongside us to guide us when we need it, some of whom we know in our lifetime.

**If there is anything you hear in this message today, hear this.** No one – not Paul, no living or dead saint, and certainly not me – none of us have reached the goal of being perfect – just like Christ in all we do, much less resurrected from the dead. Paul knew this, as do all who follow his example. But there is one thing we all do: we forget the past and everything that holds us back, and we use all our might to move forward, pushing onward in response to the call of Jesus Christ. Just like climbers seeking to reach the top of Mount Everest, through the years of preparation, the months of travel and the climb through the death zone, we seek to reach the pinnacle of faith.

When we reach the heavenly pinnacle, we will see wondrous things and have experiences we can't imagine. Best of all, we will be welcomed by the loving arms of our Shepherd and Savior, the one who came to save us: Jesus Christ. To God be the glory!

**Philippians 3:1-17 (NRSV)**

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. ... we who ... worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh - even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.