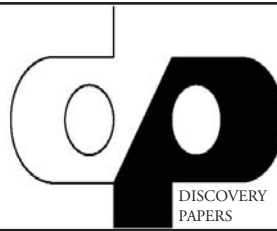


# A MESSAGE FROM GOD

**SERIES: FROM BUMPER CARS TO CARNIVAL SWINGS**



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Galatians 1:11-2:14  
2nd Message  
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Have you ever received a message, or an instruction, that claimed to be from a certain person, but you weren't sure if that was really the case? This happens a lot with kids. "Dad said it's my turn with the video game." That type of stuff. An example of this takes place in the movie *Crimson Tide*, which is set on an American nuclear submarine. This submarine has recently received orders to fire a nuclear warhead on some rebel Russian bases, essentially starting a nuclear war. But then, just when they are about to comply with those orders, they receive a new message that may contain orders to cancel the launch. However, these new orders are incomplete and can't be authenticated. One of the characters in the movie, Mr. Hunter, is particularly concerned about this message fragment that might tell him to cancel a nuclear missile strike. The movie tells the story of the extremes that Mr. Hunter goes to in order to receive the rest of this message and determine its source. Sometimes the issue of whether a message is authentic is really important. Sometimes it determines whether a nuclear war is started.

Sometimes it determines what you think about God. Do you ever wonder about this whole Christian thing? We all doubt at times. Do you ever worry that this message about forgiveness and reconciliation and a new relationship with God is just somebody's clever invention? Do you ever worry that this whole thing came from people and not from God? I do. How do you know you aren't just here because your parents started bringing you here when you were a kid? How do we know that we aren't just here because of some clever argument that duped us?

We're going to continue our study in the book of Galatians by addressing this issue. In our last message, we began looking at Galatians and saw how critical this book is because it was written to some of the first churches very early on in the Christian movement. These churches had gotten confused about the gospel. Paul originally preached the gospel to them, but some variation had apparently started floating around. So they had two versions of the gospel, and it was really important for them to get the gospel right; if they didn't, the whole Christian movement might be threatened. So Paul writes them to clear up their misunderstanding. But how do they know that this message from Paul is really from God? To allay their concerns about his authenticity, Paul has to start by showing them that his gospel is truly a message from God and not just from him.

That's what we want to see this morning, too. This gospel, all this stuff about Jesus creating a new community that is centered on God as our Father, really does come from God. And if this message does come from God, then we should expect to be changed by it. If the message

in *Crimson Tide* really came from the right authorities, it would have been a really important message to receive. If the gospel really comes from God, it must be important for us to understand.

We'll be looking at Galatians 1:11 through 2:14 this morning to see how Paul demonstrates that his message comes from God. It's a large chunk of Galatians. But the first two verses of this section really provide a roadmap and a summary for what he's trying to say. Again, I'll be reading from my own interpretive translation not because I'm capable of coming up with a better translation than a team of scholars but because I've tried to draw out the themes that I want us to notice and use some fresh language to help us get into the text. Here's Galatians 1:11-12:

**Now I want all of you, my brothers and sisters, to know that the gospel message that I preached among you didn't come from a person who thought it up. I know this because it wasn't passed down to me from some group of people, and I didn't learn it from some person who taught it to me. Instead, I first heard of it directly from Jesus Christ through a supernatural vision.**

Paul begins by telling his story. He uses his story to demonstrate that his message comes from God. His purpose here is to work through this tricky relationship of what our experience with God has to do with other people. How do you know what comes from God and what comes from other people? He starts by removing other people entirely from the equation and then gradually adding them back in. In the first part of his story, it's just him and God. But then he shows how other people relate to his experience with God.

## The Gospel Begins with God

Paul starts by telling the story of how he first encountered Christ. This is in verses 13 through 17.

**I know that you have heard about the person I used to be when I was one of the Jewish leaders. You know that I was the best of all the Jewish leaders at persecuting the churches of God and I tried to completely destroy every last one. I wanted to be the best Jew possible, better than anyone else. I was more passionate about following and defending all of our ancient traditions than anyone I knew! But God had different plans. He had decided before I was even born that I would be given a special job in life. So He reached out to me because of His grace. And then, when He was ready, He made me understand in a deeply personal way who**

**His son really was so that I could spread that gospel message among those people who weren't ethnically Jewish. Now after this happened, the first thing I did was not to go talk to some people about the message that I had received. I didn't even make the trip to Jerusalem to talk with those people who had earlier been given the same calling as apostles that I had just received. Instead I went the other direction, into Arabia and then after that I went back to where I had come from: Damascus.**

Remember the game we talked about last week? Remember how we said that without God in the picture, whenever we try to relate to other people, we have to play this game of who's more valuable than who in order to establish our place in this world? We're forced to compare ourselves to other people and figure out where we belong based on how we stack up against others. I called it the "life without God" game. Paul starts out by saying that he is the last person in the world who needed Jesus Christ. He was winning the game. He was one of the best in his group and he was on his way to becoming even better. He didn't need Jesus. He definitely didn't have any motivation to stop playing the game.

And yet, God intervened. God called him directly. The language that Paul uses here is reminiscent of the Old Testament saints. Paul is pointing out that the same God who acted in the past is the one who is calling him. This is the same God that first spoke to Abraham, the same God that spoke to Isaiah, the same God who called Jeremiah. Listen to Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Notice the similar language: "from birth," "set apart," "preach to the nations." This was the same God, calling a new person to a similar task.

Paul wants to make clear that the gospel he is preaching began with God. It began with a dramatic encounter with Jesus. That's true for all of us. Our encounters may not be quite as dramatic, but if you follow Christ, you do so because on some level, you've experienced Him. The gospel begins with God.

For Paul, everything changed in a moment. God appeared to Him apart from other people. And he didn't do what I would have done right away: go check out my experience with someone else to make sure I wasn't crazy. He knew that this message, this experience, came from God.

I've asked this question of my own story at times. I grew up going to church and as a younger kid didn't ever really question Christianity, but I didn't really fully embrace it either. It was just sort of there and a part of my life. I wasn't fully convinced of it, but I wasn't ready to ditch it either. Then in high school when I moved to a new city, we found a church with a really cool youth director. It was through the passion and love of that youth pastor that God started to seem really real to me. So in my moments of doubt, I can ask myself: was God really working in my

life or was I just a lonely highschooler in a new city who needed some positive attention? Was it God or was it people?

Then, I look back at my life, and I can identify times when God has worked in powerful ways. I can see how God protecting me through issues with sin in college. I've seen God at work in my marriage. We've had some really rough times, but God is working. In fact, I don't think I would still be married if not for His patient work. So I realize that though people have been a really important part of my experience of God, they haven't created it. It is God who acts. It is God who reaches out to me.

Paul's story reminds us that God is at work. And it helps us to look for ways that He has been at work in our lives. My suggestion for us is to think of how God has been at work in our lives. Just as Paul's story encourages us, our stories encourage each other. This is what we need to hear. We didn't make our stories up. God is actually at work. The gospel that we believe begins with God.

## Our Community Affirms the Gospel

So the first part of Paul's story was meant to show that the gospel message that changed him came directly from God—not from any person or any thing. But we live in a world full of people, and the gospel forms a community of people. So even though it is God who acts, people are involved in His work. As Paul continues his story, he progressively deals with how other people fit into his experience of God. He begins by telling us about his first visit to Jerusalem. In the beginning of his story, he pointed out that he didn't go immediately up to Jerusalem. But he did eventually. Here are verses 18-24:

**Then, three years later, I finally made the trip to Jerusalem so that I could actually meet Peter and I ended up staying with him for about two weeks. But I didn't even see any of the other apostles except for James, the brother of our Lord. It's so important that you know I am telling you the truth that I swear before God that I am not lying to you. After that trip to Jerusalem, I traveled around Syria and Cilicia. Back then, no one from the Christian churches around Judea even knew what I looked like. But they had definitely heard the amazing turnaround: that the monster who once attacked the churches was now trying to spread the gospel message that he used to work so hard to stamp out. And because of the miracle of my turnaround, they praised God in wonder.**

He tells us about going up to Jerusalem, but at this point, he goes to great lengths to point out that even though he went up to Jerusalem to meet with Peter, he didn't end up staying there very long. He

wants us to know for sure that God's voice and not Peter's confirmation convinced him of the truth of the gospel. But he's gradually introducing people back into his experience of God. The first encounter with Peter is a brief one, but then he goes to one that a little more extensive. Read the first ten verses of chapter 2.

**Then after fourteen years, I finally made it back to Jerusalem. Barnabas and I went and took Titus with us too. I made the trip because God had spoken directly to me and told me to do it. While I was there, I met privately with the people who were considered to be leaders so that I could explain to them the gospel message that I had been sharing among the Gentiles. I wanted to make sure that all of my work wasn't completely contrary to what they understood the gospel to mean. After I explained my understanding of the gospel to them, everyone agreed with me that Titus, whom I had brought along and was an uncircumcised Gentile, did not need to be circumcised to follow Christ. They all realized that the idea that someone would need to be circumcised came from imposters who pretended to follow Christ, but who in reality wanted to take away the freedom that Christ offers those who follow Him because they were jealous of that freedom. They don't want people to be free because they want to enslave them. The good news is that not one of the leaders was tempted to believe their false message for a single second because they recognized that this would endanger the very truth of the gospel for you. You have to realize that it didn't matter to me that the people I was meeting with were considered to be leaders because I know that God doesn't care about title or position. But the result of this meeting was that they didn't see anything wrong at all with the message that I was preaching to the Gentiles. So instead of correcting anything about my message, they acknowledged that I had been given the task of spreading the gospel message to the Gentiles just like Peter had been given the task of doing that for the Jews. And they realized that this came from above all of us because the same God who charged Peter with his task charged me with mine. So because they saw that my calling had come directly from God, James and Peter and John, the official leaders of the church, accepted me and Barnabas as one of their own. The result of all of this is that they validated my calling to preach to the Gentiles as equal to their calling to preach to the Jews. The only thing they asked me to do was to keep the needs of poor people in mind. The funny thing is that that's exactly what I wanted to do anyway!**

Paul tells these two stories about how, after his initial encounter with Jesus, he shared his experience with the community. The result was that the community affirmed his gospel. He's walking a fine line in talking about how other people play into his experience of God. He wants to

make sure people understand that his gospel is from God, but other people play a role in it, as well. And the first role that they play is one of affirmation. This is true of us, too. Our community affirms our experience of God. Our community affirms the gospel. The community doesn't cause or create our experience with God, but it does validate it. That's a really important distinction.

But for Paul, when he went to Jerusalem, he had no guarantee that this community would affirm his experience with God. Have you ever had a meeting that you enter with something you know is different from what people expect and you're not quite sure how people will respond? And you're worried that things might turn out really badly? You might go into that meeting fearing the worst. Paul has traveled to meet with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, all of whom are ethnically Jewish, to tell them about his experience of God and his work in sharing the message of salvation with non-Jews. What he was doing was very different than what they were doing. They were preaching mainly to Jews. He was preaching to Gentiles. He had good reason to fear that this meeting wouldn't go so well.

But this meeting ended up better than he had even hoped, and you can hear his excitement in his tone. Everything worked out perfectly. Nobody thought that Titus needed to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. Nobody wanted to change any part of his message. The reason for their acceptance of him was that they recognized God. They didn't simply agree with him. They recognized God at work.

One of my favorite musical artists is a guy named Jack Johnson. I actually played you one of his songs during my series on Sabbath. He has a very distinctive style—which is a nice way of saying that most of his songs sound pretty much the same. But I like his music anyway. The other day, one of his songs came on the radio. Eliana, my five-year-old daughter, said “Hey, isn't this the guy that sang in the *Curious George* movie?” And it was. It was Jack Johnson. She had never heard the song before, but she recognized the sound. And that's what happened in this meeting in Jerusalem. Peter and James and the others hadn't heard the song that Paul was singing, but they recognized the voice of God as the artist. So they celebrated it and they affirmed it as the work of the same God. They recognized Peter as an apostle to Jews and Paul as an apostle to Gentiles. This was a big deal!

This is how we want to strive to relate to one another. We want to look for and recognize that God is at work among all of us. Remember the title of this series in Galatians: from bumper cars to carnival swings? Sometimes in Christian circles, we act like bumper cars in this way. It's easy to think that you have to be excited about the same thing I'm excited about in order for us to be working for the same God. Have you ever felt that way in a Christian group? That there is only one way that God is supposed to work in our lives?

I knew a friend who was involved in a college fellowship

that really stressed the importance of evangelism. She was a very quiet person who wasn't comfortable with the bold style of evangelism that this group promoted. But she was an incredible artist, and she had a great heart for communicating God's truth through art. Unfortunately, her passion was rarely affirmed or celebrated. Instead, she always felt guilty for not being a bold evangelist. Her group subtly told her that if God's work in her life didn't look a certain way, she didn't belong there. And that's a tragedy—when God's legitimate work in our lives isn't recognized by our community because they can only conceive of one way for God to work.

But the gospel invites us to ride the carnival swings, not the bumper cars. The gospel invites us to recognize God as a Father, uniting all of us under our relationship with Him. He's at the top. And we're connected to Him. So if I can recognize Him in other people's lives, then I can be excited about what He is doing. It doesn't have to look like what I'm doing. I can hear a different song and recognize the same artist. I don't have to feel threatened by different songs. In fact, I should expect to hear different songs. With different personalities and different backgrounds, different interests and different life circumstances, when God works in each of our lives, we should expect it to look different. If all our passions were the same, then we'd really have to wonder whether this God thing was real or manufactured. But if the gospel is a message from God, the way it calls us and shapes us will look different in each of our lives.

How do we expect God to work in people's lives at PBC? I think we expect people to have profound Biblical insights. We expect people to be disciplined and to disciple others. We expect people to study the Bible. Are there ways that God is working around here that may not be as recognized as others? Are there areas that aren't as familiar to us that we don't affirm? If so, let's work hard to recognize and affirm them. Let's listen to each other and look for God. Look for the same God behind different songs. When you find Him, celebrate Him, even if it looks different than what you expect.

This can be hard for me at times. I had a meeting this week with a fellow college pastor, and such meetings can sometimes be challenging for me. This particular person clearly had a different style of ministry than me. So my natural instinct was to feel threatened. I start thinking, "Oh man, I'm clearly not as connected to God as he is." Or, "Maybe I'm not really following God's lead because what I'm doing looks so different." And I think we all have sensitive areas—things that we are particularly susceptible to feeling guilty about. Evangelism is a "sensitive area" for me, and this person was clearly an evangelist. It's funny how God puts experiences like that in my life so that I can learn from my own sermon before I preach it. But I think we all feel this way at times. In my case, it made me question my experience with God. Other times, we question someone else's experience of God. My hope is that in those times, we can remember that it is the same God, and it's completely normal for His work to look different in different people. We can look for that difference and

celebrate it.

But there are times when an experience may not be from God. There are times when people have experiences that they think are from God, and we as a community don't affirm them because they don't fit with what we know of God. How do we know which is which? How do we know when it's God and when it's people? We have to know how God has revealed Himself in the past, especially in Scripture. If we know God well, we'll be able to distinguish His work from the work of others. You don't have to hear too many Jack Johnson songs to recognize his style. But our God is more creative and surprising than Jack Johnson. We need to immerse ourselves in this book to know Him well. As we do that, when we hear a new song, we'll know whether He is the one singing it.

## The Gospel Transforms Our Community

So Paul actually concludes his story by showing what happened when he ran into this type of situation. Read my translation of verses 11 through 14.

**Now when Peter visited me in Antioch, I had to get in his face because he was behaving in a way that was completely wrong. You see, when he first arrived, he had no problem eating at the same table as the Gentiles who were part of our church. But then some people came to our church who claimed to represent James. And when they got there, Peter did a complete turnaround. He became really aloof from the Gentile believers. He avoided them and wouldn't eat with them anymore because he was afraid of what these really Jewish people might think. The worst part is that most of the other Jewish believers followed his example. Eventually even Barnabas became a hypocrite too by avoiding the Gentiles. But I realized that this simple action actually challenged the very heart of the gospel message, and so I called Peter to the carpet in front of everyone. I pointed out to him that even though he was a Jew he thought it was okay to act like a Gentile. So why would he ask a Gentile to act like a Jew if he himself doesn't have to?**

In this case, people aren't affirming the gospel, they're acting in contradiction to it. So the gospel challenges them and eventually transforms them. Paul started out by showing how his gospel initially came directly from God. Then he progressively shows how the community came to understand, validate, and celebrate his experience with God. And now there's a conflict within the community. Peter is singing a different song and Paul has to challenge him. He has to tell him that this new song is written by men, not by God. And so we realize that the gospel is bigger than any of us. It has the power to transform the community. At times, our community affirms the gospel. At other times, the gospel transforms our community. This is an instance of the latter.

Remember that Paul's point here is that the gospel is a message from God. The fact that the gospel has the power

to confront us and transform us should actually help us to believe that it is really from God. If the gospel comes from men—if it's just an agreement reached by a bunch of people in a board meeting—then when it comes up against the hard realities of life in community, the gospel itself should change. That's what was happening in Galatia and why Paul wrote this letter. Certain people were changing the gospel to adapt it to life in this particular community. But the gospel isn't from men. The gospel comes from God. It's bigger than all of us. And because it's bigger than us, it has the power to change us. When things get complicated, we don't change the gospel. The gospel changes us. The gospel transforms our community.

Just like we should expect the gospel to work itself out in different ways in our different lives, we should expect the gospel to change us as a community. We should expect this community to be different. We should expect the way we relate in this place and the way relationships play out in this room to be different because the gospel has changed us.

One of the implications of Paul's story here is that the gospel has everything to do with who you eat with. Have you ever thought about that? Who do you eat with? Why do you eat with them and not other people? Paul says that the gospel has everything to do with who you sit down and eat a meal with. It's not just about feeling close to God. It's not just about having your sins forgiven. It's not just about going to heaven when you die. The gospel is about who you welcome into your life and who you exclude. It's about rich people eating with poor people and young eating with old and whites eating with Hispanics and recovering addicts eating with successful business executives. We should expect the gospel to rewrite the ways that we relate across ethnicities, across genders, across age groups, across social classes. We should expect the gospel to form us as a community. We should expect to be different.

This is Paul's goal for the Galatians: the transformation of their community by the power of the gospel. So he reminds them that this message of the gospel comes from God. Figuring out how this message from God relates to other people is a complicated thing, but it has to be done because the gospel isn't just about me, it's about us. We should expect to encounter God. We should expect Him to work in tangible ways in our lives. And we should expect our community to affirm that, even if it looks different than what they've experienced. Finally, we should expect the gospel to change us. To transform the way we think about each other and the way we relate.

It all hinges on whether this message is really from God. Just like the command to fire a nuclear warhead in *Crimson Tide*, the authenticity of this message has huge implica-

tions. Since this movie is an older one, I think it's okay to give away the ending. In the end, Mr. Hunter was right. That message fragment was important enough to receive in full before taking action. It was authentic. Because Mr. Hunter went to such lengths to determine its authenticity, the message changed the course of history.

If this gospel message is also authentic, it will change us. Let's look for ways that God has made Himself real to us. Let's celebrate the different ways that God has worked in others' lives. And let's be prepared for the gospel to transform us. It just might change the course of history.

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