

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Entrenchment to Encounter”**  
**Romans 5:1-11**  
**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**May 10, 2015**

In order to understand anybody, you really need to know their story. Where did they come from? What mistakes have they made? What was their childhood like? Of course if you're from St. Louis there's only one question you ask, ***“What high school did you go to?”*** It's still strange to me that this is “the question” for St. Louisans (if that's what you call yourselves). But I've learned that there are a lot of questions being asked in that one question. Like: public or private? single-gender or mixed? Catholic or Other?

It's one of the quirks of our city, but the curiosity about your back-story isn't all that unique to us ... because knowing your story helps us to understand you. It doesn't really matter if you're a politician, or our kids teacher, or that annoying guy at work... knowing your story helps me to get where you're coming from and understand you just a bit better.

That couldn't be more true for the apostle Paul... who used to be know as Saul: Saul of Tarsus, Saul the Pharisee, Saul the righteous, Saul the persecutor, Saul the enemy of the followers of the “Way” as Christians were called at the time.

We're in our second week with Paul's letter to the Romans and we're asking, remember, what is the gospel that he's trying to get across to them and to us... what is the good news? Because we've got a hunch that maybe it's not quite as formulaic as some of us were taught along the way. Maybe it isn't just about escaping the fires of hell.

And as long as we're talking about hell, here's a fun fact for you: Paul never does... talk about “hell,” that is. Not once in Romans... or in any of his other writings for that matter. He never mentions it... which must mean that it's not part of his theology... otherwise you'd assume he would talk about it.

He's certainly not shy to talk about anything and everything that comes to his mind. In fact, some folks don't really like Paul all that much because he seems a bit too confident in what he thinks. But apparently, he doesn't think much at all about hell. It's not in his writings. It's not in his theological vocabulary. The surprising truth is, Hell is simply not in the picture for Paul. Surprised? I sure was when it was pointed out to me.

So, we're exploring what Paul is actually trying to say about the gospel and particularly how he describes it in his letter to the Romans. But in order for us to get Paul, we really need to keep in mind his own story... because it reveals an awful lot about where he is coming from and the gospel as he sees it.

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As I already mentioned and you all already know, Paul was known as Saul in his former life. Remember, he wasn't one of the twelve disciples that followed Jesus. In fact, he never knew Jesus in the flesh. Never met him.

He was a precocious young Jewish boy who didn't grow up in the Promised Land. Saul grew up out in the Roman Empire, a Roman citizen, speaking Greek, and yet holding tightly to his Jewish faith and identity with all that he had in him... just like any persecuted minority tends to do.

I imagine he was that kid who loved to play Torah Drills, and always had just one more star on his scripture memory chart than everyone else. Not only could he recite the Ten Commandments forwards and backwards, he could tell you the difference between the version recorded in Exodus and the version reordered in Deuteronomy.

And if *you* got it wrong, he'd be sure to let you know. I imagine that was just the kind of kid he was. Getting it right, being right, doing it right was important for him... and as far as he was concerned, it was important for you too.

So, of course, it was no surprise when he became a Pharisee at a young age. People probably saw it in him all along. He was just that good and faithful and righteous... At least, that's how I imagine him by the way he describes himself. In his letter to the Philippians he says that if anyone could boast, he could more. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, born of the tribe of Benjamin. As to the law, a Pharisee, full of zeal and passion. And when it came to righteousness under the law, he was perfect.

So, when the followers of the Way, as the early Jewish Christians were called, started preaching all this blasphemy about **“Jesus of Nazareth being the Son of God,”** Saul certainly wasn't going to sit idly by and let them distort their great tradition with lies.

In fact, Saul's first introduced to us at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr in Acts. He was sure to get a front row seat and took notes. Pretty soon he started “ravaging the church” the book of Acts says, dragging the followers of Jesus off to jail. He was breathing murderous threats and was feared everywhere Christians spoke his name.

He mentions this period of his life in his letter to the Galatians. He writes to them, **“I'm sure you have heard of my earlier life, when I was violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it. I had advanced in our religion beyond many among my people of the same age for I was more passionate, more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors than my peers.”**

Saul was the quintessential example of passionate religion breaking bad... of religion getting sick. At this point, he is a picture of how early stage religion often works... and the dead-end that it can create. Saul was trapped in black and white thinking. He sees the world as good guy and bad guys, right or wrong, insiders and

outsiders, clean and unclean.

But something happens to Saul along the way. He's in the middle of his persecuting rampage, on his way to Damascus, when he encounters the mysterious presence of the risen Christ. His eyes are opened in the blinding light, and everything he thought was true is turned on its head. He realizes that in the name of religion, he had become a murder. In the name of love, he had become hate. In the name of being right and correct and perfect, he had been deadly wrong.

And this moment, this change, significantly shapes how Saul, who later is known as Paul, understands the gospel. He begins to realize just how corrupt any religious system can become when it sees the world as insiders and outsiders...

us and them....

the "saved" and the unsaved

the righteous and the unrighteous

He sees just how corrupt religion becomes when its goal is correctness  
or even purity and perfection.

For the rest of his life Paul becomes a critic of immature, self-serving religion and becomes the champion of religion that is transformational, religion that is exposing and healing the ego.

And so we see again and again that for Paul, faith that isn't primarily defined or recognized by a set of religious codes...because he's been down that road and knows how bankrupt it is. But instead faith is recognized and defined by fruits of the spirit.

It is about our transformation,  
our re-creation,

our being made new... not about having all the right answers.

Rather than being "correct," Paul preaches and teaches about being connected... about being transformed by the love of God being poured out... a love that he knows from first hand experience.

When he writes what we heard earlier that "***God demonstrates God's love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,***" Paul is writing from profound personal experience or knowing his sinfulness and at the same time encountering the transformational love of God

He knows what it means to "**be an enemy of God**" as he puts it, not because of God's posture toward us, but because of our own destructiveness...

and yet at the same time to encounter the profound love of God made known in Christ that is already being poured out for us.

These words aren't simply theological speculation for Paul.  
They are personal experience.  
He writes out of his own story.

When you hold that story in mind, his writings take on new life.

The one who was once a violent religious zealot who encounters the radical life changing presence of Christ writes:

“We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” vs. 1

“Simply by faith, by trusting in God’s love, we have access into this grace in which we now stand.” vs. 2

“We have been made righteous” ... which as we said last week, doesn’t mean we’ve been made perfect, but means “We have be put back into relationship with God.” vs. 9

“Though Christ, we have reconciliation, we have restored relationship with God.” vs. 11.

This has been Paul’s experience... an experience he knows is not just for him or about him... but if God’s love was reaching out to him, it must be reaching out to everyone.

In the middle of this passage, in vs. 5, he says that the love of God has been poured into our hearts... and the form of the verb he uses here describes a love that has been and is continuing to be poured out.

It’s a love that is still being poured into our hearts today and will be pouring into us tomorrow...

no matter how far from it we’ve turned,  
no matter how blind we’ve been...

It’s here... offered to you and it always will be.

There is nothing you can do to get it, because it’s already there.

And there is nothing you can do to stop it.

There is only ignoring it...or receiving it.

This is the gospel, the good news for us all:

The same love that poured out and sparked all of creation in the very beginning,

The same love that was poured out into our universe  
creating the sun moon and stars,

The same love that blows through the leaves of the trees  
and rains down on the thirsty earth...

This same love is being poured out into our hearts.  
here and now... this day and tomorrow.

Just as it has been all along... even when we didn’t know it... even when we didn’t trust it. God’s love was being poured out into the world and poured deep into you.

If you every doubted, just look at the cross... It’s there in the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection.

While we were still, along with the crowds rejecting God's own self, yelling  
"crucify him!"  
still turned away and hiding,  
still ignoring,  
still hurting those around us  
still angry and selfish and too blind by our self-righteousness to notice or  
give a darn, Christ died for us.

This is the mystery.

There have been a hundred different theological theories and systems to try to explain why this is true... some better than others but none of which answer all the questions. I can't begin to completely explain how it all works, but I know it's true. When you gaze upon the cross with the contemplative heart ... you can see it. You encounter it.

When Jesus wanted to explain what was going to happen in the cross to his disciples, he doesn't give them a theory. He gives them a meal...the bread and the cup. He told them, "This is my life broken for you.  
"This is my life, poured out for you...  
"This is the love of God offered to you.

Take and eat. Take and drink deeply.  
And experience its power for your salvation.  
Amen.

Silent Reflection:

*O Lord, let your love dissolve my hard heart.  
Let your love raise me above myself.  
Let Your love reveal joy to me.  
Let my soul sing the praises of Your love.  
Let me love You more than I love myself,  
And let me love myself only for Your sake.  
Let me see You in all people,  
That I may love them as I love you. Amen.*  
~Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471) adapted