

IMPECCABLE CREDENTIALS**Galatians 1:11-24****(Read Galatians 1:11-24)**

Intro: Back in May Kathy and I went birdwatching up on Lake Erie. One of the highlights of our three days there was a jetboat ride across the Lake to Ontario so that we could do some birdwatching at Point Pelee National Park on Erie's north shore. Since we were entering Canada we needed our passports. Kathy and I have passport cards that we can use for land entry into Canada or Mexico, and for some reason, the Bahamas. They are much more convenient than having to carry the usual passport book – though in the ten years I've had mine, I literally had never used it for a border crossing until this trip. Even though I had never used the card and it has always been in a protective sleeve, somehow the card had begun to come apart. So, as I got off the boat at Leamington, Ontario I handed the defective passport card to the buff Canadian border agent with not a little apprehension. And not to disappoint, the card failed to work with the handheld scanning device he was using. He tried every angle to no avail as the line of excited birders was halted behind me. I thought the best-case scenario would be that he'd have to look me up in some kind of huge ledger or computer database – but I'd have to go to some station to do that – and the buses were waiting to take us to the Park. Worst-case scenario was that Kathy and everybody else would hop on those waiting buses and go birdwatching without me and I'd have to stay on the boat for the next 8 hours. All this was going through my mind as I mentally kicked myself for not bringing my actual passport and the increasingly agitated border guard worked on my worthless passport. Finally, he asked me if I was carrying any firearms to which I said no, and then he told me to enjoy my time in Canada and asked the person behind me on the gangplank to step forward. My credentials were definitely flawed, but the agent graciously allowed me safe passage.

From what I just read from Galatians 1, we can see that Paul, on the other hand, had impeccable credentials. Verse 14 says he was advancing in Judaism beyond his peers was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers. We also see Paul's credentials at other places in the New Testament, most notably in Philippians where he writes that he was *circumcised on the eighth 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 righteousness based on the law, faultless*. Philippians 3:5-6 and in Acts where Luke records Paul saying *"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison"*, Acts 22:3-4a. In Judaism Paul was the best of the best and the cream of the crop. But he often says that those credentials, perfect as they were, were nothing compared to the calling he had in Jesus Christ.

Know what? We all have that calling. We all have those same impeccable credentials, if we do as he did and appropriate them. Let's look at it.

First we need to know it's . . .

A Gospel from God

- We didn't make this up. In fact, you can't make it up. The gospel is of divine origin – not from men – he said it in verse 1 and now he says it again in verse 12.
- He also reminds his hearers that his calling was different from that of other apostles. Paul wasn't one of the original 12 apostles who walked with Jesus as his disciples – his call came from direct contact – on the Damascus road. He may not have walked physically with Jesus, but he got up close and personal with him as he was blasted to the pavement on the Damascus Road. The man whose name had been Saul went from Christianity's worst nightmare to a purveyor of the best news ever in one swift and divine move.
- Paul's urgent message for these astonishing Galatians who had slipped back into worthless and baseless traditions was that the Good News was a NEW THING that superseded the old ways of thinking. That is why it was important for him to point out that his revelation was directly from Jesus and free of the tradition other apostles may have been influenced with. This is something big! He knew about the quagmire of tradition since he had been so steeped in tradition as an extremely zealous adherent to the traditions of his fathers (v 14).

- Paul had been the strictest of the adherents in an already strict sect – the Pharisees. And he had been a persecutor of the followers of Jesus Christ. and then he saw the glorious light. It was a new and wondrous thing – a Gospel, literally Good News straight from God the Son. These were his new credentials.
- They are ours as well. This is not a human concoction. Instead it's God's perfect solution for lost humanity. Look at what he does. Just when we think we have it figured out . . .

God has other plans

- Paul lays it out beautifully in verse 15 and 16. Let's read them again, *But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles*, Galatians 1:15-16a. The apostle makes an about face because God:
 - Set him apart – from birth – actually before, from his mother's womb. You see, Paul was predestined for ministry. He didn't just happen to exist, his life, as is true for all of us, had its roots in eternity. And it's that way for us too. For every one of us our salvation begins in the mind of a loving God who has a plan for every one of us. You've probably heard someone say at some point, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." THIS IS WHERE IT COMES FROM! We aren't just random beings – God has a plan for us, and once we surrender to him, he readies us for service. This is our predestination. We have been elected to ministry because God has chosen us. Archibald Hunter writes in reference to this passage "*What election means in simple terms is this: God chooses us before we choose him; God does not choose us because we deserve it; and God does not choose us to be his favorites but to be his servants.*" So we are chosen by God – chosen not for honor but for service. The truth is we have been saved to serve.
 - And after he was set apart from birth, he points out that God called him by his grace. Here was a bitterly angry, and fanatically faithful Jew for whom the Cross was a deep offence. It was so offensive because any self-respecting Jew knew that Messiah would never have died let alone on the shameful cross. And all that anger made him into a force to be reckoned with. He had participated in imprisoning and executing many of these Christ Followers, and yet, by amazing grace he was called away from that. The other day I was sharing the story of my friend Al who thought he could never be good enough for Jesus (Tell about Al Nornhold). Grace is so amazing that even though now one deserves it – God has a place and a plan for all of us. You are beyond his salvation only when you are no longer breathing and at no other time. If you ever wondered about it, there you have it.
 - And not only that, as it was with Paul who tells us that God was pleased to reveal his Son in him. He will with us. Remember, he saves us for service. Jesus is revealed in his followers. Paul when from an angry face of persecution to the peace face of grace and good news. He got a face lift on the Damascus Road. Do people see Jesus on your face?
 - Then tell people about it. Paul said that God revealed himself in him that he might preach about him among the Gentiles. Paul no longer saw Jesus as an impostor but as the hope of all humanity. And that is what he is. Jesus is the hope of the world. Teach it.
- Finally a few things about Paul's transition from card-carrying Christian-hater to . . .

A credentialed Christ Follower

- Paul went to school. But his teacher was the Holy Spirit. In verse 16 he points out that he consulted with no human being. Instead he headed into the desert for some years of detox. He didn't seek out other teachers – it seems it was solitary confinement while the Holy Spirit leached the poison of tradition, anger and hate from his spirit. And he also just needed to ponder this awesome thing that had happened to him. And he needed to talk to God about it. Good things take time, and this was a good thing.
- This is a good thing for any Christ Follower. Sometimes you just need to get away and meet God by yourself. And also, it's good to finally figure things out on your own. There comes a time when you can no longer believe what someone else does but what you know for yourself. (Tell about my transition).
- Once Paul had spent this time in the desert of Arabia, he goes back and into ministry in a deliberate step by step restorative ministry plan. First, he goes back to Damascus, then Jerusalem, then Syria and Cilicia.

- Damascus had been where he was headed on his persecutor's quest. And it was on that journey when Jesus himself struck him to the ground and changed his default setting from Jewish Fanatic to Fool for Christ. So, it was Damascus where his ministry needed to begin. Paul needed to go back and get it right. (Why I try to get the difficult stuff out of the way first)
- After he dealt with Damascus he went on to Jerusalem. This was courageous – it was dangerous in Damascus, it would be worse in Jerusalem. He would not have been popular in his old haunts – in fact it was downright dangerous. He was a turncoat in the minds of the religious elite in the fanatical ranks he'd once been a rising star. Once again he was setting the record straight. He had new credentials and he was letting people know.
- Finally, he returned to Syria and Cilicia where his boyhood home of Tarsus was located. He knew what we need to know, witness needs to start at home. Why go across the sea if you can't tell people about Jesus at home? Paul was a bold man? Maybe. But maybe he just knew that he had to start in the most difficult places. It's there where you have to rely on the Holy Spirit more
- So, Paul's training was in the hardest places and the benefits were many. As a result, his impeccable credentials were transferred from the futility of human traditions to the Spirit driven and life-giving message of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Like Paul we need to discover that the Good News is from God and not concocted by human beings.

Like Paul we need to realize that God has other plans, and they're perfect and they include everyone who turns to him.

And finally, as we do what he requires, we too become credentialed Christ Followers, and just like him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we too can have impeccable credentials. Amen.