



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH:  
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*You Have Heard, No Doubt, Of My Earlier Life...*  
Galatians 1:11-24

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My home church in St. Clairsville, Ohio, Calvary Presbyterian Church, is celebrating 180 years as a community of faith and they have invited me to preach this summer ... what a privilege that will be. I'll be sharing stories of my life growing up in that wonderful congregation and how they were influential in my decision to become a minister. One of the stories I will share with them is about Mary Reid Wilson, my 6<sup>th</sup> grade Sunday School teacher (who just happened to be the principal at the elementary school in St. C.). Back many years ago, we had visited while on vacation one summer and I preached for them while there. After the sermon, Mrs. Wilson (I never dared address her as anything else!) Mrs. Wilson came up to me [she was in her mid-eighties at that time] and she said, "Terry, you're the first preacher I've heard preach about sin who I KNOW understands what he's preaching about." Mary Reid Wilson knew me well.

I guess I could have responded: "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life..."



Well, the Apostle Paul wrote those words: "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life ... in Judaism."

Now, trust me on this one, everybody had heard about Paul's "earlier life." It was one of the most common topics of conversation whenever members of that new church got together. And the opinions about that "earlier life" were mixed ... especially when it came to how it compared with the old-Saul who was converted. Those opinions were so mixed that it threatened to split apart and destroy the church itself. So when people read that line in Paul's opening comments to the Galatian church – "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism" -- he had their attention.

We can make some sense of all this by recapping together just what all the fuss was about. So, let's go back a couple of thousand years, to just a few years after Jesus had preached and been crucified.

The disciples had accepted the challenge of Pentecost, and having received the promised Holy Spirit had continued preaching and teaching about the new way of life as followers of Jesus. They had been successful ... successful enough to rile up the Pharisees and Sadducees, two groups who built their fortunes upon the OLD way ... the way of the temple and the old law. Then, as now, the folks in power were not all that excited to see new groups show up and try to change the way things worked. The "We never did it that way before!" group began using their power to put down this new revolution, and destroy this new church before it destroyed them.

And so, they developed a wide variety of methods in finding and threatening Christians. They followed the normal approach of all great oppressors throughout history. First, threatening someone's livelihood. Next, if that didn't work then you threaten their family. And finally, you threaten their very life. Unfortunately, these Christians were a difficult bunch. They were willing to lose livelihood, family, and even their lives for the freedom to practice their faith.

And they weren't stupid.

Although these Christians rarely denied their faith when confronted, they knew better than to run around flaunting the fact that they were believers. No big crosses or religious banners on the front porch kind of thing. They HID. They met in SECRET MEETINGS. They created SECRET SYMBOLS to communicate their faith to others who were being threatened. They even spread out ... many of them moving from Jerusalem to go to other cities in order to spread their new gospel.

Destroying this new church was NOT going to be an easy task.

Fortunately for the authorities, they did have a secret weapon. His name was SAUL. Today, Saul would have his own reality television show ... something like one of those bounty hunter shows. Saul was indeed a bounty hunter. His area of expertise was locating and capturing Christians, and he was very good at what he did. He was able to work his way inside the secret groups, taking names and then paying late-night visits to homes and carrying away these offenders of the "true" faith. But what made Saul so effective was his commitment to his work. He believed in what he was doing, and found joy and satisfaction in capturing Christians ... you know, doing his part to serve God.

One of the things that really burned Saul was the way so many of these new Christians were escaping the authorities by getting out of town and going to places like Syria. Damascus had become a hotbed for the new Christian movement, and was outside the jurisdiction of Saul and his expertise. But finally, Saul went to his bosses in Jerusalem, and convinced them to give him papers that would introduce him to the authorities in Damascus, and give him the power to find and bring back those Christians hiding there. His bosses considered it Saul's STROKE of genius.

Interestingly enough, a Higher Authority had another kind of "STROKE" in mind for old Saul.

The story goes like this:

Saul was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus. It was a few days' travel, up through the northern country of Israel, up near the border with Lebanon, and then east, over Mount Hermon and then down to Damascus. Our best guess is that it was somewhere on the downhill side of Mount Hermon, a place noted for its furious and unannounced thunderstorms, that God announced his alternative plans for Saul.

We could spend lots of time here, debating over whether Saul really got hit by lightning, or had some other kind of inner-flash. We could go on to debate if he was blinded by some actual scales that somehow got on his eyes and fell off later in Damascus. Those are fun things to argue over sometimes, but for today we won't let them get in the way. We want to focus on three simple facts: First, is the fact that Saul had some really great plans in place for his future. Second, is the fact that God disagreed with those plans. Third, is that GOD WON.

Okay ... so Saul was blinded on the road to Damascus. Keep in mind that the Sadducees and Pharisees believed that things happened to people only because God wanted them to happen. The rich were rich because God wanted them rich, and the poor were poor because God wanted them poor. You essentially got what you deserved. If Saul was blinded, he had obviously done something to deserve that blindness. And let me tell you ... The Sadducees and Pharisees had a field day with that.

Alright, we know that Saul had been this great force for the Sadducees ... accomplishing so much for their cause. But whenever someone has great success there are others who become jealous. In their eyes, Saul had gotten way too big for his britches, and so his blindness served as a great excuse for them to turn against him. The result was that Saul found himself in Damascus, rejected by his own, feared and hated by everyone there, blind, and living in a one-room shack.

You know the MasterCard ad ...

Rental horse for trip to Damascus? 4 denarii

Medical attention for blindness? 12 denarii

One-room shack on outskirts of town? 1 denarii per night

Those papers Saul carried from Jerusalem? Useless.

I guess the real hero of this entire story is a guy named Ananias. Again, we'll leave the theological debates for a later time, but just know that Ananias was a Christian, and overcoming his fears and the fears of his friends, he went to visit Saul. It was during this brief visit that Saul regained his sight, and rebuilt his life:

- ➔ He entered that one-room shack as a blind, lost man.
- ➔ He walked out of that room as a follower of the Way, with his eyes wide open.

However, his mouth was even more open than his eyes, and he began preaching about his experience everywhere he went. He became the Sadducees' and Pharisees' worst nightmare. Now, how COOL is THAT?

Over time, Saul became known as Paul. He traveled thousands of miles preaching, teaching, and leaving a trail of churches behind him wherever he went. His story was one that touched lives. If someone like Saul could start over, maybe WE can, too.

Unfortunately, it wasn't quite that neat and clean.

There were many in the church who just didn't trust him. After all, he had often pretended to be a Christian just to finagle his way into the secret meetings ... so what made anybody think he wasn't just doing that again? He hadn't really changed at all, and was only preaching things that he had heard the others preach. It was still just OLD-Saul underneath that PAUL-disguise.

Generally, it was ALL just a MESS.

And all of that leads up to: "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism." Paraphrasing his words that follow that sentence, Paul basically said: What I've told you is God's truth ... so DEAL with it.



Each one of US here brings our entire life into this place today. Some of us have rather simple stories to tell, never having strayed too far from where we probably should have been. BUT SOME OF US bring stories that OLD-Saul would definitely understand. However much we may have become something new, people still periodically remind us of what we used to be: "Terry, you're the first preacher I've heard preach about sin who I know understands what he's preaching about." Yes, they still look for an occasional glimmer of what was. It's hard to allow people to start over. And often, WE are our own worst enemies!

I look at it a lot like Paul did, and I have a suggestion for anyone who has decided to repurpose your life, and leave behind some of those things that were pretty darn creative and hard for those around you to forget.

Just keep in mind that BECAUSE of Paul's earlier life, a church was BUILT and an entire world was CHANGED. In spite of what others may have said or believed, God USED that life, with ALL its bruises and scars, to work miracles.

Why should WE expect any less from YOURS?

Amen and Amen.