

# Eccentric Originality

by Dana Congdon

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of having a heavenly vision in building the church, and encourages listeners to participate in the heavenly vision by seeing Christ in his glory and the corporate Christ, and allowing God to work in their lives to guide their ministry and purpose.*

**Scripture:** Acts 26:15-16, Acts 26:18-20, 1 Corinthians 15:1-10, Galatians 1:15-19

**Topics:** "Church Maturity", "Obedient Faith"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the life of Paul and his obedience to the heavenly vision. The speaker highlights the tremendous harvest of souls happening around the world as faithful servants share the gospel with signs and wonders. However, the speaker raises the question of the fruit of this kingdom work and the state of the church. The speaker emphasizes the importance of the church being described in Ephesians chapter 5, characterized by beauty, maturity, and holiness. Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is discussed, emphasizing the transformative power of the heavenly vision in Paul's life. Paul's obedience to the heavenly vision is demonstrated through his proclamation of the Gospel, calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus. The sermon encourages believers to also be faithful to the heavenly vision and to live out their faith through deeds appropriate to repentance.

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## Transcript

We welcome everybody here tonight. I think probably there are some here tonight who weren't here last night. And, uh, I am sharing on the life of Paul, uh, in regards to the heavenly vision and then obedience to the heavenly vision.

We want to turn first to Acts chapter 26, where we see Paul's statement regarding the heavenly vision. And of course we know that though Paul had many visions and revelations during his lifetime, his whole life and calling was summed up in one heavenly vision. And as he's speaking to King Agrippa, he, uh, we will, we'll turn to verse 15 of Acts chapter 26, where Paul says, and I said, who are you Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and stand on your feet for this purpose.

I have appeared to you to appoint you a minister and a witness, not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you. So you see in that verse, how absolutely important it was for him to see things and then to testify of what he has seen, he's going to testify of what he's already seen, and he's going to testify of what he will see. He is to testify of what he has seen.

And I will rescue you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me. So King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision. And now he expresses simply his obedience, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first and also at Jerusalem, and then throughout the region of Judea and even to the Gentile that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

And so in the simplest way, Paul says out of that heavenly vision, I have been sharing the gospel from place to place, sharing about repentance, sharing about faith in the Lord Jesus. Now we want to go to two other passages outside of the book of Acts, where Paul again shares in some measure, his testimony, the first being in first Corinthians chapter 15, first Corinthians chapter 15, and there we'll read the first 10 verses now. I make known to you brethren, the gospel, which I preached to you, which also you received in which you also stand by which also you are saved.

If you hold fast the word, which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain, for I delivered to you as a first importance, what I also received that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the 12. After that, he appeared to more than 500 brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep. And then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

And last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me also, for I am the least of the apostles and not fit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God, but by the grace of God, I am what I am. And his grace toward me did not prove vain, but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. And then finally, in Galatians chapter one, another reference to his testimony to the Galatians, Galatians chapter one, and we'll begin in verse 11, Galatians chapter one, verse 11.

For I would have, you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man, for I neither received it from man nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ, for you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral tradition. But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away to Arabia and returned once more to Damascus.

Then three years later, I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him for 15 days. But I did not see any of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. Now, in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God, I am not lying.

The whole point being that his gospel has been received by a revelation of Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Our Father, we come to you and when we're dealing in heavenly matters, it is only your spirit that can interpret the things of the spirit.

The natural man has no understanding what heavenly vision is all about. But since we are partakers of a heavenly calling, it's time for us by the Holy Spirit to consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. To see these things of heaven in such a way that we find your purpose being fulfilled here

upon this earth.

And so we would ask that your Holy Spirit would speak to our hearts, give us understanding in our hearts and mind so that we may know where we are and be faithful, not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but faithful to you, Lord, even now and to the end. Oh, help us, Lord. Have mercy on us.

We pray in Jesus precious name. Amen. Last night, we tried to share Paul's initial encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus, and there's much to say and much that is mystery.

You know, it's just like our natural man that we'd like all the details. Now, Paul, what did Jesus look like? But in fact, we don't even know if Paul saw a face or his eyes. All we know for sure is there was a bright light from heaven and this light was so full of glory that they all fell down to the ground as a result.

So we know this was a tremendous impartation of heavenly glory. And we know also that there was a voice speaking to him. And when we look at the record carefully, we see that here was this man completely undone before this Lord, whose name was Jesus.

This one he'd been persecuting, this one he'd been standing against and even hating was now coming to him in love. Now coming to him as a master and saying in the most loving and merciful way, Saul, Saul, you're under arrest. You cannot kick against me.

And Saul knew that. And after he sat in the dust for a while trying to survey what would happen, he said, Lord, what would you have me to do? And so we looked just in a very small way at the fact that the Lord began a process of devastation and reconstitution. In Paul's life, and we tried to make the point that this devastating process, despite the depth of it and despite the seriousness of it, and despite the fact that it was a lifelong process, in fact, it is a qualifying devastation for Paul had to find that all that he thought was gain was loss in order to be able to say, and now I've got one thing, I want to gain Christ and be found in him.

Oh, by this great light from heaven and by the result of this saving and sanctifying work of Saul on the road to Damascus, he was stripped of all that baggage of traditions and rituals and striving of the past. And he found as he went on in his life, his motives became more and more simple until of course, he came to that point as he shares his testimony as Paul the aged, where he says, I'm down to one thing. This one thing I do.

And so the Lord has arrested by his love Saul and called him that I want to use you now. And so we noted this early day. We also understand, you must understand, we'll look at it a little bit tonight.

You know, the whole ministry of Paul's master building and the wisdom he had in this master building came as a result of his being willing to bear the cross and wait for the Lord and listen for the Lord and wait before the Lord over that first 11 years, as we mentioned last night, Paul's life can roughly be broken into three periods of 11 years after his conversion at 30 years old until he was about 41, something like that. He was basically in a time of preparation, spent time in the desert, spent time at home in Tarsus and he served the Lord. There were times I'm sure in Tarsus where he was a brother there in the assembly, but his life was basically restricted in a waiting pattern as the Lord was showing him things.

Tonight, we come to the second phase of Paul's life as a Christian, where for 11 years or about that, he was very much running the race, serving the Lord, traveling about on that Herculean odyssey that it's hard to believe a man could do such a trip a few years back. Some of the saints who are here tonight and

myself, we went on a trip where we by bus went to all the places the apostle Paul visited. We were worn out and we were just sitting on an air conditioned bus, but he had such resolve, he had such ministry.

It's legend. We could spend the rest of the evening just mentioning places and things that he'd done and all of this sort of thing. But this is the stage that we're going to look at tonight.

But I want to stress this necessity, absolute necessity of heavenly vision in order to do the wise master building that God wants done in this final day as he's waiting for that bride to be prepared for his son. Today, the Lord is doing many things. The Lord of the harvest has sent out many workers.

And as we even tried to chronicle a little bit briefly last year, the Lord is doing a tremendous harvest across the world, even as we speak. Many, many people being swept into the kingdom as faithful servants, big and small, educated, not educated, are going out among the common people and sharing the gospel, finding the grace of God and faithfulness to share, even with signs following and wonders and amazing things are happening all about the world as this kingdom is being built and the servants are serving. But if we would be faithful to the whole counsel of God, then we need to be faithful to ask this question, and what is the fruit of all of this kingdom work? Now, we know in the word of God that the fruit of the kingdom service is the building up of the church.

And so we ask the question, where is this church? In reality, in its beauty, in its maturity, in its holiness, where is this church described in Ephesians chapter five without spot or wrinkle? And we find a tragedy in our midst, I must say, although we have to say that the Lord is doing much more than you and I can ever know, even at this present hour in these last days. As people are being swept into the kingdom, they should be gathered together into his church and there allow the life of the Lord himself to build up these people and through ministry and the exercise of faithfulness by the grace of God come into a state of maturity. But in fact, when we look all about the world, we see a church in such confusion that we have to say the gospel work is being done, thank God for faithful service.

But when it comes to the matter of the building of the church, is there heavenly vision out of which this church can be built with wisdom? You know that so much of what is called the church isn't even the church. What are called church meetings are more the kingdom meetings of ministry focused on ministry. In New York City, where I live, I've met, I've had occasion to meet a few hundred, actually, very faithful servants of God up there in the Bronx and down in Brooklyn and all over the place preaching the gospel, sharing some of them.

One man I know is a taxi cab driver and at night he preaches the gospel in Washington Square Park and about 10 of our young people go over there and then help him witness and share the gospel. There's many, many faithful servants of God in New York City. But when you look at the church in New York City, it's an absolute ruin.

There are thousands. It is uncountable the number of churches there are in New York City, hopelessly divided into little groups. It would be like the 12 tribes of Israel had entered the promised land and then split up into family households.

And now you have 4,026 households in the land of Canaan. Each one, a small little group, we've taken a hill, engaged in guerrilla warfare, each one fighting, some winning, some losing. But that general overall weakness that we see in the book of Judges, when every man's doing what's right in his own eyes and there is no king.

And because it's so fractured and we even have a there's a sort of a strategy of fracturing. It fractures it even more and more. We have niche churches that come in.

I saw on the Internet the other day, there's another one now in New York City. It's called Forefront and it is the way it advertises itself. The Forefront Church for people who don't like church.

There's so many of these. It goes beyond saying. And then when you get down to ethnic groups, there's division and division.

Now, in the United States, I know this is a unique problem, but among Hispanic works, they're just divided hopelessly. I mean, it's very rare that you find the precious brothers who are Mexicans joining with those who are Ecuadorian. They all just carry on their separate little things and and then these groups divide and divide and divide.

Every storefront seems to be taken with yet another little church. Well, who who sees this heavenly vision? Is that the heavenly vision of the church? And so on occasion, when I dared to be so bold, none of my business, really. These guys are doing what they're doing.

But since we have lunch together, I go to a prayer meeting and we have lunch together. So I get that I ask these guys questions. Now, they're always asking questions like, you know, how many people are coming and all this.

But I ask different questions. I ask questions like, what do you think about the unity of the body of Christ, even as Jesus prayed it in John 17? You know, just a conversation starter. And amazingly, I mean, I say this in all honesty.

Amazingly, there's so much sympathetic understanding for the heavenly vision. Many of these brothers and sisters, many sister pastors openly say, you know what? I read some books by Watchman Nee. I loved what he had to say.

I read the normal Christian church life. It was beautiful. I said, well, what about it? And eventually when we talk it out, they say this, you know, what is this kind of vision is a beautiful, it captures us.

We're so sympathetic with it, but we just don't understand any earthly practical way it can happen. So we just do our own thing. Now, I understand that.

My brother Ernie Heil and myself, even when we were in seminary, some guy was feeding us books by Watchman Nee, you know, who we were reading some stuff that was way over our heads. But what little we understood. I was, I felt very sympathetic for it, but honestly, I didn't see any way that a Baptist church could ever be that way.

And so the Lord has to lay hold and take us out of this confusion. By an unveiling of himself and an unveiling of his church. That we know as the heavenly vision.

Have you seen the vision of Christ, the glorious Christ? Have you seen a vision of Christ, the corporate Christ as one, as perfect, as beautiful? Have you seen these things? And we have to ask the question, are we willing to bear the cross? To be participating in that which is impossible for man and only possible with God. For when we see the heavenly vision, we do not see something that can possibly be done on earth by man's machinations and programs and plans. There is something there so organic.

With its origins in God. That unless we allow the cross to deal with all of our prejudices and all of our differences and all of our lazinesses, then all we can do is look at this vision from afar and be sympathetic with it. But I tell you, in Jesus name, the Lord is not satisfied with us standing back in sympathy to some idealistic vision.

But rather wants us not only to see him in his glory, but to find ourselves participating. In this heavenly vision, are you? Are you a participant in this heavenly vision? Do you see Christ in this church and do you see yourself living and laying hold of this reality? That's the only way it can be. A heavenly vision that we take hold, we're all familiar with the with the words of the apostle Paul there in Philippians, where he says, I reach forward that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

And we understand that that has to do very much with two things. One. To lay hold of Christ himself in his fullness, having been laid hold of by Christ.

Now, Paul was running on the upward call in Christ Jesus to lay hold of Christ, the person, the Christ of glory, the Christ in fullness. He was running after Christ. No doubt about that.

But he was also trying to lay hold of this specific, unique reason that he had been brought into it. I have been arrested for a purpose and I am running to fulfill that purpose, to fulfill my course, to fulfill my ministry. So it wasn't just that he was running after Christ.

There's many people very Christ centered who say, I just want Christ. I want all of Christ. I want Christ in his fullness.

But I tell you, a heavenly vision is more than that. It's a running after your place in Christ. And that involves a cross and that involves a devastation.

That involves the Lord. Working in our lives now, we're going to share tonight sort of from that second perspective of Paul now released, you know, there he was in his early 40s when Barnabas brought him down from Tarsus and he came down to Antioch and it says he worked there for more than a year. He was in submission to Barnabas and in submission to the brethren there in Antioch and the Lord did a wonderful work.

Many people were saved. And this is where people were first called Christians. What a tremendous experience for Paul to be gathered and we're co-working together with his fellow teachers and prophets there in the church of Antioch.

It was an amazing, amazing time. Paul learned so much. But then, of course, there came the day when they were worshipping the Lord and the Lord said, separate for me, Saul and Barnabas, for the work that I have prepared for them and they fasted and prayed and sent them out because the Lord was saying, come, come out this way.

So Saul and Barnabas began by going down to Cyprus. And then, you know, about the first journey that they took together. And so we're in that second stage now where we see Paul now serving with such quantity of ministry, but more such quality of ministry, but more such wisdom in the ministry and such fruit in his ministry and not only fruit, but abiding fruit in his ministry.

Oh, now here's a man who was prepared by God, no doubt about it. And what I want to just share tonight, we can't, of course, cover all of that time that he ministered in this way. But what I wanted to share was

because of the heavenly vision's effect on his life, his was a life that was marked by eccentric originality.

Now I mentioned that last night that we talk about this second stage, eccentric originality. And so, of course, now I must explain what that means, because it means something different today. The word eccentric today in English means something off center.

Somebody is a little bit of, you know, not all of his oars are in the water, as we say. Originally, the word's a very simple word. It means out of the center, out from the center.

And I'm using it to express Paul's life because in his ministry, his ministry always came out from the center and the center was Christ. That was his fountainhead, his source, his center, the basis of his ministry, the basis of his life, the basis of his gospel, the basis of his hope, Christ, Christ, Christ. There's not a man in the scriptures, of course, who ever mentioned the name Christ as much as Paul.

Everything was in Christ or Christ in you. He was centered and out of that center came everything. This is a tremendous, tremendous reality.

Now, of course, Paul was considered off center. He wasn't eccentric by man's standards. You know why? Because man's center is always self-centeredness.

So when we touch somebody else's self-centered, we say, hey, they're just like us. But when you find somebody Christ-centered, they're eccentric. They're off center to the world.

But God's looking for eccentrics who are centered in Christ. And when you're centered in Christ, you are a peculiar possession. You're different.

Your source is different. Your motives are different. Your starting point is different.

Your initiatives are different. Eccentric. And then the second word I put together with it is originality, meaning that which comes from an origin in Christ.

And because it comes from an origin and it's been touched, its sources touched that origin, then what comes out of it, that which issues out in ministry or whatever it is, is fresh. It's living. It's alive.

It's real. Eccentric originality. This is the mark of somebody who's been laid hold of by heavenly vision.

Every time you see somebody who's truly been laid hold, there's something very original about them. The way they share or just their whole, the way God comes through their lives is original. Something has happened, you see, at the very source that makes them original.

We have so many cookie cutter Christians who all act alike, believe alike, say alike, and they're all so predictable. They wear the same clothes. They pray the same prayers.

And then there's somebody who's been in the throne room and they come out and there's something different about them. Even when they say the same words, Oh, the Lord. And here's a little something that we have a very hard time laying hold of, but I have to say it because it's the truth in Christ Jesus.

Part of that originality has to do with who you are, because if you're actually caught up and you find yourself participating in this eternal purpose of God through this heavenly vision, then there is something very original about you that God is able to mine out of you. You see, you are a very original person and

God has laid hold of you for a very specific purpose. Now we would not all claim to be the apostle Paul or even think anything like we could be as he is, but every one of us has a purpose, a key purpose.

I love some of the littler people in scriptures who just are faithful all their lives, but then they're called upon to do, they have their 15 minutes of fame and you realize that their whole life was in preparation of that as this man Ananias there, Damascus, who came and prayed for brother Saul by faith. He'd been prepared all his life for that. And there's a reason why you, if you've been apprehended by vision, there's reason that you have been, because there's something uniquely of use to the Lord and he's laid hold of you for that purpose.

Now, do you know what that purpose is? Surely it's more than just to sort of sit in the crowd. Could be something very small, but something unique. And so we see in Paul, this kind of originality because he's touching this original source, this eccentric originality.

I'd like to make a comparison between Paul's vision and John's vision, because you see, because Paul was an eccentric, his vision began with the universal and it elucidated and worked its way out into the particular, because Paul was a wise master builder, he had to understand the particulars of how the church is built, but he saw it from the universal revealed and worked out into the particular. This was Paul's genius. And there was not another like him in there.

But then just as valid and necessary, some 50 years later, John came along and began to write and we have his gospels and letters. The reason being that now the particulars had been worked out. You know, there were ministries, there were meetings, there were, you know, traditions.

And these meetings and ministries and offices and traditions were losing their reality. And so John collected a bunch of particulars and then showed how they took on meaning only in that universal I am in the transforming work of Christ. So he takes a marriage and brings Christ into the I am into it.

He takes bread and talks about the bread of heaven and he takes a Jewish feast and has Jesus say, but if anybody's thirsty, it's here you get the living water. And so the I am comes into the particulars of our lives and transforms them because, of course, John's burden was to recover a church that was losing its vitality because focusing on the particulars we focus on outward almost immediately. Unless we have a vision of the I am.

In order to maintain and hold on to that tremendous transcendent reality behind the particular of our own lives. So you see, I make that little difference so we can see. There was no man so marked by this eccentric.

Originality is the Apostle Paul. And when we look at the Apostle Paul in his life, we realize just what he said and testified to in Galatians chapter one. The Lord laid hold of him from his mother's womb.

The Lord knew of him, had a purpose for him. And his whole life was a preparation for that which he was to do. You know, he he grew up there at a crossroads of three tremendous civilizations there in Tarsus where he grew up the Roman roads and the Roman Empire was all around him.

And wouldn't you know, just in the circumstances of life, Paul was a Roman citizen. But the whole culture and the whole language and everything was Greek. And wouldn't you know, at Tarsus, that's where Greek was spoken even in the synagogues and where Greek culture was understood and where Paul obviously had some kind of training in Greek philosophy and things.

And yet that very important move of God that had spread the Jews all over the dispersion and everywhere they went, they had synagogues. How could all of that be united? All of those Jews out there in the dispersion and then those God-fearing Gentiles just standing around in there waiting for something to happen. And there was Saul of Tarsus born right at the crossroads of that whole thing.

We realize he was chosen by God. We don't know too much about his upbringing, but of course, there's some things we could say. One, he had great respect for his background, a Hebrew of the Hebrew, his Benjamite background and all of that.

He had great respect for that. We can see that. Obviously, he probably grew up in a very religious, devout Jewish family.

He learned discipline in his life, discipline of study, responsibility. As a young man, he was apprenticed by his father, as all young men were, and he learned how to build tents in his apprenticeship. But obviously, this young man was the most extraordinary young man, unique in many, many more ways than we really know, because when it came time and he felt his serious call to be a rabbi, he went to the best, to the top.

To become a Pharisee was to become at the very top of of Judaism and to study under Gamaliel. There were two great rabbis in Jerusalem at the time. And Gamaliel was one of them, and he trained under Gamaliel, he was interned under Gamaliel.

And this young man studied the word of God and this young man led a life of discipline. This young man learned how to hold himself in order to gain the mastery from all whatever sort of temptations would come his way. This was this was a young man who was trained, who was trained.

Prepared by God, but of course, the main thing that we have to say, I do believe. Is that from his birth? Saul of Tarsus had a certain kind of genius. Now, the Lord doesn't call many geniuses.

And even those he called, a lot of them go off the deep end. Because everyone, whether we're large or small, not many called or geniuses. But this young man was he had a certain kind of genius in his mind, this logical, rational ability to work things out and a hunger to know and a hunger to understand.

And even though because he was in the traditions of the Jews, the Jews gave him plenty of exercise at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because at that time, the Jewish liturgy and traditions was expanding exponentially from just a study of the Torah to a study of the Mishnah and the Talmud and all the traditions of what the rabbis were saying. It's a lifelong, life dedicated study. The memorizing scriptures and the studying the rabbis and the Saul's great mind was able to wrap itself around that.

Oh, what happened when he saw the heavenly vision and he lost the sense of going to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and he was trained by the Holy Spirit on how to eat from the tree of life. You know what happened to that mind? And now studying the word of God and the Holy Spirit, just opening up the word of God to this man, it was probably more than his mortal body could bear. You and I know just as ordinary Christians, what a tremendous experience it is when we're reading and studying the word of God and the Lord reveals something to us.

It's just, it's marvelous. It puts us on a high for at least a couple of days. Saul had such a great mind and it's just so happens that at that season of the church's growth somewhere in its dozen years old, the church needed something more than just the simple answers.

And along came this man who couldn't rest until he understood. And it became the basis for our understanding of the foundation of our salvation and of our understanding of the foundation of the church. This is an extraordinary man and God chose him just for this hour.

Now I just want to look at a couple of things about this, but I do want to say on the other hand, you know, the gospel basically is very simple. In that first Corinthians 15, we read the Paul's own declaration of what he says is of first importance. And it's interesting how he puts it.

He says that Christ died for us according to the scriptures. Now it's not just mine, it's according to the scriptures and that he was buried and raised again in three days according to the scripture. Now that's as simple as the gospel can be.

And Peter used to preach a simple gospel and John and the others, probably Barnabas preached the gospel. Many people got saved. The gospel is simple and has never to be some kind of a great Gnostic intellectual study.

Men are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and so people would come to Peter and say, who is Jesus? He'd say, the Messiah. They'd say, amen. They'd come to John and say, who is Jesus? He'd say, the son of God.

They'd say, amen. Simple answers. What did he do on the cross? He died for your sins.

Oh, praise God. When the apostle Paul came along and experienced these same things, there was something in him and said, but why? Now you know he had the bare cross because the Lord wasn't just going to reveal the whole thing out in one day, but he searched the scriptures. Oh, I hear the echo of his own life when he tells Timothy just before Paul passes away, he tells Timothy, now you study, consecrate to show yourself approved unto God.

Grab hold of the word of God and let God reveal it to you so you'll be able to rightly divide the word of truth. Oh, Paul learned this lesson in his life. And so he shares a gospel.

In the end, he grabbed hold of this revelation that he had of Christ and the word of God, and he gained a gospel that was so unique that he could say, I found my gospel, not from man, nor was I taught it by man, but I had a revelation of Jesus Christ. That's my gospel. Now that's original.

And he found that because he waited before the Lord as the Lord unveiled this gospel to him. I just want to mention because sometimes we don't realize our indebtedness to the Lord using men and women. I just want to mention three issues that we find the apostle Paul giving us great light on in the gospel, and it's because of this unquenchable hunger he had to get to the truth.

The first issue that Paul gave us great light on in our own understanding of salvation is the issue of righteousness. Now this is the great Jewish obsession. Paul was obsessed with righteousness.

He had a zeal for righteousness. He wanted to be approved before God, and it's just like Saul when he was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus to say, what would you have me to do? Because he was willing to do anything in order to obtain approval. That understanding that we can work our salvation, we can do ourselves into righteousness.

The great obsession. Well, the Lord had to undo that whole thing. You could imagine his righteousness falling before him as filthy rags.

All of his trying to be righteous, as God broke the obsession of his righteousness, he realized that all of his righteousness was unrighteousness. And yet he felt justified. He felt forgiven.

As Ananias prayed and he looked up into Ananias' eyes, he saw a loving brother. And then they sat down and ate with Saul, and he stayed there in Damascus for a number of days, and they all forgave him. How am I forgiven? How am I justified? Oh, okay, you say I'm forgiven, but Saul says, no, wait, I've got to understand this.

I've got to understand this. Oh, how wonderful. You see, this is the way Paul ran after Jesus.

Having seen the heavenly vision, he didn't just go off in some way to himself. He went back to the origins. He went back to the center.

He said, Lord, you must impress upon me. How does this work? And of course, we see in Acts chapter 22, as he's sharing his testimony there, if you'll turn there, in Acts chapter 22, when Ananias actually speaks to him there in Damascus, this is what Ananias says to him in part. In Acts 22 verse 15, sorry, verse 14, Ananias says, the God of our fathers has appointed you to know his will and to see the righteous one and to hear an utterance from his mouth.

Now he understood that he was justified, but when he pressed into the Lord to understand this thing, this is the way I sort of imagined it came about in his understanding of righteousness. He came to understand that righteousness is a person. He saw the righteous one.

And he realized that he was in Christ who was the righteous one. Could this be possible that Jesus was made sin that I might be made the righteousness of God? How does this happen? And then he saw the righteous one. Jesus is the righteous one.

And I'm going to put it this way, because this is a very common sort of Keswick phrase. I think Paul was the first Keswick who understood not that Jesus, not his salvation or that Jesus was his savior, but Jesus was his salvation. He is my righteousness.

And because I am in Christ, I am righteous. I'm robed in righteousness. It's not a question of deserving.

It's a question of simple faith. And so Paul gives us this tremendous gospel. We have been justified by faith in Christ.

And how he opens up the righteousness of God in Romans chapter 3, you remember as he explains how God can be righteous and a righteousifier of those who have faith, or it says just and a justifier. But you understand just and righteous is the same word. He said, I have to tell you, I worked it out.

I figured it out. How God could be righteous and still righteous to supply us. He did it by sending his own son to be sent on our behalf that we might be the righteousness of God.

That's how he did it. I understand. I see it.

Oh, what a liberating gospel. Because Paul conveyed a new aspect of the righteousness of God that had not been clearly seen before. Not only that God is righteous himself and not only that God acts

righteously, but that God in his grace and love makes righteous that which was sinful by the death of his son on the cross.

What a revelation. But you know, it didn't stop there. Because now Paul was saved and yet he was struggling with sin and he was struggling with the flesh and he would hear the law say, do this.

And immediately he didn't want to do it. He sensed that rebellion. And it was Paul who came to this original understanding.

Wait a minute. This isn't about sins. I know about sins.

This is about sin. There's something in my life. But wait a minute.

Sin. Sin is that indwelled force of Adam, a fallen man. It cannot be dealt with.

But wait a minute. When Jesus died on the cross, he didn't just die for me. When he died, Adam died.

That was me. I was in there. This is all original.

As he sits before the Lord, he comes to see it. When Christ died, I died with him in Adam. The old man's crucified.

I've been crucified with Christ. He's halfway home. Then he thinks, wait a minute.

Jesus came out of the ground. What happened then? A new creation. A new man was born.

Wait a minute. I'm in that new man by faith. The old man's crucified.

Nevertheless, I live, but not I, but Christ lives in me. Wait a minute. Now, wait a minute.

The law used to talk to me as the old man. But now there's a new law. What's that new law? Christ dwelling in me.

His spirit is giving me laws. And he's giving me the grace to fulfill those laws. And Paul came into a deliverance from sins and from sin and from the old man into the new man.

And all those things are shared. And it's all eccentrically original. I think Peter just shook his head and said, I've been wondering why I was struggling so much myself.

Oh, there's a mind who won't stop until he's at the holy of holies and the Lord shows himself. Precious Paul. Another aspect that's just an amazing original thing.

In that very heavenly vision you see, the vision wasn't just on the road to Damascus, but the vision included what happened in the house when Ananias came. In that moment of heavenly vision, the Lord spoke to Paul and said, I'm sending you away to the Gentiles. Now, that had to bother him for a good bit.

I see now. I'm not good enough to be with the real saints. So the Lord sent me off into a minor league ball.

Sending me out to the Gentiles. And then when he went down to Jerusalem and he met Barnabas and met the brothers for a couple of days, he started preaching. He got in all kinds of trouble.

The Lord had to appear to him again in the night and say, Paul, get away. Go home to Tarsus. I've sent you away to the Gentiles.

I just tried to visit Jerusalem. What's going on, Lord? Why are you sending me to the Gentiles? I mean, at this point in his life, they don't even understand why. Second class.

But you know, the Lord had to undo in a devastating way all that was that Jewish pride in Paul. All of that Hebrew of the Hebrews, tribe of Benjamin as to righteousness, blameless, all of that stuff had just become refuse. And he found himself a sinner saved by grace.

And he found himself to be in such a place that he could clip his way out of the web of Judaism, which is just a spiritual principle regarding the bondage, religious bondage of all mankind that tries to gain approval through works. And having been set free by that, the Lord began to open his eyes because he sat right before the Lord in his typical eccentric originality. Said, now, Lord, here we have some scriptures.

Now, what does this mean? And the Lord began to show things to Paul so tremendous. Well, we must at least see what he says in Ephesians chapter 3 as he makes note of this particular stewardship to the Gentile. Paul says in Ephesians chapter 3 in verse 1, for this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles, for the sake of you Gentiles, if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which has been given to me for you, that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote to you before.

And by referring to this, when you read it, you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it's now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the spirit. And here it is. To be specific, three words.

The Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members, and fellow partakers. You know, I believe that this was the revelation that he saw that made him go down to Jerusalem. In Galatians chapter 2, Paul says, and because of a revelation, I went down to Jerusalem to speak to the apostles and to lay this gospel that I had received out before the apostles, just in case I had been running in vain, just in case I had some idea I wanted to submit this gospel before you, because this gospel was so tremendous that I wanted to be sure about it.

And I submitted it to the brothers. And what is the essence of the gospel? Again, verse 6. They're fellow heirs with Abraham, the Gentiles. Oh, Peter James said, wait, wait a minute, wait, wait, wait.

You're saying the Gentiles are now part of the tribe of Israel by faith? They're fellow heirs with Abraham, all that Abraham's going to get, they're going to get and be part of? Fellow heirs, is that what you're saying? Paul says, the Lord showed it to me, and then produced the scripture. And the fellow members of the body of Christ. Wait, wait, wait, wait.

You mean in the same one church, one body, the Gentiles and the Jews? These things were blinding revelations. And the walls came tumbling down. And there is no messianic church and Gentile church.

There's only one church. And Paul staked his life on that revelation. And though it was hard, I wonder what would have happened.

I know this is foolish kind of thinking, but what would have happened if Paul hadn't come along with these things? And let's say what happened at Cornelius's house happened. Would Peter have come back and

said, well, this is an exceptional thing. We doubt it'll happen again.

And then what would have happened if Antioch happened as it happened? And Gentiles just started getting saved. And then they sent up the men to check out, see what's going on. And well, yeah, this is obviously the Lord.

But then those from the party of James go up there. And then Peter and Barnabas say, yeah, we need to eat separately. And next thing you know, what would have happened? Would Antioch have become a bunch of circumcised Gentiles? But when Paul shared this revelation that he had received, that these Gentiles were full, 100% fellow heirs with Abraham, full, 100% members of the body of Christ, and full, 100% partakers of the promise of the kingdom to come, of the bride and the marriage, and of eternity ahead.

It says in Galatians chapter 2 that Peter, that James, and John said, this is the Lord. Gave him the right hand of fellowship. Amazed at this revelation.

Could you imagine it, even conceive it, that any Jew could possibly had made such a statement? And could anybody be a steward of this liberating gospel of the Gentiles, this universal gospel? I mean, Paul just blew all the walls off the gospel's limitation by this eccentric originality. And oh, how he had to stand for it. And oh, how he suffered for it.

And oh, how he went to jail for it. And oh, how he died because of it. But this is something he saw.

If you, we don't have the time tonight. You can look at the end, the last half of Romans chapter 10, and you can see the scriptures from Isaiah, and Deuteronomy, and the Psalms that Paul put together that is argument of how the Lord has gone and accepted the Gentiles, or didn't even seek him. But you could read that on your own.

You just see some of the scriptures that Paul had to wrestle with before the Lord. Lord, what does this mean? How could this be? And the Lord showed him. A third original understanding that Paul gave us, of course, was the whole nature of the church.

Now up to this time, there was great gospel work being done, even in Jerusalem, in Antioch, other places. Many people being saved. And they were gathered into the church by the Holy Spirit.

They were experiencing church life in a wonderful way. And in those early days of the church life, so much takes place just by following the Spirit, by the instinct of things. But there had to come the understanding of what is the nature of this church.

And when Saul was saved and came to fellowship with the brethren there in Damascus, and then later on in Tarsus, and when he met Barnabas, and all of these things, he sensed that there was a relationship there. There was a oneness there. There was a love there.

There was a giving there. And he'd never quite experienced this before. Why? What is the basis of our fellowship? Why is it when two or three gather together, the Lord's presence is so wonderfully in our midst? What is the reason for this? You see, he asked these questions.

What is the reason for this? And as he experienced this kind of fellowship, and this kind of union, and this kind of life as people gathered together, he went back again to that original heavenly vision where he saw

the Lord. And he realized that this was a union that was greater than synagogue community, greater than even family ties, that we as Christians bound together by one spirit had been incorporated together into a living body of Christ. That's it.

And Jesus is still alive and on this earth in his body. And the church is the living organism. And it's the Lord himself now in his church.

This was Paul's original revelation and contribution to this whole matter of the nature of the church, how this heavenly vision affected Paul's life, how this heavenly vision should affect our lives. Do we see what's involved in the church under this heavenly vision? How differently we would treat our brethren if we truly saw it. How much more freely we would give one to another if we really understood.

How much more ready would we be to submit to one another if we really saw this heavenly vision? How much more willing would we be to be disciplined if that we might be? Only flowing in the life of the Lord and nothing extraneous and of the flesh. If we really saw this heavenly vision, we would be willing to let go of things that would separate us and our own little kingdoms and our own little ideas and our own little comfortable things. And you see, when we see a heavenly vision of the true nature of the church, it basically brings the cross to bear on almost every, no, on every aspect of church life.

For the Lord to have his reality among God's people, we have to be able to stand under that heavenly vision and then work it out in the particulars. You cannot see this and then just live in some kind of compromise situation and think you're being obedient to heavenly vision. There's a great cost in this.

Now, well, I just mentioned these three original things that came out of Paul's eccentric originality, but you know, his whole life was original. And yet he was tempted, you know. He was tempted to disobey the heavenly vision.

Just as you and I would be tempted. There's a great cost to this. I want to mention, just for starters, since we talked about this whole intellectual side, can you think of the temptation Paul would have to make Christianity intellectual? But he never moved beyond the boundaries of the revelation that he had received.

He lived under the restraint of the Lord Jesus. He lived under the restraint of the mystery of God. You know, men with great minds, if they're not placed under restraint, they extrapolate on beyond what the revelation is and go into error.

The doctrines of Christ, where people go wrong. I mean, imagine him seeing Jesus on the road and Jesus says, I am Jesus. This is emphasizing the humanity of our Lord.

Suppose he'd gotten obsessed with this and began to talk about the humanity of Jesus to the place where he started denying the divinity. Or suppose, because it was the heavenly Shekinah, he'd emphasize Christ, Christ in a divine to the point where the human was lost. But he always stayed under this vision of Christ who was human and divine.

He never went out beyond these restraints that the Lord placed on his great, great mind. And so he did not disobey the heavenly vision. But beyond that, you can think of so many ways he could have compromised.

How would you feel if you were five foot one, as I'm saying the Apostle Paul was, and you were in Antioch and had to confront Peter who was six feet two. And not only in size, but in stature spiritually. You, the

young upstart, with a revelation in your heart, and seeing the particulars, how they work out in fellowship life.

And Peter, there with the saints, simple, full hearted. And then when the Jews came up from Jerusalem, he started to separate himself from the Gentiles. Now it'd be so easy to say, well, you know, I don't want to disrespect Peter.

And yet Saul got up on a folding chair and he looked right at the Apostle Peter, and he said, Peter, shame on you. This gospel that says we're saved by grace, by believing in Jesus, you are perverting, by making a distinction between the Jews and the Gentile. Now, is that a cross, to be willing to do that? Or then to go from church to church and preach a gospel and have Judi-eyers come behind him and preach another gospel.

And still stand in the truth of the gospel as he proclaims it in the book of Galatians. You know, he was tempted. There were moments where he could have compromised so easily.

He could have gotten out of jail with a simple compromise. You know, he knew that the governor really just wanted a bribe and he would let him go. It's so easy to do things that kind of way.

But no, no, Paul was captured by this heavenly vision. And he would run under that vision right to the end. He would not compromise.

Another way that, of course, during his time of running the race, he could have disobeyed the heavenly vision is just to make much of himself and his accomplishments and his authority. There were some supposed apostles, some false apostles, who made much of who they were. They could go to assemblies and demand money and abuse the saints.

And the saints said, oh, what a man of God. But then Paul would go somewhere and lay his life down and he'd build tents if he needed to. Talk with somebody all night and plead with people and be merciful and kind and instruct and instruct and help and pray.

And people would say, you know, he's not much of an apostle. Oh, listen, Paul was, Paul was under this devastation. Paul was under this whole, in this whole ministry of his, he was under an understanding that if he didn't have the source, if he weren't at the center, then he had nothing.

And so he couldn't do it. When it came to push and shove, and some people were pushing, he couldn't shove back. He was a man willing to bear the cross, not making so much of himself.

We just want to read two verses, which give us some understanding of what enabled Paul to stay centered during his time of fruitful ministry. When there were people who were ready to worship him if he was willing. When there were his underlings who looked up to him in every kind of way, and he could have just gone over the top.

And he didn't. There's two scriptures I want us to look at just to understand how he could remain so centered. The first is there in 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

We read it earlier. Just at the verse 10. In 1 Corinthians 15.

But by the grace of God, I am what I am. And his grace toward me did not prove vain, but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. Paul was a man of tremendous ministry and

tremendous accomplishment, but he was centered in Christ and very aware of the source of his flow and enabling.

He understood that apart from Christ, he could do no good thing. He said, I labor. And as a matter of fact, I labor with tremendous energy, but you know what? It's not really my laboring and my energy.

It's the grace of God in me. Now you can't get too proud when you realize it's all by grace. And Paul realized that the Lord withdrew his living waters.

Paul would collapse in a heap. His body was obviously breaking down with some problems. We don't know exactly what was going on there, but he continued to serve and have tremendous resilience and buoyancy and energy.

And Paul's testimony, it is, hey, hey, hey. It's the grace of God. It's the grace of God.

And he wasn't saying that as just some kind of a saying. He knew the experience of going to his Lord and coming and saying, Lord, I have nothing, but I receive from you by grace and finding the supply for all that he needed. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

This was a reality to Paul. It was all by grace. But you know, even in grace, we can get a little heady at times.

And so there's also that aspect of the cross that continually worked in the apostle Paul. So in his second Corinthians letters, we have that very familiar passage there in second Corinthians chapter four. Even though others may think that Paul is something great, something tremendous, Paul says, basically, this is my estimation in verse five.

We preach Christ, not ourselves. We preach Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as bondservant. And then he goes on to share this tremendous revelation we have starting in verse seven, where even though the glory sometimes shines out of Paul's life, obviously, there is a second century description of the apostle Paul that said he had a face sometimes as a man and sometimes the face of an angel.

So was his description, and it could be accurate. But all Paul knew was the breaking of the vessel. And the glory that came out was the Lord's.

And the Lord kept that distinction there so that Paul would know he was just a vessel. And we have this treasure in earthen vessels so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves. And we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, and not despairing.

Persecuted, not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

You know, the Lord, if we're faithful, continues to decrease us, continues to break things in our lives, continues to keep us in a place of humble dependence if we are participating in this heavenly vision. If we're participating in God's purpose, it's so far beyond what the human can do. We have to hold on to the Lord.

And so Paul was very humble throughout his whole ministry. He knew the grace of God, and he knew the dealings of God. Paul was an eccentric original.

And although tempted to disobey the heavenly vision, because he was living in this relationship with the Lord, he was serving by grace and accepting the cross's work in his life. And as a result, the treasure could be seen through the life of the Apostle Paul. That's really all I want to say tonight.

Except that vision produces eccentrics. Are you such a one? And vision produces originals. Are you such a one? The Lord wants you.

There's something very unique and special about you. And to be called into his purpose is to be called into your place in that purpose, to be a participator, a contributor in that tremendous church that the Lord is doing in these days. Are you one of those originals? Have you seen the Lord? Have you been in that place where he's laid hold of you? And are you now running back into your center, your newfound center, to discover why you were created, what the Lord has for you? Among the young people here, can the Lord find some eccentrics who are willing to expend energies even on their weekends before the Lord with the word of God studying, trying to understand, trying to lay hold of things? Are there some of us here who have come to the place where you have a gospel that is original? You know, I've found this to be an interesting thing when we are taught the gospel by men or taught the gospel by the word of God.

But when we see the gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ, it gives us something unique in that gospel. And that becomes your way of witness of the gospel. Are you using somebody else's pattern, somebody else's sort of plan of salvation? I think if you see how the Lord's laid hold of you and you find that sort of uniqueness of revelation, now Paul saw that because he was laying the very foundation of our understanding of salvation.

So he saw it in a very unique way. But certainly there's a uniqueness about your salvation. If you see it in Jesus Christ, then there's a certain way that you uniquely live in the good of it.

And it's yours to share with other people. And I'm also constrained to believe that there are some here, thank God, who are running the race. With your eyes fixed on Jesus, your center, and there's rivers of living water flowing through your life by the grace of God and by the work of the cross.

Oh, the Lord wants us to be part of what he's doing not just those temporary things going on around us. That heavenly vision involves eternal purpose. Christ glorified, the church glorified.

Impossible, impossible. It's impossible for us to be such. But the Lord says, it's possible with me.

Now will you be part of what I'm doing in preparing my bride? Eccentric originals. May the Lord make us that. Let's pray.

How we worship you, Lord, when we see how you work in the lives of a man and a sinner, even the chief of sinners, and an apostle, even the least of the apostles. And yet by the grace of God, he was who he is. And all we can say is that by the grace of God, we are who we are.

Surely there's a purpose and a reason for us in the scheme of things. Oh Lord, we would ask you to lay hold of us in a fresh and living way. And that you would grant us hearts to rise up from our laziness and to rise up from our discouragement and to rise up from our retirement and lay hold of that for which we were apprehended.

Lord, we believe even in this last days that you're doing an inward and a deep and a wonderful work. And loving us so much as to shake us out of our habits. Sleep, oh Lord, give us eyes to see and the faith to

enter in.

Create for yourself more eccentric originals. Those who truly see you as the center of their lives and express you in the church in a living way. Lord, I pray that there might be more original worship.

That there might be more original prayers. That out of our relationship to you could come a quality of life in the church that is not just routine, but that comes fresh from the throne. Oh Lord, grant us such brothers and sisters in our midst.

We thank you that this is your desire. Oh, make it our heart's desire as well to follow after until we obtain. To be found in a righteousness not of our own, but a righteousness by faith in Christ Jesus.

To find ourselves in the church in its unity, in its beauty, without compromise. Oh, by the grace and mercy of God, let us participate and be a testimony of that church. Lord, we ask for your help.

These are heavenly matters. These are things too high for us. And yet Lord, we sense that this is your heart's desire.

That we would say, oh Lord, only you can transform us. Only you can take us in to this heavenly matter. Lord, we pray that you would do it.

For Jesus' sake we pray, amen.

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