

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

16.9.18

God can change you! – Joss Bray

We're teaching through Paul's letter to the Philippians at the moment.

Now onto verses 7-8.

Let's read the first 8 verses of chapter 1:

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons^[a]:

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

We've already heard that it was called the friendly letter.

And that the identity of the church there was in Jesus – not in their location.

They partnered in the Gospel from the beginning with Paul.

Paul was confident that God was doing something good in them which will be completed when Jesus came back.

Paul was so thankful to God for them, he remembered them and faithfully prayed for them.

And then in verse 7 and 8 – he goes on about how he feels for them – they are in his heart – he longs for them – with about as much affection as someone can have as much as Jesus has.

Whatever his circumstances – he knows that they are with him and they share the same grace – the undeserved favour of God in their lives.

What a great picture of apostolic relationship with a church – an apostle and the people – together in purpose and heart.

Wow – what a man Paul was!

Such passion and faithfulness!

Such love and concern for the people!

And that makes me feel really bad!

I think God has a sense of humour because – when we decided to teach through this book – systematically – these verses fell to me – 7 and 8.

All about how much Paul loved and cared for people.

Because – I am not naturally like that – hard as it may be to believe!

When I was made an elder in another Newfrontiers church in 2000 – someone had a prophetic word for me that I would have a passion for the poor and needy and that I would become a spiritual father to people.

Now I remember at the time thinking – that doesn't sound like me at all...

However – over the years – God has changed me and actually that is where one of my passions is – the poor and needy – the last the least and the lost – despite that not being my natural inclination.

So any positives you see in me there – well they are from God – and definitely not me!

God can change people – he can change you – and he has changed me.

Clearly, it's an ongoing process!

This good work he is doing in us won't be complete until Jesus returns – so we all need patience with each other!

But for Paul – the process of change was initially very dramatic and totally life changing in an instant.

He would not have recognised himself in the verses above a few years before.

He was not like that at all – he had been a very bad boy!

Listen to how he told the story of what happened to him in Acts 22:

... Paul said: ³ '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. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,

⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ ‘About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?”

⁸ ““Who are you, Lord?” I asked.

“I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ ““What shall I do, Lord?” I asked.

“Get up,” the Lord said, “and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.” ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² ‘A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, “Brother Saul, receive your sight!” And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ ‘Then he said: “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

¹⁷ ‘When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw the Lord speaking to me. “Quick!” he said. “Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.”

¹⁹ ““Lord,” I replied, “these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of your martyr^[a] Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.”

So here we have a man – on fire for God – as he thought – so keen – so driven to persecute the church.

He had a mandate – the backing of the religious authorities.

He was educated and he was confident and absolutely knew he was doing the right thing.

And this right thing was to destroy the church – to imprison and beat and kill Christians – there was no question about it in his mind.

He lived and breathed for this purpose.

He was like a terminator (in the terminator films) – the way they were described accurately described Saul too:

“You cannot reason with it – you cannot bargain with it. It does not feel pity, remorse or fear. And it absolutely will not stop. Ever.”

So, what happened?

How can this man be changed – suddenly into what seems to be the complete opposite – where he can long for the church with the affection of Jesus Christ?

He had an encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus where he was going to do even more damage.

There was blinding light, there was the voice of Jesus there was the overwhelming power of God.

The persecutor had met the one who he was persecuting.

Interestingly Jesus clearly identifies himself with the church – his body on earth.

Anyone who comes against the church – the Christians – us - comes against Jesus directly.

We are in Christ and he is in us – how can it be any different?

It's worth thinking about that – don't take it personally when we are mocked, discriminated against, ignored – its not about us - it's about Jesus.

Anyway – Paul met Jesus – or rather Jesus came to meet Paul in a dramatic and indisputable way.

We read in Acts 9 that for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything.

So, what was that all about?

God had some work to do in Paul -or Saul as he was then – and he needed to be quick.

When you are suddenly blind you have to rely on help.

It's a lesson in humility – being humble and realising you cannot do everything yourself.

It was a huge lesson for Paul because he didn't even know if he would see again.

He was totally reliant on God's people – who he was persecuting - to help him. He couldn't eat or drink – he had to be led around - how long was this going to last?

He was totally reliant on God – who he had let down so badly - to heal him – if indeed he was going to be healed.

As well as learning a very quick lesson in humility and trusting God – I think that this was a time when his spiritual eyes were opened.

He couldn't see in the physical – but that meant there was less distraction for him to learn about God – this Jesus whom had he persecuted.

It was the same with not eating and drinking – God has his attention and he had to learn fast about where real nourishment came from – that Jesus was the bread of life.

And Paul must have struggled with guilt and shame over what he had been doing. Think about that for a moment – murdering, torturing beating and imprisoning.

There must have been so much repentance. He came to know the forgiveness that only Jesus can bring.

After He came to a place where he was totally at the end of himself – it was like Saul died and Paul rose after 3 days – he was born again – he had a new life.

And when it was time – in Acts 9 it records that:

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

So, Ananias was obedient to God – in a very difficult situation – and brother Saul is healed - he can see and eat again and what's the first thing he does?

No – not eat!

He was baptised – here was the sign of a changed man- born again and filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

He had learnt reliance on God the hard way – and he was ready to do whatever God told him to do.

He had a new name and a new mission - Paul was on the case!

So - was he changed totally into the complete opposite of what he was?

Well – I don't think so!

You see – God used his personality for the gospel – for his purposes.

Saul was driven by hatred – Paul was driven by love.

Saul was committed to the law – Paul was committed to grace.

Saul was tireless in persecuting Christians – Paul was tireless in making Christians.

Saul would go anywhere to arrest Christians – Paul would go anywhere to support Christians.

Saul was desperate to see the church crushed – Paul was desperate to see the church grow.

God used his drive, his commitment, his passion to build the church – so we can read the letter in the letter to the Philippian church how much he loved them.

This is such a demonstration that with God anything is possible.

What does that mean for us:

It doesn't matter who you are or what you were.

It doesn't matter what you did or what you didn't do.

Because God has something much better for you.

He uses your personality for his purposes.

He doesn't want us to become unrecognisable clones as Christians

If anything – our personality flourishes and bears much better fruit instead.

So – this happens with us and those around us – even the unlikely ones!

We need to have an encounter with Jesus.

He calls us – hear his voice.

We need to come to the point of repentance and wanting Jesus to be Lord in our life.

If we feel at the end of our tether, if we feel we can't go on, if we feel that life has been a futile mess, if we have no hope or purpose in this life – if we are on our knees - well – that's exactly the place Jesus can meet us.

He is the answer – he says he is the way the truth and the life – he is the way to Father God – the way to be adopted into the family of God.

He came and died and rose for us, so we can be forgiven and be born again – just like Paul

We can be filled with the same Holy Spirit as he was and bear good fruit in the particular race we are called to run in.

We can then live life to the full – just as God designed us to – with all the quirks and personality that each of us has – but now used in the Kingdom of God to build something lasting and of worth.

So – if you are still at the Saul stage – Jesus is calling you right now – follow him into all he has for you in a new life. What else are you waiting for?

If you are at the Paul stage – but feeling a bit inadequate for the race – be filled with the Spirit right now and see what he does!

We can do mighty things together in his power – and I really believe we are going to do that here in Northumberland.

And I also believe even have an influence around the world as we are partners with other Christians seeing his Kingdom come!

Let's pray...