

Set Apart Before You Were Born

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Date: 29 March 2026

Preacher: Billy McKillop, Executive Pastor

[0:00] I'm Pastor Billy McKillop. I'm the associate pastor here. As Pat was saying, a lot of people turned out for the deacon's workday.

Busy church. Busy people. The Apostle Paul has a word for busy people from Galatians 1. And it's a word I need to hear as a busy executive pastor.

It's a good word for you in whatever age and stage you find yourself in. This is a good word for us this morning. Paul is really showing us a different way to live.

Then the mindless hustle and bustle of our fast-paced lives. You know, we're all tempted to fall into this pattern of living at supersonic speed without much thought or time for intimacy with the Lord. In our first chapter, first part of this chapter, Paul makes it clear that there's only one gospel. There's only one source of the good news. And Jesus is the source for our peace.

[1:28] He's the source of your rest. The source of your identity. He's the source of your hope. He's the source of your energy and strength. He's the source of your approval by God.

And He's the source of our true success as individuals and as a church. Amen? Amen? So take a look with me at the second half of Galatians 1.

We'll be reading from verses 11 to 24. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when He who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me.

[2:47] But I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.

But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. In what I'm saying, in what I'm writing to you before God, I do not lie. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

They only were hearing it said, He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they glorified God because of me.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord for us today. Thanks be to God. Father, we thank you for giving us this letter from the Apostle Paul to the Galatian churches.

Father, you've done that for us who have put our faith in the church.

[4:15] May we learn of faith and trust in you. May we learn of you today from this word and your love for us through Paul's words that are inspired by your Holy Spirit. And it's through Christ we pray.

Amen. Amen. You can be seated. Amen. So as we begin holy week you know we remember our saving substitute who the father caused to suffer in our place he suffered and died as the punishment for our sin so that we wouldn't have to and Jesus was misunderstood and he was mistreated in your place and we realized that the crowds in Jerusalem that were shouting hosanna they weren't looking for a savior to die for them they were looking for a source of political power that would work for them and so they wanted a king who would help them overcome

their enemies the romans and the crowds for the most part believed that salvation was going to come through a man it was going to be politically and militarily a salvation that would come through a human being so they tried to make jesus the king in their own design and really we shouldn't be too hard on the crowds because this is a universal human problem how many americans today are looking for a man to bring healing and a sense of peace you know we often try to solve our problems more through self-sourcing rather than relying on the one true source of our strength and our hope and our identity we're not good we're not real good at believing what jesus clearly told us that apart from me you can do what nothing right apart from me he said absolutely nothing so we need god's spirit today to help us to really believe this truth that we are dependent on him for everything i have a confession to make that i need his help to believe that i can do nothing apart from him last week i was moving at supersonic speed you know acting as though i was superman super executive pastor billy you know could have said it's a bird it's a plane no it's pastor billy you know a week ago saturday i had just returned from jamaica with a team that we did some wonderful hurricane relief ministry our team of six guys uh which was demarcus chapman and me from new city and four guys from first pres along with four local men we put the roof on a widow's home in four days flat i mean we worked hard you know i was leading serving pushing myself i landed back in chattanooga saturday after midnight got to bed at 1 30 i was up for church sunday morning and then monday morning hit the ground running had breakfast with pat to catch up kept my dentist appointment had prison ministry in the evening tuesday was a blur of staff and executive committee meetings early wednesday i had a meeting with a couple of elders to discuss our church's strategic initiatives you know and how we can press those into every nook and cranny of our church and around 10 o'clock that day not surprisingly i hit a wall you know i realized that you know my foot had been pinned to the gas pedal for 12 straight days and the tank was bone dry i wasn't trying to be arrogant i don't think with this schedule but below the surface i was definitely over you know estimate overestimating my energy and underestimating my god-given limitations and then i was really acting as though i was the main source of accomplishing these goals and the reality is that my exhaustion was just a physical manifestation of a theological problem you know the underlying theological error that pastor billy had fallen into was allowing my hustle to outrun my source i was forgetting or really i was resisting the true source of my energy and strength have you been there you know can you relate maybe you're there right now you know you're relying way too much on your own energy and your own strength as the source of success maybe you're working hard you're advancing in your career or you're meeting objectives in your ministry or in your relationships and your family you might be achieving educational or financial goals you may be moving toward the top of your game or maybe you feel like that's where you are right now you know you have arrived at the top of your game but you find yourself exhausted sometimes because you're drawing your energy and strength from the wrong sources you know after his conversion paul came to understand where his identity and his strength came from and he begins this part of his letter with a plain spoken defense of himself and the gospel and he tells the galatians in verses 11 and 12 that the gospel he preaches is not a human invention he says for i would have you know brothers that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel for i did not receive it from any man nor was i taught it but i received it through a revelation of jesus christ paul didn't receive the good news from a committee or a textbook or a mentor he came to understand the gospel through a direct revelation of jesus christ jesus showed up in paul's life and you recall his conversion on the way to damascus uh recorded in acts 9 but saul still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the lord he went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at damascus so that if he found any belonging to the way men or women he might bring them bound to jerusalem now as he went on his way he approached damascus and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him and falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him saul saul why are you persecuting me and he said who are you lord and he said i am jesus whom you are persecuting but rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do the men who were traveling with him stood speechless hearing the voice but seeing no one saul rose from the ground and although his eyes were open he saw nothing so they led him by the hand and brought him into damascus and for three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank so paul's encounter he had this encounter with jesus that would change everything everything about paul's life his trajectory in life his mission and purpose his relationships his understanding of his identity his source his source of well-being everything for paul changed in that experience that he had with christ and the principle we see here is that the good news of the gospel and your life in it comes

from a divine source and not from your human effort the good news of the gospel and your life in it comes from a divine source it doesn't come from a human source or human effort notice paul's emphasis he says he didn't go to jerusalem to get authorized by the disciples who were before him these influential disciples verses 16 and 17 paul says i didn't immediately consult with anyone nor did i go to jerusalem to those who were apostles before me but i went away into arabia and returned again to damascus so he lets them know that it was three years before he even met one of the other apostles and in verse 20 he adds before god i'm not lying he wants them to be convinced you know why do you think paul emphasizes so much here that he didn't consult with anyone why do you think he wanted the galatian churches to understand this any thoughts he was pretty adamant well he wants them to understand that his primary calling and their calling and your calling as well comes to you vertically not horizontally okay comes this way not this way paul's conviction of his calling to christ and his service needed to be rooted in christ as the source before it was confirmed by the jerusalem church and this is important truth for us to consider if the opinion of others is the source of your calling then the opinion of others will be the master of your soul and likewise if your own opinion of yourself is the source of your identity and your calling then your opinion of yourself becomes the master and not the master not the true master your opinion or the opinion of others becomes the source of your comfort rather than the source of all comfort not saying that uh others opinions of you doesn't doesn't matter right character matters and so it matters um that we are understood as people of character but it's not the source of your character right the opinion of others is not the source of your comfort or your identity what does your favorite catechism say about the source of your only comfort in life and death i know the heidelberg catechism is your favorite and you probably know the answer by heart you can say it with me right what is your only comfort in life and death my only comfort in life and in death is that i with body and soul both in life and in death am not my own but belong to my faithful savior jesus christ who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins and we could add that he's the only source of satisfaction in life and in death that jesus has satisfied for my sins what he did on the cross and his resurrection satisfied for everything that i where my shortcomings are so when we recognize god as our source of satisfaction you know when we believe that his opinion is based on christ's work then we're we're freed up to serve from approval not for approval see the difference that we are serving from approval that is already given because of christ not for someone else's approval or even my own approval all right paul says i don't even judge myself you know i'm not judged by other people nor do i even judge myself if you have faith in christ as your savior then along with paul you have been set apart verse 15 before you were born and it's because of his good pleasure alone so is that hard for you to believe that god knew you before you were born that he had a plan for you before you were born that what you're doing your gifts and your talents that you're using in his service in his kingdom just like the apostle paul you could say i was set apart before i was born for his good pleasure alone paul didn't find the source the source found him he wasn't looking for jesus now you didn't love god into loving you you know while we were yet sinners he died for us and while paul was busy breathing threats and advancing above his peers and self-righteousness god was busy being gracious you know what it says the psalmist in psalm 23 surely his goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and even before you had life his mercy and grace uh would what was preparing to follow you throughout life that's sovereign grace that's what we believe the bible teaches paul is emphasizing that our call to faith comes from outside of time and from a divine source it's not from human effort or from a human source and emphasizing that he didn't consult with anyone immediately you know paul isn't trying to be a lone wolf christian he's not saying that the other apostles were unimportant he's not saying that the body of christ is unimportant in confirming your gifts and your calling he's simply establishing the priority of the source you know with christ as the source of our calling then the community's role is one of confirmation not creation so it's important distinction for us to make and it changes the way we look at ourselves it changes the way we look at our personal history our unique gifts and our calling in god's kingdom to understand that christ is the source of my calling he's the source of my coming to faith and belief in him at some point in my life uh it was it was thought of before i thought of it so why do we struggle sometimes with looking for identity and fulfillment in the wrong sources why are we so prone to look for our fulfillment and our satisfaction and our comfort in life in all these sources that don't satisfy why do we sometimes pretend that we're a superhuman you know exhausting ourselves in self-sourcing human effort the problem is what we might call the human

trap of advancement human trap of advancement paul looks back at his former life in verse 13 and 14 and he admits that he was caught in this trap of advancement he says for you've heard of my former life in judaism how i persecuted the church of god violent violently and tried to destroy it and i was advancing in judaism beyond many of my own age among my people so extremely zealous was i for the traditions of my fathers so paul was at the top of his class you know with his upbringing and his training and his intellect and his zeal for the law of god paul had a

[20:45] competitive advantage over his peers and that's where he was finding his identity he was judging himself based on where everybody else was and where he he had advanced to and our problem is we resist god's grace by making our own performance the source of our identity and our worth just like the apostle paul was before christ met him before his conversion we resist god's grace making our own performance the source of our identity and our worth paul was using zeal for advancement in judaism really as an idol and sadly he believed he was earning god's pleasure when he was actually persecuting god's son he was resisting god's grace by making religious performance the source of his identity and we you and me we can fall into the same theological error very easily we rely on ourselves for the end results we're prone to hit the ground running every day relying on our own wisdom and strength and our loving heavenly father has given us some helpful practices you might call them intimacy building practices like morning prayers and the bible that sits unopened you know by your favorite chair as you run past it to get out the door to get busy with your day so you often run on empty and in your calling whatever it is whatever god has called you to do if you're a teacher or a medical professional or a realtor or an engineer or a secretary or a business owner or a youth leader whatever it is god is has you doing in his kingdom he's given you meaningful work to do yes for his glory but he doesn't want your accomplishments to be the source of your identity and your worth your worth comes from a divine source it comes vertically it doesn't come horizontally doesn't come from within us we don't create our um our worth or our identity um so what's the solution what's the solution to our our problem with self it's simply depending on depending more on jesus who is the perfectly dependent one jesus is our substitute who perfectly honored the father as his source and now gives us his own standing of approval as a free gift so god is offering you in christ here's approval here's my standing because jesus is our substitute we have the approval of god as a free gift because of what he has done jesus as your substitute he was the only human being who ever lived on planet earth who didn't fall into this uh trap of advancement of finding his identity horizontally uh think about jesus um for a moment living through his teenage years you know um any teenagers here i know there's some teenagers we you stood up right um maybe there's some recovering teenagers you know somebody said we're still today even though we have matured you know we're we're adults um responsible adults we're still a lot like we were in middle school because we seek validation from our peers every adult uh think about the lord jesus going all the way

through his teen years without the human insecurities that we struggled with in adolescence jesus lived the perfect teenage years for every teenager jesus wasn't tainted by the effects of sin and suffering brought on by the fall so if you're a teenager or if you're a recovering teenager jesus is your substitute who went through all that you're going through and in complete union with him you get the approval the complete approval of the heavenly father and so now in this new way of living because of his life and his sacrifice we get to enjoy the freedom of not having to live for approval but live out of approval you get to enjoy the freedom of not living for your peers approval but out of the approval that is already yours there's a little booklet uh that tim killer has written called the freedom of self-forgetfulness and i read a few years ago and uh it was really a blessing to me and i tried to find it on my shelf for uh you know i've been thinking thinking through this message but i couldn't

find it so i went on amazon i ordered it and uh it's gonna be here any day but i'm gonna read it again for me for pastor billy the freedom of self self-forgetfulness i recommend it to you jesus lived in perfect restful union with his heavenly father and in his humanity we know that he became physically exhausted at times probably more exhausted than any human being has ever been exhausted think about what he went through in the garden a great sweat drops of blood um in thinking about going to the cross uh but his exhaustion was never because of misdirected zeal jesus knew where his strength came from and he worked as hard at intimacy with the father as he did with ministry to others you know how many times do we read of jesus retreating from public ministry to be alone with the father you know where was he uh before his greatest act of service on the cross where do we find jesus in the garden of gethsemane seeking intimacy with his heavenly father you know on the cross jesus took the shame of our running ourselves ragged because of our pride he took the shame of our looking to ourselves for strength or looking to others for their opinions or their approval jesus bore all of our sin and all of our failure on himself so that we could have a perfect record so jesus was cut off so that you could be set apart and because of his perfect record when god looks at your busy tired soul he doesn't see a failure he sees his beloved son in whom he is well pleased and knowing that you've been set apart and called by god from before you were even born it changes your whole perspective on your identity it changes everything you know when you're you you are not the source of your success so it changes the way you view success your heart moves from being driven by performance uh to being driven by dependent trust just as jesus was dependent trusting fully in his father and the heart of this great exchange that took place for us on the cross is that jesus gets your sin and your failure and you get his restful dependence on the father

wow that's good news right for busy people that's good news for a busy church and what was paul's response to this good news in view of paul's divine calling by christ look at what paul does he doesn't rush to jerusalem to meet with the other apostles he doesn't rush into busy activity to prove he's a good apostle where does he go he goes to arabia for three years he goes to the desert he retreats he rests and the appropriate response to your own encounter with jesus is really this because christ is now your source of identity you get to trade self-promotion for the freedom of resting in his promotion big difference not self but christ in his promotion as a follower of christ because your destiny was established before you were born you get to slow down you're you're free to have a morning where you listen to his voice without feeling like you're falling behind if you're not running out the door by 7 a.m you get to take risks by faith knowing that your career and your finances are in his sovereign hands and not your hands your rest is really a countercultural testimony to say to your neighbors and your friends when you take a day out of the week to come and worship and honor a sabbath in your life it's really a cross a countercultural testimony that says i'm not the source of my success he is he's the source of everything good in my life so as we close uh think about the implications of paul's message for your busy life and schedule you know especially as it relates to this busy week as we prepare our hearts for good friday and easter easter sunday uh one practical way to slow yourself down in order to better listen to the voice of jesus is through morning prayers and reflection you know most would agree that the mornings are the best time of the day uh before we start our busy schedule uh this is the best time for this intimacy building practice with the lord and if you don't currently practice this time you could call it the time in the garden with the lord then maybe this holy week of 2026 is your opportunity to begin or to begin again it really can be your way of allowing the lord jesus to call you away to call you into the desert to rest uh to be with your heavenly father and we we all need this intimacy building time with him our children need it our children need time away from their busy schedules their time away from technology and the phone and the computer and social media and parents you get to lead them in this new way of living independence on christ as the source of their identity we all need to make intimacy a higher priority than industry we're really good at making industry getting things done get her done as a priority in our lives but not so good at uh building intimacy we don't work as hard at that the world says go faster work harder accomplish more earn more entertain yourself more

the gospel says hey the most important work is already finished the results are in so relax in christ you enjoy the journey enjoy the source of the finished work as you enjoy the work that he's given you to do right the results are with him so we can rest in him so where's the spirit asking you busy person to slow down you know let's stop pinning the gas pedal all the way to the floor as though we have something to prove to ourselves or prove to our heavenly father or prove to others remind

yourself every morning that like the apostle paul i am set apart by grace my worth is in christ not in the daily grind i live and serve today not for approval but out of god's approval of christ in me amen amen father we are blessed by the apostle paul by his example of seeing his call to faith and service as a vertical call coming directly from you directly from jesus we ask you to forgive us of our sins for relying on ourselves as the source of our strength and finding our identity and our worth in ourselves or in our accomplishments in our busyness forgive us father for being more concerned with man's approval and not believing that we have your complete approval because we're united to the lord jesus your son remind us to live every day out of that approval rather than for approval father and for someone who is listening who is not yet certain that he or she has responded to you in faith not certain that they have your approval your forgiveness of sins father we pray that you'll draw them as you have drawn us into this satisfying relationship with you this dependent relationship upon you for everything and we pray these things through christ our lord amen