

Acts of the Apostles – Paul and the Spread of the Church

New Testament Survey – Lesson 17 (Part 1)

In one of my favorite Lawsuits in the last few years I represented the sugar industry against the maker of an artificial sweetener. The artificial sweetener came in a yellow packet, with the advertising it was “made from sugar, so it tastes like sugar.” My clients believed that the powdered sweetener was not made from sugar nor did it taste like sugar. My clients found the advertising campaign misleading and hired me to stop it.

While working on the case, I came across a story about how the powdered sweetener came to be. According to the story, scientists in England were trying to invent a new pesticide. They needed something sweet to the taste, so pests would eat it, yet toxic to the system so it would achieve its purpose.

The chemists attached the poison chlorine to a sweetener thinking it might do the trick. The result was something sweet to taste, but it seemed to have no toxic effect. Evidently the chlorine was not ingested but stayed attached to the sweetener and just passed right through the digestive system. This had profound ramifications: a sweet taste, no poison, and no calories! Because just as the sweetener kept the body from absorbing the chlorine, so the chlorine stopped the body from metabolizing the sweetener, so the calories of this new product were nil.

While the scientists were frustrated over their failure, one bothered to take a taste. He found the sweetener quite powerful! Somewhere a light bulb went off. This product was not to become the world’s newest pesticide. It was to become the world’s newest sugar substitute! This splendid product was launched and immediately began garnering market share.

This story is a classic illustration of an unintended consequence. It serves to introduce our Acts review as we consider God’s use of Paul in spreading the church. Before Paul’s conversion, his actions had the unintended consequence of spreading the church. Later in his life, God spread the kingdom through Paul’s deliberate efforts to do the same. We will see both in this and coming lessons starting with the stoning of Stephen and extending into Paul’s missionary journeys.

Paul’s earliest actions that spread the church were far from efforts to evangelize. They were motivated by a perceived calling to holiness, but were the opposite of evangelism. Paul led the persecution of the faith, seeking to stamp it out. The unintended consequence, from an earthly perspective, was the spread of the church

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he sought to annihilate. God intended Paul's unintended consequence! We have referenced this before, but now we turn to focus more directly on Luke's accounting of Paul's role in the church's persecution and the stoning of Stephen.

THE STONING OF STEPHEN

Paul never forgot his life as a persecutor of the church. In what we believe was Paul's first letter, he wrote to the Galatians saying,

You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it (Gal. 1:13).

For Paul, these actions of persecution and violence were not from a pagan life devoid of God. Paul was not a God-hater. As bizarre as it might sound today, Paul saw it as part of his spiritual calling! Paul added to the Galatians passage that his violent attempts to destroy the church were part of his,

advancing in zeal beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Gal. 1:14).

We do not have a full detailed account of all Paul did to destroy the church, but what we do know certainly gives enough detail to understand his later reflections. In Acts 6 and 7, we read Luke's history of Stephen being seized by certain Jews and brought before the Sanhedrin. During Stephen's trial, Stephen seized his opportunity to bear witness to Jesus as the Righteous One, betrayed and murdered by the supposed guardians of the Law and its promises. As Stephen delivered his impassioned speech, the council included some who were "enraged" and who "ground their teeth at him." At that point, Stephen had a vision of Jesus, the "Son of Man standing at the right hand of God," which he declared out loud (Acts 7:54-55).

Luke detailed the resulting melee,

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 9:56-60).

What happened? We know the Jews were supposedly following the Old Testament, but this seems so foreign to any understanding we have of holy and right behavior! We are well served by putting this into its historical and religious context.

PAUL'S MOTIVES

Why was Paul willing to support killing Christians? Why would Paul use violence to stamp out the church? What motivated Paul to take this destructive course? As we noted in the last lesson, Paul was a Pharisee. This becomes critical to this analysis because Paul tied his persecuting to his zeal as a Pharisee. In his recitation to the Philippian church about his Hebrew credentials, Paul explained he was.

as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church” (Phil. 3:5-6).

Paul cared about his religion. When speaking to an antagonistic crowd of Jews in Jerusalem, Paul again linked his persecuting the church to his religious zeal. He reminded them that he had studied at the feet of the Pharisee Gamaliel,

according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, *being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this way to death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women* (Acts 22:3-4).

In the last lesson, while we discussed Paul's religious claims as a Pharisee, we left out the history of Pharisees. That history is important for us to better understand the link in Paul's mind between zeal as a Pharisee and persecuting the church. The importance of the history is magnified when we remember that Paul was proud that not only was he a Pharisee, but also that he came from Pharisaic heritage.

I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees (Acts 23:6.)

This is also implied in the Galatians 1:14 passage set out earlier:

advancing in zeal beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I *for the traditions of my fathers*.

Where did Pharisees come from? What was their history? We do not exactly know where Pharisees had their beginning, but scholars have deduced certain

ideas that give us indication of what could have been in Paul's mind as he opposed the church.

Most scholars believe the Pharisees came out of the Hasidæan movement that arose in the second century before Christ.¹ The Hasidæans (aka "Hasidim") were Jews fully devoted to the Law of God as governing life and religion. In our earliest lessons in this New Testament series, we discussed the intertestamental time and the rise of the Greek world through the conquest of Alexander the Great. After Alexander, the Greek way of life (with a good bit of Greek religion) became fashionable throughout the Ancient Near East, including the territories of Judah and Israel.

In the Apocrypha, we read of this Greek influence:

In those days there appeared in Israel men who were breakers of the law, and they seduced many people, saying: 'Let us go and make an alliance with the Gentiles all around us.... Some from among the people promptly went to the king, and he authorized them to introduce the way of living of the Gentiles. Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom. They covered over the mark of their circumcision and abandoned the holy covenant (1 Maccabees 1:11-15).

Things reached a point where the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes issued a decree forbidding the practice of the Jewish faith. This decree brought about a Jewish revolt spearheaded by the Maccabee brothers. The Hasidim, who gladly sacrificed themselves to keep the religion of Moses from extermination, fought valiantly in aid of the revolt.²

These Hasidim were the fathers to the Pharisees. Paul's heritage (his "fathers") had already saved Judaism from the sacrilegious changes of religious corruption. As a multi-generational Pharisee, and as a student of the world's leading Pharisaic rabbi, Paul was undoubtedly weaned on stories of the heroes who had stepped up and offered their lives to prevent the traditions and teachings of Moses and the Prophets from deterioration. We can easily see in Paul, a Pharisee who came from Pharisees, his motive of protecting the true Jewish faith and practice coming from personal zeal as a Pharisee.

¹ "Pharisees," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Keter Publishing House 1972), Vol. 13, at 363; F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 47ff. See also *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday 1992) III at 66.

² This is the same revolt from which came Jewish Hanukkah celebrations, commemorating the lasting of oil for the lamps during the rededication of the temple.

WHY WAS STEPHEN STONED?

Now that we have looked at Paul's motive, we must ask the next logical question, what law was Paul seeking to uphold? How was the church a threat to Jewish law and tradition? The simple answer is Jesus as Christ. The church worshipped Jesus as the Son of God. Paul would have seen this as a direct violation of Deuteronomy 17:2-7:

If there is found among you, a man or woman who...has gone and served other gods and worshipped them...and it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones.

To worship Jesus as Messiah was an offense that demanded stoning under the Law of Moses – unless, of course, Jesus actually was Messiah!

Paul lets us know in his writings a principal reason why he thought it impossible for Jesus to actually be the Messiah. When writing to the Galatians, Paul reminded them of the passage in Deuteronomy 21:23 where we read,

...a hanged man is cursed by God.³

Scholars recognize in the passage that Paul used a text that he had personally relied on in believing Jesus could not be Messiah. To Paul – pre-Damascus road conversion – it was simple logic:

- Jesus was crucified.
- Anyone crucified was cursed by God.
- Therefore, Jesus was cursed by God.
- The Messiah could not be one cursed by God. By definition, the Messiah was blessed by God.

³ Paul quoted the passage as, “cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Gal. 3:13). Some might wonder why the words read differently in our English translations of Deuteronomy from our translations of Paul in Galatians. The answer comes from the way Paul was quoting the Old Testament. Paul used the Septuagint for his translation here, rather than the Hebrew. Most contemporary English translations come straight from the Hebrew, using the Septuagint mainly where the Hebrew is ambiguous. Paul used the version with which the Galatians would have had familiarity. Paul also changed the Septuagint slightly to make the passage more understandable. In flow of his writing, Paul slightly modified the verb form.

- Therefore, cursed Jesus could not have been the blessed Messiah.

Fung writes in his commentary on this Galatians passage,

He [Paul] must have made use of this text himself to refute the early Christians' claim of a crucified Messiah.⁴

In this light it makes sense why Paul would call the crucifixion of Jesus a stumbling block to the Jews.

But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews (1 Cor. 1:23).

Jews could not see how a cursed man would be a blessed Messiah. After his conversion, Paul got the fuller understanding that Christ was cursed! But it was our curse he bore, not his own!

THE EVENTS

Paul must have burned into his memory the events involved in Stephen's stoning. When Luke wrote his history, and when Paul referenced the event in his letters, the readers were generally much more familiar with stoning than most contemporary people.

The story of Stephen's stoning is both moving and appalling. We can read in the *Mishna* to better understand what happened.⁵ In the *Mishna* section that deals with civil and criminal law (the *Nezikin*), we have a section on the Sanhedrin. Chapter 6 sets out the procedure for stoning. It begins:

[When] the trial is over, they take him out to stone him. The place of stoning is well outside the court, as it is said, *Bring forth him who cursed to a place outside the camp* (Lev. 24:14).⁶

We read this in the case of Stephen in Acts 7:57-58,

⁴ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Eerdmans 1988) at 151.

⁵ The Mishna is a collection of sayings spanning four centuries, two before Christ through two afterwards. It set out the law Jews practiced at the time. In a sense, it is a commentary or explanation of the Old Testament law as applied in Jewish society. The Mishna was put into written form by 200AD.

⁶ *M. Sanhed.* 6:1A-B.

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.

The *Mishna* gives us important information that we can insert into the time between the people dragging Stephen out and the actual stoning. Section E provides that after being hauled out to the place of stoning, if the convicted party says, “I have something to say in favor of my own acquittal,” the Jews must “bring him back” to the court. Yet, Stephen made no such proclamation. Even though his life was on the line, Stephen’s heart was focused on the vision he had just experienced, as Luke recorded it,

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55).

So, Stephen chose to endure the stoning, rather than recant his worship of Christ as error.

The *Mishna* then provides that when the convicted,

was ten cubits [about 15 feet] from the place of stoning, they say to him, “Confess,” for it is usual for those about to be put to death to confess. For whoever confesses has a share in the world to come (6:2A-B).

This was a time when one was to confess what one did as wrong. Even if one thought they were falsely accused, they were told to confess their other sins lest they die without an atonement. The words are provided in the *Mishna*:

May my death be an atonement for all my sins.⁷

Stephen did not confess himself wrong for worshipping Jesus. Stephen did not need to make atonement for his own sins through his death. The death of Jesus had already made atonement for Stephen’s sins. So instead, Stephen cried out to Jesus as Lord, committing his share in the world to come to Jesus,

Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.⁸

⁷ *M. Sanhed. 6:2.*

⁸ This significance is magnified as we read the *Mishna* teaching one “how” to confess. It provides, “if he does not know how to confess, they say to him, ‘Say as follows: ‘Let my death be an atonement for all my transgression’” (6:2D). Stephen’s atonement was the death of Jesus, not his own death! To have made the Jew’s confession would have been the ultimate blasphemy!

Stephen followed this up, again, not with a confession, but with a plea that echoes Jesus' from the cross. While the convicted was instructed to cry out for personal forgiveness, instead Stephen cried out,

Lord, do not hold this sin *against them* (Acts 7:59-60)!

The stoning procedure continues,

[When] he was four cubits [six feet] from the place of stoning they remove his clothes (6:3A).

We should not confuse this with the clothes laid at Paul's feet, for Paul held the clothes of the chief executioners (See Acts 7:58 and 22:20).

The initial act in the stoning actually involved pushing the convicted from what was in essence a cliff.

The place of stoning was twice the height of a man. [roughly roof top height]. One of the witnesses pushes him over from the hips, so [hard] that he turned upward [in his fall]. He turns him over on his hips again [to see whether he had died]. [If] he had died thereby, that sufficed (6:4A-D).

The *Mishnah* adds that if the fall did not kill the convicted, then a stone was to be dropped down on his heart. Should that fail to kill the person, then all the people were to pick up rocks and throw them down on him.

Interestingly, the *Mishna* also instructed that after one was stoned, their dead body was to be hung on a tree for the rest of the day. This was to show the community what happened to a blasphemer. The *Mishna* text then cites the same verse as Paul (Dt. 21:23), noting that anyone hanging on a tree was cursed by God:

All that have been stoned must be hanged...for he that is hanged is a curse of God.⁹

We do not know at what point Stephen died, but we do know that Paul witnessed and even cast his vote for the death of Stephen. No doubt this memory haunted Paul and never left his mind. Paul was in the midst of pursuing similar violence and persecution of the early Christians when Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus.

Paul later wrote to the Corinthian church,

⁹ *M. Sanhed. 6:4.*

I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:9).

Now that passage gives punch, as Paul called himself “the least” and “unworthy to be an apostle,” but the real punch is in the verse before! In verse 8, we read in the English Standard Version,

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Paul then continued with “For I am the least....”

In verse 8, Paul used the Greek word *ektroma* (ἐκτρώμα) which is translated “one untimely born.” The word literally means a dead fetus ejected from a woman’s body or aborted.¹⁰ Paul was working on killing the church, but would later see that he was the one actually dead. Paul saw himself in comparison to the other apostles. The others were selected by Jesus, trained and prepared for their mission. Paul, however:

was a persecutor of the church, a vile, dead thing spiritually, fit only to be carried out and buried from sight. Yet to *him*, to him while being *such*, the risen Lord also appeared. He, the abortion, placed at the side of these living men, treated, honored, dignified like them by the Lord!¹¹

Paul knew first hand the atrocious deeds he committed. One must wonder if Paul did not at times reflect on his failure to follow the guidance of his teacher Gamaliel. Gamaliel had warned the Jews to leave the Christians alone,

For if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God! (Acts 5:39).

Gamaliel was right.

CONCLUSION

Luke showed that Paul’s attempts to stop the church from spreading had the opposite effect. God used Paul’s persecution to disburse believers outside Jerusalem. Even before Paul’s conversion, Paul was God’s tool for God’s plan!

¹⁰ “ἐκτρώμα,” Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (U. of Chi. 1979), 2d Ed.

¹¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament, the Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Hendrickson 1998 printing) at 640.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst”* (1 Tim. 1:15).

So, what is your worst moment? Does it measure up to Paul’s? Do we consider ours worse because Paul’s motives were “good?” First, I’m not so sure we should label Paul’s motives as “good.” Paul was moved out of zeal, but that does not eliminate the selfishness and self-promotion that often come from zealous actions.

Paul never forgot his deeds. Paul never excused them out of “pure motives.” Paul never sought to soften them. Toward the end of his life, Paul emphasized this in writing to Timothy, saying, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15).

Let us NEVER think that our worst is too much for God’s best! Whatever we are, whatever we have done, God waits to forgive – to wash us clean – to make us whole – to create in us a clean heart – and, to prepare us for his eternity. What a wonderful promise we have in Ephesians 1:7 “In Him [Jesus] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”

2. *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”* (Acts 7:60).

There is no question that Paul’s actions in the stoning of Stephen affected him. They affect us. But we should also be affected by the actions of Stephen. Stephen never sought the executioner’s mercy, never wavered, and never faltered. Stephen beheld the glory of Jesus and went home, dying with a prayer for Paul and others on his lips, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). God answered that prayer for Paul, to the benefit of church and history. Lord, may we have the faith and courage of Stephen. May we see to pray for your mercy for those who persecute us, and may we see them in heaven in eternity, through Jesus and his death’s atonement! Amen!

3. *“I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God”* (1 Cor. 15:9).

I am moved by Paul’s humility. Here was a man who was used mightily by God. He gave away wealth, family, a position in society, ease and comfort

all for a life of service to the Lord. His life of service was hard – very hard. He was robbed, beaten, jailed, cheated, lied about, threatened, and eventually killed. Paul wrote about his ability to brag over his holy lifestyle *before* he met Jesus, but he refused to do it. For Paul, it was rubbish compared to the relationship he had with the Lord. I think, however, that Paul might have had even *more reason* to brag *after* his conversion. Yet again, Paul did not do so. His humility came from a deep recognition of who God was, and how little even Paul measured up to the Lord. Yes, I am moved by Paul's humility. I pray I am moved enough to seek a vision of God that keeps my own pride in check!