

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 6

Paul's Conversion

As I type this lesson, I have just finished a meeting at a business in San Jose, California. This was my first trip to San Jose, and my flight landed just 30 minutes before my meeting. That gave me just enough time to get my rental car with its handy GPS navigation system. I plugged in the address of my destination and listened to the kind machine instruct me how to get there. The machine and I were doing just fine until I failed to make an instructed turn (it did not seem like the right place to turn to me!). The “kind” machine suddenly took a harsh tone and began barking at me, “Make the first legal U-turn. Make the first legal U-turn. Make the first legal U-turn.” I did, and I made the meeting.

It was kind of nice to have the machine instructing me the direction I should go. I was not going to make that meeting without it. When I erred, the machine placed me back where I belonged.

Now the meeting is over, and I consider this lesson on Paul and his conversion. Paul was also on a journey, headed to meet with officials in Damascus. Paul had papers authorizing him to take Jewish Christians into custody and return them to Jerusalem for punishment. Paul was on the right road for Damascus, but on the wrong road for his life's purpose. Paul's life needed to make a U-turn! He was trying to stamp out the faith Paul had been appointed to further.

SCRIPTURE

The scriptures that set out events around Paul's conversion are found in Luke's book of Acts and Paul's letter to the Galatians. We read about Paul's conversion in three different places in Acts, which should not pass unnoticed. Luke wrote Acts as his history of the church. The history unfolds over several decades, and being limited in space, Luke is very careful about what he puts in and what he leaves out. Luke chooses to dedicate the better part of three different chapters towards telling, retelling, and retelling again Paul's conversion story.

The story is captivating. The story is inspiring. The story gives hope to all sinners. The story gives purpose to those with no meaning; hope to those despairing. The story gives direction to the lost and misled.

The story begins in Acts 9. Paul is aggressively seeking out Christians to stamp out the renegade sect that Paul considered blasphemous to God and Israel. Word gets to Paul that the church has spread into Damascus, a city some 150 miles from

Jerusalem. Not satisfied with persecuting the church in Jerusalem, Paul decides to chase the church down in Damascus as well.

Paul gets permission and letters of authority from the high priest for making such arrests and heads for Damascus. “Companions” (that Luke fails to give us much information about!) accompany Paul. Scholars generally concur that these would have been “a body of Levite police that had been granted him by the Sanhedrin in order to haul men and women to prison.”¹ About noon, “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him and falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” (Acts 9:3-4). The light was brighter than the noon-day sun and it was not simply a flash of light, but it shone around Paul for a while (Acts 26:13). The voice spoke to Paul in Aramaic, Paul’s Hebrew dialect, calling Paul by Saul, his Hebrew name (Acts 26:14).

Paul’s first reaction was likely fright, for Paul fell to the ground. Paul responded to the voice asking respectfully, “Who are you Lord?” (“Lord” was a respectful term much like “sir” in certain circles today). The answer was probably the last thing Paul ever expected to hear: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). No doubt, as Paul reflected on this event over the next few days, he was stunned by the realization that all his “godly” attempts to stop the church, to eradicate what he perceived to be a cancer on Judaism, were in fact a persecution of the Lord Jesus, God incarnate. No doubt, Paul pondered on that haunting thought a long time.

We also see here, perhaps, why Paul’s favorite phrase for referring to the church is to call it “the body of Christ.”² Jesus himself pointed out to Paul that Paul’s persecution of the church was a persecution of Jesus!

Jesus charged Paul to make a U-turn in his life. Paul was never meant to serve God by destroying the church. Paul’s service to God was to be building the church. Jesus said:

For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:16-18).

¹ R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament—Acts* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1988 edition) at 351.

² See, for example: 1 Cor. 12:27 (“For you are the body of Christ”); Eph 4:12 (“so that the body of Christ may be built up”); Col. 1:24 (“for the sake of his body, which is the church”).

Then, Paul is instructed to head on into Damascus and wait for God's deliverance and further instructions. Those with Paul hear the voice, but do not understand what is being said (some see a contradiction in the story recorded in Acts 9 and the story related in Acts 22. More on that later.).

Paul stands, and having been blinded by the light, his companions lead him into Damascus. Paul spends the next three days blinded, waiting for the promised instructions from God, and fasting from food and drink. Acts does not tell us, but there can be no doubt, that Paul was replaying not just the Damascus road experience, but his entire life to that point: the stoning of Stephen, the words of Gamaliel that fighting against the Way might ultimately be fighting against God, and the request to the high priest for permission to arrest Christians in Damascus. Surely, Paul was working through his memory of scripture, trying to understand how Jesus could be Messiah, how one who is crucified and cursed, how one could be the Blessed One, how God could be one (Deuteronomy. 6:4 "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."), and yet Jesus could be God the Son. Paul must have been questioning when Jesus would send the word for what Paul was "to do," how Paul would take God's message to Gentiles, and what that message was!

It is interesting that Paul did not immediately head back to Jerusalem and offer sacrifices to atone for his errors in persecuting the Jews that believed in Christ. Of course as Christians, we understand that Christ is the atonement and no other sacrifice merits anything before God. But for Paul, that was a brand new realization. I suspect as he was working through God's instructions to stay in Damascus and wait, he was understanding anew how the sacrifice of Christ was an atonement that fulfilled all the rites and rituals of Moses.

We are told that while Paul was praying, a Jew named Ananias came to see him. From Luke, we get the background of Ananias's story.³ Ananias was a devout Jew who was a Christian believer. On an ordinary day in Ananias's life, the Lord comes to him in a vision calling him by name. The Lord tells Ananias to go to Straight Street to the house of a man named Judas.⁴ Ananias would there find "a man of Tarsus named Saul" praying. By that time, Paul would have seen a vision of a man named Ananias coming to lay hands on Paul, healing Paul's blindness. Ananias was familiar with Paul, knew his history of persecutions, and even knew

³ Luke has already told his readers that he compiled his account after "having followed all things closely for some time" knowing and talking to eyewitnesses and writing an "orderly account" so that his readers might "have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." One suspects then that Luke likely talked to Ananias at some time.

⁴ Even though Judas was a common name, it surely did not escape Paul's notice...nor Luke's... that there was an irony that Paul the Persecutor was spending his waiting time in the home of one who shared the name with the traitorous disciple.

his purpose of coming to Damascus to arrest believers. Ananias speaks of this in his vision, but God dismisses the concerns saying, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). God adds that Paul the Persecutor will soon be suffering himself for the church and the name of Jesus.

Ananias goes as instructed and finds Paul. Ananias goes to Paul, and calling him brother, lays his hands on Paul saying, “the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17). As Paul provided more details later speaking to the crowd at Jerusalem, Ananias commissioned Paul instructing him:

The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name (Acts 22:14-16).

Immediately, “something like scales” fell from Paul’s eyes, and Paul regained his sight. Paul went straight to be baptized and only after that did Paul finally eat.

DIFFERENCES IN THE THREE ACCOUNTS

When we research and read scholars’ works on the conversion of Paul, we find many scholars are perplexed over the three differing accounts in Luke. Some consider these three different traditions that some later compiler put together into a book claiming “Luke” as its author. Other scholars simply acknowledge these differences as factual flaws found in the Bible. These scholars were never trial lawyers!

As a trial lawyer who over the decades has handled literally thousands of different cases, my perspective is quite different from these scholars. What I have seen repeatedly in the courtrooms of America is that events occur which are understood and explained differently by different people. Furthermore, the same person may tell the facts around an event differently depending upon the audience and the purpose for telling the story. It happens day in and day out.

In fact, the most suspicious story is the one that is told in the same precise language with the same precise details every time. That is a story that is suspicious for veracity. If someone wants to sell something that is not true, they make sure that every detail is precise and ordered consistently. As one trained to listen to various accounts and put a full story together, I am amazed that any scholar would think that a “compiler” took three different traditions of Paul’s conversion and put them into Acts in three different places with clear inconsistencies and then tried to pass it off as an original researched book

supposedly written by a companion of Paul. Such a charlatan (even if a well-intentioned charlatan), who nails so many other details down to names, places, and times, would be brighter than that!

When Luke gives us the story in Acts 9, he recounts what occurred, giving emphasis where it suits his purpose. In Acts 22, we have the second account of Paul's conversion, but it is not Luke simply writing it over. Luke is actually recording Paul's speech before the Jewish crowd. Paul was telling the story of his conversion in Luke 22 with a specific audience listening. We know that Paul would sculpt his speech and behavior in such a way as to maintain integrity before God, but also to be a Jew to Jews and a Greek to Greeks in order to reach people for God (1 Cor. 9:20 "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews").

We read in Acts 22, Paul's presentation to a certain audience. Paul emphasizes certain points while minimizing or leaving out others. The responsible and appropriate thing to do is to compare the accounts and see the emphasis Paul adds for the Jewish audience in Acts 22. We see that Paul adds details of time ("about noon") and identification ("Jesus of Nazareth" rather than simply "Jesus").

Luke says in Acts 9 that Paul's companions did not hear the voice, while in Acts 22, Paul says the companions did. One might fairly ask which is true? The answer lies in the Greek writing itself. In Acts 9 Luke writes that Paul's companions "heard the voice" in what is called the "genitive case" which means hearing the sound, but not understanding. This is like John 12:27-29 where Jesus hears God speaking to him and the crowd *hears* but does not understand, thinking the noise was thunder. Now in Acts 22, Luke is translating Paul's speech, which was in Aramaic to the Jewish crowd. Luke writes in Acts 22:9 that Paul told the crowd that his companions did not hear the voice using the Greek "accusative case." By using this different case ending on the words, Luke conveys that Paul was saying that the companions did not "understand" the voice.

Now, there is a difference between hearing and understanding. Understanding that difference removes any alleged contradiction and clarifies what happens. The English Standard Version translation committee understood the difference and clarifies it by translating Acts 9:7, "The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, *hearing the voice* but seeing no one" and Acts 22:9, "Now those who were with me saw the light but *did not understand the voice* of the one who was speaking to me."

The same passage has the companions in Acts 9 standing while in Acts 26 (where Paul is giving an account of his conversion to King Agrippa), Paul says his companions fell to the ground. So, which was it? Careful scholars point out that Luke's language about the companions standing was a Greek expression of "standing firm" meaning "they did not run away" as opposed to a reference to

one's posture.⁵ Such may be the answer, but another equally plausible answer is that the men both stood for a time and fell for a time. That of course makes sense of both accounts. I know that my reaction to an unexpected blinding light accompanied by loud sounds would likely leave me either falling quickly or turning and running! The companions of Paul did not flee; they stood their ground choosing instead to fall flat!

Lenski and some other scholars see it differently. Lenski writes:

At the first flash of the super earthly light they, too, fell prostrate (Acts 26:14); upon recovering, they now stand speechless, in utter astonishment because of what is happening especially to Saul who is lying on the ground and talking with someone who is unseen by them.⁶

Before leaving this subject, allow me to tell you one more thing about my trip to San Jose that I discussed in the opening of this lesson. The GPS told me to take a left turn to arrive at my destination. It truly did! Now, since I never told you that aspect of my trip in the opening of this lesson, does that make the opening story false? Does it make the fact false? Of course not! The point of my opening was to talk of the U-turn we often need to make. The left turn was not relevant. Now, I add the left turn data here because it is relevant to help me make the point. We are doing Paul, Luke, and God a disservice if we are not extra careful before we write off seeming inconsistencies without adequate research and thinking!

WAS PAUL REALLY “CONVERTED”?

Somewhere in the Christian consciousness of many has crept an idea that Jews who become Christians also become Gentiles! This is not Biblical. Jews are Jews; Gentiles are Gentiles (unless they convert to Judaism).

When Paul became a Christian, Paul never ceased being a Jew. Paul would write to the Corinthians that, “to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews” (1 Cor. 9:20). Now if the Jews were not to be Jews, as Christians, how could Paul ever win them to Christ by being a Jew? We mentioned two weeks ago that Paul continued to call himself a Pharisee even though a Christian (Acts 23:6). In Acts 21, after three missionary journeys to the Gentiles, Paul returns to Jerusalem and took an oath in the Temple affirming that he lives “in observance of the law” (Acts

⁵ See *histemi* (ἵστημι) in Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d Edition (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979). In this sense, Luke uses the word earlier speaking of a flow of blood standing still or stopping (Lk 8:44). Matthew similarly used the word speaking of a star standing still (Mt 2:9).

⁶ Lenski at 356.

21:24) and that the rumors that Paul taught Jews to “forsake Moses” or “not to circumcise their children” were false (Acts 21:21).

McRay points out that Paul suffered Jewish punishments that he could have avoided simply by repudiating his Judaism. “If Paul had not wanted to remain a Jew, he certainly would not have endured the five whippings of thirty-nine lashes each given him by the Jews (2 Cor. 11:24) *in the synagogues...*”⁷ Now, one might say, what are a few whippings? But, that person has no idea what Paul actually went through.

We can return to the *Mishnah* we used last week to understand stoning and see what was involved in these lashes. In *Makkot* 3:12-15, we read how the lashes were delivered:

- “One ties his two hands on either side of a pillar,
- and the minister of the community grabs his clothing—
- if it is torn, it is torn, and if it is ripped to pieces, it is ripped to pieces—
- until he bares his chest.
- A stone is set down behind him, on which the minister of the community stands.
- And a strap of cowhide is in his hand, doubled and redoubled, with two straps that rise and fall [fastened] to it...
- And he hits him with a third of the stripe in front and two-thirds behind.
- And he does not hit [the victim] while he is either standing or sitting, but bending low...
- And he who hits him hits him with one hand with all his might.”

This section of the *Mishnah* does add that if “the victim dies under the hand of the one who does the flogging, the latter is exempt from punishment.”

⁷ John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching*, (Baker Book House 2003) at 49.

Paul endured these lashes because he was a Jew.⁸ For Paul, his Damascus road experience was not a change from one faith to another. Christ was for Paul, a fulfillment of his Jewish faith. Christ was the law fulfilled. Paul would no longer have need for the ritual sacrifices of Moses, for Christ was the final sacrifice who gave the old sacrifices meaning. In Christ, God had a new covenant with his people, but it was the same God! God opened up his kingdom to those who believe in Christ, be they Jew or Gentile.

Consider Paul's letters to the Romans and Ephesians. Paul spends time pointing out that in the kingdom of God, the Church, God makes Jew and Gentiles one. Not because they are no longer Jew and Gentile, but because they are one in the body of Christ who died for both. When Paul writes to the Galatians, "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek," Paul does not mean those distinctions do not exist. He means that those distinctions make no difference in one's status as a member of the church. In the same passage, Paul continues by saying, "there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female" (Gal. 3:28). Yet clearly there were male and female, save and free! Paul does not mean these distinctions did not exist. Paul means in the body of Christ, the difference does not translate into first and second-class Christians!

So, Paul was a Jew. As A Jew, Paul came to understand that Jesus is Lord, crucified, and resurrected. Paul never confused his Judaism as the road to God or the basis for his standing with God. Judaism and Paul's obedience to the law was never, after his encounter with the risen Lord, the basis for Paul standing before God. Paul stood before God on the merit of Christ alone. But still, we see that Paul continued a Jew, albeit a Christian Jew.

Paul was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Paul was also commissioned to take this truth and preach it. The Damascus road experience can be called a conversion, but it can also be called a "call" or "commission." Was Paul "born again?" Certainly! Paul would say to the Romans, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

While we may legitimately use the word "conversion," we need to use it recognizing its limitations in the case of Paul. As Capes, *et al.*, put it, "Paul says

⁸ Thinking about the scars and damage to Paul's chest and back gives special meaning to Paul's notice, "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17).

that he is a new creation (Cor. 5:17), not that he converted to a new religion.”⁹ We also believe it equally proper to speak of Paul’s experience as a “call” or “commission.” We should look here at how Paul wrote of his experience to the church at Galatia:

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 to 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, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus (Gal. 1:11-17).

Paul uses carefully selected language to speak of his experience on the Damascus road. Paul says that God “set me apart before I was born.” This language echoes that of Isaiah (“The Lord called me from the womb” Is. 49:1) and Jeremiah (“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” Jer. 1:5). That is not to say that Paul was high on an ego trip of being special before God. This is the same Paul who called himself an aborted child before meeting Jesus (see Paul lesson 4).

For Paul, the Damascus road experience was not simply a “come to Jesus” event. It was the necessary direction change, the new birth that enabled Paul to achieve for God the very things that God had already prepared for Paul to do. In this, Paul never considered himself something exceptional. Paul was always reminding and teaching the church that the same is true of any Christian. Paul would tell the Ephesians, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, *which God prepared beforehand*, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Paul, the aborted child, dead and lifeless, even as he thought himself God’s most zealous and holy servant, meets the resurrected Jesus, and his world is turned upside down. “U-turn” seems too mild to describe the life change. On the road to Damascus, Paul saw and heard Jesus call him and commission him. The vision and the words were clear. Paul never doubted

⁹ Capes, Reeves and Richards, *Rediscovering Paul, An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology* (IVP Academic 2007) at 84.

it. It changed his life for good. Paul lost his position, his power, and his prestige. Paul went from the one overseeing the punishment, to the one receiving the punishment. For Paul, this was not a cause for mourning; this was a cause for joy! All the things he lost were garbage and rubbish when compared to knowing Jesus. Paul readily confessed to the Philippians church, “whatever gain I had, I counted as a loss for the sake of Christ. In deed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ my Lord. For his sake I suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from law, but that which comes through faith in Christ” (Phil. 3:7-9).

2. Paul was born again into this walk with God and Christ that put his early life to shame, but Paul was not born again simply to be a Christian. Neither are we. God has a purpose for Paul, a calling. God has the same for us. Every child of God is a unique vessel fashioned for unique works in his name. We should pray for God’s will to be done in our lives; and we should live with an eye toward such purpose. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”