

From Saul to Paul

Exactly when Saul/Paul began his mission against the fledgling Christ movement is unknown with any degree of precision. Fear of him, however, was significant. Christians beyond the borders of Palestine trembled at the mention of the name of this “wolf” who stalked “the fold of the Lamb”.

Saul of Tarsus first appears in the biblical record as a witness to the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr to the cause of Christ—even “consenting” to his death. He was ‘zealous for God’ and kept the Jewish laws as well as any of the Pharisees. Henceforth his persecution of Christians, both men and women, as portrayed in the book of Acts by his own testimony, was a relentless attempt to stop their ‘heresies, as he sincerely thought he was doing Jehovah’s will. Pursuing the Christians even unto foreign cities, he beat, imprisoned, and had them put to death. Later he would write that “beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and made havoc of it”. The horrible memories of these vicious attacks would linger with the sensitive apostle for the balance of his earthly days. That frenzied ambition to exterminate Christianity from the face of the earth was to radically change,... and the record of how that occurred is as amazing as it is inspiring.

Scripture tells us a fair amount about Saul/Paul's dramatic experience. According to Luke’s historical record, Saul, armed with arrest warrants for those of the Christian Way, departed from Jerusalem en route to ancient Damascus, some 140 miles to the north. As he drew near that city, a light brighter than the noonday sun suddenly engulfed him. A voice inquired: “Saul, Saul, why do you continue to persecute me?” The double use of his name suggests a reproof. Saul responded: “Who are you, Lord?” The title “Lord” was employed at this point as a mere term of respect, for he knew not who had addressed him. The voice was identified as Jesus of Nazareth! The stunned persecutor was instructed to enter Damascus where he would be informed as to what he “must do.” Blinded as a consequence of this miraculous vision in which Christ actually appeared to him, Saul was led into the city.

For three agonizing days he fasted and prayed. Finally, Ananias, a messenger selected by God, arrived. Despite his own fears of the ‘wolf’, Ananias restored Saul’s sight and commanded him to “arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name”. After certain days passed, the former persecutor began to proclaim among his fellow Jews that Jesus “is the Son of God”.

We cannot help but be immensely impressed by the transforming power of the experience upon Paul's personality. The unfeigned brilliance and immense zeal of the Apostle shine forth in all his writings. The Greeks of Corinth and Athens were unlikely to be impressed by tales of visions and mystical insights. Among his hearers could have been initiates into the mysteries of Eleusis, for this very academy founded by Plato still operated in Athens. But the zeal of Paul--that is what impressed them.

We should note that Paul did not receive the Holy Spirit with the initial illumination, but three days later with the laying on of hands by Ananias in Damascus and Paul’s subsequent baptism.

Paul supplies clues concerning the nature of his revelations throughout his letters. In what perhaps relates to a distinction between spiritual noesis (a Greek word meaning “the ability to sense or know something immediately) and more mundane forms of knowledge, he says:

14 Whoever does not have the Spirit cannot receive the gifts that come from God’s Spirit. Such a person really does not understand them; they are nonsense to him, because their value can be judged only on a spiritual basis. (1 Cor 2:14)

But we must not neglect to remember that any purely intellectual noesis amounts to naught if unaccompanied by agape (a Greek word translated as “love”):

1 I may be able to speak the languages of men and even of angels, but if I have no love, speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell.

2 I may have the gift of inspired preaching: I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains—but if I have no love, I am nothing. (1 Cor 13:1-2)

We tend to equate mysticism with a life of contemplative withdrawal, but Paul shows how it can be vital, energetic and dynamic.

Paul is a pivotal character of history. Even his name bridges the two religions—Saul (Hebrew) becomes Paul (Greek). From a relative first-century obscurity, to a modern international figure, no one, aside from Jesus Christ himself, has been so influential to the faith. We can relate especially to Paul's situation, because his experience occurred after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Unlike the other apostles, what Paul learned of the mysteries of God he learned by Revelation, and not by direct contact with the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus. In this sense, Paul is a modern person, one of us.