

Paul

What can we say about Paul that hasn't been said already? Well let's start with his background, just who he was and where he came from.

He was born into a religiously observant Jewish family of the town of Tarsus in Cilicia. He was also born a Roman citizen. 'More than a carpenter' p. 79 and first 2 paragraphs of p. 80 finishing with Gal 1:14. He was also very significant and well known in his day. He is written about by other historians of his time. It's very likely that he would have been a prominent figure in history even if he hadn't become a Christian and written most of the New Testament. The detail and knowledge of the law he shows, especially in his letter to the Romans, is evidence of a man of remarkable intelligence. A bit later on we will deal a little more about what he wrote in Romans.

As so much has been written about Paul, it is best to focus on just a few aspects of him, as there is so much that can be said.

[Read Saul's conversion Acts 9: 1-19]

Look at the radical nature of his conversion. Here was a man who violently opposed the Christian church and then basically overnight became one of them. Acts says that before his conversion he literally "laid waste the church" (Acts 8:3). He set out for Damascus with documents authorizing him to seize the followers of Jesus and bring them back to face trial. Note that Acts also tells us that Saul was "breathing threats and murder against the Christians. So it's no wonder that when the Christians at

Damascus heard that Saul was coming to see them that they were just a little bit worried. Here was this man who they knew was out to get them and now he was coming to stay with them? It all sounded pretty suspicious. Think about the sort of person he was before and after his conversion. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Paul before his conversion as an intolerant, bitter, persecuting, religious bigot – proud and temperamental. After his conversion he is pictured as patient, kind, enduring and self-sacrificing, although these are qualities that he does not always see in himself.

As well as this, we see that after his conversion, Paul's relationship with the followers of Jesus was transformed.

Then we see how his message was transformed from one of being a bitter hater of Christians to a determined proclaimer of the Way.

Following on from this, his mission was transformed as well from being a Gentile hater to being called as an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul experienced a revolutionary and real experience of the risen Jesus. And these were some of the ways in which his life was completely turned upside down.

When I was looking at the life of Paul and his writings, the things that first struck me about Paul were what he went through in his life of service to the Lord – beatings, shipwrecks, being flogged. All these sufferings and trials and still all he wanted to do was to serve Christ. Listen to what he went through as he himself wrote it in his 2nd letter to the Corinthian believers:

Read 2 Cor 11: 21b – 28. Then read Philipians 4:11 about being content whatever the circumstances.

Now some people say that it is somewhat unrealistic for us to have the change of life that Paul had, for example to be able to say that you are content whatever the circumstances after what someone like him had been through. I disagree. The life that Paul spoke of, where we are able to have that level of contentment despite terrible circumstances, is possible for all of us. Let's not sell God short. He can do in us what he did in Paul. I'm not talking about having a vision of the risen Jesus necessarily, though He could do that, but being able to have the kind of relationship with God that Paul had. It is available to all and I think that Paul would be the first to confirm that.

It is important to note that Paul wasn't the first person to take the Gospel to the places where he went. His significance is in the content of the letters he wrote and the impact that they have had down the centuries.

I believe that it's no coincidence that God chose someone like Paul, so well versed in Scripture, and such an obedient Jew, to have the impact that he did.

Remember that the first Christians were not considered as separate from Jews; they were considered a Jewish sect who believed that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus. They were still Jews.

Paul was also such a humble man. He referred to himself as the least of the apostles and unfit to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church (1 Cor 15:9).

Also Gal 1:14 and Phil 3:5-6. he was someone who was so knowledgeable about the law, and could explain the work of Christ so well, to Jews and Gentiles alike. He explained that following Jesus, or 'the Way' as it is referred to in the book of Acts, is not a new religion, but that the long-awaited Messiah had come. Being such a knowledgeable Jew, he could go back through Scripture and explain this in such detail, as we see he did in his letter to the Romans.

The way he links the Old Testament to the significance of Jesus is profound. He quotes from the Old Testament almost 90 times in his letters.

He was a man who seemed to wear his heart on his sleeve. More than once he spoke of his great anguish and many tears.

According to history, Paul was about 60 years of age when he died, some say 65, beheaded in the time when Nero was Emperor of Rome. One of the things I thought I would focus on today is the fruits of the Spirit. Paul mentions these at the end of Galatians 5.

A point which is important to note when looking at the fruits of the Spirit is that this is not an exhaustive list. It is a list of fruits that Paul is stating that are not what he has. There are other fruits of the Spirit that Paul did not list but that was because he possessed those fruits himself.

The reason I'm mentioning this is because I think it's important to see why Paul mentioned those particular fruits of the Spirit. The fruits he mentions in Galatians 5 are fruits that were not ones he possessed. But they are definitely not an exhaustive list.

I remember when I was about 18 and had been a Christian for a few years, I was really challenged by those aspects of Jesus' character that were not me. I received some feedback about myself over a period of time about ways that I was coming across to people that was not productive. My way of relating to people was not obviously destructive. In fact if you knew me then you would have just thought that I was this really friendly, pretty reserved young man. But I was also very timid and I used to think that love involved just being nice to everyone. It was then that the stories of Jesus rebuking the Pharisees, and turning over the tables in the temple, really stuck out at me.

here was the Jesus who I served, the ultimate model of love, rebuking the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites and going through the temple with a whip made of cords and tipping over all the tables in a righteous rage. I knew that if I was going to continue to grow as a person, I needed to be more Christlike, and so I found myself becoming more assertive. It took time, you don't just realise and repent of your sinful attitudes over night (well, sometimes you might, but not me in this case). But I was realising that the things in the gospels that attracted me to Jesus were the things that I wasn't – I realised that I needed to become more Christlike in those areas too. This is just what Paul is referring to when he lists the fruits of the Spirit. He is listing those that are not ones he possessed. He felt he needed to be more loving, have more peace, have more joy. Be more patient, be kinder, be more faithful, be more gentle, and have more self-control.

What I would like to do now is to just give you a grasp of the sort of man Paul was. One of the best ways to do this is to look at his own writings in the New Testament. As I mentioned before, Paul wore his heart on his sleeve and these verses that we will look at show how he dealt with life, how much he loved Jesus and what an example he is to us.

Romans 5: 1 – 8. this is one passage that shows not only Paul's knowledge of Jesus place in God's plan of salvation, but the incomprehensible love that God has shown to us who are undeserving sinners.

Romans 8: 1 – 4. Here is such encouragement. I wanted to look at this passage because this is one that just stuck out at me when I first became a Christian – there is NO condemnation. For a shy teenager as I was at the time, who had been picked on at school, this passage about there being NO condemnation was just what I needed to hear.

2 Corinthians 12: 7 – 10. This is a passage well known for mentioning Paul's thorn in the flesh. There has been a lot of speculation about what his thorn in the flesh actually was, but the reason this passage sticks out to me is because of the last verse – when I am weak then I am strong. How does that compare to a world where we are told that we need to hang tough, to be strong, to be self-sufficient. This sort of passage written by Paul would be taken as a sign of

emotional weakness by many psychologists. But it is when we recognise our insufficiency, not our self-sufficiency, that the Holy Spirit can work in us to do His will. That is when God's will can be done in us. Colossians 1: 15 – 20. You probably could not get a clearer statement of who Christ is. Here is Paul saying that Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. What gospel passage does this remind you of? 1 Corinthians 13. Of course the famous passage about love. This timeless passage shows the characteristics of love, what it is and what it isn't.

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