

the apostle paul of tarsus

forgetting those things which are behind...

The life of the apostle Paul embodies two fundamental, yet powerful Christian concepts: *Conversion* and *Grace*. Saul of Tarsus was a thoroughly different person from the apostle Paul who, more

than any other, codified the Christian faith. The former Saul, “Hebrew of Hebrews,” zealous for the Law, became

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus,
called to be an apostle and set
apart for the gospel of God.
Romans 1:1*

He was truly “converted” from one personality and life to another. And no other First Century life so dramatically demonstrates God’s grace, for God removed—as only God could—the stain and guilt of Paul’s despicable past. Jesus called the apostle to His service even while there was blood—the blood of Christ’s children—still dripping from the man’s hands.

Forgetting those things...

The apostle Paul had more to forget than most. Others coming to Christ may have been steeped in contrary faiths, as was Paul, but few were as guilty of his extravagant loathing of Him. Others may have felt ill-at-ease around believers of The Way, but few took after them with sword, stones, and the full weight of the law.

Saul of Tarsus was the very *last* person the fledgling church would have expected to become a light shining the way toward Jesus Christ as Messiah—which, in the Lord’s eyes, made him perfect for the task.

*...but one thing I do, forgetting those things which
are behind and reaching forward to those things
which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the
prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Philippians 3:13b-14 nkjv

Aspects

Encouraging believers to know
God and His ways,
and to enjoy a more intimate
communion with Him

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A Prowling Lion

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Acts 7:58b-8:3

Saul was his Hebrew name, and Paul his Roman name, for he was a Roman citizen as well as a Jew. Trained by the scholar Gamaliel, Saul was a Pharisee, a member of that meticulous party. He was an insider, an "up and comer," upwardly mobile within the politics of his homeland.

But Saul began to destroy the church...

Let no one paint the early life of Saul with rosy hues, for he was consumed with a ferocious hatred for all things pertaining to Christ. Used nowhere else in Scripture, the word Luke chose to describe Saul's actions—translated here "destroy"—is the one

that would have been used to describe a wild boar tearing up a vineyard. Saul was like a wild man pursuing, flailing against this young faith called 'The Way.'

It would have been difficult to find anyone who more despised Jesus of Nazareth and His followers. His pursuit of them was unrelenting: Saul of Tarsus was pleased even to enter the homes of Christians and haul them off to jail, and eventual death.

*Be self-controlled and alert.
Your enemy the devil prowls
around like a roaring lion
looking for someone to devour.
1 Peter 5:8*

"The Lord stopped me just as I was rising up to strike down more of those I now call brothers."

"You mean, sir, that you were once *opposed* to Christianity?"

"I mean, sir, that I was once its worst enemy," Paul answered. "I mean that it was my life's occupation—my unquenchable passion—to remove from this earth as many followers of Jesus Christ as I could. My hatred for them could not be turned, and it was acted out in unspeakable ways."

Hate Crime

In the United States today one cannot with impunity criticize members of racial subgroups, anyone adhering to a deviant sexual orientation, those with physical or mental disabilities, or even those who subscribe to any of hundreds of fringe spiritual doctrines. To do so is to lay oneself open to ridicule, physical abuse, even lawsuit.

The sole remaining societal minority one may safely criticize—even slander—without fear of retribution or

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. Acts 9:1-2

alienation is evangelical Christianity. While it is true that this is a nation in which there still exists freedom of religion, a nation in which every Sunday morning finds people flocking to the church of their choice, it is also true that no other subgroup of this society is subjected to the same level of sneering contempt. Today if you criticize a racial

minority, you are declared a hate monger; if you show utter contempt for a Christian, however, you are deemed 'tolerant.'

In the United States one's faith may bring derision, but there are parts of the world in which one's faith may still bring death. Saul obtained government sanction to arrest and kill the disciples of Christ's teachings, and in

this day there are still governments who are determined to thoroughly eradicate the teachings and followers of the Messiah.

The methods may have changed, but hatred lives on.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” John 15:18-19

Blinded by His Light

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. Acts 9:3-4,8

It’s a favorite image among those who have reportedly had near-death experiences. They suddenly find themselves walking toward a source of brilliant, white light. In this instance it is inviting, warm, comforting.

Not so for Saul. This brilliance was anything but comforting, throwing him to the ground and taking away his sight. Jesus wanted his attention—and He got it. He chose a powerful, unforgettable method to stop the persecutor cold in

his tracks. And stop him He did: Saul never again arrested any followers of The Way.

The real value of God’s blinding light is its ability to blind us to everything but Him. Days of servitude to the responsibilities of this temporal plane can numb us to His ways, but His light can cut through the smog, wash away the distractions clamoring for our attention, and lead us directly, specifically to Him.

Personal Savior

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Acts 9:3-6

This traumatic confrontation with Christ in the life of the apostle is a perfect illustration for the Body that bears His name: the Church.

Saul had been pursuing and jailing *human beings*; he hadn’t laid a hand on the Son of God. Yet Jesus addressed him as the one who was being persecuted: “Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Saul was about to find out that life in Christ is much more than the detached worship of a far-off deity. Followers and disciples of Christ Jesus are permanently attached—not only to

each other, but to the one they call Lord. When there is pain anywhere in that Body—from the lowliest, most common new Christian, all the way to its most prominent, celebrated members—Jesus feels it, and takes it personally.

It’s why we call Him our Personal Savior.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 1 Corinthians 12:27

A Corrective Lens

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Acts 9:17-19a

Every believer has a physical or mental list of those things for which he or she is most thankful. Near the top of every list—just below the first item: the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on the cross—should be the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Without His constant caressing of our heart, it would become so easy to forget God. Our base nature would soon overwhelm any memory of Scripture or sacred experience, and leave us feeling detached and adrift from His presence. But because the Spirit is there, we carry around in us a steady reminder of who God truly is—as well as a corrective lens that adjusts our imperfect vision to match His.

A Leaf in the Wind

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

Galatians 1:13-14

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. Acts 9:19b-22

The apostle Paul, in those early years, must have felt like a leaf in the wind, being buffeted in four directions at once. In a relatively brief period of time he had gone from someone who killed followers of Christ to being one himself; he had gone from a position of strength to one of utter helplessness; he had changed cities, changed friends, and changed his message. And he now looked toward a new horizon.

When Moses was called into God's service, he protested, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" But we have no record of Paul doing anything but obeying Christ's command to serve Him. He did what he was told; he went where he was told.

...but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Galatians 1:17b

Paul willingly gave himself over to a new life, a new message, and a new Lord.

"Our journey hasn't been easy," Paul said. "We've met as many roadblocks as open roads. There have been times, I confess, when I wondered why we bothered. Why travel hundreds of miles, only to be locked out of an entire region?"

"But who locked you out?"

"The Spirit."

"The Spirit? I thought you said he was your companion. Why would he prevent you serving?"

"The Spirit is our permanent connection to God," Paul explained. "He serves the Father by translating His wishes for us."

Tough Times

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

Acts 9:23-26

When I think back to the tough times that have come as a result of my faith, it is—without exception—moments with other believers that are remembered as being the most painful. The most heart-sickening moments took place, not out in the cold, cruel world, but in church pews, small Sunday School rooms, choir lofts.

Let no one be persuaded that life in the family of God comes without its scars. Paul was not the first, nor was he the last to be the recipient of abuse and persecution—both from without and within the Body of Christ.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Yet through it all the apostle persevered, because he served not unregenerate man, or redeemed saint, but only Christ the Lord.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.
(4:16-18)

“I even depended upon the help of others to leave Damascus,” Paul continued, “as there were those who plotted for my life.”

“So soon!” Diomedes said.

“I can’t blame them. How were they to understand the change that had taken place in my life. In a very short time I went from being a zealot *against* the Christians to being a zealot *for* them. And Ananias had warned me.”

“Of what?”

“It didn’t trouble him at all to pass along what the Lord had told him. In referring to me, Jesus had told him, ‘I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.’ And so it began.”

A Friend Indeed

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

Acts 9:26-27

Everyone needs a Barnabas.

Everyone needs someone willing to encourage, defend, and go to bat for them. Paul was hanging out there all by himself—isolated, vulnerable—until Barnabas came alongside to buck him up, to stand in the gap for him.

When everyone else was against Paul, Barnabas was willing to stand by his side, to take him at his word. What he was saying to Paul, in effect, was, “I believe that you are following God’s will

for your life.” In a human sense, Paul would not have been able to fulfill God’s will without that timely, critical help. The cards were stacked against him, and he needed someone to help.

He needed a Barnabas.

Poetic Justice

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen... Acts 6:8-9

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:57-60

So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. Acts 9:28-29

We first meet Saul, in Scripture, when he is in attendance at the execution of the disciple, Stephen, who has been ministering the gospel to the Hellenistic Jews of Jerusalem. Later, after Saul [Paul] has himself become a believer, one of the first groups to which he takes the gospel is the same as that in Stephen's earlier ministry. And what is their response? The same as it was earlier: They tried to kill him, just as *he* had had Stephen put to death.

God has a long memory, and a keen sense of ironic justice. King David's lust broke up a family; though his sin was forgiven, he paid the price of having his own family bear its scars. Moses disobeyed God in the way he called forth water from the rock, so God punished Moses by not permitting him to cross the water to enter the Promised Land. And now Paul must come back to take over the work of the one in whose death he had participated—and he receives the same treatment.

Discerning

The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said,

"You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun."

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Acts 13:4-11

It is no small thing for the Christian to carry around with him the Holy Spirit. The Spirit brings intimacy with God, and what can often be a supernatural level of discernment to our walk with Christ.

Paul gave himself over to the indwelling Spirit, and, as a result, was able to distinguish the charlatans in his midst. There was no magic in Paul that gave him this ability—no special dispensation from the Father, but simply the same holy eyesight given every believer who determines to walk with Him.

The Guide

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Acts 11:25-26
My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."
Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? 1 Corinthians 1:11-13

The early believers were not called "Barnabians" or "Paulians," but Christians: "those of the household of Christ." How easy it would have been for the intelligent, dynamic Paul to construct a new cult around himself; how tempting it would have been for him to stand alone upon the pedestal of adulation.

But Paul always pointed people toward Jesus Christ. These early followers of "The Way" belonged not to him, but to Christ. The apostle Paul was not their God, but only the runner who carried God's good message.

An Unqualified Success

Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.
Galatians 1:21-24

Here, stated so simply, so matter-of-factly near its beginning, is the validating stamp of Paul's ministry.

One could say (as did he) that his work was validated by the miraculous intercession by Christ Himself on the road to Damascus. One could say it was validated by the approval of key figures in the early church, such as Ananias and Barnabas. One could say, even, that the immediate threats against him showed the effectiveness of his work in the name of Jesus.

Nothing, however, validates Paul's conversion and early preaching better than this simple proof: "They praised God because of me."

And that should forever be our goal. Forget money, forget prestige, forget even great influence and congre-

gation size. If what we do causes people to glorify God, then we have been an unqualified success in His Kingdom.

"Envy?" Paul said, astonished.

"Yes, it's true. Envy. What a wonderfully rewarding life you have! You have a God you happily suffer for; I don't even have a god who asks of me such things. You have brothers and sisters scattered throughout the world who are ready at a moment's notice to help you, feed and clothe you, even suffer for you; I have a handful of friends and acquaintances who will give me assistance—as long they have nothing better to do. I have wealth, but you have riches beyond my comprehension! Yet instead of spending it on yourself, you spend it on others—and they spend theirs on you! How marvelous!"

"Diomedes," Paul said quietly, "there's nothing remarkable about my life—except the presence of God that directs it. There's nothing remarkable about the people I consider my brothers and sisters—except that it is the same Spirit that binds them as much to each other as to me.

"Diomedes, it is our God who is remarkable—not us, or our lives. It is His Spirit that courses through us, binding us to each other. If we are prepared to give our lives for each other, it is only because we have already given our lives to Him—to our Lord Jesus Christ. *He*, my friend, is the remarkable one."

Aspects

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