

The Cloud of Witnesses

Paul the Apostle

Lesson 1: Paul the Apostle – Saul, The Sincere Religious Scholar

Reading

Acts 7:54-8:1.

Saul, The Sincere Religious Scholar

We first meet Paul as Saul of Tarsus. Whilst he is recorded as the enemy of the followers of The Way (Jesus Christ), we need to remember that even so he was also extremely devout. His knowledge of the Scriptures was as good as, if not better, than that of the followers of The Way.

He was brought up as a Jew and a Pharisee, and as such would have been well-schooled. From the age of 5 he would have been taught the Scriptures and studied them, and then gone on to learn the Jewish traditions when he reached 10 years old.

Later he had the privilege of being a student of one of the foremost Rabbis of his day, Gamaliel 1. Saul was obviously extremely zealous and would have taken all his studies more seriously than others as he advanced well beyond what they attained. That he was devout and sincere was never in doubt.

He was so zealous for the integrity and purity of his religion that his religious fervour demanded that those seen as heretics should not only be hounded down but eliminated. His drive was so strong that, having felt he had cleansed Jerusalem, he was ready to make excursions to other parts of Palestine to complete the task.

He was determined to destroy the perpetrators of the heretical faction, known as The Way. He saw in them a direct confrontation to Judaism; their teaching was totally contrary to all he had learned and held dear.

When Stephen challenged the Sanhedrin, Paul would have seen that as an act of extreme heresy. He watched as Stephen was taken away and stoned. Such was his approval that he willingly offered to watch over the clothes of those who stoned Stephen to death.

However, it seems Stephen's death neither appalled him nor satisfied him. Rather, it gave him more ammunition and confidence that what he had set his heart on was the right course of action. He would continue the persecution of the followers of The Way (Christians) both in Jerusalem and everywhere else they went. He would hound them to extinction.

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Lesson 1 continued: Paul the Apostle – Saul, The Sincere Religious Scholar

Because Saul was sure that he was doing what was right, he applied to the religious council for the appropriate letters addressed to the synagogue leaders throughout the land to force them to hand over any of the traitors to Judaism for repatriation to Jerusalem and their eventual death.

We need to remember, however, that Saul was doing no more than trying to protect his form of Judaism. Indeed, the Judaism that he had been brought up with and been taught from his childhood. He was not the one who was a radical – it was the followers of The Way who were challenging everything and offering the people a new religion.

Saul was protecting the status quo. He was defending the traditions and historical religion. Why shouldn't he?

However, as we shall see, he was totally misguided. Sincere, but sincerely wrong.

We need to be sure to base our non-negotiable beliefs on the non-negotiable Truth of God's Word.

Paul the Apostle would say to us today...

You could be sincere and yet sincerely wrong. Make sure you don't make the same mistake as me.

Prayer

Father, please help me to get to know You better so that I can walk in Your ways rather than in the ways of the world. Amen.

Additional readings

Matthew 15:1-9; John 5:31-47; 1 Samuel 15:10-26.

Questions

How can we ensure that our sincerity is based upon the Truth?

What are the things that can sidetrack us?

What are the main differences between Christianity and all other religions?

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Lesson 2: Paul the Apostle – Met The Risen Jesus Christ

Reading

Acts 9:1-12.

Met The Risen Jesus Christ

Saul continued on his murderous way with the determined intent to not only destroy the perpetrators of this new religion, “the Way,” but also eliminate the challenge to historical and fundamental Judaism.

He would embark on a personal campaign to extinguish every trace of the followers of Jesus Christ who claimed that He was both Messiah and God.

What better course of action could there be than to nip it in the bud and ensure it died early in its tracks – before it could spread like leaven through dough? If successful he would have achieved a major victory and saved the world from a hideous deception.

With that in the forefront of his mind and having considered himself successful in Jerusalem, Saul turned his attention to Damascus. Armed with the appropriate letters he started his journey towards the extermination of Christianity.

There was never a doubt that what he was doing was best or any concerns that maybe what he was striving for was wrong. He was determined to keep Judaism pure.

As he rode along that day he must have felt very pleased with himself – the saviour of Judaism. Then it happened. Completely out of the blue came this lightning flash of light and Saul fell from his horse. Opening his eyes he discovered that he was blind. But that was not all – he heard a voice speaking to him and addressing him by name.

It was the voice of Ultimate Authority – it was the voice of none other than the very person whose followers he had set out to destroy – the voice of Jesus Christ!

The challenge was an interesting one – *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?*

Not *why are you persecuting the followers of The Way* – but *why persecute Me?*

Jesus was identifying Himself with His followers – Saul was not just attacking them; he was attacking Jesus Christ – their Leader and Master.

Saul recognised something in the tone of the voice to know that he had met Someone who was all-powerful, the One before whom every knee would bow. He responded with a contrite – *Who are you, Lord?*

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Lesson 2 continued: Paul the Apostle – Met The Risen Jesus Christ

The Lord replied – *I am Jesus*. Wow! If there was ever a statement to eliminate discussion it is that. *I am Jesus*. There is never any place for a question or argument when you hear that statement. Every person on the face of the earth will be silenced by that statement. The only response that we can make is to bow and call Him, *Lord*.

We may feel we have all sorts of issues to raise with God. We may feel He has dealt us a hard life. We may feel He has let us down. We may feel He is uncaring and judgmental – but please let me assure you of this – once you hear His voice say – *I am Jesus* – as with everyone who has ever met Him in that way – you too will fall down before Him and call Him, *Lord*. The issues will become totally insignificant when you come face to face with Jesus.

As we read the rest of Saul's life – and his name was changed to Paul through his encounter with the living Jesus – we realise that he was totally transformed. His passion for the Truth was the same. His vigorous defense of his beliefs was equal to his fervency for Judaism; however, his message was totally different. His motivation was redirected from himself and his own significance to that of being completely absorbed by his passion for everyone to know Jesus. To follow Jesus.

To know the overwhelming love of God, which had been demonstrated to him – the murderer of Christians – now forgiven and given life in a whole new dimension.

Paul was totally captivated by love – God's love. He never forgot the extent of God's forgiveness expressed to him through the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. All his past forgiven and replaced by a bright and secure hope for the future – in Heaven with Jesus forever.

Paul the Apostle would say to us today...

Everyone needs a dynamic encounter with Jesus Christ who is risen from the dead and alive for evermore.

Prayer

Father, I would love to have an encounter with You – which will change my life so dramatically that I could never be the same again – so I would be totally released to be the person You long for me to be. Amen.

Additional readings

John 20:10-18; John 20:24-31; John 21:1-23.

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Lesson 2 continued: Paul the Apostle – Met The Risen Jesus Christ

Questions

What difference would an encounter with Jesus Christ make in your life?

What has an encounter with Jesus Christ made to your life?

How do you keep feeding off that encounter?

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Lesson 3: Paul the Apostle – Worked Out His Faith Through His Life

Reading

Acts 18:1-19.

Worked Out His Faith Through His Life

The Jews of Paul's day taught that there were two sides to a worthwhile life – one was the study of the Torah and the other physical work. Excellence of knowledge without excellence of labour was incompatible with greatness.

Not only should you work for your living but your attitudes in the workplace should flow naturally from your belief system. The values you hold would be evident in your work ethics and lifestyle.

So it was natural for Paul to have a job. The records tell us that he was a tent-maker. Yes, he studied harder than any of his colleagues and peers but that was not at the expense of his labour. Both came naturally to him as he moved from place to place.

It is a good model for us too. The most natural place for us to live out our beliefs and Christian lifestyle is at work as well as in the home.

I love the picture I had from the time I worked in banking. One of the roles of a banker was to make sure that every cheque that was presented for payment was technically in order. We had to check the date, the signature and the available funds before payment.

However, there was an even more important issue, and that was – Did the amount in words match the amount shown in figures? You see, all the rest of the cheque could be fine, but if the cheque had been tampered with, it would show up in these two areas.

It is easy to add a nought (or two) behind the figures or a one in front and the value of the cheque would be changed dramatically. It is much more difficult to change words, and if they were changed they had to be correctly initialed for verification. So if the words didn't match the figures, we would return the cheque for clarification.

The phrase we would use was – *"Words and figures differ"*. The cheque was then technically dishonoured.

It mirrors our lives. We can know all sorts of information and say we hold wonderful values, but if they are not worked out in the marketplace of life, they are no more than a sham, and our lives hypocritical. When someone does something they regret and they say, *"Oh dear, that's not the real me..."*, I'm sorry, that is the real 'me', for it is when we are off guard that the real 'me' shines through. Often it is not the pretty sight we hope it would be.

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Lesson 3 continued: Paul the Apostle – Worked Out His Faith Through His Life

Remember, we are challenged to live the lifestyle we say reflects our true values and priorities.

However, there is another perspective that Paul highlights and that is that we should also be prepared, released and happy to tell others our faith story. It is not just for pastors, vicars, priests or the full-time clergy. In one way it is even more important for us to do it, as they so often don't actually meet many people outside of their church fellowship.

It is even more important, therefore, for those of us who are not in church every day of our lives, but rather in the office, hospital, school, workplace, retail store or factory (or even Parliament), to tell our faith story to those with whom we have an ongoing relationship.

We need to be able to tell others the difference Jesus has made in our lives. What it was that led us to the point of asking Jesus Christ to become our Saviour. Why we wanted to become a Christian and the change in our lives that has occurred since. How it would be beneficial for them, too.

Paul frequently told others how and why he became a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Paul the Apostle would say to us today...

Just because you have a secular job doesn't mean you are excused from doing God's will and telling others about Jesus and your faith story.

Prayer

Father, thank You for reminding me that whatever I do for You is O.K. – I don't need to be a full-time pastor, vicar or priest. I can continue in my job and yet still be used by You to bring in Your Kingdom on earth. Please help me understand what it is You want me to do or say each day. Amen.

Additional readings

Nehemiah 2:1-9; 2 Kings 5:1-18; Acts 10:1-8.

Questions

How do you live out your faith at work?

How many of your work colleagues know you are a Christian?

How many have you told your faith journey to?

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Lesson 4: Paul the Apostle – Never Strayed Far From The Message Of The Cross

Reading

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5.

Never Strayed Far From The Message Of The Cross

Paul frequently told others how and why he became a disciple of Jesus Christ. Similarly, Paul never strayed far from the Message of the Cross.

What do I mean by that? What is the Message of the Cross?

There are many aspects to the Message of the Cross. I will try and highlight just a few here so we can understand Paul's fascination and single-mindedness with it.

We must keep in mind Paul's background. He was born a Jew and lived in Tarsus. Tarsus was in Cilicia, a territory of the Roman Empire, and as such, he was influenced by their pagan views. Consequently, he was very well qualified to address both the Jews and Gentile Romans.

In today's study Paul begins with the Jews. They demanded a sign that Jesus was God and yet failed to see the signs that Jesus did every day – healing the sick, the blind, the lepers, and even raising the dead. No, the Jews wanted Jesus to descend from the Cross. A thing that Jesus would not do, as to do so would have negated forever our opportunity of Salvation.

The Cross was also a stumbling block to the Jews. For three reasons. Firstly, only criminals were crucified. The Messiah would be sinless so wouldn't die as a criminal (rather He would be their King). Secondly, the Law was quite explicit – anyone who died on a cross was cursed of God – so the Messiah couldn't be crucified on a Cross. The fact that Jesus had to die on a Cross to pay the price for the curse and so remove that penalty from us escaped them. Thirdly, in any case – how could God die on a Cross? God is incapable of death, so dying on a Cross couldn't work or be true. (I don't understand it either, but it is still true.)

Paul then focused on the Gentiles reading his letter. Greek thought permeated the whole of the Roman Empire. It deified wisdom and reason. If something was considered illogical, it was futile and not worthy of any consideration. The worldly wise would look at the Cross and know that it was pointless and futile.

No-one dies for someone else. Death is the end, so if Christ died that would be the end, and He would be no different from any other misguided Messiah. *How can the death of someone from another ethnic group help me? How can someone's death which occurred a long distance away from where I live or, indeed, before I was born, have any relevance to me? It may help you in your religion but it is of no use or relevance to me.*

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Lesson 4 cont.: Paul the Apostle – Never Strayed Far ...

Faith is speculative at the best of times and who knows whether it really helps or is true rather than just coincidence?

If Jesus lived and died a good man, a great moral teacher and someone who helped others – through normal compassion or miraculous powers – it is of no significance to me. He remains just another good person whom we are glad walked the earth; someone whom we could try to emulate or model our lives on. Although I will fall a long way short it gives me some sort of direction and self-satisfaction that I tried.

However, if He was God – then that changes everything. If Jesus did rise from the dead – as He said He would – that puts Him in a different place than anyone else. Someone who was so severely beaten and left in the sun to die, pronounced dead, buried in a grave and yet came alive again reveals a quality that no one else has ever shown. He must be God, however illogical that may seem.

That then poses the biggest dilemma of all. If Jesus is God – I must bow before Him. He has authority to speak into my life and to expect certain results. The amazing thing is that although that is true, His greatest desire is that I begin a relationship, a friendship with Him, which will extend into eternity in Heaven.

Paul the Apostle would say to us today...

You need to understand the power of the Cross.

Prayer

Father, we will never be able to fully understand what The Cross means to You or to us. Thank You that – on the Cross – Jesus Christ, Your One and Only Son, died to pay the penalty of my sin and open the way for me to have a vibrant and intimate relationship with You. Help me never forget the wonder of my salvation and the power of the Cross. Amen.

Additional readings

Isaiah 53:1-12; Luke 23:26-47; Philippians 2:1-11.

Questions

Why is the Cross so powerful?

Why do we try and avoid talking about the Cross?

How important is the Cross to you?

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Lesson 5: Paul the Apostle – Ran The Race And Won The Prize

Reading

2 Timothy 4:1-8.

Ran The Race And Won The Prize

Many Christians say they want to be like Jesus – the only downside is, of course, that Jesus ended up on a Cross – at this point a lot of the initial enthusiasm wanes.

Others want to be like the great apostle Paul. Become famous as a great preacher, church planter and missionary. When, however, they take the time to read 2 Corinthians 6 and 11, and consider the extreme opposition and frightful experiences Paul had to endure, their enthusiasm to be like Paul also dissipates fast.

When Paul wrote to Timothy about finishing the race, he was doing so from the vantage point of seeing the finishing tape. He was not just six steps from the starting blocks. No, he knew what he was talking about. He had endured extreme hardship for the sake of telling others the Good News of Jesus. He had risked his life time and time again, in order to tell those who had never heard about Jesus – about His life, His death and His love.

He claimed to be *“poured out like a drink offering.”* In other words, he had withheld nothing of his energy or breath in order to expend his life for the sake of others. He would carry on to the end in his mission of evangelising the nations, whatever the cost to himself.

Why would he do that? Well, I don't think he would go that far for something that was a lie, do you? He was an intelligent man; learned, articulate and a good communicator. But he didn't do it for the money, either. Many con artists have come and gone proclaiming their deceptions and making enormous amounts of money in the process.

Not Paul. He was a servant of others. He gave his life that others might come into the freedom that only an intimate relationship with the Creator of the world can give. Paul didn't encourage people to follow him. No – He always pointed people away from him and onto Jesus.

He never forgot that he had been a murderer of the followers of Jesus. He wanted everyone to know that he had been wrong – sincerely wrong. Jesus was who He claimed to be – the Messiah of God, the Christ, The Son of God, our One and Only Saviour.

There was no-one else who can forgive us our sins. Jesus alone paid the price for our sins and Jesus alone opened the Way back to God, so He became once more our Loving Heavenly Father.

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Lesson 5 continued: Paul the Apostle – Ran The Race And Won The Prize

Why was Paul prepared to risk so much? Why was Paul ready to offer up his life and breath for Jesus? How did he maintain his determination to tell as many people as possible that there is salvation in no-one else but Christ Jesus? Where did he get his strength and determination from?

Jesus was all the inspiration Paul needed. When Paul examined Jesus' life, he saw in Him Someone who gave up everything for what He believed in. Jesus gave up His home, He gave up His family, He gave up His time, He gave up His energy, He gave up His reputation, He gave up His relationships, He gave up His friends, He gave up His power and authority, He gave up His rights, He gave up His love and He gave up His life – for you and me.

Paul recognised that and so decided he could do no less. He just hoped and prayed that his life would cause others to look to Jesus and to find in Him true satisfaction, true fulfilment and undying love.

The call comes from Heaven again – *Who will go for Us?* Paul would say to us – *What are you waiting for – respond like me – Here am I, send me.*

Paul the Apostle would say to us today...

The prize is waiting for those who don't give up.

Prayer

Father, I find the Christian walk is hard at times – actually most of the time. I see all my faults, my selfishness, my pride and my failures. Please help me draw my strength from You so that I can carry on through the mercy, grace and power of Your Holy Spirit to reach the goal You have chosen for me – and that by Your grace I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever. Amen.

Additional readings

Hebrews 11:32-40; Hebrews 12:1-11; Revelation 3:7-13.

Questions

How do we keep going when we are faced with so much opposition?

What prize are you working towards achieving?

What are the prizes awaiting the faithful, overcoming Christians?