

Paul

We have the privilege today of looking at Paul, the eighth man in our series. I think it's fair to say that apart from Jesus, Paul has had the most significant impact on the church's thinking and practice. We live in the theological heritage of Paul.

On a personal note, Paul's writings had a profound impact on me as an early Christian, particularly the books of Romans, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Timothy. I was captivated by Paul's all-consuming love for Christ and people. Romans and Galatians grounded me in the gospel of grace. And as I read 1 and 2 Timothy, I felt like Paul was speaking directly to me as his son in the faith.

The more I've read Paul's letters, I've been struck by Paul the person - the Jew, the Pharisee, the persecutor of the church who ultimately gave his life for the gospel. How can we account for such a radical transformation in Paul?

Paul met the risen Christ. Paul was captivated by Jesus, he was consumed with the message Christ had entrusted to him. He had one goal in life, the glory of His Savior.

It's important to note that Paul was an Old Testament Jew, in that he lived and worshiped prior to the arrival of the New Covenant. He was steeped in the Hebrew scriptures and the progress of redemptive history through the very men we've been studying - Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jeremiah.

After Paul met Jesus, he understood how the Old Testament pointed to Jesus, the suffering king. But before we get to Paul's understanding of Christ, let's look at Paul's upbringing.

Paul the Man

Paul said to the Roman tribune in Jerusalem, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city" (Acts 21:39).

In 67 BC, all of Cilicia became a Roman province, and its capital was Tarsus. Tarsus was well known for its production of linen and *cilicium*, a material made from goat's hair. Paul's ability in tent-making can possibly be traced to his family's work with *cilicium*. Tarsus was also a city of great learning, at least surpassing Athens and Alexandria as a center for education.¹

¹ F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 33-36.

Paul was also a Roman citizen by birth, explaining to the Roman tribune, “I am a citizen by birth” (Acts 22:28). This meant that Paul’s father was a Roman citizen. We don’t know exactly how Paul’s devout Jewish family acquired Roman citizenship in the Roman province Tarsus, since the citizens of Tarsus weren’t automatically granted citizenship. Roman generals had the ability to confer Roman citizenship to select individuals. Perhaps Paul’s father, grandfather, or great-grandfather contributed significantly to the Roman empire.²

But Paul’s family did not assimilate into the Gentile way of life at Tarsus. Paul was “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5), indicating that his family vigorously maintained their Hebrew language and worship. Before the Sanhedrin, Paul declared, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6).

While still a youth, Paul’s family sent him from Tarsus to Jerusalem. Paul said to the Jews in Jerusalem, ‘I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day’ (Acts 22:3).

Paul likely came to Jerusalem as a little boy and eventually entered the tutelage of Gamaliel, the leading Pharisee of his time, when he was a teen.³ Paul was an outstanding Jew, as he later wrote to the Galatians, “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” (Gal 1:14).

So zealous was Paul for the law that he later said that was, “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil 3:6). As far as righteousness could be found in the law, Paul was blameless.

So zealous was Paul for the purity of Judaism that he persecuted the church to death. He said, “I persecuted this Way to death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women” (Acts 22:4).

I Once Was Blind

Paul’s conversion came in the midst of his murderous campaign against Christians in Syria. Paul, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples” (Acts 9:1), went to Damascus in Syria to bring back Christians bound to Jerusalem. But the risen Christ intervened. He stopped Paul on the way to Damascus and revealed Himself to him. Jesus blinded Paul so that “for three days he was without sight” (v. 9).

² Ibid., 37.

³ Ibid., 43.

Paul's physical blindness represented his blindness to Jesus. A veil was over his heart. But Jesus came to remove the veil so Paul could see.

What Paul saw was the glory of Jesus. Christ captured Paul's heart that day. Paul, later reflecting on his Damascus road encounter with Christ, wrote, "whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil 3:7).

Here, we find the center of Paul's heart and mind - Christ.

Christ commissioned Paul, saying "I am sending you [to the Gentiles] 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 26:17-18).

As Jesus opened Paul's eyes, so must Paul take the message of Christ to the nations so that their eyes might also be opened to the glories of Christ.

A Covenant of Greater Glory

God appointed Paul as a minister of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6). As one who had been under the Old Covenant, but was now a preacher of the New Covenant, Paul had to make sense of the New Covenant's relationship to the Old Covenant, particularly to those who wanted to remain under the Old Covenant.

The Jews were immensely proud of Moses, and rightly so. They gloried in the temple system and the law that God gave to Israel through Moses. The God of glory Himself met with and spoke to Moses. How could they leave behind such a glorious covenant?

Paul answered by saying that the New Covenant surpassed the Old Covenant in glory. Paul said, God "has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6).

So Paul contrasted the Old Covenant, "the letter" and the New Covenant, "the Spirit" (vv. 7-9).

If "the ministry of death" and "the ministry of condemnation" came with glory, how much more glory was there in "the ministry of the Spirit" and "the ministry of righteousness" that gave life?

In fact, "what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory" (vv. 10-11).

The Mosaic Covenant had been brought to an end and replaced by a covenant with permanent and surpassing glory.

In what sense did the New Covenant surpass the Old in glory? The New Covenant brought believers into an unveiled relationship with Jesus Christ. Under the Mosaic Law, a veil separated Jews from beholding Jesus fully (vv. 12-15). This veil prevents them from seeing the glory of the Lord.

Paul then declared, "But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord" (vv. 16-18).

Paul was saying that when one turns to Jesus, the Lord, the veil that was over their hearts is taken away. The Spirit who takes away the veil gives them freedom - freedom from sin and the impossibility of perfectly keeping God's law. Having been set free from sin and with the veil removed, they are "with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord" (v. 18).

This word "behold" has the sense of looking at, contemplating in a mirror. As believers look upon the glory of Jesus, they carefully consider and ponder Him, for He mirrors and reflects the glory of His Father. The New Covenant allows us to behold the glory of the Lord in a way that the Old Covenant never could.

This beholding of Christ in the New Covenant makes this covenant of far surpassing glory to the Old. We see "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). Paul likens this viewing to a re-creation that takes place in our hearts. He said, 'For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (v. 5).

This view of the glory of Christ is transformative. As we behold His glory, we "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). We are changed into the image of Christ as the Spirit opens our eyes to behold His glorious beauty. Moses was temporarily transformed through his meetings with God. New Covenant believers, however, are permanently transformed as we, with unveiled face, behold the glory of Christ.

The New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant in glory because it brings life, righteousness, and most importantly brings us into the very presence of Christ, to behold Him with unveiled faces.

Abraham, Moses, Christ

Paul also had to make sense of the New Covenant and Christ's relationship to Abraham and Moses. In God's providence, the Galatian Christians' attempt to go back to the Mosaic Law compelled Paul to explain how Jesus related to Abraham and Moses. Under the Old Covenant, Jews and Gentiles accessed the Abrahamic blessings through the Mosaic Covenant. However, now that Christ had come, the Abrahamic blessings were accessed through Christ, not Moses.

Salvation

In Galatians 3:5-14, Paul explained that the salvation blessings from Abraham come through Christ and not Moses.

Abraham

Paul wrote, 'the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith' (Gal 3:8-9).

Just as Abraham was justified by faith, so too would the Gentiles be justified by faith and be saved. It is by faith that the nations obtain the salvation blessings promised through Abraham.

The Mosaic Law

When the law came, the Gentiles might have thought that they now needed to be justified by obedience to the law. To that, Paul responded with a resounding, "No." He wrote, 'For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith"' (Gal 3:10-11).

The law brings a curse to all who try to obtain righteousness through it. The Mosaic Covenant could not bring the fullness of the Abrahamic blessings to either Jews or Gentiles, for the law cursed those who disobeyed it.

Christ

Christ came to remove the curse of the law to give the fullness of the Abrahamic blessings to Jews and Gentiles.

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith’ (Gal 3:13-14).

Before Jews and Gentiles could receive the fullness of Abrahamic salvation, the curse of God’s law on all who disobeyed it must be removed. Christ took the curse of the law by becoming a curse for Jews and Gentiles. Christ’s taking of the curse of the law now meant that Gentiles were no longer separated from Jews in their reception of the Abrahamic blessings. The law visibly signified Gentile separation from Israel and God. The doing away with the curse of the law, and the law itself, meant that Gentiles too could now receive the full salvation blessings of Abraham which came as a result of the “promised Spirit”.

Sonship

God not only promised salvation through Abraham, but also an inheritance (Gal 3:15-4:7). Paul explained how Christ allowed Jews and Gentiles to receive the Abrahamic inheritance by making them sons of God.

Abraham

God promised an inheritance to Abraham and his offspring (Gal 3:16). This offspring was not the many offspring, but the one offspring, Christ. Christ, as the greatest offspring of Abraham, would receive the fullness of the Abrahamic inheritance. This does not mean that the many offspring of Abraham were not promised an inheritance, but that the fullness of the inheritance belonged to Christ.

The Mosaic Law

After God made the promises to Abraham and his offspring, God did not give them the fullness of the promised inheritance. He gave them the law, which they could not obey. Why?

God gave Israel the law to show them the need for His Son.

The law was “added because of transgressions” (3:19) to show Israel their sinfulness and need of a Savior. The law “imprisoned everything under sin” (v. 22), indicating that Gentiles too needed redemption.

Paul said, “we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed” (v. 23). They were detained, confined, and imprisoned under the law, waiting for the faith that would come through Jesus Christ.

The law was also their tutor and guardian to show them their need of Christ. "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (v. 24). The tutor/guardian was a slave who took care of a child until adulthood (4:2). These tutors were strict disciplinarians, and children longed to be free from these tutors. As long as the child was under the tutor, they did not possess their father's inheritance (4:1-2). Israelites, while under the Mosaic law, were no different from slaves and could not receive the promised Abrahamic inheritance.

In order to receive the Abrahamic inheritance, they must be set free from their guardian. They must be set free by the Son of God.

Christ

Paul said, "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith" (vv. 25-26).

Christ removed Israel from their guardian, the law, and made them sons of God. Christ brought all people, Jews and Gentiles, into His own sonship that He has with His Father.

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal 4:4-6).

God sent His eternal Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those imprisoned under the law. And having redeemed them, Christ gave them the adoption as sons.

In fact, the Father has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, and just as His Son cries out, "Abba! Father!" we cry out, "Abba! Father!" We share in the sonship of the eternal Son.

Because we have been adopted through the eternal Son, Paul declared, "So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal 4:7). We receive the Abrahamic inheritance as heirs, and we are heirs because we are sons.

Predestined for Adoption

Paul marvelled at the fact that we, fallen mankind, now share in the sonship of the eternal Son of God. In fact, the God of love planned that we would be His sons before the foundation of the world.

Paul wrote, “he [the Father] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Eph 1:4-6).

In love, the Father determined before the foundation of the world that we would be His Sons through His eternal Beloved Son. He would make us His beloved adopted sons to praise of his glorious grace. Through our union with the Beloved, we are now in the embrace of the God of love, the Father of our Lord.

Christ the Image of God

Jesus also restores mankind as the image of God. Christ “is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4; see also Col 1:15).

As children of Adam, we bear his image. Adam “fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth” (Gen 5:3). That presents a problem for the children of Adam, for Adam is a marred image of God. We must be restored as God’s image with an image far superior to Adam’s.

Paul explained our restoration as God’s image in 1 Cor 15:49: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.”

God both restores and enhances our dignity as His image by conforming us to the image of his Son, His eternal and heavenly image.

In fact, God “predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29).

Our bearing of Adam’s image prevents us from inheriting paradise and renewed Eden in the kingdom of God, for “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor 15:50). But because we “bear the image of the man of heaven”, we will be resurrected like Him when “the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality” (v. 54).

When we are resurrected in the likeness of “the man of heaven”, we will inherit the kingdom of God when Christ will be our king, ruling on the throne of David in Jerusalem.

Christ the Exalted King

Because Christ is the perfect man, the perfect image of God, the Son of God, the son of David, and the second Adam, He is qualified to be God’s king over all the earth.

Paul wrote, ²⁴Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet” (1 Cor 15:24-27).

In Christ’s kingdom, God will put all things under the subjection of Christ’s feet, including Satan, thus fulfilling God’s promise in Genesis 3:15. During the millennial kingdom, Christ will destroy all enemies, including death.

The Father’s purpose in creation will be fulfilled, namely the exaltation of His Son. The Son is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come”(Eph 1:21). God’s plan for “the fullness of time” is “to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10).

When Christ has subdued all God’s enemies, restored blessing to this earth, and fulfilled as the second Adam mankind’s mandate to rule over the earth, then He will deliver the kingdom back to God the Father. Then will come the eternal new heaven and new earth.

Israel and the Church

This lesson wouldn’t be complete without some mention of Paul’s anticipation of a future salvation for Israel. In no way did Paul view the church as the “true Israel”. In fact, during the church age, Paul still maintained that ethnic Israelites were the chosen people of God.

“They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” (Rom 9:4). To Israel presently belong, not belonged, the adoption as sons and the great blessings of God.

The church age is primarily for Gentile salvation, though Jews are also saved and incorporated into the church. During the church age, “a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25-26).

Paul envisioned a future kingdom, where both believing Jews and Gentiles are co-heirs with Christ, on equal footing and with equal access to God. The Gentiles who were far off were brought near by the blood of Christ.

Lessons from Paul

As we examine Paul's theology, we must always remember that he was no ivory tower theologian, but a missionary church-planter. He suffered greatly for his determination to preach Christ, eventually meeting a Roman executioner's sword in the mid to late 60's AD.

Glory in the Superiority of the New Covenant - May we live in the freedom and the superiority of the New Covenant in comparison to the Old Covenant. The New Covenant frees us from sin and allows us to behold Christ.

Glory in the Exalted Christ - The goal of human history is Christ. The Father's desire was to exalt Christ. May the exaltation of the Son of God be our heartbeat.