

Paul: Apostle To The Gentiles

Memory Text: “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’ ” (Acts 11:18)

Setting The Stage: Without a doubt one of the most prominent figures in the NT was Paul, originally Saul of Tarsus. “Paul was to the early Christian church was Moses was to the children of Israel.”

When you think of Paul, what comes to mind? 1) He is known for his itinerant evangelistic program, a program that has left its impression upon the Christian church for two thousand years. His methods, dedication, zeal, and relationship with God have been studied for centuries and have inspired many to also engage in aggressive evangelistic outreach for Christ.

2) He is also known for extracting biblical truths from the tightly woven fabric of Jewish tradition and custom to be given to all people that they might know Christ and be saved. Paul’s inspired message and ministry continues to influence the church today.

Sunday – Persecutor Of Christians

Acts 6:9-15;

Who was Saul? 1) He is first mentioned in the Bible in Acts 7:58 at the stoning of Stephen. 2) He was born in Tarsus (south-central Turkey) an important town on the trade route between Syria and western Asia (Acts 22:3). 3) He was born of Diaspora Jews (Jews not living in Israel) and was from the tribe of Benjamin. As a Pharisee he was probably married at some point in time. We only know of his sister and nephew (Acts 23:16). He was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-28). He was educated in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). His trade was tent making (Acts 18:3). He was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5) who were known for their strict observation of all the laws of God.

Saul’s background as a Pharisee helped him to be a successful missionary to both Jew and Gentile. With his knowledge of the OT and scribal expansions of the same, he was able to extract timeless biblical truths from the tightly woven fabric of Jewish tradition and custom and make meaningful applications of the truth to all those he ministered to. He was able to differentiate between the truth and later cultural additions.

What traditions in the Adventist church have we mistaken as biblical absolutes (time for Sabbath School and church, the eating haystacks, etc.)? How important is

it that we make a clear distinction between the two? Are we more interested in baptizing a person into our culture or into Christ?

What type of man was Saul/Paul? What was his personality (“a combination of characteristics or qualities that make up a person”)? What type of character (“the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual”) did he have? The following verses give us some clues:

Acts 9:1: “Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest.”

Philippians 3:6, 8: “Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.... Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”

Galatians 1:14: “And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

1 Corinthians 15:9, 10: “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” How would you summarize the personality of Paul?

Paul was a man of conviction and zeal. As Saul he used these traits to persecute the early church. As Paul he used these traits to advance the gospel. This idea begs the following questions: What changes in us when converted? Have we had a mistaken notion of conversion to the extent that we have believed our personalities change when we give our lives to Christ?

“The ingredients that are seen before conversion are seen after conversion. This is disturbing to people who expect it to be otherwise, but perhaps we will better understand our position in Christ if we see that God’s intentions for us is not replacement of who we are, but redemption of who we are. God’s creation of us, including our basic motivational pattern, is not bad. Conversion has us rejoicing in the fact that we are enabled to become who we originally were made to be, rather than becoming someone entirely different. The renewal takes place when we are resurrected in conversion and sanctification causes a radical change, not in the gift [talent] we have, but in its purpose and use.” (Finding a Job You Can Love, p. 119)

Monday – Saul’s Conversion

Acts 9:1-18; 22:6-21; 26:12-19

Not too long ago I read that residents of Thailand can quite easily change their names if they feel like doing so. Now some people change their names to escape

their embarrassing past, or simply because they don't like the name they were given at birth. However, in Thailand many are making a name metamorphosis in the hopes it will bring a little good luck.

An interesting article showcased some surprising outcomes when individuals changed their names. Junpim Kuntatean is an example. She won a silver medal in the world weightlifting championships, but then suffered an elbow injury a year before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. She visited a fortuneteller who recommended a name change. With her new name, Prapawadee Jaroenrattanatarakoon (poor commentators), which roughly translates as "Sparkling River-flow of Brilliant Prosperity", she won a gold medal. Similar stories illustrate this fascinating name change phenomena in Thailand. (Of course, a person would have to purely superstitious to believe that a name change can bring this type of fortune)

While a name change may bring temporal success and good fortune to some Thai citizens in the 21st century, there is real name change God offers each of us which guarantees an eternity with Him.

Acts 9:1-9. Saul's encounter with Christ changed him. Is it possible that we don't think that change is possible for us? How can we be changed like Saul? Doesn't it involve a personal encounter with Christ as well, even on a daily basis? Christ extended grace to Saul. What Christ offered Him, he did not deserve. Saul, later Paul (Acts 13:9 – filled with the Spirit), always felt indebted to Jesus for saving him from his collision course with certain damnation.

Acts 26:16-18: "But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me."

Saul's experience, his conversion experience included a call to service. When we give our lives to Christ, does it also include a call to service, or was that experience reserved exclusively for Saul?

Tuesday – Saul In Damascus

Acts 9:10-14, 26-30

Acts 9:10-19. *"Christ had performed the work of revelation and conviction; and now the penitent was in a condition to learn from those whom God had ordained to teach His truth."* (Acts of the Apostles, p. 121) God connected Saul to the church in order to provide instruction and direction for him. Here he was baptized. Here he was encouraged to work for the Gentiles. What should this tell us about the important work Christ has given to His church? How do we help engage people in service once

they have given their lives to Jesus? Is this work to be left solely for the pastor to accomplish?

Acts 9:20-22. *“A general slain in battle is lost to his army, but his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man of prominence joins the opposing force, not only are his services lost, but those to whom he joins himself gain a decided advantage. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been withdrawn from the persecuting power. But God in His providence not only spared Saul’s life, but converted him, thus transferring a champion from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ. An eloquent speaker and a severe critic, Paul, with his stern purpose and undaunted courage, possessed the very qualifications needed in the early church.”* (Ibid, p. 124)

Wednesday – The Gospel Goes to The Gentiles

Acts 11:19-21, 26

Acts 11:19-21, 26. The persecution that broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen’s death caused a number of Jewish believers to flee 300 miles north to Antioch. As capital of the Roman province of Syria, Antioch was third only to Rome and Alexandria in significance. Its population, estimated at 500,000, was very cosmopolitan, making it an ideal location not only for a Gentile church but also as the starting base for the worldwide mission of the early church (Acts 13).

Maybe some five years had passed between Paul’s post-conversion visit to Jerusalem and the invitation by Barnabas to join him in Antioch. What was Paul doing all of those years? It’s hard to say, but based on comments in Gal. 1:21 he may have been preaching in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. Some have suggested that Paul was disinherited by his family at this time and suffered a number of the hardships he describes in 2 Cor. 11:23-28. However, the church in Antioch blossomed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What are some aspects of Paul’s successful missionary work that we can put into practice today? 1. Christ was central to his preaching. 2. Multiple missionary centers (churches) were established across the region. 3. Nurture and care of newly established members was his constant concern (half of the NT contains pastoral letters to the various churches).

Romans 15:19: “In mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”

1 Corinthians 1:23: “ But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.”

Galatians 6:14: “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Why is it important to keep Christ central to our preaching, teaching, and sharing?
Bottom line, Jesus saves. Neither doctrines nor prophecies can do that. Is there a risk we can get off track and think that uplifting and defending doctrines only is sufficient in converting people? Yes we can. But we need to remember that the truth as it is in Jesus has drawing and converting power. What is the purpose of doctrines in the believer’s life? Doctrines clarify the nature, character, intentions, and plans of God. They educate us about God and give us the right concept of Him.

Thursday – Conflict Within The Church

Acts 15:1-5

Not only did Paul have to contend with challenges from unbelievers, but he also had to contend with challenges from believers too (friendly fire). Not everyone was thrilled about Gentile believers entering the church. The concern was not about whether Gentiles should be reached with the gospel but over the conditions for entry into the church. There were those who felt that faith alone in Jesus wasn’t sufficient as the defining mark of a Christian. Faith, they asserted, must be supplemented with circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses. (see Acts 10:1-11:18 to see the extent of the division between Jew and Gentile through Peter’s experience with Cornelius)

Official visits from Jerusalem, which monitored Philip’s work among the Samaritans (Acts 8:14) and the work with Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:22), may suggest some concern about the inclusion of non-Jews in the Christian community. Paul’s aggressive effort to take the gospel further into Gentile territory led some in the church to undermine his efforts.

Acts 15:1-5. These men, likely Pharisees converted to Christianity, went to Antioch where many Gentiles were being one to the Christian faith. And here started the first major controversy in the Christian church. The first converts to Christianity were Jews, but they retained many of their prejudices and practices of the religion they had grown up in. Therefore they were shocked to learn that Gentile converts to Christianity didn’t need to first become converts to Judaism.

These agitators brought into prominence at Antioch a question that proved a continuing cause of dissension throughout Paul’s ministry, and left its mark on most of the writings of the NT, and even upon postapostolic Christian literature. But what did Paul have to say about this:

Romans 2:28, 29: “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision

is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”

1 Corinthians 7:19: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.”

Galatians 5:6: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.”

Galatians 6:15: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.”

Appeal: God’s call to Paul to work for the salvation of the Gentiles is a reminder to us that the gospel needs to be taken to all people, no matter their background, their education, their creed. God is no respecter of persons and if His children want to be like their Father, then they’ll carry that disposition with them at all times and into their ministry as well.