

Agents of Hope: God's Great Missionaries

For Such a Time as This: The Apostle Paul

Lesson #1 for July 05, 2008

Scriptures: Acts 9:1-9; 22:3-5,25-29; Romans 7:19-25; 11:1; Philippians 3:5; 2 Peter 1:3-8.

1. This lesson is about conversion experiences and how they should motivate us to be missionaries. The focus of this lesson is on the conversion experience of Saul/Paul. But in order to understand Paul's conversion, we must go back and "read between the lines" about his earlier experiences.
2. While Paul must have spent several years "schooling" under Gamaliel in Jerusalem, we have no evidence that he ever actually met Jesus Christ. The persecution of Christians and the scattering of Christians to many lands began after the death of Stephen by stoning in Jerusalem in AD 34. That ended the period of the 70-week prophecy which God had "set apart" for the Jewish people.
3. Paul apparently had a young, very active, and thoughtful mind. With his Pharisaical background, he grew up with the idea that the very strict, legalistic approach to religion was "the way of salvation." While he was born and raised in Tarsus of Cilicia, he probably went to Jerusalem at a fairly young age, perhaps even as a teenager.
4. After being educated under Gamaliel, he was recognized as "a Pharisee of the Pharisees." (Acts 23:6; Philippians 3:5,6) Early in his career, he was recognized for his vigor and devotion to the way of the Pharisees. Probably at about thirty years of age, he was appointed to the Sanhedrin Council—the leading legislative and religious body of the Jews. Normally, one was required to be married to belong to that council. For that reason, we assume that Paul was married at one time.
5. But Paul's very active, very thoughtful mind recognized that there was something missing. And on the occasion of the trial of Stephen in AD 34, while listening to that marvelous speech recorded in Acts 7, Paul was "convicted." It was at that point that the real conversion process of Saul/Paul began. But Paul did not "give in" easily. After struggling with his conscience and his convictions for a period of time, he concluded that all of his Pharisaical ancestors and associates could not have been wrong, and he went out to defend his former way of life with even greater vigor. In a sense, Paul's vigor was stimulated by his trying to "drown out" the convictions of his conscience.
6. Thus, on the road to Damascus when Saul/Paul was "struck" by a "beam of light" from heaven and heard Jesus Christ speaking to him, he "surrendered." (Acts 9) No doubt, he had been thinking about those issues during the very lengthy walk or donkey ride from Jerusalem to Damascus. As a Pharisee he was probably not supposed to talk to the people he was traveling with! So he may have had a lot of time for thought. When Saul/Paul was ready, God spoke to him.
7. When Paul was converted to Christianity, what did he change? Did he change his God? Did he change his Sabbath? Did he change the place where he went to worship? Did he change his convictions about food or even the proper way to worship God? Or is it possible that the only thing that he really changed was his "picture of God"?
8. In the first three years after his conversion, Paul went through an incredible "fruit basket upset" in his thinking—a paradigm shift. Being the scholar that he was, he probably had memorized much of the Old Testament in Hebrew. But then, he had to rethink every one of those passages in light of his new convictions.
9. No doubt, Paul believed himself not only privileged but superior to all his peers in the "ways of God." He was a Roman citizen; a citizen of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia; a member of the tribe of Benjamin; a strict Jew; and educated under Gamaliel, the very best instructor available at the time.

10. Fortunately for us, having grown up outside of Palestine, Paul found it fairly easy to accept his commission as a missionary to the Gentiles.
11. As a Roman citizen, Paul enjoyed certain very special privileges. He was supposed to be protected from scourging or whipping. He could not be sentenced to death without a proper trial, and he even had the possibility of an appeal to Caesar. He had the right to vote; to make contracts; to have a legal marriage in the eyes of the Roman government; and in many cases, exemption from paying taxes. So, Paul was a man with one foot firmly in each of two very different cultures. Did that make it easier for him to be an apostle to the Gentiles? What would be an equivalent situation in our day?
12. As we recognize, today there are literally thousands of language groups and cultural groups that need to be reached with the gospel. What language groups or cultural groups are you able to reach in a special way?
13. Paul was somewhat of a “maverick.” While he did not hesitate to go to Jerusalem to meet with the church leaders, he did not for a moment “give in” to any of their suggestions as to how he should conduct his business. He even reprimanded Peter when Peter “slipped back in his Christianity” at Antioch on one occasion. (Galatians 2:11-14) Recognizing himself as a missionary to the Gentiles, Paul was convinced that his personal experience was far superior to any of those in Jerusalem in terms of reaching out to those of other nationalities.
14. But, we also recognize that Paul was a very hard-driving, non-compromising worker. That meant that while on his first missionary journey with Barnabas, when John Mark, a very young assistant, faltered in his convictions, Paul had little tolerance.
15. Paul constantly believed that he had to “beat down” his own body and keep it under control in order to serve Christ in the best possible way. (Romans 7:19-25; 1 Corinthians 9:27; 2 Corinthians 12:7) He expected his associates to do the same!
16. When you think of Saul/Paul, what immediately comes to your mind? A tireless worker? An uncompromising companion? A firebrand? A quiet but inspired scholar? A pioneer missionary and teacher? The Christian church’s greatest missionary?
17. Paul called himself “a light to the Gentiles.” What other biblical characters used similar titles? (Isaiah 49:5,6; Luke 2:30-32)
18. On several occasions while speaking to non-Christian groups, Paul told of his conversion experience. (Acts 22 and 26) What should or could we learn from Paul’s conversion experience?
19. Paul repeatedly mentioned in his writings that his main focus of preaching and teaching was “Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2) What do you think is implied by that? What did/does Christ’s death on the cross do for us? It is very interesting to notice that of the Bible writers, only Paul made a serious attempt—in Romans 3 and Hebrews 10—to try to explain why Jesus had to die.
20. Is it important for us to understand why Jesus died? Does that have any direct bearing on our salvation? Or do we only need to recognize that Jesus died “to pay the penalty for our sins”? Notice some of the reasons Paul mentioned for why Jesus died:
 - 1) To make us friends of God once again. (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21)
 - 2) To “set us free from sin” and to make us “slaves of righteousness.” (Romans 6:18)
 - 4) To set us free by forgiving us of our sins. (Ephesians 1:7)
 - 6) To set us free by the “sacrifice of Himself.” (1 Peter 1:18,19)
 - 3) To help us recognize our status as God’s children and eventually—if we are faithful—as “the bride of Christ.” (Romans 8:15-17; 7:2-4)

- 5) To redeem the whole human race. (1 Timothy 2:6)
21. So, is it really important for us to understand why Christ had to die? What difference does an understanding of why Christ had to die make in your life today? One of the most important factors and one which we usually forget is that Christ's death is meant to turn our focus away from ourselves and our own salvation to the marvelous truth about God revealed through the great controversy. Paul certainly understood that.
 22. Paul also recognized the need for emphasizing certain other biblical doctrines. He recognized that Christ—having “saved us from our sins”—expects us to do our best in cooperation with the heavenly angels and with the Holy Spirit to live a Godly life. So, given your current understanding of why Christ had to die as well as the meaning of His resurrection, can you explain why you do what you do as a Christian?
 23. Some would suggest that we do what we do because God has commanded us to do so, and He has the power to reward us or even to destroy us.
 24. Others have suggested that we should do what is right because we are so thankful that we have been saved.
 25. Still others say that if we understand what is happening in our own lives and in the great controversy, we should choose to do what is right because it is right! That, of course, would be impossible without heaven's gifts, including minds to understand what the Holy Spirit says, the angels to guide us, and the history of the life and death of Jesus to show us the way.
 26. In what sense are God's gifts a means of “escape from death”? (2 Peter 1:3-8)
 27. Are you motivated to be a Christian primarily because Christianity offers some hope for a life beyond this life? Or is the Christian life the best way to live even now?
 28. What is your greatest hope as a Christian? While the resurrection gives us hope in God's plan of salvation for us as individuals, Christ's death on the cross—as the final step in a series of answers to Satan's accusations and questions in the great controversy—should help us to recognize that the great controversy is “much larger” than our personal salvation!

But the plan of redemption had a yet broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe. To this result of His great sacrifice—its influence upon the intelligences of other worlds, as well as upon man—the Saviour looked forward when just before His crucifixion He said: “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me.” John 12:31,32. The act of Christ in dying for the salvation of man would not only make heaven accessible to men, but before all the universe it would justify God and His Son in their dealing with the rebellion of Satan. It would establish the perpetuity of the law of God and would reveal the nature and the results of sin. *Patriarchs and Prophets* 68,69 (1890); *Reflecting Christ* 60 (1985)

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