

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 9: Paul: Introduction**

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If you were in charge of approving missionaries for some mission agency, what kind of person would you send? Well, you’d want to pick someone who was obviously mature in their Christian faith, someone who would have some ability to connect with the people the person was going to share the Gospel with, probably someone with a proven ministry track record.

Would you choose a person who watched as a Christian preacher was stoned to death, and gave “approval to his death”? Would you choose the person who was known for “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples”? Would you choose a man whose sole bent in life seemed focused on destroying everything the Christian faith stood for?

Well if you were in such a position, you probably would *not* have chosen Saul of Tarsus to spread the message of Christianity across the Roman world. Sure he was well educated, but he was hardly a friend of Christians, and beyond that, even if such a figure were to be converted, why would you want to send one who had been a “Pharisee of the Pharisees” into the Gentile world?

Thankfully, God does not act according to human wisdom, and He chose exactly this kind of man to bring the Gospel message to the very heart of the Gentile world. Between the sections of Acts that tell his story and the letters he wrote, about a third of the New Testament is tied up with this apostle to the Gentiles. So before we get to his letters, we will pause today and consider Paul by answering three basic questions. Who was Paul? What was his ministry all about? And what did he write?

As we do, we will see even more of our God who does not act according to man’s wisdom, but instead gave “this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7).

**Who was Paul?**

Who was Paul? For one, he was profoundly prepared for his work as an apostle. In part because at one point in time, he was a persecutor of the church. We’ll start at the beginning of that remarkable transformation. Paul was a man who had the highest possible pedigree among religious Jews. In Philippians, Paul makes a significant statement about what he was:

“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” (3:4-6)

He was of the tribe of Benjamin: one of only two tribes from which people had remained uncontaminated by intermarriage at the exile. His parents perhaps chose the name Saul, as in the first king of Israel, also from the tribe of Benjamin.

He calls himself a Hebrew of Hebrews. Even though Saul wasn’t born in Palestine, but in Tarsus, his family had retained the old language. It wasn’t just that he’d learned Hebrew in his education: he was a Hebrew of Hebrews – that is his parents were Aramaic speaking. His parents were so faithful to the law that they had even had him circumcised on the eighth day.

He says that as to the law he was a Pharisee: we read in Acts 22:3 that Paul was educated under Gamaliel, the leading Pharisee of the day. We often think of “Pharisee” as a negative term. But the Pharisees were seen as the most careful and faithful Israelites. They abhorred how Israel had not learned her lesson from the exile, and they sought to enforce the law, so that something like the exile would never happen again. That is why they were so careful to obey the law. They were so careful that they put a fence around the law. Their additional laws were designed to stop people getting anywhere near breaking the law!

And as for zeal, Paul was beyond even his education. You’ll recall from the book of Acts that Gamaliel took a moderate and sensible position in regard to the early church, suggesting that the authorities leave it alone—that unless it was of God it would die out on its own. But Saul thought that the Christians were far too dangerous for that. He would not have these people continue their false and perverted religion, and so to his shame Paul became a persecutor of the church.

As F. F. Bruce has written, ‘If Stephen argued, “The new has come; therefore the old must go”, Paul [sic] for his part argued, “The old must stay; therefore the new must go”. Hence the uncompromising rigour [sic] with which he threw himself into the work of repression.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

As Paul later said of the Jews, to him a crucified Messiah was a stumbling block (I Cor 1:23). Crucifixion was a pronouncement of God’s curse upon someone, for “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse” (Deut 21:23). Thus, anyone who was saying that the Messiah had been crucified was speaking blasphemy, and must be put to death, lest the Lord send a blasphemous nation back into exile. Paul’s zeal to stamp out early Christians was apparently born out of a deep devotion to the Law as he understood it.

But Paul was a complex individual, for in addition to being a Hebrew of Hebrews, Paul was a Roman citizen. And as was noted last week, Paul used his Roman citizenship for the spread of the Gospel (Acts 22:25-29 and 25:10-12). It should be noted that Roman citizenship was not something to be taken lightly. Carson, Moo, and Morris tell us, “The Romans did not confer citizenship on just anyone; only a small percentage of people who lived within the Roman Empire possessed this privilege. Paul’s Roman citizenship was inherited from his family (Paul claims, “I was born a citizen” [Acts 22:28]), perhaps because of some deed of service performed by his father or grandfather for the Romans. However achieved, Paul’s Roman citizenship was an important and providential qualification for his role as missionary to the Roman Empire.”

It is Paul’s Roman citizenship that, humanly speaking, drives him to the heart of the Gentile world, so that in the Lord’s providence he might fulfill his commission as the apostle to the Gentiles.

That is Paul’s background, part of his preparation for ministry. But what happened that would change the heart of Saul of Tarsus to cause him to become one of the central figures of the New Testament? To put it succinctly, God intervened in this persecutor’s life, so that rather than persecuting, he would count it an honor to be persecuted for the sake of Christ. We read the familiar story in Acts 9:1-16 following the conversion of the Ethiopian official:

“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

God chose Paul, God converted Paul, and God would use Paul from this moment on to bring the Gospel to the nations! And isn’t this just like God? It may be tempting for us to read of Paul’s conversion and be discouraged that our own story doesn’t sound as impressive. The point is not Paul, though, and certainly not us. The point is that *God* is expanding His kingdom and has graciously and mercifully decided to include the likes of Paul and the likes of us to be a part of His Kingdom and a part of seeing it expanded even more!

When God converted Paul, he also called him in a unique way, to become an Apostle to the Gentiles (9:15). There had been twelve apostles, signifying the reconstituted 12 tribes of Israel, and now Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, becomes the “thirteenth apostle.” He was called, as we noticed, in an unusual way. Unlike the Jerusalem apostles, he wasn’t with the other apostles during Jesus’ earthly ministry. But though he was distinct from the other apostles in the manner in which he was called and his experience, he preached the same Gospel. He makes this point in Galatians 1:11-23: the gospel that he preached is identical to the gospel the other apostles preached, not because he received it from them, but because he received it from the same Risen Lord Jesus Christ that they did.

This is who Paul was, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee of Pharisees, a Roman Citizen, an Apostle, a Christian. But as his life changed to focus on spreading the good news, what was he about? Let’s answer that question next.

**Paul’s Ministry**

What made Paul tick? What was his ministry all about? Three things, as we’ll see in a moment. He was about the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ. He was about the church—the body of Jesus Christ. But ultimately, he was about God—the glory of Jesus Christ. We’ll take each of these in turn.

*The Gospel*

Throughout Paul’s ministry we see the centrality of the Cross and the Gospel Message. His calling as an apostle was one of proclaiming the gospel. As an apostle, then, he wasn’t primarily a pastor. We don’t see him stay in any one place for more than three years. He offers leadership in the churches until such a time as he can see elders raised up. And he wasn’t primarily a theologian, though his writings form much of the basis for our knowledge of God. No: as an apostle, he was first and foremost a missionary. That is, one who preaches the gospel to those who have not heard it, in order that churches may be established. And in this calling as a missionary, the gospel was central to everything he did.

That meant that he subjugated his methods to the gospel. Think of his oft-quoted phrase from 1 Cor 9, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (9:22-23) The gospel never changes. And so Paul’s methods change, to present the gospel in a way that is appropriate to the many different locations and cultures he preached in to.

Because the gospel was central to his mission, he not only subjected his methods to the gospel, but even his own comfort and well-being. Earlier in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul explained that he denied even his rights for the sake of the gospel.

13Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 14In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. 15But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. 16Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

And, of course, not being paid was the least of Paul’s discomforts. He was shipwrecked. Beaten. Left for dead. Went hungry and naked. Abandoned by friends. Imprisoned. And finally, as best we know, executed. All for the sake of the gospel.

So . . . Paul prioritized the spread of the gospel above his methods, above his comfort. He was all about the gospel. And so when we look through his letters, we see that when the integrity of the gospel message is in danger, Paul becomes his most ferocious. False teachers, he called “savage wolves” to the Ephesian elders. Those who would preach a gospel to the Galatian churches other than what they received from Paul—even from an angel of heaven—Paul prays that they might be eternally condemned. Damned to hell. He suggested that those who would teach that circumcision was required for salvation—suggesting that salvation was by God’s grace *and* our compliance—for those Paul suggested they should go all the way and emasculate themselves. And when the Corinthian church persisted in fellowship with a man who was sleeping with his father’s wife—defaming the reputation of the gospel—Paul told them to hand him over to Satan.

Paul cared a lot about love, as we’ll see in a moment. But he fought like a lion when the gospel was at stake. He was all about the Gospel. And so the letters we’ll look at are full of passion, at times vitriolic almost, when the gospel is threatened. And they soar to unbelievable heights when Paul describes the beauty of the gospel. “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of work done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.” (Titus 3:3-5a) Amen.

Paul was all about the gospel.

*The Church*

But secondly, Paul was all about the church—the body of Christ. And in particular, the unity of the church. When we read in the book of Acts that Paul is the apostles to the Gentiles, one implication of that is clear from the onset. He will physically take the message to the Roman empire. But a second implication emerges as his ministry matures. Paul is the one the Lord uses to most comprehensively grasp the implications of the gospel for the unity of Jew and Gentile within the local church. Peter, even after the vision in Acts 10, doesn’t live out the implications of the Gospel to the removal of division between Jew & Gentile, and so Paul rebukes him to his face in Antioch (Gal 2:14-16).

“But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’

‘We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.’”

Paul sees that since justification is by faith rather than ritual or ethnicity. That means that *all* the barriers that were there under the Old Covenant, where people had to align themselves to the ethnic people of God if they were to receive God’s blessings, had been permanently removed at the Cross! See how Paul moves from the idea of Salvation by grace through faith straight into the removal of the great divide between Jew & Gentile in Ephesians 2:8-18:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands- remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.”

Paul understood at his core that unity within the local church was a critical implication of the gospel. And so as he was all about the gospel, he was all about the local church. Two sides of the same coin. After all, it was his master, Jesus Christ, who had said “they will know that you are my disciples if you *love* one another.” And so this idea of love, of unity for the sake of the gospel, absolutely covers Paul’s letters.

So, that’s what Paul was about. The gospel. The local church. But what drove his passion behind both of those? It was his passion for God’s glory.

*God’s Glory*

What drove Paul’s theology, what was at the heart of his message, were the same things we read about from Genesis to Malachi, and from Matthew to Revelation. Paul’s theology was marked by a commitment to God’s glory. So, he says in Romans 1:5,

“Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”

It is the glory of God that is Paul’s ultimate concern, as it is the ultimate concern of every Christian. If we think of justification by faith as the center of Paul’s theology, we fail to recognize that the one who justifies as more central than the justification he offers. And then we fail to recognize that the whole purpose of justification is reconciliation with God. So God is the author of justification and God is the goal of justification.

Or if we only pay attention to the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham—another idea central to Paul’s thought, then we are forgetting that the promises to Abraham are about the blessing of God – and so the God whose approval we need is even more significant than the coming of that approval.

While it is true to say that the spread of the Gospel was Paul’s passion, the point of that Gospel message is God Himself. The value of the Gospel is that it is the message of how sinners, Jews and Gentiles, can be reconciled to God and live with Him forever.

Christ is the exact representation of God’s glory. Salvation brings praise to God’s glory. Eschatology is the hope of Glory. The Church is the display of God’s glory. It’s all, ultimately about God’s glory.

All the things that Paul cared about. The gospel. The church. Can in their own way substitute for God himself. We can be so caught up in “winning souls” that it because about our efforts, not God’s glory. We can be so caught up with sacrificial service in the local church that it becomes about our own efforts, not God’s glory. And so this last and greatest passion of Paul’s is critical if we are to maintain a balanced and Godly focus as we glean the great wealth that there is in his epistles.

That’s the apostle Paul. How God profoundly prepared him for ministry, and the passions on which that ministry centered. That is the grist for the epistles that will be our diet for the next few weeks. Before we close, let’s look and see how each of these things helps us in better understanding Paul’s letters from a macro perspective.

**What did he write?**

Understanding Paul as a missionary, rather than primarily a pastor or theologian helps us to understand the nature of the letters that he writes. His concern is the missionary’s concern to ensure that the churches are well-founded on the gospel. He doesn’t write exhaustively everything that we need to know about Jesus. He often writes letters that highlight places where Paul perceived the gospel and therefore the church, to be under attack. His missionary work would be in vain unless those who had come to faith under his ministry persisted in the faith.

And so his letters are primarily about explaining the gospel, connecting that with how our life should be viewed corporately, as a local church—all the while extolling God for his glory in the gospel and in the church. Getting this perspective right is essential if we are to read his letters as he wrote them and not turn them into legalistic dos and don’ts for the Christian life.

So, he writes Galatians because another gospel is being accepted. He writes 1 Corinthians because divisions are undermining the gospel. He writes Ephesians because he is concerned that the gospel be displayed. He writes Colossians because the gospel is getting affirmed but left in the background & marginalized. He writes the pastoral epistles because he is concerned that the gospel be passed on. He writes Philemon because he wants the gospel to transform social attitudes.

We see in his writing that practical Christian instruction is never divorced from the Gospel and truth about who God is. So we see in Romans, most of the book is devoted to explaining and magnifying the Gospel, and only after significant Gospel meditation, Paul turns to practical instruction for what Righteous living looks like. Gospel understanding and Gospel belief produces Gospel living and never the other way around.

You see that same pattern in almost all of his letters. Two halves. The gospel on one hand, and life together as Christians on the other. Descriptive sentences in the first half; imperative verbs in the second. Neither makes sense without the other. Gospel theology without corporate witness is worthless. Like the demons who believe—and shudder—because that belief in truth has not been taken hold of with faith that displays itself in works. And imperative verbs without the gospel? The Old Covenant that, as Paul writes the Corinthians, “brought death.”

Even letters like I Corinthians which is known for the practical admonition that Paul gives to that church, we see him begin by saying, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (I Cor. 1:18).

We should be careful when we read and apply the letters of Paul. It can be easy to skip the “doctrinal” sections, and go straight to the practical advice for Christian living that Paul seems to be dispensing. Yet, if that is how we read our New Testament, we will miss the whole point. The point of Paul and every other writer is not to provide the new ethical manual for Christianity, but to further explain the implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As soon as we separate the Gospel from the things we consider more “practical” we have lost the purpose of these books.

So, when you read Ephesians 4:29, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” Be considering that instruction through the lens of Ephesians 2, “And you were dead in your transgressions and sins … But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” We don’t clean up our speech because it makes God happier with us, nor do we have the ability to speak perfectly regardless of our motivation. No—our language is increasingly characterized by grace-infused words because our hearts have been transformed by God’s grace through Christ Jesus. Never read Paul, never read any of your Bible, without this perspective.

And it can be easy to think of all those imperatives as basically about me and my obedience. But they’re not. Read through these books anew as we study them in the next few weeks. It is the *church* that the “manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”—Ephesians 3:10—and so it is our life corporately that is at the center of Paul’s focus. Read these books to understand the corporate implications of the gospel.

**Conclusion**

As we consider Paul’s letters in the coming weeks, we need to have the backdrop of his life, ministry, and theology in view. We should be asking ourselves certain questions. Are we ultimately concerned about God’s glory? Do the uses of our time, money, energy, and words, proclaim God’s glory in Christ is what we care about? To what extent are our lives and decisions driven by the one overarching concern of how we can further the ministry of the gospel? We will see Paul’s letters as a great resource for evaluating ways in which the centrality of the Gospel might have been displaced in our own lives.

1. FF Bruce. *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free,* 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)