

PAUL: HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 5

Paul – The Persecutor

What's the worst thing you have ever done in your life? Do not answer out loud! Answer the question to yourself. Is it hard to figure out? Does one thing immediately come to mind? Several things? As you think through your life, your choices, and your actions, how do you square those horrible decisions with your faith and your service to God?

This week, we look at Paul's life as a persecutor of the Church. We will see Paul responsible for horrendous acts of violence against children of God. We will see that Paul committed those violent acts under the label and guise of faith and fidelity to God!

I think that we have somehow accepted Paul's history in a way that raises some concerns and shuts away some of our natural reactions and feelings. I am not sure that we really focus and accept that Paul was a man who, claiming to be acting with proper religious zeal and fervor, was actually condoning and seeking the death of peaceful people simply because they worshipped God in ways Paul believed wrong. What kind of man would do that? What kind of religion would condone it, if not outright authorize it?

Once we look at Paul's life honestly and try to understand and see Paul for who he was, we can better understand and see his conversion, the church's reaction, and can greater appreciate his life of sacrifice and love that followed his conversion. We should also grow to appreciate the hand of God in our lives, regardless of the sin we have committed.

We will build this class around the scriptures that give us the data and perspectives available in the Bible. We will try to put those scriptures into their historical context. Then, we will seek to apply them in our Points for Home.

SCRIPTURE

Paul never forgot his life as a persecutor of the church. In what we believe was Paul's first letter, he wrote to the Galatians saying, "You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal. 1:13). For Paul, these actions of persecution and violence were not from a pagan life devoid of God. Paul saw it as part of his spiritual calling! Paul adds to the Galatians passage that his violent attempts to destroy the church were

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evidence of, “advancing in zeal beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal. 1:14).

We do not have a full detailed account of all Paul did to destroy the church, but what we do know certainly gives enough detail to understand his later reflections. In Acts 6 and 7, we read Luke’s history of Stephen seized by certain Jews and brought before the Sanhedrin. During Stephen’s trial, Stephen has a chance to bear witness to Jesus as the Righteous One, betrayed and murdered by supposed keepers of the Law. As Stephen delivers this impassioned speech, among the council were those “enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.” At that point, Stephen has a vision of Jesus, the “Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:54-55).

Luke then records:

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 9:56-60).

What happened? We read the Old Testament and we try to understand and follow the precepts of God. Yet, this seems so foreign to any understanding we have of holy and right behavior! Let us try to put it into some historical and religious context.

PAUL’S MOTIVE

Why was Paul willing to support killing Christians? Why would Paul use violence to stamp out the church? What motivated Paul to take this destructive course? Remember Paul was a Pharisee, and Paul ties his persecuting back to his zeal as a Pharisee (“as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church” Phil. 3:5-6) Paul told the Jewish crowd to remember that he studied at the feet of the Pharisee Gamaliel, “according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this way to death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women” (Acts 22:3-4).

Last week, we discussed Paul’s religious claims as a Pharisee. While we discussed the doctrines and beliefs of Pharisees, we left out their history before Paul. That history is important for us to better understand this link in Paul’s mind between zeal as a Pharisee and persecuting the church. The importance of the

history is magnified when we remember that Paul was proud that not only was he a Pharisee, but he also came from Pharisaic heritage (“I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” Acts 23:6.)

Where did Pharisees come from? What was their history? We do not exactly know where Pharisees had their beginning, but scholars have deduced certain ideas that evidence some of what could have been in Paul’s mind as he opposed the church.

F. F. Bruce sets forth a good argument that the Pharisees were originally a part of the Hasidaeans movement that arose in the second century before Christ.¹ The Hasidaeans were Jews fully devoted to the Law of God for governing life and religion. During the time between the Old and New Testaments, the Greek way of life (with a good bit of Greek religion) became fashionable in Israel.

In the apocrypha, we read of this Greek influence:

In those days there appeared in Israel men who were breakers of the law, and they seduced many people, saying: ‘Let us go and make an alliance with the Gentiles all around us....Some from among the people promptly went to the king, and he authorized them to introduce the way of living of the Gentiles. Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom. They covered over the mark of their circumcision and abandoned the holy covenant (1 Maccabees 1:11-15).

Things reached a point where the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes issued a decree forbidding the practice of the Jewish faith. This decree brought about a revolt the Maccabee brothers spearheaded. The Hasidaeans, who gladly sacrificed themselves to keep the religion of Moses from extermination, aided the revolt.²

From these roots came the Pharisees. Paul was of heritage that had already saved Judaism from changes brought by religious corruption. Paul had been weaned on stories of the heroes who had stepped up and offered their lives to prevent the traditions and teachings of Moses and the Prophets from deterioration. We can easily see in Paul, a Pharisee who came from Pharisees, his possible motive of protecting the true Jewish faith and practice coming from personal zeal as a Pharisee.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 47ff. See also *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday 1992) III at 66.

² This is the same revolt from which came Jewish Hanukkah celebrations, commemorating the lasting of oil for the lamps during the rededication of the temple.

WHY WAS STEPHEN STONED?

Now that we have looked at Paul's motive, we must ask the next logical question, what law was Paul seeking to uphold? How was the church a threat to Jewish law and tradition? The simple answer is Jesus Christ. The church worshipped Jesus as the Son of God. Paul would have seen this as a direct violation of Deuteronomy 17:2-7:

If there is found among you, a man or woman who...has gone and served other gods and worshipped them...and it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones.

To worship Jesus as Messiah was an offense that demanded stoning under the law of Moses – unless, of course, Jesus actually was Messiah!

Paul lets us know in his writings why he thought it impossible for Jesus to actually be Messiah. When writing to the Galatians, Paul reminded them of the passage in Deuteronomy 21:23 where we read, “a hanged man is cursed by God.”³ Scholars recognize in the passage that Paul is using a text that originally served him as a reason for believing Jesus could not be Messiah. To Paul – pre-Damascus road conversion – it was simple logic:

- Jesus was crucified
- Anyone crucified was cursed by God
- Therefore, Jesus was cursed by God
- The Messiah could not be one cursed by God, by definition, the Messiah was blessed by God
- Therefore, cursed Jesus could not have been the blessed Messiah.

³ Paul quotes the passage as, “cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Gal. 3:13). Some might wonder why the words read differently in our English translations of Deuteronomy from our translations of Paul in Galatians. The answer comes from the way Paul is quoting the Old Testament. Paul uses the Septuagint for his translation here, rather than the Hebrew. Most all of our translations come straight from the Hebrew with the Septuagint as an aid where the Hebrew is ambiguous. Paul uses the version with which the Galatians would have had familiarity. Paul also changes the Septuagint slightly to make the passage more understandable. In flow of his writing, Paul slightly modifies the verb form.

Fung writes in his commentary on this Galatians passage, “He [Paul] must have made use of this text himself to refute the early Christians’ claim of a crucified Messiah.”⁴

Also, we see here why Paul would call the crucifixion of Jesus a stumbling block to the Jews. “But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews” (1 Cor. 1:23). Jews could not see how a cursed man would be a blessed Messiah. Next week, we will see Paul get the fuller understanding that Christ was cursed, but it was our curse he bore, not his own!

HOW WAS STEPHEN STONED?

Paul must have burned into his memory the events involved in Stephen’s stoning. When Luke writes his history, and when Paul references the event in his letters, the readers were generally much more familiar with the stoning than we likely are.

The story of Stephen’s stoning is at once moving and appalling. We can go to the Mishna to better understand what happened.⁵ In the Mishna section that deals with civil and criminal law (the *Nezikin*), we have a section on the Sanhedrin. Chapter 6 sets out the procedure for stoning. It begins:

[When] the trial is over, they take him out to stone him. The place of stoning is well outside the court, as it is said, *Bring forth him who cursed to a place outside the camp* (Lev. 24:14).⁶

We read this in the case of Stephen in Acts 7:57-58, “But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

The Mishna gives us important information that we can insert into the time between the people dragging Stephen out and the actual stoning. Section E provides that after being hauled out to the place of stoning, if the convicted party says, “I have something to say in favor of my own acquittal,” the Jews must “bring him back” to the court. Yet, Stephen makes no such proclamation. Even though his life is on the line, Stephen’s heart is focused on the vision he had just experienced, as Luke recorded it, “But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into

⁴ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Eerdmans 1988) at 151.

⁵ The Mishna is a collection of sayings from 1st and 2nd Century A.D. that set out the law Jews practiced at the time. In a sense, it is a commentary or explanation of the Old Testament law as applied in Jewish society. The Mishna was put into written form by 200 A.D.

⁶ *M. Sanhed.* 6:1A-B.

heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). So, Stephen endures the stoning, rather than recant his worship of Christ as error.

The Mishna then provides that when the convicted “was ten cubits [about 15 feet] from the place of stoning, they say to him, ‘Confess,’ for it is usual for those about to be put to death to confess. For whoever confesses has a share in the world to come” (6:2A-B). Stephen does not confess himself wrong for worshipping Jesus. Instead, Stephen cries out to Jesus as Lord, committing his share in the world to come to Jesus! “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁷ Stephen would follow this up, again, not with a confession, but with a plea that echoes Jesus’ from the cross. Stephen cries out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59-60).

The stoning procedure continues, “[When] he was four cubits [six feet] from the place of stoning they remove his clothes” (6:3A). We should not confuse this with the clothes laid at Paul’s feet, for Paul held the clothes of the chief executioners (See Acts 7:58 and 22:20).

The initial act in the stoning actually involved pushing the convicted from what was in essence a cliff. “The place of stoning was twice the height of a man,” so perhaps roof top height is a good image for us. “One of the witnesses pushes him over from the hips, so [hard] that he turned upward [in his fall]. He turns him over on his hips again [to see whether he had died]. [If] he had died thereby, that sufficed” (6:4A-D). We are then told of the process of throwing a rock down onto the heart in the event the fall did not kill the convicted. Should that fail to kill the person, then all the people were to pick up rocks and throw them down on him.

We do not know at what point Stephen died, but we do know that Paul witnessed and even cast his vote for the death of Stephen. No doubt this memory haunted Paul and never left his mind. Paul was in the midst of pursuing similar violence and persecution of the early Christians when Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus.

Paul later wrote to the Corinthian church, “I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor. 15:9). Now that passage gives punch, as Paul calls himself “the least” and “unworthy to be an apostle,” but the real punch is in the verse before! In verse 8, we read in the

⁷ This significance is magnified as we read the Mishna teaching one “how” to confess. It provides, “if he does not know how to confess, they say to him, ‘Say as follows: ‘Let my death be an atonement for all my transgression’” (6:2D). Stephen’s atonement was the death of Jesus, not his own death! To have made the Jew’s confession would have been the ultimate blasphemy!

English Standard Version, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” Paul then continues with “For I am the least....”

In verse 8, Paul is using the Greek word *ektroma* (εκτρωμα) which is translated “one untimely born.” The word literally means a dead fetus ejected from a woman’s body or aborted. Paul was working on killing the church, but would later see that he was the one actually dead. Paul saw himself in comparison to the other apostles. The others were selected by Jesus, trained and prepared for their mission. Paul, however:

was a persecutor of the church, a vile, dead thing spiritually, fit only to be carried out and buried from sight. Yet to *him*, to him while being *such*, the risen Lord also appeared. He, the abortion, placed at the side of these living men, treated, honored, dignified like them by the Lord!⁸

Paul knew first hand the atrocious deeds he committed. One must wonder if Paul did not at times reflect on his failure to follow the guidance of his teacher Gamaliel. Gamaliel had warned the Jews to leave the Christians alone, “for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:39) Gamaliel was right.

Next week, we dissect Paul’s conversion.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. So, what is your worst moment? Does it measure up to Paul’s? Do we consider ours worse because Paul’s motives were “good?” First, I’m not so sure we should label Paul’s motives as “good.” Paul was moved out of zeal, but that does not eliminate the selfishness and self-promotion that often come from zealous actions.

Paul never forgot his deeds. Paul never excused them out of “pure motives.” Paul never sought to soften them. Toward the end of his life, Paul emphasized this in writing to Timothy, saying, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15).

⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament, the Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Hendrickson 1998 printing) at 640.

Let us NEVER EVER think that our worst is too much for God's best! Whatever we are, whatever we have done, God waits to forgive – to wash us clean – to make us whole – to create in us a clean heart – and, to prepare us for his eternity. What a wonderful promise we have in Ephesians 1:7 “In Him (Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.”

2. Some really bad things can be done in the name of religious zeal. Let us always measure our actions by Jesus' standard of love. There is a considerable body of work setting out the Jewish understanding that with the advent of the Messiah, the Age of the Law and Torah comes to an end. As Christians, we understand that Jesus brought the law to an end, not by abolishing it, but by fulfilling it. For example, we are no longer tied to the Law's requirements of stoning or of sacrificing. Instead, we see in Jesus a fuller understanding and explanation that binds us not to an eye for an eye, but out of love, if one slaps us on one cheek, then we turn the other! We treat people as we would like to be treated. This is some of the significance of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7!

3. There is no question that Paul's actions in the stoning of Stephen affected him. They affect us. But we should also be affected by the actions of Stephen. Stephen never sought the executioner's mercy, never wavered, and never faltered. Stephen beheld the glory of Jesus and went home, dying with a prayer for Paul and others on his lips, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). God answered that prayer for Paul, to the benefit of church and history. Lord, may we have the faith and courage of Stephen. May we see to pray for your mercy for those who persecute us, and may we see them in heaven in eternity, through Jesus and his death's atonement! Amen!