

“They’re Real People! — Saul/Paul”

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Galatians 1:11-17

¹¹ For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. ¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And 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. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.” [ESV]

“They’re Real People! — Saul/Paul”

The key catalyst who broke up the Messianic Ghetto that had been developing in Jerusalem was this enigmatic figure named Saul. Immediately after the execution by stoning of the deacon/evangelist Stephen, Saul hunted down every adherent to what he viewed as the Messianic Heresy.

“And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul... And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” [Acts 7:58, 8:1-3 ESV]

While Saul may not have cast a stone at Stephen, he certainly witnessed the stoning, standing by holding everyone else’s cloaks and tunics. He would have most certainly heard Stephen’s exclamation —

“Look! I see heaven opened, and there’s the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” [Acts 7:56]

Saul no doubt looked up — but saw nothing. Visions are very private experiences, enjoyed only by the visionary. Saul’s personal yet very physical apocalypse would happen to him later.

Saul saw his calling as he stood there holding coats — he would dedicate himself to the eradication of these Messianic miscreants!

“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” [Acts 8:1, 3.]

That word “ravaging” is so expressive. It was open season for hunting down the followers of Jesus. They had to flee for their very lives!

We know the names of some of those arrested by Saul. We even have hard evidence of the existence of one of them, an ossuary bearing his name and his bones found in the ancient burial tomb of the Bar-Saba family. The Talmud lists five of them by name, ridiculing them with jokes about their names before executing them. It was ugly, but also the only way to get the Gospel moving elsewhere. Unwittingly, Saul was doing God’s will, forcing the early congregation of Christians to get moving with Christ’s message to the world.

We know of Saul’s character and training. In his own words in his letter to the believers in Philippi, he described himself:

“If anyone else thinks he has reason for 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, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” [Philippians 3:4-6 ESV]

He reiterated some of this in his letter to the Roman believers:

“For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.” [Romans 11:1 ESV]

He said in his own defense, at the time of his arrest 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 22:3-4 ESV]

In his letter to the believers in Galatia, he described himself —

“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And 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.” [Galatians 1:13-14 ESV]

In his own self-defense before King Herod Agrippa, Saul said,

“My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.” [Acts 4-5 ESV]

Even Rabban Gamaliel spoke of him — he called Saul “an impudent student who accepted heresy.”

The best that may be said of him in his life as Saul of Tarsus is that he was a good Jewish boy, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, a faithful Jew in the highest possible sense.

It’s ironic, however, that the experience he saw in Stephen as he was dying suddenly became his own. Stephen had looked up and exclaimed “Look! There’s Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God!” [Acts 7:55, 56].

The fact that Stephen claimed to see Jesus as the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God was enough for Saul to conclude that the whole movement was a demonic delusion.

But then, there was that event on the way to Damascus. Saul in his zeal asked for letters of reference from the Sanhedrin, authorizing him to carry out his pogrom in the capital of Syria. Rooting these heretics out of Jerusalem was not enough — they had to be eradicated from the whole planet.

“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.” [Acts 9:1-2 ESV]

Telling his own story to King Herod Agrippa, he described his passionate hatred of the Messianic Movement —

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” [Acts 26:9-11 ESV]

Saul was a raging, fanatical bigot! He not only arrested Christians, he also tortured them, trying to force them to deny Christ.

However, there’s an indication here that his conscience was bothering him. As he told his own conversion story to King Herod, he quoted Jesus like this:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the *goads*.” [Acts 26:14 ESV]

Goads? Yes, the equivalent of cattle-prods today! Something some sort of spiritual steel pointed stick was sticking him, poking him, tormenting him, forcing him to think about what he

was doing. He was in deep spiritual conflict. The more he tormented the saints, the more he was in torment within himself. The fact is, he had to go totally blind before he could finally, truly see!

What Saul saw was the same vision Stephen saw — Jesus in His exalted, ascendant glory at the right hand of God! He continued his story to King Herod Agrippa —

“At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

“And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 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.’

“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.” [Acts 26:13-20 ESV]

Saul the persecutor, literally in a blinding flash, became Paul the preacher. We know that this was a literal, physical moment — when Ananias, “a devout Jew” came and relieved Saul of his blindness, something like scales fell from his eyes — burnt corneas from the blinding flash. [Acts 9:17-18.]

Jesus became his personal mentor at that moment. Saul, now Paul, had to be totally reeducated. What he learned became the cornerstone beliefs of the Christian faith, still impacting us to this day.

“For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” [Galatians 1:11-12 ESV]

Paul understood the meaning of Christ in ways that were but dimly understood by the rest of the Apostles. Matthew, Mark and Luke described what Jesus *did* and *taught*; Paul taught us what Jesus *means*. While Christianity is founded upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, our understanding of our destiny is founded upon Paul’s understanding of Jesus. Even Peter and John were molded and shaped by Paul’s preaching. But that’s a subject for the future.

What we learned from Paul is that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, whose perfect obedience is our righteousness, whose atoning death on Calvary is our complete atonement, whose resurrection is our guarantee of our eternal future, and whose ascension keeps us in closest fellowship with His Father. God was, in Christ, reconciling us to Himself. Paul preached the Gospel fully! [Romans 15:19]. There is no other Gospel than the one preached by Paul. [Galatians 1:8-9]

For Further Contemplation:

The apostle now stood in the presence of that council of which he himself had been a member,—that council by which Stephen had been condemned... He recognized many who had been his associates in the school of Gamaliel, and who had also united with him in persecuting the disciples of Jesus. They were now as eager to put Paul to death as they had been to destroy Stephen. [Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 221.]