**BEFORE AND AFTER PAUL’S CONVERSION**

***13******For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely*** ***I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. 14******I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people*** ***and was extremely zealous******for the traditions of my fathers. 15But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace,*** ***was pleased 16******to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. 17I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.***

***18Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. 19I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother. 20******I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.***

***21Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. 22I*** ***was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. 23They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” 24And*** ***they praised God because of me.***

**Galatians 1:13-24 (NIV)**

Paulbegins with his ‘pre-conversion’ state ‘*in Judaism*,’ when he was still a practicing Jew. What he was like in those days was well known. ‘*For you have heard of my previous way of life’* meaning he would have told them. He mentions two aspects of these unregenerate days, the persecution of the church, which he now calls *‘the* *church of God’* (1:13) and his zeal ‘*for the traditions of my fathers’*(1:14). In both, he says, he was fanatical.

Paul persecuted the church ‘*intensely.’* The word Paul uses indicates the violence and savagery he used. He went from house to house in Jerusalem, seizing any Christians he could find, men and women, and dragged them off to prison (Acts 8:3). When these Christians were put to death, he cast his vote against them (Acts 26:10). Not satisfied with persecuting the church, he was bent on ‘destroying’ it, stamping it out forever.

He was equally fanatical in his enthusiasm for Jewish traditions. ‘*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people’* (1:14). He had been brought up according to the strictest party of the Jewish religion, the Pharisees (Acts 26:5) and this was how he lived.

This was Paul of Tarsus before his conversion. He was bigoted and fanatical, whole-hearted in his devotion to Judaism and in his persecution of Christ and the church.

Paul’s emotional and mental state meant no human power could change him. It would take supernatural power.

In 1:13 and 14, Paul is speaking about himself, ‘*I persecuted the church … and tried to destroy it …* *I was advancing in Judaism and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.’* But in 1:15 and 16 he begins to speak about God. It was God ‘*who* *set me apart from my mother’s womb,’* who **‘***called me by his grace’* who ‘*was pleased**to reveal his Son in me.’* At each stage the grace and initiative of God are emphasised.

First, ‘God … *set me apart from my mother’s womb.’* Like Jacob who was chosen before he was born, in preference to his twin, Esau (Romans 9:10-13) and like Jeremiah, who before he was born, was appointed to be a prophet (Jeremiah 1:5), so Paul, before he was born, was set apart to be an apostle. If he was consecrated an apostle before his birth, he had no initiative in the call.

Secondly, his pre-birth choosing led to an historic call. ‘God …*called me by his grace’* (1:15), by His utterly undeserved love and goodness. Paul was fighting against God, against Christ and against men. He neither deserved mercy nor asked for it yet mercy found him and grace called him.

Thirdly, ‘God … *was pleased**to reveal his Son in me’* (1:16). Whether Paul is still referring to his experience on the Damascus roador to the days immediately following it, what was revealed to him was Jesus Christ, God’s Son. Paul had been persecuting Christ because he thought Jesus was an imposter and the claim he was the Messiah was blasphemous. Now his eyes were opened. Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the world.

It was a private revelation to Paul but it was for a public communication to the Gentiles (‘*to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles’* [1:16; cf. Acts 9:15]). What Paul was charged to preach to the Gentiles was not the Law of Moses, as the Judaizers were teaching, but the ‘good news’ (the meaning of the word ‘*preach’* here) – the good news of Christ. Paul literally says this Christ had been revealed ‘in me.’ It was an inner illumination in his soul, God shining into his heart ‘*to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ’* (2 Corinthians 4:6). This revelation became so part of him that he was able to make it known to others.

Saul of Tarsus had been a fanatical opponent of the gospel. But God had turned him around to make him a preacher of the gospel he had so bitterly opposed. God’s pre-birth choice, historic call and the revelation of Christ in him, were all the work of God. This meant that neither his apostolic mission nor his message came from any human source.

But even if his conversion was a work of God, did Paul receive instruction after his conversion so that his message was still shaped by man?

From Acts 9:20 we know Paul spent a little time in Damascus preaching, suggesting he understood the gospel clearly enough to share it. But soon after he went into Arabia (1:17). Nothing is known of where he went or why he went. Possibly it was not far to go from Damascus. The whole district at that time was ruled by king Aretas of Arabia. He probably didn’t go to evangelise but for solitude and time to reflect. This is the point of 1:17 ‘*I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia.’* He seems to have stayed there for three years (1:18). In this period of withdrawal, as he meditated on the Old Testament scriptures, on the facts of the life and death of Jesus that he already knew and on his own experience of conversion, the gospel of the grace of God was revealed to him in its fulness.

‘*Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother’*(1:18,19). This is probably the Acts 9:26 visit, after he had been smuggled out of Damascus, being lowered down the city wall in a basket. While Paul is open about this visit, he sees it having no significance to his understanding of the gospel. It took place ‘*after three years’* (1:18), almost certainly meaning three years after his conversion. By this time the gospel would have been well and truly formulated in Paul’s mind.

While in Jerusalem, he only saw two of the leaders, Peter and James. James, numbered here among the apostles, seems to be almost mentioned in passing. Paul saw none of the other apostles. They may have not been there, been too busy in other things, or even afraid to see Paul (Acts 9:26).

Paul was in Jerusalem for ‘*fifteen days’* (1:18). While this would have given time to talk, Paul’s point is that his time there was limited. Acts 9:28,29 tells us Paul spent a good part of this time preaching.

Summarising, Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem was only after three years and lasted fifteen days. He only saw two leaders and spent a portion of his time evangelising. Paul’s point is that his understanding of the gospel did not come from the Jerusalem church or its leaders.

‘*Then I went to Syria and Cilicia’*(1:21). This visit to the extreme north corresponds with Acts 9:30 where Paul, in danger for his life, was brought to the Christians in Caesarea, where they ‘*sent him off to Tarsus’* which is in Cilicia (Acts 9:30). Again, Paul is emphasising his distance from Jerusalem.

As a result, he was ‘*personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ’* (1:22). They only knew him by hearsay and the rumour that ‘*the man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy’* (1:23). Hearing this, ‘*they praised God because of me’*(1:24).

The fanaticism of his pre-conversion life, the divine initiative in his conversion, and his almost total isolation from the Jerusalem churches afterwards, combine together to demonstrate that his message was not from man but from God. The historical evidence of what happened when was easily provable. Paul could say with a clear conscience ‘*I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie’* (1:20).

Paul has said all this to verify what he said in 1:11,12, ‘*I want you to know, that the gospel I preached is not something man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.*

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

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