

Paul the Apostle

1 Paul – a man of contrasts

There can be few greater contrasts in character than that which is seen between Saul of Tarsus and the man we know as Paul the apostle. Saul is the man before conversion – the man on the Damascus road – and Paul the great servant of Christ as found in all his epistles. I can think of only one character who has such a change and that is Benjamin.

In Genesis chapter 49, a dying Jacob has something to say about all 12 of his sons, including Benjamin. The old man is not very complimentary.

27 Benjamin shall ravine as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.

Jacob thus gives us the picture of a ferocious and merciless man.

In Deuteronomy chapter 33, Moses blesses not now the 12 sons of Jacob but rather the 12 tribes of Israel, descended from the sons. He gives a very different account of Benjamin.

12 And of Benjamin he said, The beloved of the LORD shall dwell in safety by him; and the LORD shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between his shoulders.

Can we see the reason now why we have mentioned Benjamin as part of our consideration of Paul? Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin and fulfilled what is said of Benjamin in the words of both Jacob and Moses. Saul is like the Benjamin of Genesis 49, Paul is like the Benjamin of Deut 33. What brought about the great transformation? It was the grace of God in salvation. The ravenous wolf has become a gentle nurse. We first read of Saul at the stoning of Stephen. In chapter 8, he turns his anger towards the believers in Jerusalem; then in chapter 9, he sets off from Jerusalem towards Damascus intending to do likewise in Damascus

Ac 7:58 and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

Ac 8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Ac 8:3 As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

Ac 9:1 And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,

While speaking of his conversion later, Paul showed his innermost hatred against these followers of Jesus.

26:11 And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

What words would we use regarding this young man?

Hateful, angry, merciless, bigoted? He was all these things and more. But divine grace met him on the road to Damascus and he was marvellously saved. So, what can we say about the character of the saved man?

2 Paul – a man of zeal

As a saved man, Paul certainly lost nothing of his zeal and determination. He was as zealous for the gospel as he had before been zealous against it. He felt himself to be debtor to all men, to make the gospel known. "Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel."

3 Paul – a man of contention

Some might argue that Paul was just as contentious after salvation than he was before it. He certainly did not avoid contention where the work of God was concerned.

In Acts chapter 15, Paul is at Antioch when certain brethren arrive from Jerusalem, teaching the saints that they had to be circumcised in order to be saved.

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

Paul and Barnabus engaged in a heated argument with these men. When the matter could not be resolved at Antioch, they decided to take the issue to Jerusalem to put before the apostles and elders there. Paul says about those who opposed him, "To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour". Was Paul simply being stubborn? Rather, he is defending the truth of the gospel which had been revealed to him directly by the Lord Jesus, as he tells us in Galatians chapter 1. The gospel came to him "by revelation of Jesus Christ". Paul was totally unyielding when it came to defending divine truth, and we should be willing to follow his example. To add anything to the gospel is to take away from the Lord Jesus.

But at the end of chapter 15, he has another dispute, this time with Barnabus. Now the issue was, should they take with them John Mark on their new missionary enterprise? John Mark had let them down before and had left the work.

37 And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark.

38 But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.

39 And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;

40 And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.

The language used here is significant. Paul “thought it not good”, but “Barnabus determined”. Barnabus was the uncle of John Mark and was perhaps being unduly influenced by family ties. But Paul was more concerned about the work of the gospel being put at risk by any further failure on the part of Mark.

So who was right – Paul or Barnabus? When Paul chose Silas to go with him, he, not Barnabus, received the commendation of the brethren, so I believe Paul was justified in the stance he took.

A further difficulty arose at Antioch. After the matter of circumcision had been discussed and agreed at Jerusalem, Peter decided to accompany Paul and Barnabus back to Antioch. The church sits down to have a meal, Jews and Gentiles sitting happily together. However the door opens and in walk some brethren from Jerusalem. Peter, through the fear of man, gets up from his table where he had been sitting with the Gentiles, and moves across to another table to sit with the Jews. Barnabus does the same. Paul sees what is happening and is alert to the danger. Antioch was becoming a centre of Christian testimony to rival Jerusalem. Peter’s action could easily have divided the assembly at Antioch, and the division could have spread even further. Paul acts decisively:

11 But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.

12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision.

13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

Was Paul just stirring up trouble over an apparently simple incident? No, he was defending the unity of the church, the body of Christ.

So Paul did involve himself in disputes – but only when the truth of God, the work of God, and the church of God was at risk.

4 Paul – a man of ambition

There is no doubting that Saul of Tarsus was a man of ambition. He had everything going for him. He was a citizen of Rome as well as being a citizen of Tarsus. He probably was fluent in four languages – Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. He was at the best school – that of Gamaliel. And at his school, he was an outstanding pupil – he profited in the Jews religion above his fellows. He had gained the trust of the High Priest as Acts 7 to 9 would attest. He was ambitious to rise to the top in the affairs of the Jews.

But what about Paul the apostle – the converted man? In Philippians chapter 3,

he writes of how he given up those things he once held dear. "What things were gain to me, I counted loss for Christ." But now he was characterised by a new ambition, as he explains in Phil chapter 3:.

10 That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

To know Him was more than just knowing about Him. It was to know the Lord Jesus as a person. He goes on to speak of knowing "the power of His resurrection". Paul knew about the doctrine of resurrection, but he wanted to know the power. A man with this power is living above this world with its attractions and temptations. Thirdly it was to know the fellowship of His sufferings. Note how the power of His resurrection comes before His sufferings. A man who was living in the power of His resurrection would soon attract the enmity of this world and would experience the same sufferings of the Lord Jesus, even to the point of death.

So, Paul was a man of zeal, a man of contention, a man of ambition. But these were the things that characterised him in his unconverted state. Had he not really changed? Now there is a new centre and objective in his life and that centre was Christ. It was His work, His gospel, ambition to know Him.

So, what can we discover about Paul the apostle that went beyond zeal, contention, and ambition? There is much we can uncover much about Paul the converted man in his letter to the Philippians:

5 Paul – a man of prayer

After the incident on the Damascus road, Paul was taken to a house in the city. He had been struck down with blindness after seeing the glory of the Lord Jesus. Ananias was sent to speak to him, and he was told about Saul, "Behold he prayeth". Prayer marked out Paul in those early days, and in his letters we see how often Paul was engaged in prayer for himself and the readers of his epistles. I believe he prays for the saints in all his epistles bar one – the epistle to the Galatians. They had fallen victim to the Judaizers who would have dragged them back into keeping the law. And Paul obviously felt he could not bring himself to pray for the Galatians.

Paul prayed for saints whom he knew well, like the Philippians and the Thessalonians. He prayed for those whom he had never seen, like the Colossians and the Romans. He prayed for assemblies, and for individuals like Timothy and Titus. He prayed for different things – for the love of the Philippians, that it might abound yet more and more. He prayed for the enlightenment of the Ephesians, that they might understand the ministry he was bringing to them. He prayed without ceasing. He truly became a man of prayer.

6 Paul – a man of forgiveness

Philippians is one of Paul's prison epistles. Yet Paul finds himself writing to the Philippians about certain brethren who were preaching Christ out of contention, not sincerely, hoping to add affliction to his bonds. No doubt these were true believers, for who else would preach Christ. But why would these men be

stirring up trouble for Paul? I believe these would be Jewish converts. On hearing Paul's ministry about the equal place of the Gentiles and the Jews: ie that God had broken down the middle wall of partition, and Jews had lost their special place of favour in the purpose of God, they had become Paul's enemies. How did Paul react to these men? Was he seeking to vindicate himself? Was he swearing to get even with them? No rather, he simply rejoiced that Christ was being preached. He had a big heart –a heart of forgiveness.

7 Paul – a man of love

In Philippians chapter 1, Paul states his love that he had for these believers. God is my witness how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ. He was claiming that the love he had in his heart was just like that which existed in the heart of the Lord Jesus. It was no idle boast – he writes "God is my witness". He had a similar love for the Corinthians though sadly he writes, "The more I love you, the less I am loved".

8 Paul – a man of unselfishness

In Chapter 1 again of Philippians, we see how Paul put others before himself. He is in the worst possible circumstances. He is in a Roman prison with all the hardships that entailed. He has a desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better. He longed for heaven, but then he thought of the needs of the saints and declares that to abide in the flesh was more needful for them.

Again in the second chapter, he writes, "And I, if I be offered upon the sacrifice and offering of your faith, I rejoice and joy with you all". He was willing to pour out his own life for them.

9 Paul – a man of joy

1:4 Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy,

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.

There are 17 references in this short epistle to joy, rejoice, and rejoicing. It is "joy from the jail". There wasn't much joy in the life of Saul of Tarsus, but not so with the apostle. He had learned how to be independent of his physical circumstances.

10 Paul the peacemaker

Some of the above comments about Paul might seem to portray him as being a contentious man - still like the man on the Damascus road. When he wrote the epistle to the Philippians, he was aware of a problem between two sisters, Euodias and Syntyche. He plays the part of a peacemaker.

2 I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.

3 And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers,

whose names are in the book of life.

He also writes a brief letter to Philemon, interceding on behalf of a runaway slave named Onesimus.

9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

11 The gentleness of Paul

1Th 2:7 But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children:

The above shows just how much Paul has changed after his conversion. Yet this is the fiery young man of Acts 9, now describing himself as a nurse, gentle with his children.

12 A man of humility

Paul describes himself as the least of all the apostles. He goes further – he is the least of all saints. He had learned the meaning of true humility.

Conclusion

So who does Paul remind you of in his love, forgiveness, unselfishness, humility? He has surely become like the master whom he served. And that is the highest aim of every Christian - to be conformed to the image of God's Son.