

“PAUL, THE UNEXPECTED APOSTLE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:13-16

Introduction.

Today is Cadet Sunday and in the providence of God, I planned to preach on the first word of Romans today, Paul. He is a great example and teacher to our Cadets, and to all men, and to all Christians.

If we are going to study the most important letter this man wrote, and as we heard last week, perhaps the most important letter ever written, we should know something about the man who wrote it. Paul's letters are personal, they all bear the stamp of his personality and background.

Rom. 1:1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

Someone in the first century reading this for the first time, might be shocked. “Wait a minute, you mean Paul as in Saul of Tarsus? You mean that arrogant, zealous, murderer and persecutor of Christians, hater of the church of Jesus Christ? The Paul who has more in common with a Taliban terrorist than an apostle?”

How in the world did he become the author of the greatest letter in history? What is this amazing thing the Lord has done? What does Scripture tell us know about this man called Paul? What do we learn *about* Paul, and what do we learn *from* Paul?

What do we learn about Paul?

Acts 22:3 I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia [no obscure, insignificant city], 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.

Paul was born a Jew around 7 or 8 AD, in the Roman city of Tarsus the capital of Cilicia in Asia Minor, southern Turkey. This was an important cultural center and known for its schools, it rivalled Athens and Alexandria, if not surpassing them. Paul early on learned Greek and was taught Greek literature and philosophy. In some of his letters he quotes Greek writers. By the hand of God, he was trained in the reason and logic of Gentiles to whom God would send him.

Acts 22:27-28 The tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” 28 The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.”

Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, the city of Tarsus was declared by Rome to be a free city and the citizens of Tarsus given the privileges of Roman citizenship. His father was a Roman citizen.

Paul's Roman citizenship from birth gave him a higher social status. He enjoyed the honor and privileges that would not have been his if he had been born in Jerusalem. The hand of God determined when and where and to whom Paul would be born.

By the hand of God, it would be his Roman citizenship that would get him an all-expenses paid cruise with bodyguards to Rome.

Philippians 3:5-6 ... 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; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

These were Paul's first credentials, the letters after his name, more important than his Roman citizenship was his being a Jew. This is what he boasted about. Being of the tribe of Benjamin might explain his name, since King Saul was also of the tribe of Benjamin.

Around the age of 12 Paul would have been sent to Jerusalem for his formal training in Jewish law. He was fortunate enough, perhaps because of some privileged background to sit under the greatest Jewish teacher of the day, Gamaliel. This was sort of like going to Harvard or Princeton. The hand of God.

He mastered Moses, he knew the Law and the Prophets. By the hand of God he was trained in the doctrines and reasoning of the Jewish religion which would equip him someday to refute them with great force of insight. Paul by all accounts was brilliant, a scholar of great intellect.

Acts 26:5 ... according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.

Pharisees were conservatives, Bible believing Jews, the most orthodox. They were the most careful and faithful Israelites. They were the strictest law keepers.

Galatians 1:14 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.

Among the Pharisees Paul was best of best, the strictest and most zealous of them all. He was at the top of his class. He had impeccable moral character. There were no stains on his reputation, he had not wasted his youth sowing wild oats.

He absorbed everything the great Gamaliel taught him and then the student exceeded beyond his master. Remember Gamaliel had urged restraint in the treatment of Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul went beyond his teacher and pursued and persecuted the followers of Jesus.

Galatians 1:13 You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

Anyone who dared believe the Messiah would die cursed on a tree was uttering blasphemy, and that deserved death. He zealously and violently set out to destroy the church of God, the Christian religion. The first time we lay eyes on Paul in Scripture is in Acts 8, he is standing there giving silent consent to the stoning of Stephen, with blood splattered on his clothes.

Paul was personally persecuting Christians, murdering them or bringing them to trial to be put in prison or killed. Men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. He was destroying lives, ripping apart families. He was causing people to have to flee their homes and livelihoods to save their lives. Paul was hell bent on destroying anything to do with Jesus and

the Christian faith. And this is the hand of God, all part of God's plan of salvation and spreading the Gospel.

God was the potter, molding, forming, fashioning Paul for His purposes, even his sin, fitting him for the mission He had planned for him. God is doing that all the time. God forms us and equips us according to His particular plans, for specific good works.

But God.

Sometime around his thirtieth year of life he set out to expand the reach of his terrorism, his hate crimes. He got letters from the High Priest to go to Damascus to arrest more Christians.

Acts 22:4-5 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, 5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

Galatians 1:15-16 *But ... [God]* 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.

Acts 26:12-16 I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 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. 14 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.' 15 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 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.

Paul saw the resurrected Jesus, whom he believed was crucified, dead and buried. Jesus shattered Paul's worldview, shattered all his preconceived ideas about God, radically turned his entire life and world upside down. The hand of God has no hesitancy to do what He pleases. This is a stunning, most unexpected, amazing work of God to convert a murderous, zealous Pharisee into the greatest missionary apostle who ever lived. This is the greatest, most important, most amazing event in Christian history after the resurrection.

How do you explain what happened to Paul? He is a real, verifiable historical person, who was well known for what he did before, and then did a complete 180, and was well known for what he did after? How do you explain such a transformation? How can anyone deny God in the face of this?

Mark this well, it was not Paul's intellect or superior education or privileged status or upbringing that made him a great apostle. It was the revelation of the resurrected Jesus Christ. It was grace.

Acts 13:1-3 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me

Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Acts 13:9 But Saul, who was also called Paul.

On his first missionary journey to the Gentiles, Paul changes his name (or uses his other name). Saul was his Jewish name, but from now on among the Gentiles Paul goes by his Gentile name, Paul.

Paul spent the rest of his life proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all who would listen, mostly to Gentiles and planting churches all over the Roman empire. He labored under the most extreme circumstances, dangers and persecutions, without hesitation or faltering.

How do you explain Paul’s perseverance in the face of great suffering?

II Corinthians 11:23-30 *Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one*—more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? 30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

II Corinthians 1:8-10 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 10 He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

Why? Why would anyone go through all that? Why? For the sake of the Gospel of Jesus.

Philippians 3:7-10 Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, ... 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul had it all, he had arrived, he was at the top of his game, in everything he did he excelled. He was somebody. And he gladly laid it all aside, gave it all up, for the sake of Christ and not only that but for the privilege of sharing in the sufferings of Christ and receive the resurrection from the dead. He was not defined by his accomplishments, by Jesus’ accomplishments.

Paul loved Jesus so much and was so thankful for all Jesus did for him, he was willing to suffer and sacrifice anything for the Gospel. And he suffered as much as any person ever has for the sake of sharing the good news wherever he could.

What do we learn from the life of Paul?

I hope as we get to know Paul and his letter to the Romans, we will grow to love this man and grow to desire to imitate his faith and his love for Jesus and the Gospel.

Our world needs examples of men, leaders like this man. Our young sons need masculine role models like this.

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Who says that today?

Paul teaches us the importance of being born again.

Conversion is the greatest of all human experiences. To be apprehended by God Himself, to have the divine hand of the living God reach down and snatch you from the brink of self-destruction, from the brink of hell, there is nothing else like it.

May we all learn the first and greatest lesson from the life of Paul, the power of conversion of being born again by the Spirit of Christ, of being released from the bondage of our sin, guilt and shame, of having blind eyes opened, deaf ears unplugged, carnal minds made pure, the incomparable joy of being forgiven, redeemed, justified. To be born in the flesh is a wonderful thing, but to be born of the eternal Spirit of God is a mystery beyond human understanding.

We must all, like Paul, have a personal encounter with Jesus, a coming to real faith in Jesus, a surrendering to Him in faith and repentance.

If God will include the likes of Paul in His kingdom, will He not also be pleased to include the likes of us.

No one is beyond hope, has sinned beyond hope. Don't think you are beyond use to God, that nothing valuable can come of your life. Your past doesn't disqualify you from God's grace.

I Timothy 1:15-16 Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

Paul never got over Jesus' amazing grace, nor should we.

Paul teaches us to see the hand of God in all our lives, the sovereign providence of God over our lives.

We must learn to see everything in our lives as part of God's plan, part of His workmanship. We are not our own, God is the potter, we are the clay. We must humbly surrender to Him.

As much as we think we are the masters of our lives, we are not our own. We belong to God, He created us, we did not create ourselves, we determined every facet of our lives, when we are born, where, to whom, why here and now. It is God's doing by His grace for His glory.

Paul teaches us be humble, to be able to admit we are wrong.

Paul hated Jesus and Christianity. But in Paul's own words later in life, he admitted he was ignorant and in unbelief. He was blind, deaf, dead.

I Timothy 1:13 I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.

Paul puts his sin out there to help us in our sin, and to show us how to boast in our weaknesses and shortcoming and failures, find peace and joy in the love and forgiveness of Jesus.

This is the mark of a Christian man, of a mature Christian, he knows his sin and he doesn't hide his sin. He hates his sin.

Jesus came to Paul to tell him to go to the Gentiles. Jesus calls only flawed sinners to serve, to go in our weakness and sin, go in dependence on Him. Jesus says, "Who will go for me?"

We either live in humble surrender and submission to Him or in rebellion against Him. Paul started out in rebellion until He saw the resurrected Jesus, then he humbly, and joyfully submitted.

Paul teaches us to be humble and content even in suffering and to love our enemies.

Philippians 4:11-13 I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Love those who are bullies, who are mean, who are hard to love.

Paul teaches us to have a goal, a purpose in life, that is bigger than us, that is God-sized.

What unexpected and amazing thing God did for Paul, He still does. Paul was a man like us, who was so gripped by the grace of Jesus he freely surrendered his life to Jesus, willingly suffering anything for the privilege and joy of worshipping Jesus and loving and serving the Gospel.

What are you striving for, what are you living for, what gets you out of bed in the morning. Have you had a vision of the resurrected Jesus, do you know Christ who laid down His life and died for you?

Are we willing to lay aside our own goals and desires in life, give up our own wills to follow Jesus? If God can use Paul to change the world, He can use you, as a servant of Jesus. Are you willing to believe God can do amazing things in and through you?