

Don'T Give Up!

Paul's Conversion

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Have you ever wanted to just give up? I am sure all persecuted Christians down through history have had their moments. Have trials weighed you down to the point of despair? Is old age sapping the strength and determination from your heart and mind? Are you dwelling on the question, "How long, O Lord!"? Psalm 38 expresses similar frustration.

Psalm 38:20-22 Those also who render evil for good, they are my adversaries, because I follow what is good. Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!

I think that is what we feel when we are in the midst of any trial, especially the more severe ones involving health. This is the way the Christians during Saul's and the Jews persecution must have felt at times, as they or their brethren were pursued, captured, and murdered by the zealous Saul.

Acts 9 contains Luke's account of the conversion of his friend Saul, but the story is told twice more, once in chapter 22, and again in chapter 26. These later accounts are not mere summaries of Saul's conversion, they are full accounts, each with its own particular emphasis.

It is significant that in so short a book, attempting to cover the expansion of Christianity from its small beginnings in Jerusalem to a religion that filled the whole empire, that the tale of one man's conversion would be so greatly emphasized. It is remarkable, but not surprising, because more than any other individual in these early years, Saul of Tarsus promoted the gospel of Jesus Christ and the coming of Kingdom of God throughout the Roman Empire.

Obviously and rightly Luke considered Saul's conversion to be a watershed event in the history of Christianity. We will begin here in Acts 9.

Acts 9:1-5 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him

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from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." [This last sentence is not in the original text, it was copied from Acts 26:14, but it still appropriate.]

The conversion of the apostle Paul was one of the great foundational occurrences in the history of Christianity, however intending to discredit Christianity, secular critics and even liberal theologians argue that Paul's conversion to Christianity never really happened.

Was Paul converted as the Bible says he was? Let us investigate this. Saul, who later became Paul, was introduced at the beginning of the Acts 8. Now what can we say about this man? One thing is that he had received an extraordinary education.

Sometimes people wonder whether taking time to get an education is worthwhile. Ask yourself who was the man who was most used by God in the Old Testament? The answer to that question is obviously Moses. Did he have an education? The answer is, yes he did. What kind of an education did he have? He had the best education that was possible to get his day and it was a secular education. True, he had been trained along spiritual lines in his home, he knew who God was he could see that YHWH was the only God.

When the time came in his life when he was confronted with a choice between the pleasures, wisdom, prestige, and power of Egypt and God's people, he chose to identify with the people of God even though that was obviously going to involve great self-denial and suffering.

Hebrews 11:24-27 By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

He was a spiritual man but his formal education was nevertheless secular. Stephen, recorded in Acts 7 said:

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Acts 7:22 And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.

So ask yourself: who was the man most used by God in the New Testament, apart from Jesus Christ? The answer undoubtedly is the apostle Paul. He had the best possible education a person in his time could have but it was a secular education. Overtly secular in his hometown of Tarsus but also secular in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, Saul received what would have been called in that day, a religious education. He had studied under Gamaliel.

His education was the equivalent of going to Harvard University, which was first established as a religious university. Now registering in the religion department, it was a thorough study of religion. Saul did learn the traditions of Israel but it was not a truly spiritual education, per se. Saul was not yet called by God and did not have God's Holy Spirit. So what he was learning was on the physical level with physical understanding and intellect.

Christianity would have been incompatible with Judaism but there would have been more to his rejection of Christianity than this. Not only would Paul have considered Christianity wrong, he would have considered it as deceptive and this is because it made such great claims. It claimed not only that Jesus was the Son of God but that he also had proved this by His resurrection from the dead.

All this conflicted in Paul's mind with what Judaism taught, even though it did not conflict with the Old Testament. Keep in mind that Saul was looking at it from that secular Judaism viewpoint.

The early Christians were preaching the resurrection in the very city in which Jesus' tomb was located. The priest and early Christians discovered it to have been empty. Now if the enemies of the gospel had been able to produce the body of Jesus Christ in those days, they would have done it because nothing would have destroyed Christianity as quickly, or as thoroughly as that. That they could not produce the body was a great embarrassment to them and nevertheless they tried to explain it.

The traditional explanation is the one reflected at the end of Matthew's gospel, namely that the disciples came and stole the body which is recorded in Matthew 28:11-15.

So that is what Saul must have thought. To him it was not just about Christianity being wrong, rather Christianity was a damnable deceit in Saul's eyes at that time. It was

leading people away from the truth.

Now if Saul needed justification for his fierce actions he could have found it easily in the Old Testament. There is the story of Phinehas for example. Phinehas killed an immoral man and woman with a spear and God honored the action by halting a plague. Phinehas was praised by God. Saul was trying to stop a plague of false religion, possibly this is one of his justifications, but I do not know.

Therefore having helped in the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem and hearing that the sect of the Nazarene's (which in this story is now called "the way"), had begun to spread and was taking roots in Damascus, he turned his persecution in that direction. He was on his way when God called and began to convert him. In the version of the story found in Acts 26, the Lord is quoted as having said to Saul:

Acts 26:14 And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

This means that Saul was bothered in his conscience. What was his state of mind? The explanation must come from his exposure to Stephen at the time of Stephen's death. In the trial and martyrdom of Stephen, perhaps for the first time in his life, Saul must have actually have come face to face with a true and articulate Christian. What an impression it must have made on him.

Saul was educated and so was Stephen. Stephen may not have had the equal of Saul's superb education, but when Stephen gave his testimony before the Sanhedrin he demonstrated a knowledge of the Scriptures that was at least equal to that of his chief persecutors. Also he displayed it effortlessly, it was a natural part of him. Stephen also made his points clear.

Could Saul have given an address that powerful before his conversion? Where did that power come from? Notice would Jesus told His disciples Matthew 10.

Matthew 10:19-20 But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

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Paul did not realize that. He thought that the power was coming from Stephen, but it was actually God's Spirit empowering Stephen with the proper words. From Paul's perspective, he would have been impressed with what Stephen had to say.

Now during Jesus' life on earth the Holy Spirit was with the disciples and after the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, the Spirit was within them as it had been in Christ. At this time the disciples were born from above by the Holy Spirit marking the beginning of the New Testament church of God.

Now Saul would have been somewhat impressed with Stephen's final words. As Stephen died he looked to heaven and said,

Acts 7:56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

Could Stephen have been lying in those circumstances? At that moment, Saul had to be impressed by Stephen's conviction. There was also the way in which Stephen died. As he died he repeated the words of his Master.

Acts 7: 59-60 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

I suspect that Saul asked himself whether he could have died like that. Was his faith as strong as Stephen's? Could he die with peace of mind and heart? Did he have a moral character that could ask forgiveness for his murderers at the moment when he was being killed?

Prejudices die hard however and although Saul may have been kicking against goads, he was nevertheless still kicking against them. And it was while he was in that frame of mind that Christ met him.

The expression to "kick against pricks" in the King James Version, or "against the goads" in New King James Version, is derived from the action of a stubborn and unyielding ox kicking against a spiked stick used for driving cattle, call the goad.

The ox would not injure anyone but himself and neither would he gain anything by

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kicking at it. It came to represent an obstinate and stubborn disposition and course of conduct. It is resistance and rebellion against lawful authority.

This type of resistant conduct opposes common sense to one's own injury. Someone with this attitude gets into greater difficulty by attempting to shirk his normal responsibilities. By all this they only injure themselves and this is the condition of every sinner. Paul, at that point, pretty much represented every sinner.

Saul was concerned that the religion called "the way" was spreading. The reason it was called "the way" was because it was a way of life to live. It had started in Jerusalem and Saul was doing everything he could to stamp it out there but he heard rumors that the faith was taking root in Damascus, a Gentile city in Syria.

The gospel had spread to Samaria and now it had spread the whole way to Damascus, one hundred twenty miles north, despite Paul's persecution.

There is an irony here though. In the chapter immediately before this, we have been told about Phillip and the Ethiopian and how the gospel was spreading to the south. Saul was concerned that the gospel was spreading to the north. But while he was on his way north, God picked up Phillip from Samaria and leapfrogged him over Saul, sending him down the Gaza road in the direction of Ethiopia. Saul was trying to stamp out Christianity in one direction while God was advancing it rapidly in the other. On the way to Damascus there was a bright light from heaven and a voice.

Acts 9:5-6 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Saul was so sure of himself. True, he had been resisting the goads of God concerning Stephen, but nevertheless he believed that the Christians were wrong. Suddenly, in this remote place, as barren as the area in which the Ethiopian was traveling, without a Christian anywhere around, there was a light from heaven; God spoke and God was Jesus Christ.

This was an extraordinary life-changing event. Unless Saul was hallucinating, the appearance of Jesus proved that Jesus was alive and that Jesus was God. This was not like merely meeting a man walking along the road, this was a voice from heaven.

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Furthermore this Jesus, who was God, was identifying himself with the very people Saul was persecuting. You can be sure that Saul was shaking in his boots at that time.

Up to this moment Paul had been doing what he liked; what he thought was best; what his will dictated and from this time forward he would be told what to do. Upon our conversion we cease to do what we want to do, or at least we should, and begin to do what Christ wants us to do. We have to be careful and work hard not to “kick against the goads.”

Saul was blinded as a result of the bright lights, so they led him into the city and while he was in the city praying, God sent a Christian leader named Ananias to him. Now what did God tell Ananias? Picking up the story here in verse 11,

Acts 9:11-14 So the Lord said to him [that is Ananias], “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.” Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.”

Ananias knew who Saul was. Every Christian in Jerusalem knew who Saul was.

Acts 9:15-17 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.” And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

That has to be one of the quickest conversions on earth. When God spoke to him, Ananias was strong enough to believe God and do what He said. Trusting God for the consequences, he might have said something like this: “Oh no Lord you’re mistaken. I know you’ve been able to convert many people but you haven’t converted Saul. If ever there was an unconvertible enemy it was Saul.” But Ananias did not say that. If God said Saul was converted, Ananias was willing to believe it, so he went.

Any one of us would have been terrified to go do that. Is our faith as strong as the faith of this man, this great man of Damascus? Many of us pray for people, sometimes it is for a son or daughter, a parent, a friend, a wife or husband, and we ask God to change his/her life and to call and save that person, but often we really do not think that God can do it.

God can and frequently does do something remarkable but it has to be according to God's will and within his time frame, not ours. We should be greatly encouraged that God saved Saul in such a way.

God turned this great persecutor of the early Christians into the first great missionary, so to speak. He took the man who had been doing the most harm to the church and turned him into the man who did the most to build it up. If God could do that with Saul, God could do the same thing today with anyone.

Now let us get back to whether Paul's conversion happened the way Acts 9 describes. If it did not happen the way it is described in Acts, then Paul must have been one of three things: 1) an impostor, 2) an enthusiast, that is one who got carried away with himself; one who was virtually out of his mind or, 3) he was deceived by others.

Was Paul an impostor? Luke was Paul's friend and wrote the book of Acts, as you well know. He undoubtedly got the story from Paul directly. That should count for something but maybe it was just a big put on. Perhaps Paul was pretending something happened but it never really happened. Could it be that Paul knew the truth but he fooled his friend Luke as well as many others?

If that were the case we have to ask, what could have possibly been Paul's motivation? If Paul had gone to such lengths as to invent this story and then try to persuade others of its truthfulness, why would he do it?

Some might do something like this to try to get ahead in life, it might be a way of impressing people and making a mark for oneself. People sometimes do that in religious circles today. They pretend a faith that they do not have because they think it is a good thing to be a member of the church and to be highly thought of by other Christians. Others want to be popular as some type of religious leader so they invent impressive stories of how God spoke to them and called them into the ministry.

That was not the case with Paul. Paul had a bright future and that bright future was not with the persecuted Christians and he had been doing very well in Judaism. He was Pharisee of the Pharisees. If anybody was going to make a name for himself in Judaism

it was Paul.

Paul could not have invented the story to get ahead, in fact the opposite happened. Humanly speaking he got behind rather than ahead and he gave up everything and suffered many things as a consequence of having thrown his lot in with Jesus Christ and the Christians.

Was Paul just an enthusiast for Christ after having been a zealot for Judaism? Was he just continuing his tendency of being virtually out of his mind, an off-the-wall fanatic? Does that explain Paul? Was that the kind of mind Paul had? Although he was zealous did he have a mind or personality naturally given to fantasies?

We have to remember that Saul was not Sadducee who did not believe in the resurrection, but rather a Pharisee who did. Besides, he was one who had heard stories of Jesus' resurrection but did not regard them as valid.

This is not a picture of a crazy man, but rather the picture of a man who says something like: "I know that the Bible teaches that there will be a resurrection at the end time and I believe the Bible, but I've lived a long time, and although there may be a resurrection someday it's for the future. Right now dead people don't rise. If the Christians are saying that Jesus rose from the dead they must be trying to deceive people."

This is exactly the opposite of a person who is religiously unbalanced, which is what this explanation demands. This leads to the next question, the third impossibility, which is: was Paul deceived by others? We have to ask: who would have deceived him? It would have had to have been the Christians, and could they even have thought of the possibility of inventing something to deceive their great enemy?

They were trying to stay as far away from him as they could and they were not capable of such a deception. Even if they were, how could they have carried it off? A bright light from heaven? A voice that Saul believed to be the voice of God? What is the conclusion? Maybe with the technology of today you could fake a little bit of it, but back then they certainly could not fake that, not enough to deceive Paul anyway.

Obviously if each of these other explanations has to be discarded the only remaining possibility is that the story is true, that there was a genuine appearance of Jesus to Saul followed by an authentic conversion. It is obvious that Saul was not deceived by the fraud of others and what he said of himself cannot be the result of his being misled, no more than to willfully fake it.

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It is clear that what Saul believed was the cause of his conversion and what happened as a result did all really happen. This is another proof that the Christian religion is a divine revelation. The only thing that could account for it is that it was accomplished by the power of God.

Sadly there are non-genuine conversions. They pass away but all true conversion is the result of the work of the same Jesus Christ who knows His sheep. The same Jesus Christ who called upon Saul at that time, opened his mind, and gave him the Holy Spirit is the same Jesus Christ that is our Master and Lord today.

Christianity does not rest on a foundation of human reasoning and tradition, it rests on the Word of God as is demonstrated in the conversion of Saul.

John 10:27-29 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand."

Is there a greater assurance of safety than that, if we can continue to be obedient and to overcome? A flock follows its shepherd to pastures and streams, true Christians not only obey Christ but we imitate Him. We go where His Spirit and the wisdom from above leads us and we yield ourselves to His guidance and seek to be led by Him. This is the point that Paul came to when he received God's Holy Spirit directly from Jesus Christ.

When Jesus was on earth many of His disciples followed and attended Him from place to place. Therefore true Christians are called His followers. In Revelation 14:4, we are described as the ones who follow the Lamb. Following means to obey; to do with that master tells us and walk in His footsteps.

Now let us take a look at Luke's account of what happened to Paul after his conversion. If we want to have the chronology of the whole story in our minds we must also read Paul's own account of the matter in Galatians 1:15-24 as well.

When we put the two accounts together we find that the chain of events runs like this:

- 1) Saul is converted on the Damascus road.
- 2) He preaches in Damascus.

- 3) He goes away to Arabia (Galatians 1:17).
- 4) He returns and preaches in Damascus for a period of three years (Galatians 1:18).
- 5) He goes to Jerusalem.
- 6) He escapes from Jerusalem to Caesarea.
- 7) He returns to the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21).

So we see that Paul began by doing two things. First was that he immediately bore his witness in Damascus. In Damascus there are many Jews and consequently there would be many synagogues and it was in these Damascus synagogues that Paul first lifted up his voice for Christ, which was an act of great courage. It was to these same synagogues that Paul had received his letters of credit as an official agent of the Sanhedrin.

It would have been a lot easier to begin his Christian witness somewhere where he was not known and where his past would not stand against him. He was not ashamed of the gospel and he was determined to make it known to those who best knew him.

The second thing he did immediately is not mentioned by Luke at all, and that is that he went to Arabia, found in Galatians 1:17. Into Paul's life had come a shattering change and for while he had to be alone with God.

He was about to embark on the journey of a different life and he needed two things: guidance for a strange new life and strength for a seemingly overwhelming task that had been assigned to him. He went to God for both.

Acts 9:19-22 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

That was a pretty bold move and he was courageous about it but God gave him the

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guidance and the strength to carry it out. He was up against probably the worst audience anybody could have.

Now it is sometimes helpful to compare parallel accounts of Bible stories. Parallel accounts are generally not quite identical and the variations usually shed light on one another or on the meaning of the passage in which each occurs. That is the case with the stories of Paul's conversion. Luke makes different points in each one and there is also different information in each.

When we read Acts 9:5, we find Paul asking Jesus, "who are You, Lord?" In response Jesus told him,

Acts 9:5-6 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

However when we read Acts 22:10 we find that Paul also asked the second question, "what shall I do Lord?" This is an important addition to the story and a significant combination of ideas, because together the two questions form a sound basis for a strong Christian life.

Many people approach Christianity on the basis of the second question only and they want to know what to do, so they become great activists and rush around doing many good things and this is not necessarily true Christianity.

If Satan can make you busy he can make you sin. On the other hand others ask "who are you, Lord?" and they are the speculative ones, the theologians. They love doctrine but they are not very interested in practical matters. They do not want to know what to do, they want to know what to think and this is not necessarily a form of true Christianity either. We need both questions that Paul asked.

Christianity begins with the question "who are you, Lord?" and that is because the deity of Jesus Christ is the foundation for everything that follows. Without that foundation we rush around doing things that appeal to us, things that seem good to us but are not necessarily God's plan for us.

Having established that base we also need to ask the second question, "what shall I

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do?" This is because God has appointed certain good works to be done by every Christian.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Paul got it right from the beginning. He began with the question "who are you, Lord?" but then submitted himself to this One who was the Lord and asked quite properly, "what will you have me do?"

Now the verses in Acts 9 about Paul's early ministry describe events that appeared to happen very quickly. Luke uses phrases like, "some days" in verse 19 and "after many days were past" in verse 23. This gives the impression that it was only a week or two, but we learn more when we read what Paul says in Galatians that it was actually a three year period.

Sometime during this period Paul went into Arabia and then return to Damascus. Then after he had returned to Damascus, three years now having passed either in Damascus or Arabia, he went to Jerusalem. These time details teach that even the apostle Paul needed significant time for preparation.

Three years Paul needed to be prepared for what God was having him do. However, this need for preparation does not mean that Paul was not ready to speak for Christ. We are told in this section that as soon as he was converted he had received his sight again.

Acts 9:20 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

Sometimes when people are talking about their conversion they say things like "well I'm converted but I want to be inconspicuous about it, I want to be a silent Christian." Is that really possible, to be a silent Christian? There are people who are naturally shy and afraid to speak up, other people no doubt have a difficult time speaking for Christ because of various circumstances.

But although it is often hard, at some point early in the life of a person who has come to believe God's truth there must be a verbalized expression of that faith. If there is not, it is doubtful that the new life of Jesus Christ is really there.

This is what happened to Paul. Paul was a very bright man and had a great deal of biblical understanding. True he was still young in the faith and needed time to learn and that is one reason why he went to Arabia and spent three years there. In a sense that was his ministerial training.

Nevertheless although he did have a great deal to learn and although the chief work of his life was still many years ahead, he verbalized his faith and began his first preaching by declaring rightly that Jesus is the Son of God there in Acts 9:20 and that Jesus is the Christ in verse 22. Thus from early in his conversion, Paul became a preacher of righteousness.

What was his essential message? If you had said to Paul at this stage, "we want you to write down a doctrinal statement of what you understand about the Christian faith," this is what I expect Paul would have included: "First, Jesus is the Son of God. Second, Jesus is the Christ." Apparently Paul understood a great deal since it says in Acts 9:21 "all who heard were astonished" And in verse 22,

Acts 9:22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

They would not have been astonished or baffled just by his saying "Jesus is the Son of God," or "Jesus is the Christ." They were astonished because he could explain what he meant and why he believed it. Later on we find the Grecian Jews were impressed with him because he argued theology with them undoubtedly on the basis of the Old Testament.

The true statement that Jesus is the Son of God has been redefined by progressive theological scholars in our day and beyond for hundreds of years, as we are hearing from John Ritenbaugh in his commentaries. They diligently worked to give Christianity a humanist acceptance.

The so-called mainstream Christianity has redefined the term "Son of God" to mean merely that everyone is made in God's image, meaning that we are all sons of God and daughters of God. With this definition there have been progressive theologians who are quite willing to admit that Jesus is the Son of God. They say, "of course He's the son of God, everybody is a son or daughter of God." But that is not what this term meant out of the mouth of Jesus Christ, nor is that what it meant to Paul.

In mainstream Christianity today we are seeing a movement where they are trying to un-

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deify Jesus Christ into being just a man, a prophet, and in doing so introducing their humanist viewpoints and propaganda.

The proof is that Paul was persecuted for his declaration that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Why would he be persecuted for this if all he meant by the words Son of God is that Jesus was just another human being?

Remember in his trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin and all the leaders that was part of the argument whether he was just a son of God, which they all were, or whether he was *the* Son of God. Paul was emphasizing and convincing them that he was the Son of God. This is very important to remember especially with the deceptions that are going on a mainstream Christianity today.

Knowledge of spiritual things is based upon the identity of Jesus Christ as God. Why? Because if Jesus is the Son of God then Jesus is God. Everything Jesus tells us in His written inspired Word can be trusted beyond a shadow of a doubt. If He tells us God is a certain kind of God we can believe it because He is God Himself and speaks truthfully.

If He tells us that the Bible can be trusted, that it comes from God, that heaven and earth will pass away but the Word of God will never pass away, then we can trust the Bible. It is that important! In a sense nearly everything we know about spiritual things is based on the confession "Jesus is the Son of God."

Our salvation is also based upon the value of Jesus' death because it is linked to Him being God. If He was but a man, it could have only been for Himself, it could not have been of infinite worth. If He was just a man, His death would be no different from the death of any other human being. But Jesus is not merely a man.

He had to take on human flesh while at the same time being God, as well as man. He died as God and thus accomplished what God alone could accomplish. How important is it that we believe that Jesus really is the Son of God?

I John 4:13-15 By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

It is essential that we know and believe this because without this conviction God does not abide in us. It is that important.

Paul also preached that Jesus is the Christ in Acts 9:22. As you know the word Christ is the same word as the Messiah. Christ is the Greek word and Messiah is the Hebrew word—both mean anointed. When they refer to a specific individual they mean the anointed One, and that is the one promised in the Old Testament as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises.

Therefore when Paul began to prove, from the Scriptures, that Jesus is the Christ he must have gone back to these Old Testament promises to show that Jesus was the one God had promised. He was the one who had now redeemed His people.

At one time Paul's idea of the Messiah would have been the same as that of the majority of the Jewish people of his day. They thought that the Messiah was going to be a political figure who would rally the nation and drive out the Romans. They thought he would reestablish an earthly throne of David.

Jesus had not done this of course, so in speculating, Paul must have gone back to the Old Testament and asked himself, "if the Messiah was not one whose primary function was to drive out the Romans, what was He to do?" Paul probably reflected on the word anointed and asked, "who, in the Old Testament, was anointed for a specific function?" The answer was prophets, priests, and kings.

The people had been thinking in terms of the political king but Paul must have realized that Jesus came to fulfill a prophetic and priestly function too. Jesus must be a prophet, the last and greatest of the prophets.

We do not know for sure whether Paul wrote the epistle to the Hebrews but it is very likely that he did because he had the Old Testament education, the depth of understanding, and the wisdom from above that it would take to write it. Consider what the apostle Peter said about Paul's writing in II Peter 3.

II Peter 3:15-16 and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his [Paul's] epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

Therefore in writing the letter to the Hebrews Paul would have understood Christ's function as a profit.

Hebrews 1:1-2 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son [equating him to the prophets], whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.

As he reflected on the Old Testament Paul would have been able to say that since Jesus is the Christ, He is a final word from God to us, He is the one from whom we are to learn what God is like. Then Paul must have reflected on the fact that the priests were anointed as well and he must have concluded that if Jesus is the anointed one then He must also be God's great priest, and He must be the one who was to offer himself as the only true adequate sacrifice for human sin. He offered Himself once as the perfect sacrifice forever.

The next conclusion to Paul would have been that Jesus was also a King. David was the greatest of kings, but he grew old and died and his throne was taken over by another. Jesus rose from the dead to live and reign forever. When Paul got around to thinking about that he must have reflected on his encounter with Jesus on the road and how Jesus said to him, "now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do."

Christ talked to him with power and authority. It meant that Paul was no longer his own master, but rather the rightful servant of the true King of kings and Lord of lords. This King, Paul's Master, was sending him to the Gentiles and to the rest of the Israelites. The apostle John had not had his vision of the revelation of Jesus Christ during the time Paul was alive. Nevertheless Paul knew the Messiah would be the sovereign King because of his knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures.

Psalms 47:2-3 For the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth. He will subdue the peoples under us, and the nations under our feet.

Psalms 47:6-8 Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with understanding. God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne.

Zechariah 14:16 And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.

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Malachi 1:14 “But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and takes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished—for I am a great King,” says the Lord of hosts, “and My name is to be feared among the nations.”

Paul would have closely read and studied all these kingly Old Testament scriptures and more. In Acts 22:3 Luke tells us that he was diligent in his learning the Old Testament.

Now the result of Christ's kingship is found in Revelation 19:16 and Revelation 17:14. There He is the King of kings and Lord of lords that is occupying the same place that YHWH occupies in the Old Testament passages that speak about His kingship. The Lord God Himself is the King of the ages.

The Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, judge, and king all coalesce in the New Testament in Jesus Christ who is the exalted king over all and to whom every need will bow.

Philippians 2:8-11 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As we reach Acts 9:23, Paul is only at the gateway of his adventures for Christ. But even here he is escaping with his life by the skin of his teeth. Here, we also find the beginning of something else Jesus spoke of, Paul sufferings for Jesus' sake.

He had his first taste of this from the Jews of Damascus. It is a dramatic story and when Paul had returned from his time and Arabia, the Jews conspired to kill him.

Acts 9:23-24 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him.

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This incident is a witness to Paul's courage and also to the effectiveness of Paul's preaching. He was so unanswerable that the Jews, helpless in debate, resorted to violence. You can picture this by looking today at what the liberals, the leftists, and the progressives want to do to anyone who disagrees with them or who wants the truth to come out. They are mentally violent and will kill people who differ with them. It is an insane mindset.

That was the beginning of many escapes for Paul and sometimes he did not escape. Sometimes they caught him, imprisoned him, and beat him. He did indeed have to suffer many things for Jesus' sake.

Acts 9:16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." [speaking to Saul, at the time.]

The apostle Paul describes, not only what he went through, but also what many other saints have had to endure.

Hebrews 11:36-39 Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these [speaking of the saints], having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise. [We can say 'yet,' but they will upon the resurrection.]

Acts 9 also gives another glimpse into another kind of suffering, not the kind of outright suffering that Paul frequently suffered from overt enemies of Christ, from those who would have killed him if they could. But rather suffering that came from the suspicions of the early Christians.

Paul suffered mentally because of the suspicions of the early Christians. No doubt this hurt Paul more than anything, even the physical abuse. He came to Jerusalem where he had started out some years before and as it says in Acts 9.

Acts 9:26 And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.

We can hardly blame them, though maybe we should. God is the God whose ways are not our ways. You are familiar with the scripture in Isaiah 55 where it says:

Isaiah 55:7-9 Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."

He saves the most unlikely people. If he did not then why would we be Christians? We find it hard to think like this, especially when some great enemy is involved. Saul had been an enemy and a fierce one who even had the power of life and death, if God allowed him.

So the Christians found themselves saying, "Well it is true that God saved us and no doubt we were all difficult cases, but how could He possibly save a person like Saul? Saul was an outright enemy. God might kill somebody like Saul, strike him down, and it would serve him right, but not save him! It must be a trick."

Now one of the most delightful things about the Christian life is getting to know the kind of people God calls and saves because they are generally not the kind you would expect. It is impossible to figure out what God is going to do because God does not do what we might expect. That was what God was doing with Saul the great persecutor. But the Christians in Jerusalem did not understand it and were afraid of him. From a human standpoint we can understand that.

There was one person who was not of that belief. His name was Barnabas, the son of encouragement. Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus who sold his property and gave the proceeds to the early church.

Later, in Acts 13-14, it says he traveled with Paul on his first missionary journey. In Acts 9 we see him seeking out Paul when everybody else was afraid of him, listening to him, recognizing that his testimony was genuine, and then bringing him to the apostles.

Barnabas was a man who insisted in believing the best of others. When others suspected Paul of being a spy, Barnabas insisted on believing that he was genuine. I am not saying we should not use wisdom in whether we trust somebody or not, but we

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cannot pass judgment on someone until we see the fruit, in one way or another. Even then we cannot pass condemnation, rather an evaluation type of judgment.

The world is largely divided into those who think the best of others and those who think the worst. It is one of the curious facts of life that ordinarily we see our own reflection in others and make them what we believe them to be in their own minds.

If we insist on regarding a person with suspicion, we will end by making him do suspicious things in our own mind. And if we insist on believing in a person we will end up compelling him to justify that belief. As Paul said, "love thinks no evil."

No one believed in people as much as Jesus did and it should be enough for us as His disciples that we imitate our Lord and Master.

Barnabas was a man who never held anyone's past against them, as far as we know. It is often the case that because a person once made a mistake he is forever condemned. It is the greatest characteristic of the heart of God that He has not held our past sins against us and we should never condemn a person because he once failed.

Barnabas brought Paul to the apostles and Paul spent the next few days in Jerusalem with others who were of the Way. Not very long later Paul tells about it in Galatians, stressing how little contact he had with the Christian leaders.

Galatians 1:18-21 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

No doubt Paul cherished this time even though it was short. Later in his ministry when he was on his own in hostile areas of the world, he must have thought of those days and rejoiced that God had made him one in spirit with the other apostles who are back in Jerusalem.

What do you suppose he and Peter talked about during those momentous 15 days? Undoubtedly they talked about Jesus Christ and what He had accomplished and preached during His time on earth, about His teachings and miracles, and above all about His death and resurrection. Peter would have instructed Paul in these things and eventually his enemies got after him in Jerusalem too.

He had tried to debate with the Hellenists, taking up the responsibility left by Stephen. It is a possibility that Paul was probably trying to make up for his role in Stephen's death. But the religious leaders hated Paul even more than they had hated Steven and tried to kill him. And when the Christians learned of this they took Paul to Caesarea and sent him to Tarsus.

There is a strange irony in this situation. The story of Saul's conversion in Acts 9 begins with him leaving Jerusalem with an official mandate from the high priest to arrest fugitive Christians and the story ends with him leaving Jerusalem as a fugitive Christian himself.

Counterfeit Christianity is always safe but true Christianity is always in danger. To suffer persecution is to be paid the greatest compliments because it is certain proof that men think that we, the saints of God, really matter. Why would they persecute us if they did not think we mattered? Because of the fear that we will have an impact, and deep down they really recognize some of the truth that we speak. Satan and his minions always fear the truth.

Now since Paul was now back in Gentile territory one would think that he began his missionary activity at once, but as a matter of fact he did not. About ten years had passed before Paul finally emerged again at Antioch and was chosen by God. At that point Barnabas and Paul became the first official missionaries of the Christian church and Paul in particular, became a model pioneer missionary as far as the records that we have.

Now Paul was not at all prominent up until then, in fact Paul says in Galatians that he was personally unknown to the churches of Judea during those years.

Galatians 1:22-24 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God in me.

Now they had some memory of him. They must have remembered that years ago there was a man who was very active in persecuting them. Paul, the unknown or the hardly known, was the way he was for those ten years. I am sure he was preaching somewhat but it was on a more local level.

Later he was the most influential man in the New Testament period, if not of all Western history. Yet during these unknown years God was working in his life teaching him and

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training him for future service.

Paul was searching out the Scriptures to learn about the faith more thoroughly and the bottom line is that God's ways are not our ways and His timing is not our timing, so we need to learn to wait patiently for Him to act, preparing ourselves as Paul did for the responsibilities as kings and priests in His Kingdom.

We pray for people and nothing seems to happen, but that does not mean that nothing is happening. It only means that we cannot see it. God is working. In fact one of the joys of getting older in the Christian life is that you begin to see some of the things God is doing that you had missed earlier in life.

Problems we pray about earlier are being resolved. Some of the people whom we might have given up on early in life we now see some change. So whatever you do, do not give up. Do not give up praying for other people and do not give up on yourself. We have God's own promise and assurance in Psalm 55 which says:

Psalm 55: 22 Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you; he shall never permit the righteous to be moved.