

Life After the Damascus Road

Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road also represented his calling to serve as a missionary to the nations. The Lord made it clear when Paul was converted that he was "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Paul's role as a missionary is captured by the words Jesus spoke to him on the Damascus Road according to Acts 26:18, "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." Paul was God's chosen instrument to bring God's saving message to the ends of the earth.

It is crucial to see that Paul's role as a missionary to the nations fulfills OT prophecy. "In the fullness of time" God sent forth his Son, Jesus Christ (Gal 4:4). Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection fulfilled the salvation predicted in the OT. It was never God's intention, however, that the saving message would be restricted to Israel. When God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he emphasized that all nations would be blessed through them (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 26:4; 28:14). This promised universal blessing did not become a reality during OT times. Indeed, the Lord did not intend for the nations to be saved on a large scale until the coming of Jesus Christ, for the glory of Jesus Christ is maximized when the peoples of the world are saved by calling on his name and knowing the great salvation he accomplished.

Paul, then, enjoyed the great privilege, as one who lived on the other side of the cross, of bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to both Jews and Gentiles. In the book of Acts three different missionary journeys are recorded: 1) Paul's first trip in A.D. 47-48 (along with Barnabas) to the island of Cyprus and to cities in modern day Turkey (Acts 13-14). 2) The second trip (A.D. 49-52) included re-visiting churches established on the first missionary journey in modern day Turkey, and then Paul and his companions crossed the Aegean Sea and planted churches in Macedonia and Greece (Acts 15:36-18:22). 3) The third journey (Acts 18:23-21:36, A.D. 52-55) included visiting churches already established, and includes Paul's extended stay in Ephesus. When Paul returned to Jerusalem, a riot started in the city, and he was imprisoned for a number of years in both Caesarea (A.D. 57-59) and Rome (A.D. 60-62). Even during his imprisonment, Paul continued to proclaim the gospel before kings and rulers and all who were in contact with him. There is good reason to believe the tradition that Paul was released from prison after his first Roman imprisonment, and that he continued to preach the gospel in various places, and probably traveled to Spain to preach the gospel there. We do not know the details, but Paul was likely arrested again, and beheaded in Rome around A.D. 65.

We should not think that Paul was the only apostle who preached the gospel outside of the land of Israel, or that he was the only one who brought the good news to the Gentiles. We need to recall that the Acts of the Apostles is not a comprehensive story of the missionary activity of the apostles. Indeed, the only apostles that receive any significant attention in Acts are Peter and Paul. It does not follow from this that the rest of the apostles were failures and did not engage in ministry. Indeed, there is significant evidence from history that many of the apostles proclaimed the gospel outside Israel. ,

Luke never intended to write an exhaustive account of the missionary labors of the early church.

The focus on Paul's mission to the Gentiles in the NT, however, is very significant, for in the fullness of time the Lord raised up Paul as the theologian of the new missionary endeavor. Paul was theologically trained as a Pharisee, and hence had a profound knowledge of the OT scriptures. He grasped that the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ fulfilled the promise given to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through Abraham's seed. Paul understood that Jesus was the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16). By his resurrection he was enthroned as the Messianic King, so that he was clearly the heir to David's throne and the promised Messiah and the Son of God (Rom 1:3-4; 2 Tim 2:8).

The pouring out of the Spirit upon the Gentiles (cf. Gal 3:1-5, 14) represented the fulfillment of God's promise that in the last times he would pour out his Spirit. Many OT prophecies taught that when the days of fulfillment arrived that the Lord would bless his people with the Holy Spirit (e.g., Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 11:18-19; 36:26-27; Joel 2:28). The pouring out of the Spirit upon both Jews and Gentiles on the basis of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension signaled that the last days had arrived. When Paul proclaimed the gospel on his missionary journeys, he argued that the fulfillment of all of salvation history had arrived in Jesus Christ. The new covenant was now a reality in Jesus Christ (Jer 31:31-34). The law was no longer written on tablets only, but the Spirit was now implanted on human hearts (2 Corinthians 3). The forgiveness of sins promised by Jeremiah was now a reality by virtue of the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Paul keenly understood the significance of the fulfillment of the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. In the old era Jews and Gentiles were separated from one another. The Jews were God's covenant people, and the Gentiles were by and large outside the circle of God's saving promises (Eph 2:11-12). But with the coming of Jesus Christ the old era had come to an end. Now Jews and Gentiles were united as members of God's household by virtue of Christ's work on the cross (Eph 2:13-22). They were now members of the same body and heirs of the same promise (Eph 3:6). The salvation of the Gentiles in Christ was not plan B, but the fulfillment of what God intended when he pledged to save the whole world through Abraham.

Paul also realized at the Damascus Road that the message for his mission was justification by faith alone. Gentiles did not become members of the people of God by keeping the Mosaic law and abiding by the Sinai covenant. Indeed, no one could be righteous by the works of the law since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). He proclaimed to the Gentiles that the only way to be right with God is through faith in Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Lord. Moreover, Paul grasped that the Mosaic covenant was no longer in force with the coming of Jesus the Christ (Gal 3:15-4:7; 2 Cor 3:4-18; Rom 7:4-6). The Mosaic covenant was an interim covenant, intended to regulate the Jewish people until the coming of faith in Jesus Christ. Hence, when false teachers following on the heels of Paul's mission insisted that the recent Gentile converts observe the Mosaic law and practice circumcision, Paul denounced them for preaching a false gospel. They were turning the clock back in salvation in history and insisting that Gentiles behave as Jews to join the people of God. Further, they were perverting the gospel by teaching that people became right with God by works rather than faith.

We see, then, that Paul was not only an activist who brought the gospel to the nations. He was also a theologian who comprehended the significance of Christ's coming in light of the OT, and articulated the basis upon which Gentiles enter the church of Jesus Christ. God raised Paul up at a unique time in history to both spread the gospel, and to explain how the gospel fits with the OT.

One other dimension of Paul's life as missionary should be mentioned. One of the striking features of Paul's ministry is the suffering he endured as a missionary. Paul's sufferings, of course, were not atoning like the sufferings of Jesus Christ. But the sufferings Paul endured were the means by which the gospel was extended to the nations. Even though Paul's sufferings were not atoning as Christ's were, they were a *corollary* to Christ's sufferings. They testified to the preciousness and beauty of the gospel, since Paul was willing to give his life and even break his body to bring the gospel to the nations. As Paul teaches in Col 1:24-29 God ordained that Paul's sufferings would be the means by which those who had not heard the message would be fulfilled. For Paul believed that preaching the gospel to all peoples was absolutely crucial. No human being can be saved through the revelation that comes through nature, for all people reject this witness and are therefore left without excuse (Rom 1:18-32). The only pathway to salvation is through hearing and believing the good news about Jesus Christ (Rom 10:13-17). People must call upon the name of the Lord to be saved. Hence, Paul was willing to suffer remarkably to bring the message of life to the nations.

Paul was uniquely called of God in the fullness of time. He understood the significance of the gospel in the light of the OT. But Paul was no ivory tower theologian. He was a risk-taking missionary, who suffered to bring the good news revealed to him on the Damascus Road to the ends of the earth.