

PAUL'S THREE MINISTRIES

by Michael Penny

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THE OPEN BIBLE TRUST
36 Hardwick Road
Reading, RG3 4LN, U.K.

One good reason why Christianity was triumphant was that it found in Saul of Tarsus, later St. Paul, a missionary of genius. What he preached had little to do with the historic Jesus, a preacher of a very different kind. His concern, so fierce and deep that he gave himself no rest, was with the resurrected Christ, the Saviour-God, the Redeemer, who was revealed in that vision on the road to Damascus. A guilty man crying to other guilty men, in a world doomed to be stricken with sin and death, he preached salvation through Christ. He must have blazed through that pagan twilight like a rocket.

Though himself a Jew, Paul took this new and startling religion, as far removed from perfunctory offerings to Fortune as a cry of "Fire!" is from a bid at bridge, out of Judaism into the world of the Gentiles.

J.B. Priestly, *Man and Time* page 156.

All Scripture quotations in this booklet have been taken from the New International Version.

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PAUL'S THREE MINISTRIES

1. INTRODUCTION

Acts chapter seven records Stephen's long speech before the Jewish Sanhedrin and when he had concluded they were furious. Undeterred he carried on and said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Those who had witnessed against Stephen laid their clothes at the feet of a *young man* named Saul who approved of this execution, (Acts 7:56; 8:1).

Almost insignificantly a new character is introduced onto the pages of Scripture. Who is this Saul? We are not told but as we continue reading we find that from that day onwards, great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and all, except the apostles, were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Who was behind such oppression? It was Saul, amongst others, who began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison, (Acts 8:1-3).

As most of the Christians fled from Jerusalem Saul soon found he had few to persecute but he was intent on this action. Breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples he went to the high priest and asked for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any Christians there, whether men or women, he might take them prisoner to Jerusalem, (Acts 9:1-2). No doubt the high priest eagerly agreed and Paul set off for Damascus but:—

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple called Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest

all who call on your name." But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord — Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here — has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. (Acts 9:3–19)

This Saul was now a changed man and, as often happened to people in the Scriptures, he had his name changed, to Paul, (Acts 13:9). But who was he? Where did he come from? We can find out more about him from his own words. Before the crowd at Jerusalem he said:

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the council can testify. (Acts 22:3–5)

When writing to the Philippians, Paul described himself as having been:

Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Philippians 3:5–6)

Thus Saul, who became Paul, was a Pharisee, so keen to preserve all he believed that he persecuted the Christian church. He hounded its followers out of Jerusalem and followed them to Damascus but he never got there as Saul, the Pharisaic Jew. He arrived there as Paul, the blinded Christian. What was the Lord doing in using a man like Paul, who had consented to the stoning of Stephen and who had imprisoned Christian men and women?

That this was an important event in the plan of God can be seen from the fact that Saul's conversion is recorded no fewer than three times in the Scriptures. With the exception of the ministry and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, few other events are recorded twice, let alone three times. But with Saul's conversion to Paul, the Holy Spirit saw fit to have it written down in Acts 9, 22 and 26. (See page 6.)

Not only did Paul meet his Saviour on the Damascus Road but he was also commissioned. The Lord told Ananias that "this man is my

chosen instrument to carry my name **before the Gentiles** and their kings and **before the people of Israel,**" (Acts 9:15). Thus right from the start there appears to be a duality to Paul's ministry. He was to carry the Lord's name to two very different groups of people; the Gentiles and the people of Israel. But what was he to say to them? Would his message be the same for each? Such a two-fold ministry would not be easy as one group had been brought up on the Law of Moses with its signs and symbols, its types and shadows, its commandments and regulation. The other had its roots in paganism with influences from the Greeks and their mystery cults.

In the account of his conversion in Acts 22, Paul was told by Ananias that he was to be the Lord's witness "to *all* men of what you have seen and heard," (verse 15). But what had he seen and heard up to this point? We may now know exactly, but it is clear from Scripture that Paul was to learn much more after that time. In the third account of the Damascus Road experience we read that the Lord had said to Paul:

I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of **what you have seen** of me and **what I will show you.** (Acts 26:16)

What *had* Paul seen? What was he *to be shown*? The only way we can answer these questions is to go back and see what Paul said and did in his life.

ACTS 9:3-19

As Paul neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."...

Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."

ACTS 22:6-21

About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?" "Who are you Lord?" I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting," he replied...

"What shall I do Lord?" I asked. "Get up," the Lord said, "and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do."

My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light blinded me.

A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, "Brother Saul, receive your sight!" And at that very moment I was able to see again.

Then he said: "The god of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous one and to hear words from his mouth. *You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.* And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name."...

The Lord said to me, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

ACTS 26:12-22

On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

Then I asked, "Who are you Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," the Lord replied. "Now get up on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. *First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and Judea, and to the Gentiles also,* I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

2. WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN

After being blinded on the Damascus Road, Paul was led into the city and for three days he neither ate nor drank. Then Ananias went to him and healed him and baptised him. Paul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

At once he began to preach in the synagogues that *Jesus is the Son of God*. All those who heard him were astonished.... Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that *Jesus is the Christ (Messiah)*. (Acts 9:20–22)

This was the first thing Paul did. He preached that the One who had appeared to him on the Damascus Road was the Son of God. He proclaimed that this crucified, resurrected and ascended Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah (Christ). This was what Paul *had seen* and he witnessed to it straightaway. As such his message was in complete harmony with that of the twelve apostles, including John, who wrote his gospel for this very reason. He said these signs “are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name,” (John 20:31).

Paul so baffled the Jews at Damascus that they conspired to kill him, but he escaped. Eventually Paul arrived in Jerusalem where he stayed with the Christians who had returned to the city and he moved freely about, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Greek-speaking Jews about Jesus, but one can only deduce that they were baffled and could not answer him for they tried to kill him also. Paul was taken to Caesarea and then sent to his home town of Tarsus, (Acts 9:23,28–30). We hear no more about this man for a while but eventually Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Paul and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. There, for a whole year, these two met with the church and taught a great number of people. Eventually they were despatched to Jerusalem bearing gifts for the Christians living in Judea, (Acts 11:25–26,30).

Evidently they returned from Jerusalem for in Acts 13:1 they were both back in Antioch where the Holy Spirit gave out some special instructions:

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. (Acts 13:2–5)

What they proclaimed in these synagogues can be seen from the first major speech of Paul, recorded in Acts 13:16–41. This address is based squarely on the Old Testament, demonstrating that Jesus of Nazareth is the One spoken about in the Scriptures and the One Who fulfilled them. The central point is again that this *Jesus is the Son of God*, (Acts 13:33). The recurrent theme that runs through Paul's ministry in Acts is that Jesus is the resurrected One, the Son of God, the Christ (Messiah). For example:—

- (1) At Damascus “Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 9:22)
- (2) At Pisidian Antioch Paul preached, “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’ ” (Acts 13:32,33)
- (3) At Thessalonica “he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said.” (Acts 17:2,3)
- (4) At Corinth “Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” (Acts 18:5)
- (5) Paul taught Priscilla and Aquilla who taught Apollos and “he (Apollos) vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.” (Acts 18:28)
- (6) At Jerusalem Paul recounted his Damascus Road experience stating that the voice from heaven was Jesus of Nazareth. (Acts 22:8)
- (7) Before Agrippa Paul again stated that the voice was Jesus and that “the Christ would suffer.” (Acts 26:15,23)
- (8) At Rome Paul tried to convince the leaders of the Jews “about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” (Acts 28:27,23)

There can be little doubt that what Paul had already seen was the great truth that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ (Messiah). He was the Son of God. There may well have been other things that Paul had seen but this great truth dominated his ministry from that time. Straightaway he preached this at Damascus and continued to do so throughout his ministry.

3. WHAT I WILL SHOW YOU

There are also four references to the Son of God in Galatians (1:16; 2:20; 4:4,6) and this epistle may help us in our quest to find out what Paul was taught later. However, in the first chapter Paul sets about

defending the gospel saying that “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you, let him be eternally condemned,” (Galatians 1:8). Paul’s character had not changed. He was still as zealous as ever but now it was not for Pharisaic legalism but for the gospel of grace. The former originated with men, but the latter?

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11,12)

Paul follows this defence with a brief account of his life and focuses on the early years following his conversion.

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult with any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. (Galatians 1:15–18)

Here Paul spoke about a time in Arabia when, possibly, the Lord fulfilled “what I will show you” but that time did not exhaust the revelations for we read that fourteen years later “I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus also. I went *in response to a revelation* and set before them the Gospel that I preach among the Gentiles,” (Galatians 2:1,2). Thus this gospel was precious to Paul for he had received it directly from the Lord Jesus Christ, by revelation. In case there is any doubt about the contents of this gospel it is, perhaps, wise to quote Paul himself.

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:1–4).

From Paul’s first major speech at Pisidian Antioch we can see that this gospel had an important place in what he said.

But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:36–39)

This gospel of righteousness/justification through faith/belief in Christ is another major part of Paul's preaching. Certainly the message that the righteous shall live by faith could be called Paul's hallmark, (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:28).

4. PAUL'S FIRST AND SECOND MINISTRIES

When we read through the Acts of the Apostles we see that Paul was commissioned by the Holy Spirit in Acts 13:2–4. This resulted in him proclaiming the word of God in the Jewish synagogue at Salamis. After this he went to Pisidian Antioch and, on the sabbath day, entered the synagogue of the Jews and sat down, but they invited Paul to speak and he stood up and addressed the congregation, (Acts 13:5,14,16). This was to be the pattern of Paul's activities everywhere he went.

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went, as usual, to the Jewish synagogue, (Acts 14:1). When they came to Thessalonica there was a Jewish synagogue and Paul, as his custom was, went in and on three sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, (Acts 17:1–3). At Berea, they went to the Jewish synagogue, (Acts 17:10). At Athens Paul reasoned in the synagogues with the Jews, (Acts 17:16,17). At Corinth, every sabbath day he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade the Jews, (Acts 18:4). At Ephesus Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God, (Acts 19:8). Three days after arriving in Rome, Paul called together the leaders of the Jews, (Acts 28:17).

There can be no doubt about it that this man had a ministry to the people of Israel, in line with what the Lord had said to Ananias: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and *before the people of Israel*," (Acts 9:15). Everywhere he went he addressed the people of Israel first. Even in his epistle to the Romans he stated clearly that this people had the first place and certain advantages.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)

There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 2:9,10)

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. (Romans 3:1-2)

Here, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul was stating that Israel had the first place and this is reflected in his ministry throughout the book of Acts. However, some people object to this view because of the following verses where Paul is called:

The apostle to the Gentiles. (Romans 11:13)

A minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. (Romans 15:16)

The prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles. (Ephesians 3:1)

Some read the above verses to mean that Paul's ministry was exclusively to and for Gentiles but such a reading cannot be correct. A simple reading of Acts shows that everywhere Paul went he sought out the synagogue of the Jews and spoke to them first about the Lord Jesus Christ. Also the Lord's words in Acts 9:15, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and *before the people of Israel*," clearly indicate that Paul had been given a ministry to Israel. Why, then, is his name so linked with the Gentiles? An answer may lie in the word *ethnos*, which is translated Gentiles but which means, simply, nations. Depending on the context *ethnos* may mean all nations including Israel or all nations excluding Israel. Only the context can decide which is best. Certainly Paul had a message to both Israel and the other nations, of that there can be no doubt.

Another passage which must be considered in the light of the present discussion is Galatians 2:6-9.

As for those who seemed important — whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance — those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (*ethnos*), just as Peter had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles (*ethnos*). James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles (*ethnos*), and they to the Jews.

