

about this book . . .

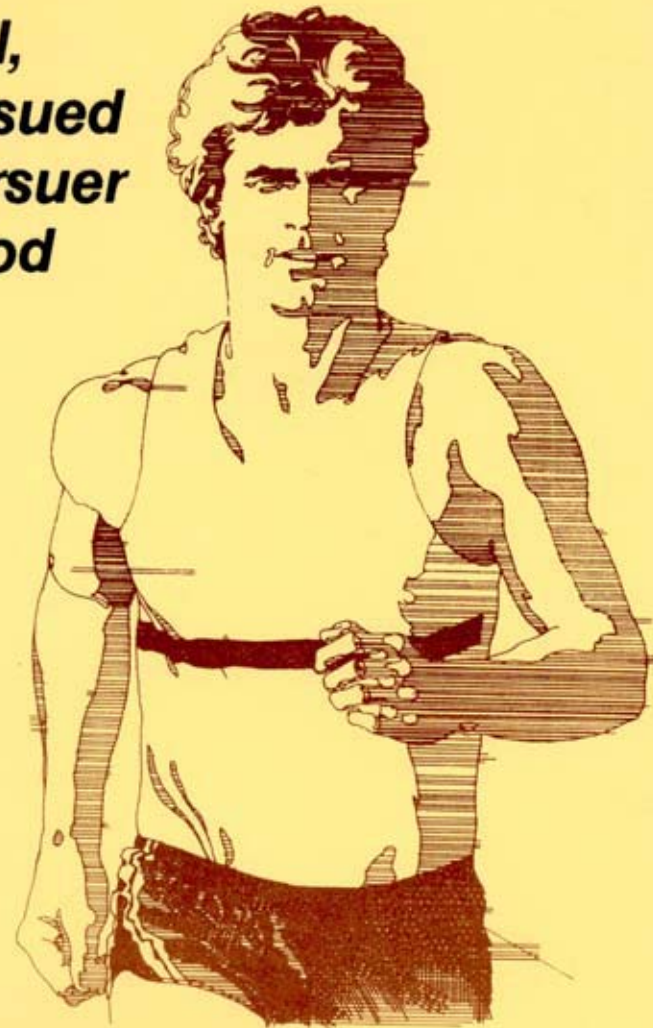
- Was Paul a mere person of his time?
- Was he the founder of a Gospel which was not Christ's but his own?
- What turned a strict Pharisee and Jew into a man with universal vision?
- Where did this man get his amazing Gospel?
- What constraint of motive kept him going, ceaselessly?
- How is it that he has influenced Christian thought and world history so deeply?

From over fifty years of studying Paul, the author is convinced that this man—more than any other but Christ has understood the nature of God, and His goals for human history and destiny.

Because his own life has been so deeply affected by the life and teaching of this apostle of Christ—'born out of due season'—**Geoffrey Bingham** has set down in a simple but packed essay, some of the thoughts that have been borne in on him over five decades.

These insights are not complex, and not only theological. They relate to the great issues which always face the human race, and which each person—in his own way—seeks to resolve. This, at least, makes this small volume quite valuable.

Paul, the pursued and pursuer of God



Paul,
the pursued
and pursuer of God

by Geoffrey Bingham

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FOREWORD

Paul has always intrigued me. He seemed to have such an instinct for the truth, and the reason—or reasons—for this is disclosed in this little book.

I was suddenly struck one day by the realisation that Paul never really proclaimed anything he, himself, had not experienced. Whatever theology he may have had prior to his experiences, he appears to speak primarily from experience and not from some theological rationalisation of the same.

He talked of Christ as Lord because that was the way he met him. He spoke of forgiveness because he had been forgiven, and of justification because he had been justified. The Cross meant everything to him because he had been there: I have been crucified with Christ'. He knew the gift of the Spirit because he had received the Gift, as indeed he had been filled by him.

And so on. Whilst it is true Paul had an amazing knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, yet he understood them in light of his encounter with Christ, as indeed he understood—and knew—Christ in the light of them.

Paul then is the key to reality. For him theology can never be only objective, anymore than it can be only subjective. God visited Paul. Christ lived in him and he in Christ.

Here then lies, the key to 'theology of the heart' that is not merely human in its thinking and subjective in its experience.

We ought to use this Pauline key unceasingly.

Geoffrey Bingham Coromandel East, 1986

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Paul, the pursued and pursuer of God

THERE are many kinds of writers no doubt, but it seems to me that they divide, ultimately, into two classes, namely those who write because it is a habit, a hobby, or an occupation, and those who write only because they cannot desist. Even then they often find the going tough. The first group include scribblers, compulsive composers, and people who look around for a subject, and generally, with it, the rewards that writing brings of money or admiration, and even criticism. Perhaps they just wish to be seen or heard, recognised or fussed about. I wish them well.

The second group write because they want to say something, and this because they think it ought to be said. It may be said in fun and for entertainment, or in cynicism because the writer is angry, critical or frustrated. It may be said' seriously because the writer is pious, political, gentle or generous: but it has to be said.

I like to think I am in the second group of writers, although sometimes I am found straying and guilty amongst the first! And I am writing this biographical essay because

there is one man who stands out in my affections, admiration and thinking, and it is the man called sometimes 'Saul of Tarsus', 'Saint Paul', and sometimes just plain 'Paul'. 'Apart from the man Jesus of Nazareth, God's Messiah and His Son, Paul the apostle is the greatest man who ever lived, and I will attempt to justify that claim.

Let me tell you of other great men whom I admire, and one or more of whom you may regard even more highly than Paul. These are Abraham, Moses, John the apostle, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Augustine, and Peter Forsyth. There are many others, of course, and I am sure that they, as well as these I have mentioned, were all men of humility, persons who knew themselves to be flesh and not God, and who learned to rely upon Him, and not themselves.

No less great—and no less humble—are many of the women of history, women such as Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, and Mary the mother of Jesus. Simple greatness is found in Mary of Bethany, in Monica the mother of Augustine, Susannah the mentor of 'her sons John and Charles Wesley—amongst others.

History then has its grand roll-call of great men and women, and it may well be that the greatest have not had mention by name. Why then should we single out this man 'Saul of Tarsus'? Ah, the answer to that is to see who this man was, and what he did. 'By their works you shall know them.' Even so, they are works which glorify their Father in heaven.

Paul had a proud pedigree—if that is what matters amongst men, He could trace back his ancestry to Benjamin the youngest son of Israel, and through him back to Abraham, the great—and greatest—father figure of all human history. He was a Pharisee to the core, and this sect of the Jews had a rich history of piety and of holy living. True Pharisees

were regarded as the most orthodox of the Hebrews, and Paul had been trained under one of the greatest of them, the strong but gentle Gamaliel. He lacked no knowledge of the Judaic Scriptures, and treated them with great reverence.

He once made the claim that he was away ahead of his contemporaries in the mystery of the truth, that all in Palestinian Jewry knew him to be zealous for God above many—if not all—others. He said, 'I worship 'the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets.' He had great reverence for the law, for the prophets, and for the way of true worship. He might have been called 'the impeccable Jew'. Indeed he said, 'As to righteousness under the law [I was] blameless.'

Others of an easier way of life might scorn this Saul of Tarsus and his early beginnings. They might say his theology was for nought when he could not immediately recognise the Messiah of God who appeared, incarnate. They might insist that his ruthless persecution of the church of Jesus showed his failure to grasp truth, and in some sense they would be right, but they must not forget that truth is a revelation that God alone can give to the human heart.

Paul was the first to confess that his sin was great, both of self-righteousness, and of cruel persecution of the truth. 'I am the greatest of sinners,' he averted, "but God forgave me because I did it in ignorance.' Part of his greatness was his humility in seeing his sin, but we must not think of him as a hopelessly ignorant man. Part of his life was the endeavour 'always to have a clear conscience towards God and man'. This was both prior and posterior to' his conversion. No, he seems always to have carried the hallmarks of greatness in his persistent pursuit of God'.

Yet it was God who pursued him! This is the key to Paul, the key which opens the door to our true understanding of him. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob encountered him on the dusty road which led from Jerusalem to Antioch

in Syria. Christ confronted this passionate Jewish zealot with his own self. The occasion was memorable, not only for this apostle-to-be, but for all human history, history which dates from the invasion of the Son of God into human affairs, and the commission he gave to this servant to all men.

And what an encounter! Knowledgeable men—and some of them wise ones—have sought to account for the conversion of Saul of Tarsus into the apostle Paul. Some have said he ‘was an epileptic, and had a brilliant brainstorm in the heat of midday, psychologically understandable, and even beneficial to the human race.

Others see Saul as a man suddenly caught in great remorse. The tides of guilt no longer lapped at his feet, but they rose to engulf him. In a terror at what he had done, he went through what moderns call ‘abreaction’, a great rejection of all that he had known, of all that had caused him to treat Christians so cruelly. Then and there he vomited up his guilt in a horror of remorse. His memory, loaded with the cries of the persecuted, forced him to repent, and reverse his way of thinking. ‘So,’ they say, ‘he was converted by a psychological action well known to us in these days of brainwashing. The new man, Paul, is a perfect example of conversion which can arise within a person.’

Paul thought otherwise. To him, his encounter with God was not merely an interior and subjective happening. It was so objective that he could see the great light with his own eyes, and hear the voice, ie. ‘the sound (phone) of Christ’. He heard words. He talked. He asked questions. He was answered. The event may have been a vision, but it was not merely visionary. It was a tangible vision, worked out in the reality of the day. Others ‘With him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one’. Paul later said, ‘Now those who were with me saw the light, but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.’ He means the sound of

speaking. Was there, but the words of utterance were withheld from them. All saw the light, heard a great sound, and all fell to the ground.

Nothing could be more objective than that, yet the encounter was for Saul alone. He had met with God in Christ. He later cried, ‘I want to apprehend that for which Christ apprehended me!’ He was never to get to the end of this great mystery, yet even so it was a mystery which was continually intelligible to him. God had grasped him, ie. had taken hold of him, and so had transformed him. He was able to say, ‘The love of Christ constrains me’, and he did not primarily mean, ‘My love for Christ grips and rules me’, but ‘Christ’s love for me grips and controls me’.

I think there is nothing more powerful in its effects upon a man than that he is grasped by another, and in this case, ‘The Other’. Man fights for his autonomy; struggles to remain independent. Yet in some strange and deeply mysterious way he is greatly overcome when one stronger than he comes upon him in insistent and irresistible love. He is made to be a slave forever; and only when he is made to be a slave after this manner does he truly know himself to be free. ‘I am the slave of Christ!’, this man Paul cried, more than once, and only he who has come into such a darling slavery can understand him.

He who would understand the man Paul must first understand God as Sovereign in His universe. Human pride denies such sovereignty to God. He must not be the one who controls suffering, sickness and shame, or man feels impotent. He must have a God after his own liking, a God who is kindly, who is baffled by the exigencies, happenings, and circumstances of the universe. The Sovereign God who ‘creates weal and woe’ is too stark, and too majestic. This stark and majestic One was the God Paul knew. He ascribed full sovereignty to Him.

‘He separated me from my mother’s womb!’, Paul once

cried, thus aligning himself with other great servants of God, especially that man of high sorrow and suffering, Jeremiah. 'He was pleased to reveal His Son in me', Paul added. This, then, was the act extraordinary! No wonder some translators have put it, 'He was pleased to reveal His Son *to* me', but the Greek has *en emoi*, 'in me'. Here, then, lies the 'secret of the man: God revealed His Son *in* this man. Some kind of revelational explosion took place within him, spreading outwards from the centre to every fibre and filament of his being. Now he knew Christ!

That is why he said, 'For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.' By 'a revelation of Jesus Christ', does he mean 'Christ gave me a revelation', or does he mean 'Christ was revealed to me: he was. my revelation of the Gospel'? Whilst I am sure it is the latter, I am also sure it includes the former. To know Christ is to know all: it is to know the Gospel, and it is to know the truth.

On the road to Damascus, Paul saw the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, and so an objective revelation of Christ was received, but then Christ revealed all of the Gospel in revealing himself. Doubtless the three days spent in the darkness of blindness in the house in Straight Street, 'Damascus, helped him to 'get things together'. Providentially he was made blind, so that he could contemplate the whole of the truth. There can be no doubt that his mind was hugely gripped by Christ, and that all his theology, his knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures with their law, and the actions of God and prophecy, came together to form a brilliant understanding of the Gospel.

There was nothing timid about this man who breathed threatenings and slaughter against the Christians. He had not been given the spirit of timidity but the spirit of love and

of power and of a sound mind. He saw the Gospel in its wholeness, its ramifications, and its most dynamic implications. The mystery that had so angered him as he charged Jewish Christians with heresy, had now broken through. In his blindness he could see! In his darkness there was only 'light!

This, then, was the moment for Ananias to obey the Lord who had appeared on the road to Damascus. The name of Saul of Tarsus was enough to daunt this quiet saint, but he was reassured when he was told, 'Saul is praying, and he has seen you come in and lay hands on him that he might receive his sight.' So he went with Christ's words ringing in his ears: 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.'

His words to Saul were, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Later Paul told his Jewish brethren who desired to kill him that Ananias had added, 'And now, why do you wait? Rise and be baptised, washing away your sins, calling on his name.'

Herein lay the reality of the truth which Saul of Tarsus came to understand. He received his sight. He called on the name of the Lord. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was baptised for the forgiveness of sins. All of this *happened* to him! Faith sprang out of the action of Christ, out of the great 'grace that descended upon' him. Repentance and faith were gifts immediately received, and instantly exercised. Out of the fullness of Christ, the great Hebrew Scriptures, his training in the truth, and this revelation of its fulfilment in Christ, the man Saul became the one who—most of all—understood the Gospel of Christ.

All too few of us have seen that Paul spoke of nothing but *that which had happened to him!* He spoke strongly and clearly of salvation because he had been saved. He spoke of

forgiveness because he had been forgiven. He talked of being filled with the Spirit because he had been filled with the Spirit. He proclaimed the Lordship of Christ because he had seen the Lord and come under his Lordship. He described the fact and effects of baptism because they had happened to him.

Doubtless he possessed a theology of all these things, but this theology was not primary. Christ, the Son of God, Saviour of the world and Redeemer of his people, was his primary understanding, and this because the revelation was not only to his mind, but to his heart and his spirit, and to his personal understanding. Doubtless, too, he drew upon the Scriptures he knew, the understanding he had had, further enlightening his mind which had once been filled with 'works-righteousness', but the revelation was a quick and sudden thing. The Spirit—at that point—led him into 'all the truth'. So many see Paul as making his tortuous way to truth through years of contemplating, experimenting—sometimes with failure and sometimes with success—until ultimately he had formed a body of truth which we now call 'Pauline'.

How wrong they are, these observers and conjectors: how wholly wrong! Paul did not puzzle his way through to the truth and fullness of the Gospel. He knew it all. Luke records his immediate action at the time of conversion: 'For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And in the synagogues *immediately* he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." ' Luke then adds, 'Saul *increased all the more* in strength and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ [Messiah]'

It is time for us, 'then, to lay to rest a myth or misunderstanding concerning Paul, namely that he spent three years in Arabia, working out all the implications and ramifications of the Gospel. Some picture him as going through 'a desert experience', in much the same way as Moses spent

forty years in 'the backside of the desert', and Elijah lived in the wilderness in the company of ravens. It is a nice thought, no doubt, that a man go through a pilgrimage, that he work through the facets of his faith thoroughly, but in Paul's case this does not accord with the facts. Some have even described Romans 7:13-25 as Paul's 'desert experience', ie. that in some sense he declined into a state of turmoil between mind and flesh. This also is not true, and in any case is a superficial reading and interpretation of that Scripture portion. The misunderstanding has come through a reading of Galatians 1:15-18:

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to 'reveal his Son in me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [Peter], and remained with him fifteen days

Some see Paul as preaching the Gospel immediately after his conversion, then going into Arabia, staying there for three years, returning briefly to Damascus and then. going on to Jerusalem. This is not what the text says. it says he went to Arabia, returned to Damascus, and then after three years (possibly all the time in Damascus, but certainly not in ' Arabia), he went to Jerusalem. The point is, he did not' spend three years in Arabia.

One of the points which appears to strengthen the argument for Paul being briefly in Damascus before going for three years to Arabia is the claim that the immediate reaction that Paul provoked in the Jews at Damascus, precipitated a hurried departure. However, in II Corinthians 11:30-33 and Acts 9:23-25 we read that 'after many days'—i.e. not immediately—'his' disciples' took him by night and lowered him down over the wall in a basket. Paul—it seems clear—

had been long enough in Damascus to make his own disciples! The question is, when did he return to Damascus after being in Arabia—which, by the way, was nearby to Damascus? We cannot say how quickly or how slowly that happened. What we do know is that he saw his departure—its fact and manner—as weakness on his part. This is clearly seen in I Corinthians 11:30-33. He may have seen that weakness as a good thing, or as something to be regretted: we do not know. His return to Damascus may have been quite soon, and if so, then typical ‘of other situations in which Paul was later involved.

Whilst we are seeing that Paul did not need some years to mull over the Gospel, or to go through mystical experiences of Christ—in contrast to his initial objective encounter—let us examine the dynamic years of ministry which Luke does not describe in Acts. Two passages tell us he had a wide range of experiences which Luke did not recount. The passages are II Corinthians 6:3-10 and 11:21-29. These things must have happened before Paul wrote his second letter to Corinth. He talks of having had five sets of 39 lashes by the Jews, and three times having been beaten with rods. Acts records no lashings, and only one incident of a rod-beating (16:22). Paul records three shipwreck events, and only one is recorded in Acts (chapter 27), but this event was *after* writing his letter to the Corinthian church!

The two passages we are examining speak of years of tempestuous sufferings, and these must have taken place between the time of his conversion and his first ‘missionary’ journey recorded in Acts 13 and 14. In Galatians Paul puts fourteen years between his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, and his second visit with Barnabas and Titus (1:18; 2:1). Paul, then, must have had many dynamic years of ministry which Luke—for his own reasons—left unrecounted. None of them seems to have been for quiet contemplation, seated thoughtfully on stones in a desert, or accomplishing some

mystical and theological ‘pilgrimage’ until all became clear to him. We repeat: it all came clear to Paul on the Damascus road and during the three days of his blindness.

All of this brings us to a fascinating understanding of Paul’s ministerial life. It is not merely an insight: it is the explanation of the oneness of his conversion and his call to be an apostle. It is in fact a pattern or paradigm for all who are converted. In the moment of conversion there is the call to ministry.

First let us look at the descriptions of Paul’s conversion. These—along with some commentary by Paul—are recorded in Acts 9:1-22; 22:6-21 and 26:9-23. The key to them is Galatians 1: 15-16, in which Paul says, ‘When [God] . . . was pleased to reveal his Son in me *that I might preach him among the Gentiles...*’ He is really saying, in effect, ‘God brought me to conversion with a view to my proclaiming the gospel to the nations.’

The main point then is that conversion is not simply with a view to conversion [*sic*], but with a view to proclamation of the Gospel. Now this is a powerful fact of the truth. Present-day practice seems to be that when a conversion happens, some raw and uninformed enthusiasm is shown by the new convert, after which he withdraws, presumably to learn, become mature, be trained in some appropriate academic institution, thus being groomed for ministry. This, of course, only if God has called him to such a vocation.

Roland Allen, in his priceless books *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Christian Church and Paul’s Missionary Methods or Ours?*, has shown the absurdity of the approach described in the paragraph above. He shows the incendiary nature of the Gospel. He describes the early apostles as making their way across nations, leaving in their wake not only fire they had started by proclaiming the Gospel, but also leaving behind converts who themselves started fires wherever they went. Allen describes this as the spontaneous

expansion of the Christian church. -

Paul could only understand his conversion in the light of his call to proclaim the Gospel. Also he could only understand his call to proclaim the Gospel in the light of his conversion. He well knew what Jesus had told his disciples: 'You will receive power, the Holy Spirit coming upon you, and you will be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.'

Here the key word is 'witnesses'. Not all are apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers, but all are witnesses. That is a subject on its own, and we wish to stick to our point, namely that Paul would never be able to understand the mentality of one who thought he could be converted and *not necessarily* proclaim the Gospel by lip and by life. This kind of thinking would be astonishing to him. He lived by the same rule as the other apostles: 'We cannot but tell the things we have seen and heard.' Had not Jesus said to him, 'I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I Will appear to you, delivering you from the people [the Jews] and from the Gentiles [nations] -to whom I send you to open their eyes, 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'?

The passages in Acts which we have nominated all show that to be converted is necessarily to become a proclaimer. How else could it be?

This, then, brings us to the message of the great apostle. As we have said, he spoke nothing but what had happened to him. He had received the Gospel by revelation, but certainly no esoteric knowledge, no occultic understanding, no gnostic mystery known only to the initiated. His message was simple; but of course profound. It was never simplistic,

for Paul did not cut corners. He claimed that his Gospel was 'the whole counsel [will] of God'. More. than that he could not claim, and less than that he could not proclaim.

What then was Paul's message? Most immediately it was 'the Gospel of Christ', which was so personal that he called it 'my Gospel'. Paul's critics have agreed with the latter statement. 'He has made a gospel all of his own,' they say, 'and it is not the Gospel of Christ. We find no such gospel in the Gospels.' They are partly right: exposition of the Gospel' such as we find in the Letter to the Roman church is absent from the four Gospels. Its roots, however, are there. These critics say, 'Paul thought in rabbinical terms. He came out of a certain Judaic background. He manufactured a gospel, a forensic one at that, quite unlike the good news spoken by Jesus.'

There is weakness in this kind of criticism. Peter Forsyth is quick to ask, 'What, anyway, is wrong with rabbinical thought?' He may well have a point. But of course Christ never formulated a 'Gospel' as such. He simply said, 'Repent and believe the Gospel', and by 'Gospel' he understood 'the Gospel of the Kingdom of God'. Paul understood it this way also (cf. Acts 20:21, 24, 25, 26), but he formulated it, showing how. it sprang from the law and the prophets. His task as an apostle was .to interpret the events of Christ in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of the events of Christ.

He saw no break in the continuity of God's events Which form history. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His Son was working history as its appointed Lord. To Paul, 'Jesus is Lord!' meant that the man Jesus had triumphed over all evil in (and by) his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension. Paul was not creating a Gospel from his own 'rabbinic' thinking. Because he had met the Lord of history, and because he had been appointed as a special apostle to

the nations, he had not only a sense of history, and a sense of God's salvation, but the sense that all history is 'salvation history', and that the goal of God is the triumph of the Kingdom of God, through the victory of Christ.

When we see that Paul's Gospel is not an element foreign to Judaism, and incongruous to Christ's proclaimed word, then we can understand that salvation, as such, is not a message for human individualism, but *the* message for all humanity. It is not a message which can be made relevant to man and his history, so that it will apply in any culture, in any time or season of human history, but it is the message which makes history. It polarises man in his sin, and brings grace to bear upon his events. God's encounter with Paul on the Damascus road is not a rare event. God is the God who acts in all history, and who acted—and acts—supremely in Christ. This is what makes God's Gospel universal, though never universalistic.

The greatness of Paul lies in his grasping the vision to which—he claimed—he was never disobedient. Jew of Jews, he had the widest understanding of the Gospel. He could say 'to the Jew first, and then to the Greek', but he saw that in Christ there was neither Jew nor Greek. He saw that 'the Gentiles [nations] are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel'. In this sense Judaism dissolves into the Christian corpus, as pagan Gentiles are caught 'up—by redemption—into the same body, ie. the New Humanity, ie. Harnack's 'third race'.

Seeing this wide perspective Paul has of bringing about 'the obedience of faith of the nations', we might miss the substantial and particular nature of the Gospel itself. We must not miss its particularity when seeing its implications and ramifications for nations and for all history. We will return to this panoramic view which Paul holds, but now we must 'address ourselves to the sturdy nature of the Gospel,

for it has the deepest personal action and application that man has ever known.

A good place to start understanding Paul's Gospel 'is undoubtedly his Letter to the Roman church. This letter speaks of God's righteousness in justifying sinful man, his righteousness given to redeemed man, His righteousness operative in the church of His Son, and then the wider question of His righteousness in history, ie. among the nations. Yet even more valuable as a starting point is Paul's first recorded sermon, contained as it is in the thirteenth chapter of the Acts. He announces:

Let it be known to you, therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. and by him every one that believes is freed [justified] from everything from which you could not be freed [justified] by the law of Moses.

Forgiveness of sins and justification are the root, heart and substance of the Gospel, for Paul. His own experience of these took place on the road to, and in the city, of Damascus. 'Arise, and be baptised, washing away your sins.'

No man in history has understood law more than Saul of Tarsus. It would require a volume to explain his approach to the law. He knew the reality of forgiveness and justification in 'the face of, and in the light of, law; and he, of all men, fights for it. Even the magnificent Peter once endangered that doctrine (Gal. 2:1 If.). Not, however, Paul: he saw it as the Gibraltar of the Gospel. He understood the dynamics of guilt, and the greater dynamics of grace. He knew how guilt destroys man, how it sets him in anger and hostility against God, and how it vitiates his given powers. He knew how grace surmounts the most terrible of human sin and sins, as easily as a beautiful charger will clear a desert bramble,

When then he preached his first *recorded* sermon—probably a decade and a half after his conversion—he went to the heart of the matter. Firstly he spoke to his fellow Jews as

'sons of the family of Abraham'. He then preached Christ as the fulfilment of the message of the prophets. He referred to the most significant events of Jesus' life as the death of the Cross and the Resurrection from the grave. On the basis of these events he proclaimed forgiveness of sins, and justification from the curse of the law. His powerful conclusion was:

Let it be known to you, therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed [justified] from everything from which you could not be freed [justified] by the law of Moses.

To understand the righteousness of God in justifying sinful men who believe in Christ, we need to read his Letters, especially those written to Rome, to Galatia, to Philippi, to Timothy and to Titus. In logical and theological precision he 'sets out his arguments as to the universal sinfulness of man, the universal guilt of all men before God's law, and the incredible grace of God which delivers men from the curse and judgement of the law without imperilling that law itself, or evoking deceit in the consciences of men. Paul—more than any man I know—was careful to treat God's law as holy. In no way did God's justifying righteousness—that righteousness which justifies the ungodly—abrogate or disestablish the law. Whilst Jewish law—as such—had come to an end as the way of life for God's covenant people, the law of God—as ever—obtained for all mankind, whether or not they would obey it..

Once we start probing into Paul's view of God, of man, of law, and of grace, we find the matter quite complex. This is not because his message of the Gospel of grace was not simple enough. It was, but man's sin makes all things complicated, and unravelling the tangled skeins of human thinking is never a simple process. Paul's premise, then, was as follows:

'God is holy and righteous, and His law demands total obedience under pain of the curse, the wrath and judgement of God. Man is bound under this wrath by being given up to the guilt of his sin. Such sin and guilt is universal. Man's sin compounds his guilt, and his guilt compounds his sin. The Gentile is caught in it, and so is the Jew: all have sinned. Man is unable—as indisposed—to extricate himself from his predicament. He is therefore under irrevocable doom. He may think to extricate himself from this doom by "works of the law", but by nature of the case this is impossible. "Works of the law" are demanded by God as the norm for godly living. They do not justify, let alone earn salvation. Indeed when one fails under the law one is under the curse.

'God is the God of grace, and not of law only. His 'righteousness is normally known through the law, but His righteousness which justifies the ungodly man who believes in His Son, is an unexpected righteousness. Any judge who accounted a convicted person as righteous would be going against true law and morality, but in Christ God has provided the propitiation for sins. Christ on the Cross does that propitiatory work which God has planned. This establishes the law in its holiness, and in its right to judge and condemn the sinner. Christ effectively becomes that sinner. He is sinner-for-all, and receives in himself the just judgement for all sin. In doing so, he destroys human guilt with all its dynamics, and establishes the basis for justification.

'Justification is God's non-imputation for sins to a person who believes in Christ. This is seen in Romans 3:24: "They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation [propitiation] by his blood, to be received by faith." In practice this means the believing person is not guilty before God, or His law, for "There is... no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus'

'This means that any person, whether Jew or Gentile, is

forgiven all his (or, her) sins, and is accepted by the law as guiltless.’

The implications of Paul’s teaching of forgiveness and justification are many, and are powerful. Whereas man had once ‘exchanged the truth of God for a lie’, he now exchanged the lie for the truth of God. Instead of being under judgement he is forever freed (justified) from it. This means he does not live under guilt, but under grace. Human existence and experience under guilt is one thing, and under grace entirely another matter. By nature of the case, his views of God, man and creation are radically changed, resulting in a life that is changed. This person is not entangled in guilt and rebellion-*ie.* human ‘flesh’—but he has the mindset of the Spirit, *ie.* the experience of life and peace.

Paul learned grace from Christ. This was seen in the mandate the risen Lord gave to him, and Paul had heard the form and matter of it from the Christians he had persecuted. He saw the true place of the law of God, and the advent in human affairs of the vast grace of God. All human sin—though most evil in itself—was but a trifle in the face of grace. The grace of God in Christ did not merely equal the power and dynamic of sin as though quantitatively parallel, but it dismissed sin as puerile and ineffective. ‘Where sin did abound, grace did *much more abound!*’ Hence Paul’s triumphant comparison in Romans 5: 17:

If, because of one man’s [Adam’s] trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

It is fairly clear that Paul saw this Gospel as able to transform the entire human race. He could understand the dynamics of grace as over and against the dynamics of guilt. All that comes out of guilt—such as sin, crime, striving for

political power, broken relationships, hatred, rebellion against God, and other forms of human perversity—would be defeated by the new power of grace when it was understood, accepted and practised. Paul of course did not think all the human race would accept it. His doctrine of God’s Foreknowledge, calling and election shows that he envisaged only a part of mankind—the elect—coming into eternal life and ultimate glorification.

When we say, ‘Paul knew the dynamics of grace’, we mean first of all that he came to experience this grace of justification for himself, whilst seeing it was all congruent with the law and the prophets. He had experienced Christ’s victory over his own proud heart. When he was sure of his own righteousness through works of the law. Yet whilst Paul was a personal witness to the grace of Christ, he knew that grace by its very nature was the only answer to man’s dilemma. He knew it was God’s planned way of redeeming man and setting him free from the guilt of sin before the law. He also knew that not only did it release man from guilt but liberated him into a life of holiness and service. Being free from sin and law and wrath, he was also free from Satan, the world powers, and the world system.

In saying all of these things, it may appear that Paul’s system was a difficult one to absorb and understand. Not at all! The heart of the matter lies in the Cross and the Resurrection. The Jews had looked upon the cross as a thing of shame, and the death of Jesus was a judgement upon him for his falsity and blasphemy. The apostles showed quickly that his resurrection was not only the proof that Jesus was accepted by God, but that his Cross, too, was part of God’s plan. They do not seem to have elaborated on this, but Paul did. He saw the power of God as residing in the Cross. He said, ‘The word of the cross... is the power of God’. This was equal to ‘The gospel... is the power of God unto salvation’.

When we look into his 'word of the cross', we see that it is as we have shown above: the act of propitiation planned by God and executed by Christ. Jesus the man was made to be sin. Paul said that 'God abandoned him up for us all', and also said that 'the Son of God... loved me, and abandoned himself up for me'. The Son carried out the will of the Father, and the will of them both was to redeem man. Paul saw Christ made the curse of the law in order to redeem man from (the guilt and judgement of) the law. Even so, Paul does not see this as a 'device' by God to get around the law, but as the only true way of grace.

The death, then, is essential to deal with human guilt and the judgement upon it. Whilst also revealing the love of God, it is primarily effective in justifying man. Yet, had Jesus not risen from the dead, the exercise of the Cross would not have been sufficient. Paul had seen the risen Christ—as also had the apostles—and he could not forget it. He said, 'he was delivered for our offences, and raised for our justification'; 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures'; 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... you are still in your sins'.

This then is the great Gospel of liberation, and this to some degree explains Paul to us. It also tells us that he is amongst the greatest of men, for no one else—even when we include the other apostles—has ever expounded the grace of God so brilliantly. Of course I have not done justice to his exposition of grace, and you must read Paul yourself to discover his insights and understand the revelation which came to him.

Having written the material above, I am aware that I have left so much unsaid. Only if you and I were soaked in Paul's '

background, his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures, and his personal encounter with Christ, would we fully comprehend him and his teaching. Of course we are not required to understand all that he writes, or to see things from his point of view. John, Peter, James and Jude also teach us, for the Gospel is not merely 'Pauline'. It is in fact 'the gospel of Christ', but we do not criticise Paul when he says, 'my Gospel'! It had become part of him, but then he also called it 'the whole counsel of God', and that is yet more than simply the doctrine of justification—powerful as that is—for it includes the entire purpose or counsel of God.

So then, via another theme, but nevertheless related to the Gospel and the whole counsel of God, we will look further at Paul, in his understanding of 'peace', ie. *eirene* (Greek), or *shalom* (Hebrew). That the idea of peace is significant for Paul is seen by the number of times he uses the word—about forty in all—and the contexts in which he names it. Whilst the Greek word can mean all that the Hebrew *shalom* meant, it also carries the idea of concord or reconciliation. For example, Romans 5:1 says, 'Wherefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ', ie. 'we have been reconciled to God'.

The Hebrew ideas contained in *shalom* were 'completeness', 'health', 'wholeness', 'welfare', 'tranquillity', 'unharmful', and 'unhurt'. In short, the 'son of peace' was a person who in himself was complete, and who acted in peace towards others. This rich concept must have been in Paul's mind. The prophets had spoken of the coming Messiah as 'the Prince of peace', saying that his Kingdom would extend peace without limitation, and Paul says of Christ, 'He is our peace'. He meant that Christ's atonement had brought peace of mind to human beings, that they were in a state of wholeness, delivered from the tragedy of guilt, and cleared of the doom which had hung over them. Now they could see

God as the God of all grace, and especially as 'the God of peace', ie. the God who brought peace through His Son, and caused His people to continue in peace.

If this peace were only an individualised and privatised state of being, then it would not be enough. Paul saw its operation as universal, as bringing peace to the human race, and to all creation. His statement in Romans 1:18-32 and 3:9-19 shows man living in a state of strife and unpeace. This was the cry of Isaiah, 'The wicked are like the restless sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked'. Paul's point about the wicked was, 'The way of peace they have not known' (Rom. 3:17, cf. Isa. 59:8).

He saw the act of the Cross bringing peace to the Jews, and peace to the Gentiles, and in fact making Jew and Gentile into one 'new humanity', ie. the new race of God's true people. There was enmity between man and God, and enmity between man and man (Jew and Gentile), and the Cross was the way of, and to, true peace. Man could be reconciled with God; for God, through the Cross, would not impute iniquity to the believing person. Paul's proclamation of the Gospel, then, was to help bring in the holy people, the true Israel of God. It was to bring the nations to 'the obedience of faith', ie. to submission to Christ, and through him to the Father, 'that God may be all in all'.

When we begin to see the implications of Paul's Gospel, then we see how vast was his vision and understanding. Christ's resurrection was not merely a certification of the work of the Cross, and an assurance for true believers. It proclaimed that God had raised him from the dead to be Lord over history. He had put all other powers under Christ, giving him Lordship to win the nations, and to bring them to obedience through grace and love.

It was also to make the new people the true Israel, and the very sanctuary of God, for in Christ 'the whole structure is

joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit'. As Israel was to be 'the holy city', so now the church. It was to be 'the new Jerusalem' or 'the Jerusalem above'.

This high and holy calling of the new people—the '*shalom* people'—was so much in Paul's thinking that he could scarcely speak of 'grace' without also saying 'peace'. In the salutation of every letter he says, 'Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', and often he repeats the prayer in his closing benediction. He uses phrases such as, 'the God of peace', 'the peace of God', 'the God of love and peace', 'the Lord of peace'.

If he continually links peace with the Father and the Son, he also links it with the Holy Spirit. He says that 'the kingdom of God is not [matters of] eating and drinking, but righteousness, joy and peace *in the Holy Spirit*'. He says 'to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace', and prays later, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope'. One of the nine fruits of 'the harvest of the Spirit' is peace.

Paul then sees man reconciled to God and having peace in his heart. He also sees man as reconciled to man, and having peace in the midst. He calls this 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace', but he looks to the end when the Lord of history will 'unify all things', 'fill all things', 'reconcile all things', and 'harmonise all things'. This pacification of 'all things' is presently proceeding. Whilst now all creation groans as it awaits liberation from the 'bondage of corruption', and whilst the people of God have this groaning also, it is not an anguish which destroys peace with God, or peace within. In fact it is part of it, for just as Christ makes peace by the blood of his Cross, and by the agony he endured on the Tree, so the present suffering is a form of birth-pangs

which will help to bring in the end, when the pacification of all things will have been accomplished. At the end it will be all peace, and all the elect will be 'the sons of peace'. True justice will obtain throughout creation. Paul's knowledge of the prophets would not allow his Gospel to float in an ocean of personal pietism. He knew his Gospel was cosmic and its end universal. He knew that through grace and love only *shalom* could obtain in the end, for such was not merely the peace of man—a gift of God—but the peace of God Himself.

Having reached this high note—perhaps the highest of all—have we then finished with the character and thought of this great man, Paul? We have not. What to me is significant in the thought and life of Paul—and perhaps for me, personally—is his teaching of human weakness in contrast with, as also along with, the power of God. That may come as a surprise to anyone who has read this far, for pagan thinking, too, often puts man's power as nil in the face of the gods, or of the high god who rules over all. 'Man,' they say, 'is miserable, finite, a weak thing of time and space.' 'God,' they say, 'is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.'

On the face of it, such thinking seems high and even correct, but it is wrong altogether. Paul has a high view of man as man, if not as a sinner. That God should so move in history to redeem man is a matter of perpetual wonder to him, but it highlights his view of man. Man was intended to be a creature of holiness, of love, and of service. God has set man's goal to be personal—and even bodily—glorification, and His grace will accomplish this. He who has begun such work in a person will complete it, 'right up until the day of Jesus Christ'.

What to me is so rich and wise in Paul is his thinking about man's weakness, and God's strength. Paul does not think of God's power in terms of the pagan's understanding, ie. that God has enormous reserves of strength on

which he may draw, and so effect what He will, regardless of human will, of circumstances, of human heredity and **environment**. Paul does not see God as abrasively and aggressively pushing through to complete His plan, willy-nilly, ie. in the manner of 'come what may'. In this sense God is weak towards man, overcoming him and constraining him only by His love.

Paul is prepared to talk about 'the weakness of God' and to say that Christ was 'crucified through weakness'. He sees the wisdom of God expressed in and through His Son, 'made in the likeness of sinful flesh'. This one must be 'born of a woman, born under the law'. Christ, then, as man, is in 'the form of a servant', for he has emptied himself of his prerogatives of Deity. The 'servant Son of man' is the 'servant Son of God'. If then God is 'weak', so His children must be weak. They must be weak as servants.

Paul's second Letter to the Corinthian church is a marvellous exposition of his own weakness. Powerfully autobiographical, he can speak of his innate weakness as a servant of God. In his first Letter he used strong irony about some of the Corinthians:

Already you are become filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled we bless; when persecuted we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things.

Paul was always against triumphalism, that human *hubris* which originates with Adam and haunts the inferior and decadent man, assuring him he is as a god. When the

Christian man takes .this *hubris*' into his Gospel-faith, it becomes more terrifying than ever. As we shall later see, it was also a danger ever-present to Paul once he had had visions beyond even those of the prophets.

Paul was 'for' weakness. His second Letter to Corinth seems to make almost an over-emphasised insistence upon personal weakness. In 1:8-9 he says:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly; unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, 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.*

In 7:5 he says, 'For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest but we were afflicted at every turn— *fighting without and fear within.*' Here we find no triumphalism. Indeed we ask whether Paul and his friends are really in *shalom!* The two powerful passages of 6:4-13 and 11:21-30 show us Paul's thesis of 'strength-only-in-weakness'. The key to this lies in 4:7, 'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God'. Paul was a vessel of clay, but he carried the glory of God in that same frail vessel!

What power had Paul, in fact, exhibited? He claims in . 12:12, 'The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.' In Romans 15: 19 he speaks of the way in which God had enabled him to preach the Gospel 'by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit', but in I1 Corinthians 3:5 he explains, 'Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new 'covenant.' Further, in 2:14 he says, 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.'

What then is this weakness-power principle?. It is, '... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be manifested in our bodies'. It is the principle that 'death is at work in us, but life in you'. It is stated in somewhat different form in 8:9:

'For' you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.'

Had Paul not carried the death Of Christ in his body, and emanated this powerful word of the Cross, then he would have been left alone, but his preaching was as though he were baiting sinful man. He could even have been recognised as a brilliant person if he had preached the Cross with 'eloquent wisdom', ie. 'plausible words of wisdom', but he dared not, lest-he 'emptied the cross of its power'. That was why he was weak towards men, and was with them in 'weakness, and in much fear and trembling'.

What, then, is the nature of this seeming paradox: being weak yet being strong? It lies, surely, in Paul's' view of God and man. God as God is strong, yet God becomes' weak to win man by His love. For God to become incarnate is surely an admission that sheer power does not capture the human will. Paul sees man as thinking he is strong in himself. His exposition of man's weakness in the face of sin in Romans 7:13-25 is, of course, as brilliant as it is penetrating, and its conclusion is that sin *of itself* is stronger than man *of himself*. Man can only overcome sin and the flesh in the power of the Spirit. He is a weak creature *of himself*.

Man's eagerness to be strong of himself is shown in pride. Paul's passage of II Corinthians 12:1-10 amply demonstrates that he was given revelations, being, it seems, caught up into Paradise. The 'abundance of revelations' became a snare. 'And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from 'being

too elated.’ ‘Being too elated’ was a fearful danger. The ‘earthen vessel’ might suddenly become a ‘strong golden one, and eyes might be drawn to it.

The next words of Paul are one of the greatest gifts God has given us:

Three times | besought the Lord about this [thorn in the flesh, Satan harassing me], that it should leave me; but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for *my power is made perfect in weakness.*’ I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for *when I am weak, then am I strong.*

As God is ‘strong’ in His ‘weakness’, so man is truly man only when he is ‘weak’. As man he may be stronger than a mouse, and as man-in-himself he may build the tower of Babel or ascend to the moon, but as man before God— *coram deo*—all his strength is weaker than the ‘weakness of God’. The truth is that man is never man except when wholly dependent upon God, and wholly in union with him. This is when he is ‘the image and glory of God’.

Paul did not discover the truth of God and man by his own brilliance of intellect. At the heart of his theology was the enigma of the Cross: God—in Christ—becoming weak and going up on a cross and being abandoned, and abandoning. This came to him ‘by a revelation of Christ’. He saw the nature of God and of man, in him, and by him, and he was gripped forever.

For this reason I tremble. Had this man not demonstrated to me the dreadful danger of hubris, and the wonder of grace, then I would have looked upon grace as a human fight, and upon hubris as the rightful outcome of the new creation. This would have meant that I had not taken one step away from Adamic pride, nor one step into the saving humiliation brought about by grace.

This is why I see Paul as the greatest amongst men, but

then only because he was weak, as ‘the refuse of the world’, and as ‘the offscouring of all things’. Because he was pursued by God he pursued Him, and because he was apprehended by Christ he sought to apprehend that for Which he was apprehended. We too have been apprehended, and no less than Paul. We have been pursued and are pursued, hence we must pursue. We must live in the security of our weakness as in the power of God. *Shalom* is ours now, but will be ours in greater measure, indeed in its totality.

The God of hope, then, fill us with all joy and peace in believing, that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope. He will soon crush down Satan under our feet.

The God of *shalom* be with us all!