

1. Background: Saul the Persecutor

Introduction

Geoffrey Bingham, *Paul, the pursued and pursuer of God*, NCPI 1986. P. 2, v:

‘Apart from the man Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Messiah and His Son, Paul the apostle is the greatest man who ever lived.’

An assessment not shared by all. Nietzsche called Paul’s gospel ‘the most evil of all...He embodies the immense creative power of hatred...’ (Günther Bornkamm, *Paul*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1969, p. 230). Many positions in between, including those who claim that ‘Paul was the real founder of Christianity, misrepresenting Jesus and inventing a theology in which a ‘Christ’ figure, nothing really to do with the Jesus of history, becomes central’ (Tom Wright, *What St Paul Really Said*, Lion Publishing, 1997—this is not Wright’s position, nor is it my own). There are many agendas here, which we will not go into, which seek to justify some disagreement with words and actions attributed to Paul in the New Testament (eg ‘Paul is a woman-hater, so we can disregard everything he said about women in ministry and marriage’).

Paul provoked severe antagonism during his ministry, as he has since. Even amongst those sympathetic, there has not always been full understanding:

13 But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 15 And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. *2 Peter 3*

Note, however, that even here, Paul’s writings are accounted among the ‘scriptures’.

This introduction is just to get you interested, like they do at the beginning of any TV drama! We can leave these issues with the scholars, as we seek from the New Testament to get to know something of Paul and his message.

Saul of Tarsus

A number of Paul’s own statements give us something of his background:

I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cili'cia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gama'li-el, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as you all are this day. *Acts 22:3*

Outside the holy land—important for later ministry—but raised at its centre. ‘Zealous for God’—before his ‘conversion’. Who was Gamaliel?

29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." 33 When they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gama'li-el, a teacher of the law, held in honour by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a while. 35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you do with these men. 36 For before these days Theu'das arose, giving himself out to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was slain and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After him Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present

case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" 40 So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. *Acts 5*

A wise and moderate man, with a 'wait-and-see' attitude. His moderation was not emulated by his disciple Saul, before or after his conversion!

4 "My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and at Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. 5 They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. 6 And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. *Acts 26*

Pharisees, a strong lay religious movement dating from the time of resistance to the Hellenising of the Jewish faith in the second century BC, accepted the whole of the Old Testament as we now have it (again significant for Paul's later ministry), in contrast to the ruling priestly Saducees, who accepted only the first five Books of Moses:

the Sad'ducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. *Acts 23:8*

So Paul here is referring to the hope of the resurrection of the dead, something he had always believed in.

Saul was proud of his Israelite inheritance, which meant a lot to him:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. 2 *Corinthians 11:22*

I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, 6 as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. *Philippians 3*

But as we shall see, there came to be something, or Someone, even more important to him than all these things. Later he reflected back on how he would have seen himself at that time:

if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the law and boast of your relation to God 18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed in the law, 19 and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth... *Romans 2*

Saul the Persecutor

Saul's persecution of the church began with the stoning of Stephen:

Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. *Acts 7:58*

And Saul was consenting to his death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Sama'ria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. *Acts 8*

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

PAUL THE APOSTLE

I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blasphemous; and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. *Acts 26*

But it was Saul's very zeal for God that set him on this course:

13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; 14 and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. *Galatians 1*

Why was this so? It was not as if Saul and the other Jewish leaders did not know about the Messiah. Saul knew well God's great promise to David:

Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 I will be his father, and he shall be my son. 2 *Samuel 7*

For Paul later spoke about the Messiah in these very terms:

[God] raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' 23 Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised. *Acts 13*

Saul knew what Psalm 2 said about this Son of God:

6 "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." 7 I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." *Psalms 2*

For he later used it in his own preaching:

And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." *Acts 9:20*

Saul knew the ministry that this mighty coming one would have:

The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. 16 He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. 17 He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as a mantle. 18 According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render requital. 19 So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives. 20 "And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the LORD. *Isaiah 59*

For he later quoted this passage:

as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob" *Romans 11:26*

So if Saul already knew about the Messiah, why did he get so upset about those who claimed to be proclaiming the Messiah? It was because they were saying that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. And no way could Saul ever believe that, because Jesus had died on a cross. And Saul knew what the God's law said about anyone like that:

if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God *Deuteronomy 21*

For Saul and the Jewish leaders it was inconceivable that Jesus, who had died on a cross, and so was cursed by God, could ever have been God's Messiah promised in the Scriptures. The very notion that Jesus could have been 'the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered' (Acts 7:52) drove them to fury and rage. Saul believed it was his duty before God to

eradicate these blasphemers who dared to do such despite to the holy Name. It was as Jesus had said it would be:

They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. *John 16:2*

With this went a whole mindset, common to the human condition, of thinking that we can make ourselves approved by our outward actions and lifestyle, when the inner relationship with God, and all that goes with that, is badly disordered. It was on this issue that Jesus had clashed with those of the Pharisee party, to which Saul belonged:

27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! *Matthew 23*

This condition is necessarily accompanied by a terrible inner blindness:

37 Though he had done so many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him; 38 it was that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed our report, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" 39 Therefore they could not believe. For Isaiah again said, 40 "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and turn for me to heal them." 41 Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him. 42 Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: 43 for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. *John 12*

While there are plenty of references in the Old Testament to the sufferings of God's chosen one, yet this is not something that anyone could just sit down and work out. Especially not from a state of heart such as this. It would have to come by a revelation of God.

Paul later acknowledged this blindness and ignorance, and the great mercy of God that pierced through it:

13 though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief...15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; 16 but I received mercy

It is clear that this change of heart could only come about by the action of God. Yet, in a strange way, Saul had already been given a heart for God. When he said,

I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward God and toward men *Acts 24:16*

he was saying something that probably applied to the whole of his life. As he later said of his fellow countrymen,

2 I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified. *Romans 10*

But for this inner relationship of faith to be established would take a revelation from God of Christ himself. For Saul, as well as for us.

2. The Conversion of Saul

We return to Galatians 1:

PAUL THE APOSTLE

13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; 14 and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...

Let us set out the elements of this happening, as Paul saw them:

- **he who had set me apart before I was born**

here again was that mystery of God's choosing of Paul for His purposes even before he was born, present through all those times when Saul was trying to 'kick against the pricks' (Acts 26:14). It is reminiscent of the way Jeremiah experienced his own calling:

4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

This helps us to understand later Paul's great doctrine of election:

28 We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

- **and had called me**

Again, this calling had been with him right through his life. Is this why he was so 'zealous for God' (Acts 22:3) from an early age? We come across a similar instance where Stephen sees Moses misplaced attempt to avenge his wronged brethren by killing the Egyptian slave-master as an expression of the call he was yet to receive forty years later at the burning bush (Exodus 2:11–12, Acts 7:23–25). It was on the strength of this direct call of God that Paul later defended his position as 'called to be an apostle' (Romans 1:1) against those who would challenge it.

- **through his grace**

This comports with his designating himself 'the foremost of sinners':

I am the foremost of sinners; 16 but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. *1 Timothy 1*

As he said of us all,

So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. *Romans 9:16*

- **was pleased to reveal**

As we said, the change of mind and heart that was necessary could not have come through trying to work it out, but could only come through a direct action of God. So Paul said,

11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. 12 For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. *Galatians 1*

'A revelation of Jesus Christ' could mean a revelation from Jesus Christ, or a revelation from God of Jesus Christ, or both.

- **his Son in me**

The Greek word usually translated 'to' is *en*, literally 'in'. This matches Jesus' prayer in John 17:

22 The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

Or as Jesus said in John 14:23,

If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

So we may imagine that what burst upon Saul at this time was the whole relationship between the Father and the Son, as he was caught up into that, and found it thumping away in his own breast! Hence Paul's cries, 'He is the Son of God' (Acts 9:20), 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Corinthians 12:3), 'Abba! Father!' (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6).

- **in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles [nations]**

The 'revelation of Jesus Christ' that came to Paul was not for himself alone, but for his ministry among the nations. From that time on Paul found himself at the spear-head of a movement at that time of history, prophesied from the time of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), when the blessing of God would begin to go out from Israel to all the nations:

18 For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, 19 by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ, 20 thus making it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man's foundation, 21 but as it is written, "They shall see who have never been told of him, and they shall understand who have never heard of him." *Romans 15*

8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."...14 that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. *Galatians 3*

And as an example of such preaching:

30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead. *Acts 17*

Let us now look out for these elements in the accounts of Paul's conversion that we have:

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. 4 And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; 6 but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Anani'as. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Anani'as." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen a man named Anani'as come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Anani'as answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Anani'as departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "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." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptised, 19 and took food and was strengthened. *Acts 9*

See *Paul the pursued*...p. 3–5.

Paul gave two other accounts of his conversion later in the *Acts of the Apostles*. The first to fellow Jews in Jerusalem:

1 "Brethren and fathers, hear the defence which I now make before you." 2 And when they heard that he addressed them in the Hebrew language, they were the more quiet. And he said: 3 "I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cili'cia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gama'li-el, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as you all are this day. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, 5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brethren, and I journeyed to Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished. 6 "As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 8 And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.' 9 Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. 10 And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' 11 And when I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus. 12 "And one Anani'as, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And in that very hour I received my sight and saw him. 14 And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; 15 for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.' 17 "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get quickly out of Jerusalem, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 19 And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in thee. 20 And when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I also was standing by and approving, and keeping the garments of those who killed him.' 21 And he said to me, 'Depart; for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" *Acts 22*

In each of these accounts we are given some different details, but the same elements are present. The second one was given to the Herodian king Agrippa and Festus the Roman procurator, with their entourages:

1 Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defence: 2 "I think myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, 3 because you are especially familiar with all customs and controversies of the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. 4 "My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and at Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. 5 They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. 6 And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? 9 "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme; and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

12 "Thus I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining round me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' 15 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles--to whom I send you 18 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.' 19 "Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem and throughout all the country of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in

the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles."

24 And as he thus made his defence, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad." 25 But Paul said, "I am not mad, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." 28 And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" 29 And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am--except for these chains."

The heart of the gospel

The whole of the Letter to the Romans should be read and studied, along with Paul's other writings, to get what Paul called 'the gospel of the grace of God', or 'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:24, 27). He comes to the heart of it in Romans 3:20–28:

20 For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. 27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. 28 For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.

We can see here elements that have been true to Paul's own experience: thinking that he was dutifully carrying out the law of God, he found himself to be in terrible sin. Yet this came with the revelation that God had given his Son as the means by which God's righteousness is fully satisfied and our sin is forgiven. This is communicated simply through the gift of faith, apart from anything the receiver might have done or not done. But see the tremendous turn-around that has happened in Paul: *the cursed one on the cross was indeed the Christ, the Messiah, put forward by God to be the one who suffered the terrible death that is due under the law to Saul and all sinners, that we might go free, and come into that relationship with God for which we have been made as His children.* This would have come to him at the moment when this brilliant one who was speaking to Saul, whom he knew could be no other than the 'Lord' Messiah, identified himself as Jesus, the one Paul was persecuting in the persons of his followers. The horrific fact of the crucifixion, which before had been such a forbidding barrier to him, now became a glorious gospel:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" *Galatians 3:13*

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. *2 Corinthians 5:21*

3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us *Romans 8*

4 But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. *Galatians 4*

This was very personal for Paul himself:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. *Galatians 2:20*

Yet it had universal implications for the whole human race, and indeed for the whole creation:

God our Saviour, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. 7 For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. *1 Timothy 2*

19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. *Colossians 1*

How faith comes

Paul had a clear understanding of what his role was in the coming of faith to both Jew and Gentile:

if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved....12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. 13 For, "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." 14 But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? 15 And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" 16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" 17 So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ. *Romans 10:9, 12-17*

And he saw Christ in this way effecting a great transformation in the lives of others, as Christ had in his own:

1 And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God-- 9 not because of works, lest any man should boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. *Ephesians 2*

Paul's preaching of Christ for conversion

"Whether short or long, I would to God that...all who hear me...might become such as I am" (Acts 26:29). Whether speaking to Jews or Gentiles, the longing of Paul's heart was that what happened to him should happen to them. Not necessarily in the mode or the time span in which it happened to him, but that what was now so real and all-important to him should also become so to them, by the same power of God.

Here, then is a sample of his preaching to the Jews (along with some God-fearing Gentiles). After an introduction which traces the history of Israel from the patriarchs to John the Baptist, and how what happened to Jesus fulfilled the promises regarding Christ in the Old Testament:

38 Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed [or justified] by the law of Moses. 40 Beware, therefore, lest there come upon you what is said in the prophets: 41 'Behold, you

scoffers, and wonder, and perish; for I do a deed in your days, a deed you will never believe, if one declares it to you." *Acts 13*

No less was Paul's appeal to believe in Jesus given to non-Jewish Gentiles:

27 When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, 30 and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?" 31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptised at once, with all his family. 34 Then he brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God. *Acts 16*

And here are some of the results of his preaching, at both a corporate and personal level:

8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedo'nia and Acha'ia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 9 For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. *1 Thessalonians 1*

9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. *1 Corinthians 6*

How much has flowed from Christ's action on that road to Damascus!