

Daily Readings

Next week we begin a five week study of the journeys of Paul. Each week we will be search through the book of Acts and the Letters of Paul for insight to the traveling evangelist and how his life and words relate to the 21st century. This week we begin this series by looking at the conversion of Paul. Below we have chosen some of the passages from the letters of Paul and from the book of Acts that relate to our need for continuing change as a follower of Jesus.

Monday, September 21 – Read Acts 7:54-8:1. No one can fully understand the change in Paul without understanding the stoning and martyrdom of Stephen. In this passage we hear the Stephen forgiving his attackers. While they show nothing but hatred toward Stephen, he shows them complete unconditional love. Paul witnesses this event and Luke (the author of Acts) notes that Paul increases his persecution. If you were Paul, how would you have view Stephen’s words of forgiveness? If you were Stephen, would you be able to ask God to forgive your attackers? Can you ask God for the spirit of Stephen?

Tuesday, September 22 – Read Acts 9:1-18; 22:1-16; 26:1-18. These are the three accounts of Paul’s conversion experience. The first is Luke’s own account. The second is Paul’s account while making his defense before the Jewish High Counsel. The third is Paul’s account while making his defense before King Agrippa. Read and compare these accounts. How did you first meet Christ? How has your faith matured since then?

Wednesday, September 23 – Read Roman 5:1-11. This is Paul’s famous account of justification by faith. He says, “While we were still weak (or sinners), at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” This is the perfect gift we received in Christ through faith. It was this experience in the life of Paul that moved him from a vicious persecutor of Christians to the most prolific apostle of the first century. Can you pray right now for the forgiveness that comes only from above? God through Jesus Christ love us more than we can ever know. Can you let that love transform the way you see yourself?

Thursday, September 24 – Read Galatians 3:1-29. In this early letter of Paul, he reminds them of the cross of Christ. When they received Christ, they were given the Spirit by faith, not by works of the law. Paul warns them not to go back to the law, but to place their confidence in Christ. In what ways have you traded faith for law? Are you working out your own salvation by “being a good person”? Or do you spend time each day listening for the word of Christ to come to you?

Friday, September 25 – Read Ephesians 2:1-21. “For by grace you have been saved through grace, it is not any of your own doing but a gift from God.” (Ephesians 2:8) Salvation is secured by faith alone. This excludes any and all human works of righteousness. This is a regenerating faith that changes and transforms. It is a continuing work of God in each of us as we live for Christ. What did you do today to tune your ears to hear what God has for you today?



STUDY GUIDE & DAILY READINGS

Sunday, September 20, 2009

STAGES (Following the Journeys of Paul), Week 1 of 4

LISTEN

Acts 26:4-23 — The Word from the Bible (New International Version)

“The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?”

“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

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

“Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

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

“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

Paul’s Conversion

“Conversion” is typically how we refer to what happened to Paul on the Damascus road, although Paul himself calls it a revelation (Gal. 1:16), a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), an appearance (1 Corinthians 15:8). It did mean a radical change in his attitude toward the followers of Jesus.

Usually we associate a moral or religious change with *conversion*. Neither of these applies to Paul’s experience. He had always striven to obey the law and in the eyes of his Jewish contemporaries, could claim to be **blameless** (Phil. 3:6). Further, he never consciously rejected Judaism for **Christianity**. The gospel he insisted upon was the proclamation of the age-old plan and purpose of God to save humanity, which his fellow Jews had rejected.

Paul was moved by the behavior of Christians under persecution, especially by the behavior of Stephen (whom he never mentions, but is mentioned in the book of Acts). He witnessed the unflinching spirit of the early Christians, unbroken by persecution, maintaining an inner peace which he himself longed.

Paul presents his experience on the Damascus road as the act of God, penetrating to the core of his being. For Paul, the action of God and the revelation of Christ were the unmerited favor and grace of God. The three accounts in Acts (9:1-18; 22:1-16; 26:1-18) and the scattered references in the letters are in agreement. The accounts in Acts are incomplete without Paul’s

own words in his letters. All three stress the voice, the light, but not the actual vision of Christ, which is central in Paul’s own words (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8). Paul refers to his own transforming experience on several occasions (1 Corinthians 15:8; Gal. 1:15-16; and 2 Corinthians 4:6).

Paul considers his experience with the resurrected Christ to be the last appearance of Christ. There is no indication in Acts or in any of Paul’s letters that he is suggesting that his conversion be a model for others. Instead, the ***vision or revelation*** was the basis for his apostleship. It was his calling to the Gentiles.

Acts 26:4-23

This speech before King Agrippa is the high point of the three statements of defense that we see in the book of Acts. While it is evident that the political charges were the primary concern of the Romans, Luke insists that Paul has committed no crime against the state. Christianity is no threat to good order; it is a religion of resurrection, fulfilling the hopes of Jew and Gentile.

Now the reader is told that Paul’s mission to the Gentiles is the cause of the whole process against him.

As in 22:3-16 Paul describes his early life. Details told in earlier passages are not repeated. The main point is that Paul has been a Jew of the strictest party (literally “sect”) and that this fact is known to the Jews.

As a former Pharisee, Paul sees the resurrection hope as the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise (Luke 24:44-49) – the hope of all Israel (the twelve tribes). At verse 8 the defense is turned into a missionary appeal.

Paul’s testimony is confirmed by his earlier role as a persecutor. The picture of his opposition to Christianity is sterner here than in 22:3-5. He not only imprisoned the believers but advocated a sentence of death. While the phrase ***I cast my vote against them*** does not prove that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, Luke seems to suppose that Paul played some official role in the execution of Christians. His effort to make them blaspheme may anticipate the persecutions of the second century where Christians were compelled to curse Christ.

Paul’s conversion has been described in 9:1-9 and 22:6-11. The address ***Saul, Saul*** (in all three accounts) is explained – the voice speaks Hebrew (actual Aramaic). Strangely, the voice announces a Greek proverb: ***It hurts ... to kick against the goads*** (prods used on unruly animals). The saying was used by the Greeks to depict those who resisted the will of the gods.

Most important, Paul’s commission to preach to the Gentiles is given in his conversion experience (Galatians 1:16). The material about Ananias and Paul’s blindness is omitted. The commission of Paul is presented under the motif of the prophetic call (Ezekiel 12:1; Isaiah 35:5; 42:7, 16). This use of Old Testament allusions makes it clear that Paul’s mission is under the direction of the God of Israel.

The promise that Paul will be delivered does not imply that Luke believes the trial will end in acquittal. Paul is to be ***delivered*** in the sense that his witness will be accomplished.

Paul’s gospel is nothing more than what the prophets and Moses predicted. While the Jews did not expect a suffering Messiah, the Christian experience of the Crucifixion and Resurrection led to a messianic interpretation of texts like Isaiah 53. The idea that Christ was the first to rise from the dead finds parallels in 1 Corinthians 15:20 and Colossians 1:18. (Summarized from the *Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*)

Our Focus

The conversion experience of Paul is rich with parallels to our lives and faith. Two in particular are of note. First, Paul notes that while his traveling companions saw the blinding light, they did not hear the voice of Christ. The message seems to be for just Paul. Certainly, the Christ addresses Paul by name with no mention of his companions, but could it be that the actual experience of the revelation is just as dependent on the hearer as on the divine revelation itself. The phrase, ***Why do you kick against the goads?*** seems to imply that Jesus has been trying to reach Paul for quite a while and he just was not listening. If this is the case, then Paul’s companions did not have the capacity to hear the words of Jesus. They did not have their ears tuned to the message.

So what was it that brought Paul to the point of hearing the word? Did the words of Stephen pleading for his executors with his dying breath impact Paul? Was it the courageous spirit of the early disciples who went to their suffered Paul’s persecution with peace and courage?

Second, Jesus mentions that Paul was “kicking” or “pushing” against the “goad.” The goad was a pointed stick used to train livestock, particularly oxen. A goad can be compared to the cattle prods used by farmers today. In the first century, the sharp end of the goad was rarely used. Typically, farmers would just tap the flank or hip of the oxen to encourage them forward. Only if the animal kicked or back up would the sharp end of the goad stab the animal. It was the action of the animal moving back and against the goad not the farmer stabbing that would inflict the pain.

When Jesus says this to Paul, he insinuates that Paul has been ignoring the guidance of Christ. Paul, it seems, had cause

himself pain in ignoring Jesus. The spirit of peace Paul saw the Christians he persecuted was the very peace he could not find for himself.

Bridges to the 21st Century

Most of us in the church wonder about our conversion experience. Is it once and for all? Is there something else? What do I need to be doing? All of these are questions that haunt us at times in our faith.

Our relationship with Christ is an ongoing experience. It is never measured by some blinding light incident. Instead, we live each day listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through events, circumstances, and people. For Paul, the Damascus Road experience was only the beginning of many revelations from God.

At one time or another, we all rebel against God. Jesus refers to Paul’s resistance as ***kicking against the goad***. To follow the metaphor of the goad, we inflict pain on ourselves by ignoring God’s place in our lives. The more we focus on self, we less we are able to hear from God. The less we know of God’s guidance for our lives, the harder we “kick” against God good and loving will that brings blessing.

Does this mean that life will be a bed of prosperity, health and good times? Not necessarily – God promises through Jesus Christ strength for ever situation, peace in the midst of chaos, and the ultimate victory in all things through Jesus Christ.

Prayer Focus

Trietsch is a praying church. This morning, as you worship, one of our prayer volunteers is praying for everyone in each section of our worship center. We believe that prayer changes lives and hearts for good and for God.

We invite you to join these volunteers by praying for those persons around you. We believe these prayers will have an immediate impact on those for whom you are praying. Remember... someone is praying for you.

This morning, let the spirit of God lead you in your prayers. Some prayers will come immediately to mind because of a known need. Let other names come to mind, pray for these persons even if you do not know why God is leading you to pray for them. Spend time counting your blessings and giving thanks to God for all God’s good gifts. If there is a difficult situation in your life right now, we invite you to release it to God during this worship service. It will be there after the benediction.

Please consider including these prayer concerns in your morning prayers:

The sick, the bereaved, the lost, the absent, and those in crisis;

Those who are out of work;

Those who are serving in our military;

Those who are serving our local, state and national government.

Please consider the following needs in our church:

The need for workers in our children’s area as we begin the new school year;

The call for those to offer their gifts of music through our choirs in worship;

That God will call our youth and young adults into full time Christian service;

That God will give our pastors and staff wisdom, courage and grace;

That will inspire our congregation to great levels of generosity in these difficult economic times;

Please join with others in our worship today by praying the following:

I pray for our Church –

That God will lead our church deeper into prayer

That God will lead each person here into a deeper relationship with Christ through worship and Bible study

That God will lead every participant into a deeper walk with Jesus.

Lord lead me closer to you in all I do. In Jesus’ name, Amen.
