

SEEING THE LIGHT

how to prepare your heart for learning and sharing the gospel

LESSON 3 | PAUL SAW THAT SIN WAS THE SOURCE OF HIS PROBLEMS | 12/20/2020

Paul the Apostle is regarded by many as one of the most remarkable men who has ever lived: a man from “Tarsus of Cilicia” and devout Pharisee. (Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3; Phil 3:5) and skilled in the trade of tent making there. (Acts 18:2,3). He was a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5) and in Acts 22:3, he says that he was trained “strictly according to the law of our fathers,” the Law of Moses. He was “educated under Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3). To Timothy he wrote, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost” (1Tim 1:15 [NASB] or “chief” [KJV] or “the worst” [NIV]).

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Even though before the Sanhedrin Paul will recount that he had “lived my life before God in all good conscience,” it was still after Paul’s own recounting that his response to be saved in baptism was “to wash away his sins” (22:16) and that Jesus Himself had said that he was “kicking against to goads” (26:14). Goads were long, sharpened sticks used to prod oxen when they were hitched to yokes. Not wanting to be jabbed again with the stick, the ox would kick against it. *It would soon learn that it was better to accept the direction of the farmer than to “kick against the goad.”* In Acts 26:14, Jesus was telling Paul of his foolish futility he was continuing to manifest against the will of God.

Based on that, it would suggest that the Lord had been “goading” him for some time. Quite likely, Saul may have heard Jesus teach and preach in public places – but he certainly heard the preaching from disciples that caused his mission against them. Yet, when he arrested them, instead of behaving like criminals, the Christians he arrested, imprisoned and killed most likely exuded grace, confidence and forgiveness. Even Stephen’s words and demeanor as he was martyred (Acts 7:58; 8:1) may have stayed with Saul and he was wrestling to harmonize that he saw in them with what he thought of them.

But Saul did not have to look far outside himself to find out why he would be “the worst of all sinners.” Sin is a problem we must accept in ourselves before we can truly see the light. Paul will say that he was zealous for the Law of Moses and persecuted the church because he believed Christians were enemies of God and worthy of death (1Tim. 1:13). He had many dragged to prison (Acts 8:4). He even acknowledged that he had been “formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor” (1Tim 1:15). Yet, he knew that he had been “shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.”

We could say the essence or root of sin is to

1. Purposely Defy the Rule of God (1John 3:4).
2. Fail to honor God (Rom 1:21; 3:18-20).
3. Boast about our own Goodness (Rom 1:22; 1Cor 1:26-31).

This breach of law, violation of relationships with God and pride and prideful rebellion against God, is not a substance but a relationship of opposition. Sin opposes God’s law. Sin hates rather than loves, it doubts or contradicts rather than trusts and affirms, it harms and abuses rather than helps and respects.

Even after his conversion, there are events that suggested sin did not escape him. In Romans, Paul affirmed that none are righteous and without sin (3:10,23) and never indicated that he was an exception to this rule and never claimed sinlessness because He was now a Christian. Even though his self portrait he made of the struggle he had with sin was under the law of Moses, *it was still with sin* that is a universal problem no matter “the law” one is under and it is the very thing we know Christians must still embattle. All Christians, as Paul would include himself, will be strongly tempted, but both God and His Son can help us overcome temptation and forgive as we repent and confess (1Cor 10:13; Phil 4:13;

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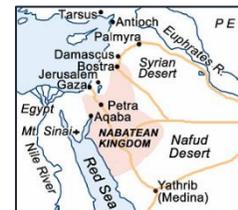
1John 1:8-10). And God was, and still is, ready to help the ones who call upon Him for help (Rom 8:31,32).

But there are still even other occasions that may reflect his shortcomings:

- 1) **His (mis)treatment of John Mark.** Paul was disappointed that the missionary zeal of John Mark weakened in a foreign country “and returned to Jerusalem” (Acts 13:13). Luke does not mention the reason for John Mark’s return. In Acts 15:37-38, we learn Barnabas was John Mark to come again and Paul refuses. Was Paul unable to forgive? Was Paul unwilling (until later) to give him another chance (2Tim 4:11)? Why could Barnabas see what Paul could not (until later)?
- 2) **His (mis)action in the Temple** (Acts 21:26) where he took others and with them, purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them associated with the vow. J. W. McGarvey has commented, “If disciples, whether Jewish or Gentile, should now assemble in Jerusalem, construct an altar, appoint a priesthood, and offer sin-offerings, they could but be regarded as apostates from Christ. But why should it be regarded as a crime now if it was innocent then?” (Commentary of Acts of Apostles, 260.)
- 3) **And then there is his self-revelation that sin “came alive” in him.** And the sin he uses to illustrate is covetousness (Romans 7:7-20).

What helped Paul “see the light” when he came to Jesus:

1. **He was not without sin.** As a Pharisee (based on the actions of the many Pharisees with whom Jesus dealt), he would have been influenced to find sin in others before finding sin in himself (Matt 7:5; 23:23; Rom 2:1).
2. **He realized the weight of sin.** It is not until the speech before Agrippa (the third record of his conversion) that we learn from Jesus why Saul was persecuting Him in His people; Jesus said his stubbornness was the weight that kept him kicking against the goads. Paul stopped kicking. For three days, he sat quietly reflecting on himself and on what his actions were actually doing.
3. **He was willing to change.** It is also in the third record that tells us that Jesus said he would “open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (26:18). He would preach what he would learn to live.
4. **He was able to go the distance.** While the timeline is not clear, Paul does say that between his conversion in Damascus (Acts 9:19) and his later return to Damascus (Acts 9:23), that for three years he “went away to Arabia.” This period of time is not spent in modern Arabia (i.e. Saudi Arabia), but rather the Nabatean kingdom on the east side of the Jordan. As Robert Smith states, the term “Arab” “could be used as a virtual equivalent of ‘Nabatean’ (1 Macc 5:25, 39, 9:35, and 2 Macc 5:8)” (ABD, 1:326). Simply, he followed the commission Jesus gave him but he went where there was more pagan influences than Jewish. He proclaimed “the whole purpose of God” and “did not shrink from declaring... “anything that was profitable.” (Acts 20:27, 20).



In application, we must not try to dismiss our own sins and sinfulness (or the sins of any other) because sin must be confessed to be forgiven by God’s grace. (1Jn 1:7, 9). Like all converts, Saul had to repent of his sins (Acts 2:38) so they can accept the forgiveness of those sins from the Atoning Sacrifice. And the Apostle Paul, like all Christians, had to pray continually for forgiveness (Mat 6:12; Luke 11:4).