

A Revelation From God  
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Some have blamed Paul for Christianity. They claim that is his invention and, more seriously, that it has nothing to do with Jesus the Christ, who did not come to birth a new religion. Paul doesn't ascribe to this view at all: **the gospel I preach is not man's gospel.** (v. 11) . . . **I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.** This can be taken two ways: 1. that the gospel was revealed to him by Jesus; or 2. that the gospel came by way of a revelation of Jesus to him. The latter has the benefit of aligning with the surprised by grace piece of the Damascus Road experience. We covered that in the Acts 9 reading this morning. He was known as Saul of Tarsus at the time of this incident. **Still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.** (Acts 9:1) He had it in for those Christians and he persecuted them ruthlessly, he was making a name for himself by so doing and seemed intent on making a career of it. Now he was a student of Gamaliel<sup>1</sup> who in Acts 5 had counseled quite differently: **So in the present case I tell you, have nothing to do with these men and let them alone, if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found to be opposing God!** Saul fell in with those who chose to actively suppress the early church. It is hard to grasp how much of the massive amount of Jewish teaching Saul had mastered (the Torah, the Mishnah and the Gemara which together compose the Talmud) and he was a **Pharisee of Pharisees** as he put it—extremely zealous for the traditions of the elders, or fathers. This characteristic he seems to have shared with Martin Luther who was a very scrupulous Roman Churchman, extremely well studied, and it was his inability to be perfect that drove him to his knees, and the realization that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone that sparked the Protestant Reformation. He was not the only prominent figure in that movement but the similarity of temperament between Martin and Paul has been noted and studied at some depth. At any rate the last thing Saul was looking for was an encounter with the crucified and risen Lord—it upended everything. Figuratively and literally. That encounter, which demonstrated the truth that Jesus never tasted corruption despite dying on the cross compelled Paul to accept it as evidence that Jesus was indeed the One prophesied in Scripture. He was the Messiah.

According to Acts 9: 3c-5 **suddenly there shone a great light around him. And he fell to the ground and he heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I**

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<sup>1</sup> He was the son of **Simeon ben Hillel** and grandson of the great Jewish teacher Hillel the Elder. Gamaliel is thought to have died in 52 AD. It is my sense that Gamaliel's father was the Simeon who greeted the Christ child for he was awaiting the consolation of Israel and came to the temple at the same time as the prophetess Anna as recorded in the nativity narrative in Luke 2. Because he believed that Jesus might be the Messiah he was snubbed for the annals of Jewish history as an apostate.

**am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** A light and a voice from heaven announcing the Lord! Now the men traveling with him heard the voice, but they saw no one. This was Paul’s **revelation of Jesus Christ**. And this, from today’s reading is how he described that moment: **But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles**—this being the very content of God’s instructions to Ananias (**Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel**. Acts 9:15), the whole episode comes into focus for us. Now this is important to point out because all we have from the account earlier in Acts 9 is **a great light** and **a voice**, identifying itself as Jesus! The supernatural revelation is interpreted for us so that we have a clear understanding. It was a heavenly vision and a heavenly call.

Now we might want to explain all this naturalistically, suggesting that Ananias and Paul conversed over this divine appointment. But the Lord speaking to Ananias in a vision says differently. The Lord specifically says, **For I will show him how much he will have to suffer for the sake of my name**. (9:16) That is certainly a clue as to what some of the content of Paul’s time in the Arabian desert communing with the Lord—and sorting out the massive amount of scriptural knowledge according to a new principle of understanding. **The gospel which I preached . . . I received through a revelation of Jesus Christ**. No wonder he believes there is no other gospel! Consider the source!

All this to show that Paul was indeed God’s spokesperson. And that his source was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The other disciples may have walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry but Paul claimed to have communed with the crucified and risen Lord. Called by God, commissioned by God, serving God. **If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ**. Paul is alluding to his people pleasing days as Saul when he was determined to murder Christians if and when he could—to keep them from defiling the religion he held so dear, leading others astray with strange doctrine. Saul became the loving pastor of the church which he had so violently sought to destroy.

Paul had a credibility problem. Of course he did. After his vicious persecution of the church who would dare to trust him? Well, praise God, Barnabas did. When the church at Jerusalem heard that the hand of the Lord was with the church plant in Antioch, they sent Barnabas. Acts 11:23-26: **When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians**. The credibility problem was with Christians whom he had persecuted, and with Jewish Christians in the

Jerusalem vicinity. However, this would not have been the case in Galatia where Paul was credentialed by his message, his gospel and the spiritual results that accompanied the preaching of that gospel.

Now as I have been emphasizing the supernatural side of Paul's conversion, I want to pause and draw our attention to the kindness of the Lord in confirmation. Yes, when Ananias came to Paul he confirmed, or validated Paul's experience—underscoring that what he had experienced was real beyond the subjective of seeing **a great light** and hearing **a voice** which we may safely interpret as coming from heaven (and not inside his head!). The same Lord he say, is the same Lord who appeared in the same circumstances to Ananias in a vision. And the same Lord who ministered to Paul through Ananias also ministered through Barnabas who commended and recommended Paul—even to the point of teaching with Paul in Antioch for a year. Those who trusted Barnabas would transfer some of that trust to Paul. God used other Christians to validate the call and the integrity of Paul—confirming the call, validating the message God gave Paul in solo. Thus the usual and customary, or, normal and ordinary reinforced the supernatural—indeed without that confirmation, some caution about what one claims to have heard from heaven, or directly from the Lord is very warranted. The testimony of Scripture is subject to the same constraints—you remember the massive amount of Jewish sacred writings that Paul mastered, this served as ballast to keep the ship of interpretation stable, or settled in the water.

There is something of credentialing included in **you have heard of my former life in Judaism**. This adds to serious learning and scholarly aptitude, the fact that Judaism is “a way of life”—fully operand observable. Christianity was also known as ‘The Way’ long before it was known as Christianity. It is still a way of life built upon faith and a belief system. **I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my peers, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.** (v.14) We would say he was at the head of his class. Saul was an exceptional student of Gamaliel. And when Saul became Paul, that connection was probably ruptured even though Gamaliel lived beyond the Council of Jerusalem which brought some of the turbulence of the strife between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians to a formal close—even as the dominance of Jewish Christians succumbed to the overwhelming tide of new converts from the nations.

The divine encounter between Jesus and Saul on the Damascus Road, a supernatural event, changed everything. Paul was in for a major theological retooling. And Scripture suggests that this process took the better part of ten years—with Paul preaching constantly as he grew in understanding. What a relief that the developmental side of the preacher's work get's established so early on! That encounter led to Paul's conversion—and because this is a major flip flop, because some might say it signaled the character flaw of inconsistency, or instability, Paul works at establishing the validity of supernatural sourcing: **set apart before birth . . . called by grace . . . and commissioned** (to preach to the

**Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel).** Paul's **I did not consult with anyone** should have the exclusion of the Lord attached—Paul intends to communicate that he did not seek the counsel or endorsement of **those who were apostles before me.** (v. 17) He had enough to do to sort through all that he had already learned (the Talmud!) all of which had to be restructured since the Messiah had appeared, and the fullness of time had arrived. Those are the times we are living in! We are no longer looking forward to the incarnation, the first advent of Christ—we look forward to the second coming instead *and that is very, very different.*

We affirm that the Kingdom has come with power. And we further affirm that the power of which we speak is the power of the Holy Spirit. That power was poured according to the prophetic word at the time of Jesus' ascension, somewhat prior to Pentecost. The empowerment from on high came after the disciples had been together and in prayer for a season of ten days (**not many days** from the ascension) on the fiftieth day after the resurrection (which coincided with "the feast of first fruits"). The ascension occurred after forty days (from the resurrection) during which time Jesus appeared and taught his disciples many things pertaining to the Kingdom—or the age of the Church which would commence with the out pouring of the Spirit.

Now the reason that this is so important is that to the naturalistic mind the only way of transmission was by way of human transfer. Jesus taught the disciples and the disciples, in turn taught others-so that assumption is that everything hinged on the usual and ordinary means of transmission! However, this is not the case. The Holy Spirit is the tutor of all believers—leading them into remembrance of all things that Christ had taught, all truth and, whether we like it or not, this is a supernatural process. When we who were set apart from before our birth, are called by his grace and the Son is revealed to us as Lord and God, we all graduate, as it were, from the same university! It is not dependent on man, but on God. And, yes, others may confirm the business but they do not originate, or cause it.

**Amen.**