

In my previous posts I talked about Paul's life up to his conversion and the conversion experience itself. Now, for two posts, I want to talk about what the conversion actually \*meant\* to Paul, particularly in terms of how it affected both his thinking and his life (which, for Paul, were very closely related to one another). His thinking involved his theology and his subsequent life involved missionary work as the newly minted apostle of Jesus with a distinctive message.

It is easiest to understand Paul's subsequent missionary activities and evangelistic message by realizing how an appearance of the living Jesus would force him from "fact" to "implications." (I've discussed some of this on the blog before, but indulge me for a bit: I'm trying to clarify in my own mind exactly how I'm imagining all this...)

For him the "fact" was that Jesus was alive again (it was a "fact" for him because he had seen Jesus alive three years after he had died). And from that fact Paul started reasoning backwards. This backward reasoning must have proceeded through a number of steps. They ended in a remarkable place. Paul came to believe that he himself, the chosen apostle, had been commissioned by God to fulfil the predictions of Jewish Scripture, prophecies recorded by those inspired by the Spirit of God hundreds of years earlier but looking forward to his day, to his labors, and to him personally. It's a breath-taking conclusion.

Here is how the thought process appears to have worked. Paul, as I indicated, started with the "fact" that Jesus was alive again. Since Paul also knew that Jesus had been crucified, his reappearance must mean that he had come back to life. There was only one way for that to have happened. God did a miracle. God had raised Jesus from the dead. But if God raised Jesus from the dead, that would mean that Jesus really was the one who stood under God's special favor. He was the one chosen by God. He was the anointed one. But then why would he die? If he was in God's special favor, why would God let him be executed? Would God require him to be executed? Tortured to death? Is this what God does to the one he favors? What does he do to his enemies?

The matter was actually a bit more complicated than that for Paul, because Jesus didn't die just any death, not even just any excruciating death. He was killed on a cross. That was a particular problem for Paul because he knew full well (as he indicates in his letter to the Galatians) that Scripture itself pronounces God's curse on anyone who dies on a tree (Galatians 3:13; quoting Deuteronomy 21:23). If Jesus was the one blessed by God, how could he be the one cursed by God? Paul drew what for him was the natural conclusion. Jesus must not have died for anything he himself had done wrong. He was not being cursed for his own deeds. He must have been cursed for the deeds of others.

Paul, as a good citizen of the ancient world, and a good Jew in particular, immediately saw that Jesus must have been a kind of human sacrifice. A sacrifice who suffered not because of his own misdoings but because of the misdoings of others. Jesus' death was not an accident or a gross miscarriage of justice. It was an atoning sacrifice that could remove sins. And why would God ordain that? Because he wanted to save people from their sins. And it was Jesus' death that did it, as proved by the fact that God raised him from the dead (which was proved by the fact that Paul had seen him alive).

From here came a further and all-important thought. If the salvation of God comes by the death and resurrection of Jesus, this must be how God had planned all along to save his chosen people. That in turn must mean that salvation cannot come by the zealous adherence to the prescriptions of the Jewish law. If salvation could come by belonging to

the covenantal community of the chosen people, there would be no reason for God's messiah to have suffered an excruciating death. And so following the law must have no bearing on how a person stands in a right relationship with God.

That in turn has inordinately significant implications. If the law has no bearing on a person's standing before God, then being a Jew cannot be a requirement for those who want to belong to God's people and enjoy his gracious act of salvation. The only thing that must matter is trusting in the sacrificial atonement provided by Christ. And that means that the message of salvation is not for Jews only - although it certainly is for them, since it was through the Jewish messiah sent to the Jewish people in fulfilment of the plans of the Jewish God as set forth (Paul came to realize) in the Jewish scriptures. But the message is not for Jews only, those who observe the law. It is for all people, Jew and gentile. And it comes to gentiles apart from observing the Jewish law.

To be members of God's covenantal people, it is not necessary for gentiles to become Jews. They do not need to be circumcised, observe the Sabbath, keep kosher, or any of the rest. They need to believe in the death and resurrection of the messiah Jesus. This was an earth-shattering realization for Paul. Prior to this, the followers of Jesus - the first Christians - were of course Jews who understood that he was the messiah who had died and been raised from the dead. But they knew this as the act of the Jewish God given to the Jewish people. Certainly gentiles could find this salvation as well. But first they had to be Jewish. Not for Paul. Jew or gentile, it didn't matter. What mattered was faith in Christ.

(A lot of this I've said before on the blog: but not, I think, the next set of implications, which I'll address tomorrow.)

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