

SEEING OURSELVES IN THE BIBLE: THE APOSTLE PAUL

Hello, brothers and sisters in Christ!

Welcome to a new segment of our Bible lessons. This blog is meant to get us thinking about the men and the women of Bible as the real people they were, with short-comings and successes, so that maybe we can recognize aspects of ourselves in their stories. When we examine how these people related to God and how it transformed their lives, it can give us confidence that we can come into true relationship with God and allow Him to transform our own lives in turn. I love the story of the Apostle Paul as the man who underwent the ultimate "attitude adjustment" in his face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ Jesus and how that change of heart allowed God to use Paul to change the world.

If you're thinking that God can't use you in the same way that he used Paul, if you are quietly minimalizing your potential to serve the Lord...well, STOP THAT! Here's why:

- 1) We are the chosen people of an UNLIMITED God. YOU are the child of the unlimited, all-powerful God.
- 2) God has a purpose for EVERYONE. Your existence is not an accident. If you think otherwise, I'd encourage you to go back and examine our previous studies of how carefully God directed history from Eve to Christ to preserve the lineage of the Messiah. God has just as carefully directed your lineage to your existence in this moment. He has a plan for you.
- 3) There are no small roles in God's plan. Maybe you've seen the inspirational quote: "Be strong, you never know who you are inspiring"? Let's paraphrase it here: "Be faithful: You never know what role you are playing in God's great plans". When you drop a dollar in a donation box or buy a bottle of water for a homeless person or teach a child to understand the Bible or are kind to someone for no reason other than showing God's love, you are making an impact. You may not see the consequences, but God will.

- 4) You can never fall so far that God can pull you back to your spiritual feet and bring you back to His side. Let's just consider the life of Paul for a few minutes as proof of this truth.

At every point in the believer's life, there comes to a moment of realizing the reality of Jesus Christ, understanding our need for forgiveness through Christ, and recognizing our dependence on the grace of God in Christ as our hope for salvation. This conversion is the moment the believer steps into a new life in Christ. Paul's story is a perfect illustration of this truth.

Consider Paul when we first meet him in the book of Acts: Though Paul has spent his lifetime seeking righteousness in God, he's very much enmeshed in the ways of the world (so much so that he's inadvertently made himself an enemy of the Lord). Paul was a Pharisee, a position of authority and esteem among the Jewish people. He calls himself "blameless" before the Law. This means that he was obeying every tenant of the Law, following every ritual of the Law---in other words, seeking righteousness and salvation by his own self-works. He represented every ideal of the world, but doing things right according to the prescriptions of the world does not amount to being right with God. Paul was probably convinced that he was doing everything right, that he understood what God wanted perfectly, that he was enacting God's will, perhaps he even believed that his status as a Pharisee was proof that the Lord approved him (how often in this world do we see someone with many material goods, a nice home, a successful spouse and children and assumed that the Lord has approved and blessed them?). The Law and the Scriptures had been interpreted according to human understanding and reason.

Paul most likely had the same expectations of a Messiah that other Jewish leaders shared: The Messiah would be a King to redeem Israel from Roman rule while forgetting the Scriptures that prophesized the Messiah would also be a suffering servant who would die. No god had ever come to earth and assumed human form, so it is understandable that Christ's arrival in humble flesh would have been unexpected. For that matter, Jesus had died a criminal's death. What would have seemed "kingly" about that from the perspective of Jewish leaders? Jesus had challenged the Jewish leadership. His teachings contradicted

the Law of Moses, which had been given to the Hebrew people by God Himself. Their eyes were on the blessings that God had promised Abraham...promises that are still to come at the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ. We also have to understand that the Jewish people had spent centuries obeying a Law that required their separation from pagan nations who worshipped false gods. They had learned from the lessons of their ancestors, who suffered separation from God through the exile to Babylon for their failures at recognizing, worshipping, and obeying the One True God. Naturally, to have a man among them teaching and behaving in ways that were contradictory to that Law (such as performing miracles and eating on the Sabbath) would have elicited suspicion. Those like the Pharisees were recognized as teachers because they followed a course of study carefully established by the Sanhedrin. Jesus and John the Baptist had not done these things. In other words, everything Jesus taught and did was contradictory to every worldly standard.

With that in mind, Paul had a genuine desire to please God. However, Paul was so determined that he was doing everything right that he had closed his mind, his heart, and his eyes to the reality that the Lord he so adored and strove so hard to obey, the Messiah he had awaited, had finally arrived. The salvation he sought to achieve by his own works was being offered, yet Paul did not recognize it.

And, tragically, there are many people today who still do not recognize the reality of Jesus Christ's presence or their need for forgiveness, salvation, and hope that can only be attained through faith in Christ. Why? Proverbs 14:12 warns us that there is a way that seems right to man, but that way ends in death. Without Christ, we are following a path to righteousness that was written according to the ways of men. We know that, because of Adam and Eve eating the fruit, sin and rebelliousness has entered the heart of every person. We can read the Bible and think we understand what it means to be righteous. Some of us even believe we can discern God's will and live by it without ever having read a Word that God placed in the Bible.

What we are doing is following human ideals of what it means to be a good person; we are trying to attain righteousness by doing things our way. We're following a path on a map that is incomplete because we do not have the benefit of God's greater vision. God has laid out the course of history: He

knows where creation began, He knows how history will unfold, He knows that path men must take to be redeemed and enter into the kingdom of Christ, and He knows the moment when the establishment of that Kingdom will be completed (for it already began with Christ's death and resurrection) in the Parousia. The map we're using trying to gain our righteousness through our own efforts probably doesn't show the gaping pit about to swallow us or that we're about to tumble off a cliff. We have a wallet-size snapshot compared to God's big picture.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those of us who are like the Pharisees: We have our own ideas of how God fits into our world, how God will (and should) act in our lives, and if God doesn't conform to those expectations, we doubt Him (or worse we outright reject Him as the Pharisees rejected the reality of Jesus as the Messiah). Once again, we're trying to navigate life with our own incomplete map. Others of us believe that we have made so many mistakes, sank so far into sin, that there's no possible way that God could ever forgive us. Why would the most holy God choose us for His own?

Paul must surely have wondered the same thing when he had that moment of realization that Christ Jesus was indeed the Messiah, that he had failed to recognize the God he had tried to serve with diligence and zeal, and that he even had the innocent blood of Christ's believers on his hands. See what happened? God, who is full of grace and mercy, looked into Paul's heart, saw the repentance, knew Paul's great potential to serve His plans, and was faithful to forgive Paul's sins. More than forgiving Paul's sins, God received Paul as His own apostle and prophet. If God can show this kind of mercy to Paul, we can be assured that He is capable to forgive our own sins when we approach Him openly, sincerely, and with genuine zeal for Him.

Modern culture nurtures and fans the embers of the innate rebellious tendencies within man. The word "dependence" carries a negative connotation (it brings to mind being trapped in destructive relationships or addicted to chemicals that harm our bodies and minds). Independence, self-reliance, achievement, success (evidenced in material possessions, diplomas, social status), and self-determination are ingrained goals in the modern psyche. We can accomplish anything we desire if we only try hard enough. Once we do, we should take pride in our status. We deserve recognition and accolades for our achievements.

Here's the reality: THIS WAY DOESN'T WORK.

We can't achieve redemption, forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life on our own anymore than we can expect God to conform His plans to our will. We can't do enough good deeds to punch our own ticket into the Kingdom of the Lord. We can't buy our entry with donations to charities. As we see from Paul and the Pharisees, we can't expect that God is going to conform to our expectations. Anything we achieve in this world is doomed because this world will eventually pass away. Only the ways and the people of the Lord will endure. Take a deep breath and accept this truth: It's okay to admit we need and are utterly dependent on Jesus Christ. We can't do it on our own...and you know what? We don't need to be ashamed of that.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. He loves us as His own people, His family, even as His own little children. King David (who has his own story of adoration of God, descent into sin, repentance, and forgiveness of God) reminds us in Psalm 103 that the Lord will put our transgressions as far as the east is from the west when we put aside our worldly ambitions and pride and acknowledge our need and desire for that forgiveness and relationship with the Lord.

If you think about it, Paul got the first recorded "Come to Jesus" moment, and he got it from Jesus Himself. Paul thought he was doing everything right. He was so convinced of it that he inadvertently became an enemy of the very God that he loved and desired to serve. He was so convinced of his place among the chosen people of God that he was in reality persecuting the true chosen people of the Lord, even approving their executions. There, on the road to Damascus, Paul was confronted with the reality: He was not the blameless, righteous man he imagined. In fact, he was a sinner (Paul even called himself the worst of sinners).

Give credit to Paul: Once he had that "come to Jesus" moment, he ran with it. He still lived his life with the zeal for the Lord and the desire to live according to God's will, but this time he was following the path actually established by God instead of the map drawn according to man's understanding of God. Once Paul let go of pride in himself and surrendered to dependence on God, giving God control over his life, the Lord was able to use him to accomplish great things. Many people were brought to Jesus because of Paul's

tireless efforts to live by the Lord---and people are still reading the teachings God imparted through Paul today, coming to know Jesus better because of these teachings. Paul did many good works for the Lord not because he thought they made him righteous but because doing good works was an expression of his gratitude to God and displayed God's love to others so that they could be brought to belief in the Lord and His ways.

Each of us needs to have that same gut-check moment: Are we willing to admit our complete dependence on God? Are we willing to acknowledge that we've been pursuing the goals of this world according to the ways of this world instead of seeking the true path of the Lord? Are we willing to let go of our own ambitions and control of our lives and surrender these things to God's perfect will? Are we willing to stop running so hard in the opposite direction from Christ and rest in assurance that he's already achieved our righteousness and salvation through His death and resurrection? Are we? Are you?