

Why Paul?

A STUDY OF HIS DISTINCTIVE APOSTLESHIP

By Richard Jordan

There is a haunting question the church of Jesus Christ never seems to address—one that provides the antidote for the religious confusion all about us. It is really a very simple question: *Why Paul?* Exactly *why* did the Lord reach down from heaven's glory and save His chief opponent, Saul of Tarsus, and make him Paul the Apostle?

The scriptural answer to this question is not hard to find. One simple verse will suffice:

For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office”
(Romans 11:13).

Notice carefully that Paul says, “I magnify *mine office*.” Clearly Paul was not exalting himself. Rather he magnified His God-given *office* as *the Apostle of the Gentiles*. Thus, far from magnifying Paul, to speak about and magnify the fact that he is God's chosen apostle for today is to make much of that which God Himself magnifies: the office that Jesus Christ gave to Paul—and the ministry and message He gave through him.

Think for a moment: the Scriptures repeatedly refer to “the Law of Moses”—but who would question that it is in reality “the law of God?” Moses was simply the one through whom the law was given to Israel. Thus Moses boldly declared,

“Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do *them*, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you.

“Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish *ought* from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you”
(Deuteronomy 4:1,2).

Was this self-important self-exaltation on Moses' part? Would Israel be “following man rather than God” when they “obeyed Moses”? Could it be that our Lord was exalting Moses above Himself when He commanded the leper to offer “those things which Moses commanded” (Mark 1:44)? Of course not!

None of this is exalting the man Moses; rather it is a recognition of his God-given office as the Law-giver to Israel, the instrument through whom the Lord revealed His law to them. In like manner, Paul is the one through whom the Lord Jesus has made known the truth of “the mystery.” For us to recognize his special office no more exalts Paul over Christ than Israel's honoring of Moses' position exalted over Jehovah.

Paul's epistles clearly set forth his position as the “grace-giver” for the present dispensation. For example,

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,
“If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:
“How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; ...”

It was by personal, direct revelation from Christ Himself that Paul was given a new revelation about God's secret purpose in the dispensation of grace. Thus he writes about "the grace that is given to me of God, that I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles" (Romans 15:15,16).

To recognize the special place committed to the Apostle Paul in the program of God is not to exalt the man Paul. It is simply to honor his God-given position as "our apostle."

CHRIST'S EARTHLY MINISTRY

During His earthly ministry neither our Lord nor His twelve apostles ministered to the Gentiles as such. Rather, Christ came to minister to the nation Israel. Romans 15:8 is very clear on this point. This is a verse that can revolutionize your understanding of God's Word:

"Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises *made* unto the fathers."

In light of this simple declaration—one which only unbelief would gainsay—we can confidently know something: *the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John record the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ to the nation Israel exclusively.* He confirmed to Israel that the promises made to their patriarchs were true. He proclaimed the good news that they were soon to be fulfilled.

When we point out from a verse like Romans 15:8 that Christ's earthly ministry was exclusively to Israel, somewhere someone will rise in objection by quoting "the world" and "whosoever" from a verse like John 3:16. This is supposed to prove that His earthly ministry had the world—not just Israel—in view.

Unfortunately those who do so somehow ignore verses like Matthew 10:5,6.

"These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into *any* city of the Samaritans enter ye not:
"But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But why would Christ say, "God so loved the world" and yet *forbid* His apostles going to the world? What is going on? And there is more. Consider the account in Matthew 15.

"And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, *thou* Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil" (Matthew 15:22).

"According to popular view, Christ should have rushed right over to this young girl and immediately helped her. But read on: "But he answered her not a word" (15:23).

Did you think the Lord would do this to someone in such obvious need? And when His disciples interceded on her behalf, we have His plain words:

"But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24)

When we compare this verse with John 3:16, it isn't hard to get confused. Didn't Christ love this lady and her daughter? Surely He did. Then what is going on?

Unless we recognize exactly what the program of God was at the time we will never find the answer. You see, at that point the program was not a wholesale going out to the nations. The program in effect then was based on the promises made to Abraham and amplified by the prophets.

The Old Testament abounds with promises and prophecies that salvation would go to the ends of the earth *through redeemed Israel* (e.g. Genesis 22:17,18; Isaiah 60:1-3; Zechariah 8:13, 20-23, etc.). *This is why* our Lord confined His earthly ministry exclusively to the nation Israel. They were the chosen and prophesied *channel of blessing* to the nations.

God indeed loved the whole world, and His specific promise was that salvation was to go to the world *through the rise of Israel*. Reading on in Matthew 15, we discover the woman finally received the healing she sought for her daughter. It is important to see on what basis she got this blessing.

“Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.
“But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast *it* to dogs”
(Matthew 24:25,26).

Mark 7:27 amplifies the Lord's statement by adding His words: “Let the children first be filled.” The ministry was *first to Israel*—they must “first be filled” with God's blessings—then through a redeemed and “filled” Israel, salvation would go to the Gentiles. The woman's answer reflects her understanding of where she stood:

“And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table”
(Matthew 15:27).

When she took her place under Israel's table, she received the blessing which overflowed from it. In other words, she got her blessing in the program then in effect.ⁱ

This explains why our Lord was sent to none but the “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” That favored nation was in a sad spiritual condition. They surely needed to repent for they were in no condition to be a blessing to anyone.

This same program—and Israel's same need—continued on after the death and resurrection of Christ. In Acts 3:25,26, Peter clearly sets forth the program of early Acts. Speaking to the nation Israel, he says:

“Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.
“Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.

While Christ's earthly ministry had been confined only to Israel, now the ministry begins to expand; but it is still Israel *first*.” By comparing our Lord's post-resurrection orders we see this clearly:

“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospelⁱⁱ to every creature”
(Mark 16:15).

The worldwide revival that so many today erroneously seek will come when this passage is fulfilled (cf. Isaiah 2:1-2; 11:9, etc.). But we must not overlook the fact that in our Lord's commission there is a specifically designated *order* for carrying out this ministry:

“And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

Luke further develops this order in Acts 1. Let's start in verse 6:

“When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?”

Christ had spent some 40 days teaching His apostles “things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (verse 3). Clearly their question about *the restoration of the kingdom to Israel* is a solemn testimony to what was on their mind.

They did not ask about the beginning of the Body of Christ. They did not seek information about a new program to begin shortly. They did not suggest prophecy was about to give way to the mystery. On the contrary: they fully expected Him to “restore again the kingdom to Israel.” Notice the word: “again.” It is important because it fixes the nature of the kingdom they expected.

The only kingdom Israel ever had was a literal, physical, visible *earthly* kingdom. If the apostles somehow at this late date still misunderstood the nature of His kingdom, now was the time for Christ to set them straight. The fact that He does not challenge their understanding of His teaching is a forceful evidence that the kingdom is indeed a literal, earthly one—not the spiritual Body of Christ.

What He focused on was their duty in His absence:

“And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Notice the order: *Jerusalem is first*, of course, for it is “the city of the great King” (Matthew 5:35; Jeremiah 3:17). Next comes *Judaea*—that covers the area of the southern tribes. *Then Samaria* is the area of the northern tribes. These, of course, cover the whole territory of the twelve tribes of Israel. *Then and only then* were they to go “unto the uttermost part of the earth.” This is the prophetic order.

Early Acts is the record of the carrying out of this prophetic plan through Israel. It has *nothing to do with the forming of the Body of Christ or the mystery program* later revealed through the Apostle Paul.

PAUL NOT ONE OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES

While the apostles and brethren were tarrying in Jerusalem they went about fulfilling the Scriptures, complying with the instructions therein concerning the selection of a successor for Judas.

Some have accused Peter of mistakenly leading in the selection of Matthias but this simply cannot be true. Three facts conclusively eliminate Paul from the ranks of the twelve:

First, he did not qualify for the post. Acts 1:21-23 set forth the basic requirements as having “complicated with us all the time” beginning from John’s baptism until the ascension (cf. John 15:27). This, of course, was not true with Paul.

Second, Paul did not work under the same commission as the twelve. In I Corinthians 1:17, Paul says, “Christ sent me not to baptize.” In light of Matthew 28:19’s “Go ye ... baptizing,” none of the twelve could never have said this. No one working under Christ’s post-resurrection instructions could say such a thing.

Third, in I Corinthians 15:5,8 Paul clearly distinguishes himself from “the twelve.” He writes. “And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: ... And last of all he was seen of me also.” For those who regard the

inspired Word of God as the final authority these verses settle the issue conclusively. The twelve were present to see the resurrection of Christ—and Paul was not one of them!

It is a simple Scriptural fact that Paul's ministry was completely separate and distinct from that of the twelve.

PENTECOST NOT THE BODY OF CHRIST

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost is generally accepted as the reason for believing that the Body of Christ began at that time. Again, however, Scripture teaches otherwise. In fact, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is one of the great proofs that the Body of Christ did not begin in Acts 2. The fact is that the Apostle Peter, filled with the Spirit and speaking as He gave him utterance, declared the Spirit's coming to be the *fulfillment of prophecy*. In Acts 2:16 Peter explains what was happening by saying:

“But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.”

Now compare this with Ephesians 3:2-5.

“If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:
“How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,
“Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)
“Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his
holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”

This is a comparison you should learn to make: the distinction is between *prophecy* and *mystery*. Joel knew about, prophesied about and wrote about the coming of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit definitely knew what He was doing at Pentecost and He inspired Peter to declare, “This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.” He was fulfilling prophecy, carrying out the next step in the long-prophesied kingdom program.

But Ephesus 3 is equally clear that Joel knew nothing about the Body of Christ. He thus did not prophesy or write about it. Now: If Joel (a) knew about, prophesied about and wrote about what happened at Pentecost and yet (b) he did *not* know about or write about the Body of Christ, then (c) the forming of the Body of Christ could not have been what was taking place on the day of Pentecost.

The same is true of the program following Pentecost. Acts 3:21 is clear that what was happening was that which was “spoken by the mouth of all the prophets since the world began.” This is the *opposite of* “the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began” (Romans 16:25).

Passages such as Acts 3:25,26; 5:31,32; 8:1 demonstrate the program was still to Israel *first*. In fact, as late as Acts 11:19 we read that they were “preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.”

Sad to say, the nation Israel rejected Christ—first in His earthly ministry and then in His resurrection witness through “the little flock” under the leadership of the twelve. Israel even persecuted those who preached Christ, and Saul of Tarsus became the leader of that persecution.

It was in this crisis that God interrupted the prophetic program and saved Saul, making him the Apostle, so that He might unfold His secret purpose of grace to him and through him to us.

Paul spelled it out this way:

“Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did *it* ignorantly in unbelief.

“And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant ... that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” (I Timothy 1:13-16).

PAUL’S OWN CLAIMS

Paul’s epistles set forth his inspired claims for the distinct character of his Apostleship and message. The following sampling leaves no doubt about the matter:

Romans 11:13: For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office.”

Romans 15:15,16: “... I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind, because of the grace that is given to me of God,
That I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles ...”

Romans 16:25,26: Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began,
“But now is made manifest, ...”

Galatians 1:11,12: “... I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.
“For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught *it*, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Ephesians 3:1-3: For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,
“If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:
“How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; ...”

Colossians 1:25,26: “... I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God;
“*Even* the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints.”

1 Timothy 2:5-7: For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;
“Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.
“Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, *and* lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity.”

Titus 1:2,3: In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began;
“But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Saviour.”

1 Corinthians 15:3: For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; ...”

1 Corinthians 11:23: For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, ...”

1 Corinthians 15:51: Behold, I shew you a mystery; ...”

These—and the list could go on and on—are Paul’s own words on this matter. Since he writes by inspiration they are also *God’s Word* on the subject. Scriptures teach as a *fact* that Paul’s apostleship and message are absolutely separate from that of the twelve before him. This means, of course, that we must go to Paul’s writings to find what God has to say to us as members of the Body of Christ.

This is what the church in general has refused to accept. Confusing God’s prophesied kingdom program with the mystery committed to Paul for us in this present dispensation results in spiritual catastrophe—just look around to see it on every hand. Who can honestly doubt that the confusion and division that so grip the Church of today is connected with the warning in Galatians 1:8,9:

“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

“As we said before, so say I now again, If any *man* preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.”

You can’t avoid it: failure to honor the distinct ministry and message our Lord committed to Paul results in great loss. It certainly did for the Galatians. They had been drawn away from Paul and his grace message, causing him to write to them:

“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel” (Galatians 1:6).

“O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?” (Galatians 3:1).

Where is then the blessedness ye spake of ...?” (Galatians 4:15)

Departure from Paul’s God-given message results in the *loss* of the joy and blessedness that standing in grace brings.

Friend, the only path to *true* revival and spiritual health is through a renewed interest in what God has said *to us*. It is not praying for revival, not in fasting, confessing or even making special sacrifices. No, the only path that will lead us—whether the church in general or you and me individually—to true spiritual vigor is to honor His message for today. *This* is the one great need of the church today.

Paul’s words to Timothy are important for us too:

“Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

“That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us” (II Timothy 1:13,14).

“Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

“And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (II Timothy 2:1,2).

This is the attitude we are to have toward Paul’s distinctive message and ministry: Hold on to it, protect it, keep it, guard it—and most of all, pass it on to others. It is the message of Jesus Christ to the world today.

ⁱ For a more thorough study of Gentile salvation then and now, see the editor’s booklet, *Where We Fit In*.

ⁱⁱ This, of course, is the “gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 24:14), not the “gospel of the grace of God” much later revealed through Paul.