

## Reflections on Saint Paul: Paul's Conversion

By Aidan Dewar

*“Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” - Acts 5v58-60*

In celebration of our 150th anniversary and in recognition of our patron saint, Paul, over the coming year, I will be offering reflections on the letters of St Paul. However, to understand his writings, it's important, first, to understand Paul, the man.

We first meet Paul in the book of Acts, under the name 'Saul'. We read he was a witness to the brutal murder of the apostle Stephen, as seen in chapter 5. At this point in his journey, Paul was ferociously opposed to the new followers of Christ and an advocate of the use of physical violence, to silence 'heretics', proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus and His kingship.

Paul's pre-conversion attitude towards the early Christians was born from his understanding of salvation. Paul was a Jew, specifically a Pharisee. The Pharisees believed salvation would come as a consequence of the liberation (restoration) of Israel, both from Roman rule and ideas contrary to their strict reading of the Law. Following the completion of this liberation (and only then), would come the [physical] resurrection of the righteous dead, who would then live for eternity in a restored Israel - God's people, with Him, on the inside, everyone else locked out, for good.

However, the means by which the liberation; then resurrection would come about, was a serious point of contention. The Pharisees were split into 2 further factions, the Hillelites and the Shammaites. The Hillelites were more tolerant of the status quo, so long as they could live out the Torah, by their own expression, who cares if the Romans control Jerusalem, God will restore Israel in His way, in His own time. The Shammaites, of whom Paul was a disciple, believed they had a responsibility to bring about the liberation of Israel on God's behalf - and that meant armed rebellion against the Romans and suppression of beliefs they viewed an affront to that which is Holy.

The early 'Christians' were not merely an annoyance Paul wished to oppress; they were a new and growing obstacle to the liberation of Israel and the more they grew, the further he and his worldview was from salvation. Paul, therefore, saw the destruction of the early Christians as his urgent, moral duty.

Acts 9, recounts Paul's miraculous conversion, on the road to Damascus. In verse 5, the physically resurrected Jesus appears to Paul, divine; authoritative - Paul is temporarily blinded from the experience. In this incredible exchange of humility and grace, Paul finally recognises the means to restore Israel is at hand because Christ defeated death through His resurrection, first. Paul awakens to the truth, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, not its destroyer.

Paul's journey from zealous persecutor of Christ to arguably the greatest Christian apologist in all of history, did not just give birth to his magnificent epistles but demonstrates how God can use even the most wicked to His glory.