



RESOURCE KIT FOR THE STUDY OF SAINT PAUL: SESSION ONE

This 'kit' is provided as a follow-up to the interactive e-conference on Paul sponsored by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to mark the close of the Year of Paul on 30 June, 2009. It may be used by individuals or by groups of people who might meet regularly to use it as a basis for communal study, reflection and discussion.

The passages are taken from Paul's **Letters**, along with some extracts from the **Acts of the Apostles** that provide a context for what we read in the Letters. Details from the Letters and the Acts are not always in harmony, since they stem from different times. But together they fill out the picture.

The selection of passages has been made according to major **themes** that feature in the Letters of Paul. While this procedure may give a more rounded presentation of Paul's theology, it has the disadvantage of removing the passages from their immediate contexts in the wider texts. Those who have time and leisure might profit from reading the entire letters from which the selections are taken.

Those who would prefer to study **entire** letters are advised to begin with the shorter ones such as **Philippians**, **1 Thessalonians**, **Philemon**, and **Colossians**.

Though the early themes by way of introduction focus upon Paul's early life and mission, the later ones follow in no particular **order**. Individuals or groups should feel free to pick and choose among the themes as they see fit, rather than being bound to see the whole course through to the end.

The **Questions** posed at the conclusion to each selection are intended to stimulate the reflection and discussion that might promote deeper engagement with the texts. It is in no sense necessary to move through all the questions. Stay with those that you or your group find most interesting. The final questions in each case are more directed to seeking the meaning of the texts for our life in the Church today.

The accompanying **Brief Sketch of Paul's Life and Missionary Career** and the **Glossary of Pauline Terms and Concepts** are provided to help with the interpretation of the texts. If you or your group come across terms or concepts that are difficult or unusual, consult the Glossary.

In some cases the texts are accompanied—before or after— by a **Note** explaining the role of the text in the wider context and providing information essential for understanding.

The **translation** used in the texts is that of the *New Revised Standard Version* (with spelling occasionally modified to conform to Australian usage).

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SESSION ONE

THEMES:

1. PAUL'S EARLY LIFE & CONVERSION

The first appearance of Saul (Paul): the Stoning of Stephen: Acts 7:58—8:1

7:58 Then they dragged (Stephen) out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named **Saul**. 59 While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. 8:1 And **Saul** approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

The First Account of the Conversion of Paul: Acts 9:1-20

9:1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

7 The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11 The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,

19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Questions:

1. Why do you think the early Christians described their new faith as 'the Way'?
2. What is the significance of the question the 'voice' (Jesus) puts to Paul?
3. How would you describe the role played by Ananias in the incident? Is St. Luke trying to say something about Christian life through his description of Ananias' action in regard to Paul?

Paul's Own Account of his Early Life and Conversion: Galatians 1:11-24

1:11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

15 But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; 19 but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother.

20 In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, 22 and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ;

23 they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." 24 And they glorified God because of me.

Questions:

1. Why do you think Paul makes so much of his 'career' as a persecutor of the Church?
2. What do you think are the most important things about the description of the turn-around in his life that he gives in vv 15-16 above?
3. What was the change in Paul's understanding of Jesus Christ? Recall Acts 9:20 (above).
4. Why do you think that he so emphasizes his independence from any of the other apostles?
5. Think of yourself as a 'fly on the wall' in Peter's house in Jerusalem during Paul's two-week visit (Gal 1:18-19). What do you think they talked about?

A More Theological Account of Coming to Faith in Christ: 2 Corinthians 4:4-6

4:4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 6 For it is the God who said, "*Let light shine out of darkness*," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Questions

1. In the context of discussing the experience of the apostolic life, Paul seems to make a brief allusion to the experience of his conversion in v 6. In what context did God say, "*Let light shine out of darkness*"? What might be the implications of this for his understanding of coming to faith in Christ?
2. Does this reference to "light" and "darkness" remind you of any other notable document in the New Testament?
3. What do you think is meant by "shone in our hearts"?
4. What do you think he means by describing Christ as "the image of God" and by speaking of "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"?

The 'Surpassing Value' of knowing Christ Jesus: Philippians 3:4-12

3:4 ...If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Questions:

1. How do you respond to the very strong contrast Paul makes between his previous life as a devout Pharisee and his life following his 'capture' by Christ?
2. Do you understand what is meant by 'righteousness'? (cf. the Glossary).
3. What do you think Paul means by speaking of the 'power' of Christ's resurrection and 'becoming like him in his death' (v 10)?
4. Can you recognise the image that underlies Paul's statements in vv 12-14?
5. What do you think Paul's insistence in these verses that he has not yet 'reached the goal' but is straining towards it 'forgetting what lies behind', says about his spirituality?
6. Overall, what does this text say to you about Paul's relationship with Christ?
7. How might the text speak to my own understanding and practice of Christian life?