

St. Paul: Saturday Session Eighteen: Mystical Body of Christ

Applications of Paul's Message: Christ Jesus

Paul's Experience with Christ's Body

Paul never saw Christ's earthly body. Jesus appeared to Paul some years after He rose from the dead, 1 Cor 9:1, & 15:8. We usually date Paul's knowledge of the Mystical Body of Christ from those appearances. Christ Jesus "seized" him, Phil 3:12. After Christ seized him, Paul was equal to the other apostles, 1 Cor 15:5-7. Paul even claims that God called him from his mother's womb, Gal 1:15. That's puzzling. Paul's contemporaries hardly noticed this calling during the years that Paul tried to kill Christians. However, Paul's life does resemble Jeremiah's, because both answered God in spurts, with hesitation, heading in the wrong direction too often, and complaining about God's call. So Jeremiah and Paul fit this description: ***Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you came out of the womb, I sanctified you. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations***, Jer 1:5. The Anchor Bible develops this similarity in its introduction to 1 Corinthians, p 4. First Paul thought God called him to exterminate Christians. Later he discovered instead that God called him to be Christ's apostle to the nations. This diametrical shift changed history.

Though this is a *toto caelo* shift, a wise man would have seen it coming, because Christ perfects the law of Moses. Paul insists that precisely his Mosaic training led him to Christ. Raised a Pharisee, Paul lived and loved the Mosaic law, Phil 3:5-6; Gal 1:14; 2 Cor 11:22. Without knowing it, Paul used the Law to accept Christ. As Jesus often said, Moses taught about Him, the Christ to come. See: Luke 24:27, Mat 17:3, Mk 9:4, Mk 12:26-27, Lk 9:30, Lk 20:37, Lk 24:44, Jn 1:45, Jn 3:14, Jn 5:45, Jn 5:46, Acts 3:22, Acts 26:22-23. Moses was really all about Jesus.

As the Jerusalem Biblical Commentary (JBC) notes, p 1384, this preparation enabled Paul to envision the Old Testament (OT) vividly, and to live it fully. So he could properly interpret it as prophesying Jesus. To interpret it that way, Paul used the exegetical method, so familiar to Jewish scholars, called *midrash*. This method acknowledges that there is always a deeper meaning behind Scripture's words. Biblical scholars excavate this meaning. Because God is perfect, His word cannot be confined to any one detailed expression. Instead, God's word transcends every interpretation. Therefore, we must interpret and reinterpret often, finding more perfection in Scripture. Paul refers to Scripture as light, because it shines more perfectly as we comprehend it better. God compels apostles to share this light, to proclaim the gospel, to enlighten all men. As Paul puts it: ***For God who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory on the face of Christ***, 2 Cor 4:6.

This light is God's love, the center, or sun, radiating all light and warmth to us. Love Himself seized Paul, and convinced him that ***Jesus is Lord***, 1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9; Phl 2:11. Paul, after all, saw the face of Christ. By seizing Paul near Damascus, Jesus instantly delivered so much revelation that Paul spent the rest of his life explaining it. Naturally, Christ provided more revelation after this initial seizure. But the light of Christ so illumined Paul's mind that he saw how Moses proclaimed Jesus to be Lord. This is the ***mystery of Christ***, Eph 3:4. This is the Mystical Body.

As the JBC, p 1385, says: "That "revelation", Gal 1:12, 16, impressed Paul *first* with the unity of divine action for the salvation of all humanity, which is manifest in both the old and new dispensations". Christ is the head of all humanity. Christ enlivens all humanity, inviting each and every person to Christ-life. Therefore the Mystical Body images this unity very well. As the human soul animates every cell, so Christ enlivens every person who joins His body. This image fulfills the deepest meanings of the Old Dispensation, or Testament. Jesus struck Paul like lightning. Paul conveys this instant bolt from above gradually: ***As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"*** Acts 9:3-5. All quotes are from the New American Standard. In these several sentences, Paul expresses in steps what happened in a flash. We're happy to follow these steps to comprehend some of Christ's revelation.

First we understand that to persecute Christians is to persecute Christ. Then we see the Mystical Body from this fact. It takes longer to see how Moses prophesied Christ. As JBC continues: "The Father who revealed his Son to Paul was the same God that Paul the Pharisee had always served. He was the creator, the lord of history, the God who continually saved his people Israel, and who proved to be a faithful lord of the covenant despite Israel's infidelities. Probably because he had been a Pharisee, preoccupied with the minutiae of the law, Paul never manifested a profound understanding of that 'covenant', so infrequently does he speak of it. Yet his experience near Damascus did not alter his fundamental commitment to the 'one God'." This reinforces the Anchor Bible claim that Paul was consistent. His commitment remained the same. But he saw further into his Mosaic commitment, into the Messiah who fulfilled the law.

JBC: "*Second*, that vision taught him (Paul) the soteriological value of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah in God's salvific plan. If his basic theology did not change, his Christology did. As a Jew, Paul had shared the messianic expectations of his people, Dan 9:25, 1Qumran Scrolls 9:11, looking forward to the coming of a messiah (of some sort). But the vision of the risen Christ taught him that God's Anointed One had already come, that he was ***Jesus our Lord, who was handed over for our offenses and raised up for justification***, Rom 4:25. Before ... Damascus, Paul certainly knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified 'hung on a tree', and hence 'cursed' in the sense of Deut 21:23, Gal

1:13; 3:13. This was one of the reasons he, as a Pharisee, could not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus was a ‘stumbling block’, 1 Cor 1:23, one ‘cursed’ by the very law that Paul, so zealously observed, Gal 3:13. But that revelation impressed him emphatically with the messianic, soteriological, and vicarious value of the death of Jesus of Nazareth in a way that he never suspected before. With a logic that only a Pharisee could appreciate, Paul saw Christ Jesus taking upon himself the law’s curse, and transforming it into its opposite, so that he became the means of freeing humanity from malediction. The cross, which had been a stumbling block to Jews, became in his eyes the **power and wisdom of God**, 1 Cor 1:24. Henceforth, he would understand that crucified ‘Lord of glory’, 1 Cor 2:8 as his exalted Messiah.”

These few steps show how much happened instantaneously outside Damascus, and there’s more to tell. But pause a bit to reflect on this JBC comment. Instantaneously, Paul saw in the risen Christ the Messiah Moses promised. True, Paul had first rejected Jesus because of the stumbling block of the cross. But in that instant, Paul recognized that Christ became cursed for our salvation. The entirety of Jesus is lord, or *soter*, because he overcomes death by paying all debt for all of us. As the **wages of sin is death**, Rom 6:23, Christ wins through death by the infinity of His divinity. No death from sin remains for the Mystical Body. Thus did Jesus transform the law’s curse into blessing, and become everyone’s exalted Messiah. Experiencing this realization in a flash, Paul spent the rest of his life attempting to express it. And here’s more.

JBC, p 1386: “*Third*, that revelation impressed Paul with a new vision of salvation history. Before the encounter with the Lord, Paul saw human history divided into three great periods: 1. from Adam to Moses: without the law; 2. from Moses to the Messiah: with the law; 3. the messianic age: when the law would be perfected or fulfilled. The experience near Damascus taught him that the messianic age had already begun, introducing a new perspective into salvation history. The *escaton*, ‘end time’, so avidly awaited before, had already started, 1Cor 10:11, although a definitive stage of it was still to be realized, as was hoped not too far in the future. The Messiah had come, but not yet in glory. Paul realized that he, with all Christians, found himself in a double situation: one in which he looked back upon the death and resurrection of Jesus as the inauguration of the new age, and another in which he looked forward to his coming in glory, his *parousia*.”

Digesting that paragraph can take us a while. Christ is infinite impact, so His revelation extends forever. As Paul accepted Jesus outside Damascus, and experienced His Mystical Body, he comprehended more of this impact than we may ever grasp. This third part of that revelation changed Paul’s historical vision. No longer in the time of the Mosaic law, Paul emerged into Messianic time. Beginning with Christ’s death and resurrection, the end time, or *escaton* is upon us. The more we accept it, the more we orient to Christ’s second coming in glory, His *parousia*. Between the start and finish of this Messianic age, we live in Christ, and reach out to those who are unaware of Him. Apostolic time has dawned, the time to enhance Christ’s body by inviting cells to join, and assisting cells to grow in Christ. How enlightening this revelation is appears in all Paul’s magnificent efforts to invite and assist. We can’t witness his missionary trips, but can revel in his missionary letters. Thus he pulses still through the Mystical Body, the mystery of Christ.

As JBC continues: “Far more than his Pharisaic background, therefore, or even his Hellenistic cultural roots, that revelation of Jesus gave Paul an ineffable insight into the ‘mystery of Christ’. It enabled him to fashion his ‘gospel’ to preach the fundamental good news of salvation in a form that was distinctively his own. However, Paul did not immediately understand all the implications of the vision accorded him. It provided only a basic insight that was to color all that he was to learn about Jesus, and His mission among human beings, not only from the early church’s tradition, but also from his own apostolic experience in preaching ‘Christ crucified’, 1 Cor 1:23.”

Rightfully, Paul’s entire life, from the womb, answered God’s call. Step by step, Paul mastered the Old Testament, then experienced its fulfillment in Christ. Step by step, Paul decoded this fulfillment, revealed outside Damascus, and more fully expressed each day. That glorious set of steps inspires us to take our own steps into Christ crucified, the glory of God. These steps help us mature in Christ, as if we were cells in His body. His body is more real than any biological body, and we are more real than any cells therein. The organism of the Mystical Body transcends biology. It will exist for all eternity, after biology is over. The Mystical Body is the reason for biology. It is the destiny of the greatest biological being: man. By sharing in this magnificent vision, man matures into full spiritual life. Thus Paul hands on, *paradidonai*, what he has received, *paralambanein*, 1 Cor 11:2:23; 15:1-3. This is the apostle’s job: to accept what God provides, and thus receive revelation, then hand it on. Handing it on is personal, loving, living, sharing. It is from the hand, not from the shovel, much less from the bulldozer. Just as Love reveals, so we must love revelation, then love each neighbor to whom we hand Love on. As this reciprocal loving unfolds, each Mystical Body cell enlivens every other one.

JBC, p 1386, # 17 notes that this is the rabbinic process: pass on to, *maser le*, what we receive from, *qibbel min*. Paul learned early exactly what he practiced the rest of his life. First he absorbed the tradition he received, then he handed it on, passing it around the entire church, to nourish each cell of the Mystical Body. You find all this in **the customs of the churches** 1 Cor 11:16; **fidelity to tradition**, 1 Thes 2:13; Phil 4:9’ 1 Cor 11:2’ 15:2; Rom 6’17; 2 Thes 2:13; 3:6. Yes, someone could just memorize the words, reducing revelation to merely **the tradition of human beings** Mk 7:8; 1 Thes 2:13. But Paul saw beyond this surface resemblance to God’s tradition. That’s what he sought in the Old Testament, found in Christ outside Damascus, and elaborated in his epistles for the Mystical Body. This elaboration grew into the New Testament, which has nourished the Mystical Body for two thousand years. What wonder Christ wrought outside Damascus.