

St. Paul: Saturday Session Eleven

Summary of St. Paul's Life, and introduction to his Love-theme:

Summary: St. Paul 101

St. Paul exceeds every attempt to explain him. He lived large, was super-active, thought profoundly, and loved intensely. He excels all accounts of his accomplishments. His superlatives astound us. When he persecuted the Church, he was the very best persecutor. When he promoted the Church, he was the very best promoter. All we can do is sketch his main achievements. That opens the door for each of us to add insights worth sharing about this great servant of Jesus Christ.

Born in Tarsus around 10 AD, he was thereby a Roman citizen. His father provided excellent education, so Paul knew the Law, and was fluent in Hebrew /Aramaic, Greek and Latin. In Jerusalem he studied with Gamaliel, as Acts 22:3, and 26:4 mention. We find Paul's story in his epistles, Acts, and 2 Peter 3:15-16.

He described himself in these words: "I too am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin," Rom 11:1; "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, ... a Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the church; as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless", Phil 3:6. Therefore he excelled among Pharisees, who prided themselves on keeping every jot and tittle. His zeal for Torah impelled him to attack Christians, hauling them back to Jerusalem in chains.

On such a mission he met Christ, Who converted him from law to grace. "And as he journeyed, it came to pass that he drew nigh unto Damascus: and suddenly there shone round about him a light out of heaven: and he fell upon the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: but rise, and enter into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men that journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but beholding no man. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing; and they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and did neither eat nor drink, Acts 9:3-9.

Christ came to him, showing him new life. His circumcision name, Saul, represented his old, withered life. So I assume that he changed it to Paul, when he accepted Christ. While it's true that we do not have explicit Scriptural evidence that he changed his name to Paul, renaming follows the good example of Simon (Cephas) becoming Peter (Petrus), Mat 16:17-18. Many scholars propose that Saul and Paul were merely alternatives depending upon the language a person was speaking at the time. After Paul prayed and fasted for some days, Ananias cured his blindness, and scales fell from his eyes. Then Paul began to cure his spiritual blindness by learning all that Christians could teach about Jesus. Human attempts to convey Christ fall far short. So Christ spoke directly to Paul, showing him much more than humans could tell. Paul calls this peak of personal revelation "being raised up to the third heaven", 2 Cor 12:2.

Paul so lived Christ that he said: "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me", Phl 1:21. His epistles flow from Jesus Christ, by divine love. We will explore these epistles, and Luke's accounts of Paul's missions throughout the Roman Empire. Paul reveals himself most completely in his epistles, which are stormy love letters to his brothers in Christ. Love is exactly what urges him, 2 Cor 5:14. Luke's account of Paul in Acts fills in many blanks, and provides context. Finally, historical records provide extra-biblical support for Biblical statements. All three of these sources highlight facets of Paul.

Secular historical supports include documentation that the procounsul Junius Gallio Annaeus served Claudius in Corinth during the Emperor's 12th year, 52AD. Acts 18:12 mentions that Paul appeared before Junius in Corinth. This connection is so clear that all authorities accept it. Also unquestionable is Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome in 49AD, mentioned in Acts 18:2. That is how Aquila and Priscilla, rich merchants, met Paul during their exile, and welcomed him to their home in Rome when they returned. In May 2008, some of us visited the church built over their home.

Roman records authenticate Acts 12:28 about the famine during Claudius' reign: 46-48AD. They also chronicle the change from Felix, procurator of Judea, to Porcius Festus, as Acts 24:27 notes. Though the date is not clear, it probably occurred in 60AD. At that time, Festus wanted to send Paul to Jerusalem for trial. To avoid assassins, Paul appealed to Caesar. Earlier, Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to preserve peace in Judea, but zealots rebelled instead, around 36AD. Roman history notes that the emperor recalled Pilate to Rome at that time to answer for his conduct. Thus the outbreak of persecution after Stephen's stoning, Acts 7:58-60, was probably 36AD. That was the year of Saul's conversion to Christ.

Here is the most likely sequence of his development, from his epistles and Acts. Conversion outside Damascus, Gal 1:17, and Acts 9:1-22. Journey to Arabia to be with Jesus in prayer, Gal 1:17. Paul then returned to Damascus, Gal 1:17, where he spent 3 years in prayer and catechesis from disciples. His escape from Damascus in a basket is attested in 2 Cor 11:32-33, Acts 9:24-25, and Gal 1:17-18. As a Roman citizen, he could have appealed to Roman authorities for safe passage, so his escape must have occurred after direct Roman rule ended in 37AD. If this escape occurred between 37 and 39, then his conversion would have been 3 years earlier. This coincides with our other estimate of his conversion date.

Paul then went to Jerusalem, Gal 1:18-20, Acts 9:26-29. When he attempted to contact the apostles, they were afraid of him, and Barnabas had to convince them that Paul was committed to Christ. Paul then learned from the apostles, and moved freely around Jerusalem, representing Jesus to all men. So successful was his apostolate that Church leaders sent him to Syria and Cilicia, Gal 1:21-22, and to Caesarea and Tarsus, Acts 9:30. From there, he preached in Antioch, Acts 11:26/ In Gal 2:1, Paul says that after 14 years of spreading the Gospel, he went back to Jerusalem. The occasion was

the first Church Council. Acts 15: 1-12 affirms this Jerusalem visit, without mentioning that Council. Then Paul withstood Peter to his face in Antioch, Gal 2: 11-14, Acts 15:35. His next apostolic venture took him to Syria and Cilicia, Acts 15:41. Then South Galatia, Acts 16: 1-5, followed by North Galatia and Phrygia, 1 Cor 16:1, Gal 4:13, Acts 16:6.

From there, Paul moved to Philippi, according to 1 Thes 2:2, and 3:6, and Phil 4:15-16. Acts 16:7-10 mentions Mysia and Troas, and then Philippi, Acts 16:11-40. After that, Paul evangelized Thessalonica, by testimony from 1 Thes 2:2, and 2 Cor 11:9. This city is in Macedonia. Next came Thessalonica again, as 1 Thes 2:2 and 2:17-18, and Phil 4:15-16 affirm. Acts 17:1-9 notes that Paul preached in Amphipolis, Apollonia, followed by Thessalonica. Acts 17:10-14 then refers to Berea. From there Paul went to Athens, as 1 Thes 3:1, and 2: 17-18 remark. Acts 17: 15-34 confirms this visit.

Then Paul evangelized Corinth. Evidently, he was the first to preach Christ there, as 2 Cor 1:19, and 11:7-9 note. Acts 18:1-18 claims he resided 18 months there. During that time Timothy arrived, as 1 Thes 3:6 points out, with Silvanus, according to 1 Thes 1:1. Acts 18:3 says that Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia. According to Acts 18:18, Paul departs from Cenchrae, then leaves his friends Priscilla & Aquila at Ephesus, 18:19-21. Paul urges Apollos to visit Corinth, as he says in 1 Cor 16:12. Priscilla & Aquila sent Apollos to Achaia, as Acts 18:17 affirms. Paul himself goes to Caesarea Maritima, according to Acts 18:22. From there, Acts 18:22 says he journeys to Jerusalem. In that same verse, 18:22, Acts affirms that Paul stays for a while in Antioch.

For the second time, Paul visits Northern Galatia, as Gal 4:13 notes, and Acts 18:23 agrees. Then 1 Cor 16:1-8 recounts his stay in Ephesus. Acts devotes all of chapter 19, and part of 20, to this lengthy stay, perhaps for 3 years, and at least for 2. During this stay, Chloe, Stephanas and friends visit Paul (1 Cor 1:11; and 16:17), bringing an important letter (1 Cor 7:1) One of the reasons for his long stay seems to be imprisonment in Ephesus (1 Cor 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8). He sends Timothy to Corinth (1 Cor 4:17; 16:19).

Once out of prison, Paul visits Corinth. 2 Cor 13:2 calls this visit “painful”. Back in Ephesus, Paul hears about more misbehavior from Corinth, so he sends Titus with the letter “written in tears” (2 Cor 2:13). Paul writes about his plans to visit Macedonia, Corinth and Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:3-8; 2 Cor 1_15-16). Acts 19:21 refers to his plans to visit Macedonia, Achaia, Jerusalem and Rome. Meanwhile he ministers in Troas (2 Cor 2:12), then goes to Macedonia, as 2 Cor 2:13, and 9:2-4 affirm. Acts 20:1 seconds that motion to Macedonia. Paul mentions that Titus arrives (2 Cor 7:6), and goes ahead to Corinth (2 Cor 7:16-17), carrying a letter. It’s likely that this letter was interwoven into what we call 2 Cor.

From Rom 15:19 we learn that Paul visited Illyrcum. Rom 15:26, and 16:1 mention his trip to Achaia, and 2 Cor 13:1 shows that he visited Corinth. Acts 20:2-3 refers to three months in Greece, including Achaia. After that, Acts 20:3 notes that he tried to return to Syria, but went by way of Macedonia and Philippi (Acts 20:3-6). He stopped at Troas, says Acts 20:6-12, then Miletus (Acts 20:15-38). Acts 21:7-14 shows that he visited Tyre, Ptolemais and Caesarea. In Rom 13:22-27, Paul reveals his plans to visit Jerusalem, Rome and Spain. Acts 21:15 to 23:30 recounts his Jerusalem adventures, leading to his capture. Acts rounds out his life, noting his transportation to Caesarea, (23:31-23:32), and his journey to Rome (27:1-28:14). Then Acts 28:15-31 describes his two years of Roman imprisonment. It’s a puzzle why Luke does not mention Paul’s martyrdom. Perhaps it was well known throughout the Church at the time.

This compact account of Paul’s life sketches his main achievements. Many more events occurred than either he or Luke mention. As an example, tradition says he did visit Spain. This outline shows him to be so active that we would call him restless. Reading his epistles convinces us that Love urged him ever onward. He was afire with Christ. He understood his conversion to mean: “God was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles”, Gal 1:16. Obviously, he grew in Christ, and thereby flared up in Love, always seeking to spread Love to all God’s children.

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Paul’s Love Theme

Love is the main theme of Paul’s life. Forever ardent, he first loved Torah, then Christ. Jesus took Paul to His heart, aflame with Love Himself. So Paul could insist: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord”, 1 Cor 9:1. This experience might have filled him with pride, but Paul was so loving that he kept himself in perspective. “For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was

buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas; then to the twelve; then he appeared to above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some are fallen asleep; then he appeared to James; then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to the child untimely born, he appeared to me also. **For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.** But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not found vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. Whether then it be I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed” 1 Cor 15: 3-11. Paul shows us that sharing Jesus is all-important. In Christ-life we join His beloved. This loving union is the salvation which all of us desire, and which Paul lives to share.

Paul’s love rushes on, like his spoken word. To appreciate this, read his epistles aloud. That was the style of his time. Even the very long epistle to the Hebrews was meant to be read aloud at one sitting. Hence he instructs his helpers: “And when this letter has been read among you, read also the letter from Laodicea”, Col 4:16. 1 Thes 5:27 is even more emphatic: “I adjure you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the brethren.” If the reader was impressed, the effect was better than Paul himself, as 2 Cor 10:10-11 notes. People of that time considered the author to be spiritually present when his letter was read aloud, as affirmed in 1 Cor 5:4. We continue this tradition by reading epistle and Gospel at Mass.

When you read any of his epistles aloud, look for the elephant in the room: the exploding love of Christ. That explosion impelled Paul around the known world, seeking people who would accept and return Christ-Love. Luke was so impressed with Paul’s conversion from Torah to Christ, that he tells the tale three times (Acts: 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). Without mentioning the word “love”, it’s clear that Christ’s love enflamed Paul, who loved Him in return.

No doubt, each of you has his favorite love-passage from Paul. We want to incorporate them all. We do not need to systematize them all, but it’s wonderful to know that Fr. Spicq has done just that. His study of agape, or love, includes all of Scripture. In his second volume, on the New Testament, he shows how Paul experienced Jesus as love made human. See page 100. Jesus is incarnate Love, Ti 3:4. Love proceeded to live among us for some thirty years, modeling our life in Christ, or showing us how to live in Love. Jesus loved all humans, showing us that agape is universal. No person can be excluded from Christ-love, unless one freely rejects it. We are all God’s children, unified by His Love. Therefore every division is scandal. 1 Cor 12:27 expresses Christ-life and love among us: “Now ye are the body of Christ, and severally members thereof”. To be the body of Christ is to be Christ. So any separation among us is unacceptable. Paul’s great symbol for Love Himself is the mystical body of Christ. Just as it’s impossible to separate the hand from the arm without violence, so we are one in Christ. Love unifies. Hatred divides. In his love-flames, Paul shares Christ’s greater fire.

Paul amplifies his body-symbol by saying: “Is Christ divided, was Paul crucified for you, or were ye baptized into the name of Paul?”, 1 Cor 1:13. He hoped to heal schism by reminding the Corinthians of Christ’s loving unity, and picturing attacks on His body. Similarly, he upbraided them for: “brother goeth to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? Nay, already it is altogether a defect in you, that ye have lawsuits one with another. Why not rather take wrong, why not rather be defrauded? Nay, but ye yourselves do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren”, 1 Cor 6:6-8. Perhaps we miss Paul’s loving focus because he doesn’t use the word itself in this passage. But the spirit of this practical injunction is love so intense that it need not be named. Charity is the only activity that builds up the body of Christ, 1 Cor 8:1. Thereby, it constitutes the spiritual life. To have charity is to have all perfection, Col 3:14. To lose charity is to lose everything, 1 Cor 13:1-3. Paul explains that love is Christ Himself, revealed by His incarnation. All follows from that act.

Paul shows how this follows: “Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross”, Phil 2:5-8. If we unpack this pregnant sentence, we see how Paul compacted many important ideas. They include: we should accept Christ’s good example, so that we think as He thought. He thought that love was more important than status. Equal to God as He was, transcendent above all creatures, Jesus emptied Himself of all that glory so that he could take human nature to Himself. His Love urged Him to become one of us. So he took the form of a servant, in our likeness. Creator God became creature man. This humbles Him indeed. Moreover, he obeyed even unto death. That would have been extraordinary enough. But He went further, to die on a cross, like a slave. This is Christ’s infinite Love, acted out to teach us Love. Truly awesome! No wonder Christ’s love exploded Paul forth for us.

The Navarre Bible commentary on Corinthians amplifies the mystical body with Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium* extension to all Church members as God’s people. Quoting: “St Paul’s concept of the Church as a body goes far beyond the human concept of corporate unity, for between Christ and the Church, between Christ and Christians, a unity is established which is not just agreement on goals, or doing certain things together at particular times: it is a living unity, Christ communicates life to the Church and to Christians, thereby making them inseparable. St. Augustine writes: ‘Let us rejoice together and give thanks, for we have become not only Christians, but Christ. Do you realize that, brethren? Are you aware of the grace of God that is within you? Rejoice in wonder: we have become Christ. For if he is the head, and we the members, the whole man is he and us. The Apostle Paul says as much... The totality of Christ is the head and the members. What does head and members mean? Christ and the Church.’” Navarre Bible: *Corinthians*, p 18.

Fr. Spicq says it well: “St. Paul’s religion is based on the first, gratuitous, and eternal love of God who chooses his faithful, pardons their sins, and accords them final salvation. Christ, sacrificing himself in the service of men, is the realization in history of that love. At baptism he acquires new being in Christ, and lives under new laws of existence and behavior. He lives “in the newness of life”- religiously, divinely. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit live in him, inspire him,

and move him by their own charity. They make the Christian life, which is participation in the life of the Trinity, be lived for God, in Christ, under the movement of the Holy Spirit”, p 100.

Because Paul lived in Love Himself, he experienced more than words can say. He had to stretch words way beyond their common extension. This is why Peter insisted that: “as our beloved brother Paul ... wrote unto you; as also in all his epistles ... wherein are **some things hard to be understood**, which the ignorant and unstedfast wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction”, 2 Peter 3:14-16. Not all of us can stretch as far as Paul in love.

Simply put, love pulls us so close to God that words cannot express our experience. Again, Fr. Spicq’s words work well: “The believer is so vitally bound up in divine charity that agape defines his essential being. It is the one supreme and absolute Christian value (1 Cor 13:1-3, & 13) whose plentitude of being is not determined by its object. It is pure spontaneity, governed from within by its own need for expansion and giving. As the expression of the Christian’s being, it directs all his behavior, attitudes, aims, and ways of doing things. The Christian’s moral life is not primarily the observance of commandments or acquiring of virtues, but rather the unfolding of the life of a reborn son of God walking in the dynamism of love.

“St. Paul’s ‘ethic of charity’ is comprehensible only because of the real divine adoption which makes the Christian an autonomous being at the same time that it places him under God’s vital ascendancy. The ‘interior man’, the believer, remains the same person he always was. He loses nothing of his personality or human qualities, but Christ begins to live in him, and the Holy Spirit moves him and guides him. Agape keeps the same spontaneity and generosity in the Christian that it has in God. It is like a self-determined will that inspires and regulates all Christian conduct, as the love of the heavenly Father determines his choices, his decisions, and his actions. As with God himself, agape is the expression of the Christian’s interior nature. Since the interior man is daily renewed, 2 Cor 4:16, his charity is truly the principle of the movement from within which is his life, and St. Paul considers ‘to imitate God’ a synonym of ‘to walk in and by love’. The more freely and spontaneously the believer loves, the more authentic and divine his love. The mystery of his greatness is that he is able, as God is, to take the initiative in loving. He is truly risen with Christ, and he no longer lives according to the flesh, but in the heavenly kingdom, Col 3:1-3, Phil 3:20. The great effort of his moral life is to acquire the unconditional liberty that will enable agape to become pure act.

“Charity is the inspiration and motive force of the new man’s every action. It extends to everything and everyone. Nothing is foreign to it, nor even the most ordinary aspects of family life. Because its truly divine nature is characterized by initiative and gratuitousness, and because no one lives for himself alone (Rom 14:7) charity concentrates especially on neighbor. St. Paul seems to unify and direct Christian morality by means of fraternal love, because the believer can love as God and Christ love only by giving himself to his neighbors and sacrificing himself for them. He behaves as a true son of his Father, making manifest what he is: a loving and generous creature who acts for the good of his brother. His moral conduct is the proof and flowering in act of the charity which has been infused into him, just as God’s actions are manifestations of his mysterious agape.

“As soon as St. Paul has pronounced the word charity, he has said everything there is to say about what God accomplishes for men’s happiness, and what man has to accomplish for his neighbor. He has defined the heart of Christian morality. The one thing we must do on earth is love. ‘Therefore, while we have time, let us do good to all men, especially to those of the household of the faith’, Gal 6:10. All the virtues can be considered ‘faith in action’ (1 Thes 1:3; Rom 2:6-7) when faith means adherence to the mystery of the divine love of which Christian charity is the manifestation and the final fruit.” Excerpted from *Agape in the New Testament*, p 100-102.

Pondering these words, we connect them to our experiences with Paul. Though he uses the word love only now and then, all his words express love. On the frequency of the word, Fr. Spicq notes that the verb *agapan* = to love, in its various forms, appears about as frequently in Paul’s epistles as in the synoptic gospels, namely 34 times to their 25, p 15. By contrast, the noun *agape* appears many more times in St. Paul than in the synoptic Gospels. Paul uses it 75 times in his 13 epistles, making it more frequent in his vocabulary than in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Moreover, Paul uses it more consistently as the center of his preaching: his gospel, or good news. Only St. John excels Paul in emphasizing love, p 103. Paul realized that God started this loving exchange. God loved us into existence, loved us out of sin, if we accept His saving blood, and will love us into heaven, if we remain faithful. Quite likely, we can devote more sessions to Paul’s love.