

23. Paul's Conversion

Romans 7:7-25

The inner agony of Paul consisted of this: the Law was supreme, but the Law, expanded to hundreds of increasingly fine rules, could not be kept in full. Given the desires of the flesh, some sin was certain. All sins were offenses against God, and all brought death. This was terrifying to a devout Pharisee, since the Pharisees believed in an afterlife. For them, eternal suffering loomed.

Paul has left a picture of what this dilemma had felt like.

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Howbeit, I had not known sin, except through the law, for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, finding occasion, wrought in me through the commandment all manner of coveting; for apart from the law sin is dead. And I was alive apart from the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was unto life, this I found to be unto death; for sin, finding occasion, through the commandment beguiled me, and through it slew me. So that the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good. Did then that which is good become death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might be shown to be sin, by working death to me through that which is good – that through the commandment sin might become exceedingly sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I know not, for not what I would, that do I practice, but what I hate, that I do. But if what I would not, that I do, I consent unto the law that it is good. So now it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwelleth in me. For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not. For the good which I would, I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I practice. But if what I would not, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwelleth in me. I find then the law, that, to me who would do good, evil is present. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man, but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members.

Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I of myself with the mind, indeed serve the law of God; but with the flesh, the law of sin.



Reflections

Here was the problem, for someone whose Law forbade sin, but sin which, due to the weakness of the flesh, one could not avoid. Paul could break that circle only by stepping outside it. Jesus, risen from the dead, was the answer. God had spoken, and by means of a certified miracle: a miracle with witnesses. Paul embraced it, and in so doing, he resolved his deep inner contradiction. Jesus' Resurrection, if it was ardently believed in, *would eliminate the Law*.

How did this come to him? Acts three times describes Paul's vision on the Road to Damascus. But that's Luke's picture. Paul's own account is different: he was caught up to Heaven:

I know a man in Christ, fourteen years ago . . . caught up even to the third heaven . . . how that he was caught up to Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. (2 Cor 12:2-5)

and called to be an Apostle:

But when it was the good pleasure of God, who separated me, from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace, to preach his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles . . . (Gal 1:15-16a)

So Paul's call came from a higher authority than that of the Twelve, since their call was only from Jesus, not from God Himself. And Paul's call came not during his lifetime, like theirs, but was determined at the beginning of his life.

Paul's conversion did not reconcile him to those he had earlier persecuted. Theirs was the religion of Jesus, based on the ethical part of the Law: the original Alpha faith. Paul had been converted to the Beta version, centering on the Resurrection. For Paul (if not for everyone else), that meant abandoning the Law as a means of salvation. And so Paul remained the enemy of the Alphas. In a moment of anger, he picked up their Maranatha prayer *as a curse*:

If any man love not the Lord, let him be anathema. "Maranatha."
(1 Cor 16:22)

Which is to say, You have prayed for the Final Judgement; see how you like it. May the Lord indeed come, and judge you, and condemn you for your errors.

What was the importance of Paul for Christianity? He abandoned the Law, and thus forsook Judaism as he knew it, fifty years before Christianity and Judaism reached a more formal separation. He championed the Gentiles, who turned out to be the future of Christianity, when Christianity still saw itself as part of Judaism. Paul's was a spirit of opposition, not one of accommodation. He was by nature an Either / Or thinker.

Quite possibly his vehemence, his possessiveness, his unforgivingness, his larger-than-self selfishness, which are off-putting to not a few modern readers, were advantages at the time. If inner conviction is the hallmark of a leader, Paul had it more than anybody else of whom we know.