

4. PAUL RECOUNTS HIS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE



St. Paul, Ravenna, Italy

Paul yearns to make Jesus known. He is not interested in anything else. By proclaiming the Gospel, he wants to provoke others to meet Jesus personally, similar to the way he met the radiant Lord on the way to Damascus. But in speaking about his encounter with Jesus, Paul is also obliged to speak about himself. And this is providential because in doing so he reveals that what he believed to be a personal story he had fashioned “with his own hands” was in reality a story God had helped him to shape, although Paul did not realize it at the time. Paul’s adversaries do consider him an apostle on a par with the Twelve who had followed Jesus along the roads of Palestine, who saw him die, and who, on the third day, received the news of his resurrection. They claim his preaching is false because, in substance, he declares that faith in Jesus is more important than external works, which do not guarantee salvation. Indeed, it is faith that gives rise to those works! Others warn the Christian communities founded by Paul to be on guard because he is trying to deceive them. They assert that what he claims to be “his Gospel” is just an easy way to make disciples and advance his “career” as an apostle.

Paul’s adversaries declare that good works are the price God expects us to pay for our salvation. In contrast to this, the Apostle says that God saves us freely in Jesus, with no strings attached, because he loves us. Faith in Jesus should be our response to his merciful love. It is this faith that produces good works—what Paul calls “faith in action.” It enables us to stand before God as we truly are: sinners who have been saved.

Paul realizes that the only way to quell all these accusations is to offer the proof of concrete facts. Thus, to combat the calumnies leveled against him, he writes to the Philippians a few years before his death, telling them what happened to him. He says that his life had formerly been founded on the Law but without Christ. Now both his present and his future are Jesus, whom he is straining to reach so as to attain fullness of life. Paul reveals that during the period of his life without Jesus, he was proud to be a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee fired by such zeal for the Law that he persecuted the Christians. As a young man, he lived in single-minded fidelity to the Hebrew perception of God: he observed the Law of Moses, the commandments, the sacred rites, prayer—all to the point of perfection. He was so observant that not even God would have been able to find fault with his behavior. No one could ever have accused him of being unfaithful to God!

But everything changed on the road to Damascus. The light that surrounded Paul showed him that the human importance he gloried in was a cumbersome mask that prevented him from seeing Jesus as the Messiah sent by God. After having recounted his past, Paul says with deep emotion: “But whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ.” Profoundly moved, the Apostle declares that now Jesus is his Lord—that is to say, Jesus is everything to him: his greatest wealth, his treasure, his sole love. Paul the Christian is no longer focused on observing the Law. Instead, he has established a personal, friend-to friend, relationship with Jesus. The Saul who observed the Law so scrupulously because he thought it assured him salvation is dead. In his place stands Paul,

who lives in Jesus, with Jesus and for Jesus. He tells the Philippians that now his only desire is to dwell in Jesus as if in his own home: "I want to be found in him."



Miniature of St. Paul

For him, the way to reach this goal is to establish a relationship with the Lord based on faith. This relationship involves listening, dialogue and a spiritual journey that leads him to think, desire and love like Christ to the point that he can say: "For me, life is Christ! Without him, I feel dead!" He expresses this sublime experience by declaring that he wants to "live the uprightness of God that comes through faith." With these words, he affirms that only a faith relationship (that is, a personal relationship) with Christ will make us similar to him. To have faith, the Apostle says, means not only believing in Jesus but entrusting ourselves completely to the One who freely gave his life for everyone. This faith/love transforms us into him. In the life of a disciple of Jesus, this is this relationship that really counts. Everything that leads us away from Christ is rubbish!

Love for Jesus is, at the same time, love for all those he loves. Paul understands that he must loves Jesus, present in his brothers and sisters, to the point of giving his life for them, as his Lord did. Having been "conquered by Christ," he now is striving to "conquer" him in return a little more every day. He compares this profound relationship to a race that requires great energy, coherent choices and total focus on one's goal. Paul's goal is Jesus, whom he wants to love and give to others by means of his words and life. This is the source of his missionary zeal—a "debt of love" he feels he owes every person on earth. Paul wants to respond to the love of Jesus by loving his brothers and sisters and he does this by bringing them the Gospel.

FOR DEEPER REFLECTION:

After carefully reading Philippians 3:3-15, choose the phrase below that best describes how Paul recounts his message:

- with the passion of a lover
- with enthusiasm
- contagiously
- with resignation
- with conviction

If you prefer to use a different phrase to describe the tone of this Bible passage, write it below and coin a slogan to go along with it.