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“The Passion of Paul: Suffering, Limitations, and the Development of His Theology of the Cross” Dr. Mary Ann Getty Sullivan

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Paul's gospel is rooted in his personal experience of Christ that changed everything. His call to be Apostle to the Gentiles, his missionary vision, his authority to found, form and maintain relationships with early Christian communities all shaped the way he corresponded with other believers. Yet in these same letters Paul sketches his own journey in discovering the wisdom and the power of God in the cross of Jesus (see 1 Cor 1:18-25). He speaks so personally of illnesses and loneliness, of physical and mental limitations, of trouble with authority both secular and religious, of being persecuted, ostracized, imprisoned, tortured, misunderstood, tried and sentenced to death. All of these experiences combine to teach Paul the meaning of the gospel that reverses the standards of this world's values and leads us to the joy and fulfillment of Christ's resurrection that makes all things new.

Introduction

I. Who is this Paul? and How do we know him?

A. Some basic facts about Paul

- born ca 8-10
- call/conversion: ca 34
- seven letter writing career spanned roughly one decade (49-58)
 - 7 undisputed letters: in supposed order of composition= *1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, Romans*
 - 6 deuteropauline letters: *Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*
- executed under Nero in Rome: 62-64

B. Much of what we know come from Paul's own letters. Other sources include Acts of the Apostles (written by Luke in the mid-80's) and some apocryphal works such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

C. Some factors contributing to Paul's unique importance

- coined much of early Christian vocabulary: e.g. gospel, apostle, church, combination greeting "grace" (Greek *chaire*) and "peace" (Jewish *shalom*)
- first Christian "theologian" who articulated the basics of Christian preaching (kerygma)

D. Rich personal Background

1. credentials in Jewish, Greek and Roman world

- **Pharisaism:** "separated ones," known for their strict observance of the Torah (According to Matthew, Jesus says, "Do and observe what they tell you, but do not follow their example") (Mt 23:3).
 - In Paul's own words, he was a "zealot," or fanatic for Jewish traditions: Gal 1:14; Phil 3:5-10

- a rabbi, well versed in Scriptures: e.g. Paul uses combination quotations that appear in later Christian literature, an indication that he either originated or used so-called "testimony books" to respond to inquiries about Jesus' messiahship.
- **Hellenism:** well educated; used many literary techniques known in Greek literature: e.g. diatribe
- **Roman:** well-traveled: *Acts* tells us he was a Roman citizen
- 2. credentials in Christian world:
 - revelation (*apokalypsis*) makes Paul an apostle (He has "seen the Lord"; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8-9)
 - He is adamant in defense of his authority as one called by God
 - Paul founded, formed and maintained contact with early Christian communities
 - Paul insists on maintaining his apostolic authority in the communities he founded

II. How can we relate to Paul? Some thoughts:

- A. Paul's call of apostleship: Gal 1:11-17; Phil 3:5-10
 - grand vocation based on description of the prophets: e.g. called from his mother's womb, an apostle, even if "last" of the apostles
 - common pattern in call stories in Bible: call sometimes mediated by angel or dream etc, mission, protest, reassurance, sign (e.g. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Peter, Paul)
- B. Paul's difficulties and limitations: Gal 4:13-15; 2 Cor 10-13; esp chaps 11-12
 - Paul's problems probably used against him by detractors and even by other Christians. But Paul uses them as further evidence of his apostleship
 - reinterpreted in the light of the Cross of Christ. One of greatest obstacles to belief in Jesus (i.e. the cross) becomes the centerpiece of Paul's theology (which is basically a Christology centered in the meaning of Jesus' death "for us")
 - core of Paul's Christology: the cross as revelation of the power and the wisdom of God
- C. Paul's experience and his mysticism
 - The Epistle to the Philippians as a case study
 - Paul's imprisonment as context for the christological hymn of Phil 2:6-11** and vice-versa
 - suffering (of Paul, of the community) as window into the meaning of Christ's passion
 - Union with Christ: the meaning of being "in Christ"
- D. Belonging to the new creation: 2 Cor 5:17-20; Gal 6:15
 - the ministry of reconciliation: to restore all in Christ
 - "All that matters is that you are created anew" see Gal 6:15

Conclusion

**Phil 2:5-11

⁵Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus.

⁶Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

⁷Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance;

⁸he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death,
even death on a cross.

⁹Because of this, God greatly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.

¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Quotes from Letters of Paul

1) Paul's call:

a. Gal 1:11-24: ¹¹Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel preached by me is not of human origin. ¹²For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³For you heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, ¹⁴and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions. ¹⁵But when [God] who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; rather I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. ¹⁸Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days. ¹⁹But I did not see any other of the apostles, only James the brother of the Lord. ²⁰[As to what I am writing to you, behold, before God, I am not lying.] ²¹Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²²And I was unknown personally to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³they only kept hearing that "the one who once was persecuting us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." So they glorified God because of me.

b. Phil 3:5-10: ⁵I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born to Hebrew parents; as the law a Pharisee, ⁶as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. ⁷But whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I even consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith ¹⁰to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death.

2) Scripture:

a. 1 Cor 11:24-25: "This is my body that is given for you...This cup is the new covenant in my blood." comp Mt 26:28: "For this is my blood of the covenant which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins." (See Ex 24: 8; Is 53:12)

b. Rom 9:32-33: "They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold I am laying a stone in Zion that will make people stumble and a rock which will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'" (Is 8:14; 28:16; comp 1 Pet 2:6-8).

3) Personal Illness, setbacks, obstacles

a. Gal 4:13-15: ¹³You know that it was because of a physical illness that I originally preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴and you did not show disdain or contempt because of the trial caused you by my physical condition, but rather you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Where now is that blessedness of yours? Indeed I can testify to you that, if it had been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me...

b. Gal 6:17: From now on, let no one make troubles for me; for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body...

c. 2 Cor 4:1, 7-11: ¹Therefore since we have this ministry through the mercy shown us, we are not discouraged...⁷But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed but not despairing; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. ¹¹For we who live are

constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

d. See all of 2 Cor 10-13: some excerpts: 2 Cor 10:10: For one will say, "His letters are severe and forceful, but his bodily appearance is weak, and his speech contemptible."

e. 11:6-9: ⁶Even if I am untrained in speaking, I am not so in knowledge...⁷Did I make a mistake when I humbled myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? ⁸I plundered other churches by accepting from them in order to minister to you. ⁹And when I was with you and in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my needs. So I refrained from burdening you in any way. (See 1 Cor 9).

f. 11:30-12:10: ³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹The God and Father of the Lord Jesus knows, he who is blessed forever, that I do not lie...¹I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know someone in Christ who, fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows)...⁵On behalf of this person I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except about my weaknesses. ⁶Although if I should wish to boast, I shall not be a fool, for I shall be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so that no one may think more of me than what he sees in me and hears from me. ⁷And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it might leave me; ⁹but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

4) Paul's ministry to people like himself

1 Cor 1:26-29; 2:1-7: Some excerpts: ²⁶Consider your own calling, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, ²⁸and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing...²⁹so that no human being might boast before God. ³⁰It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification and redemption...^{2:1}When I came to you,...proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with the sublimity of words or of wisdom.²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness...⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God...

5) Greetings to the churches

a. Phil 1:1-7: ¹Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi,...²grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, ⁴praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, ⁵because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus... ⁷I hold you in my heart, you who are partners with me in grace...

b. Rom 1:1,7: ¹Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God...⁷to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. Grace to you and peace from God...

