

40 DAYS
with
Paul

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Introduction

The Year of Paul, running from the festival of Saints Peter and Paul, 29 June 2008, to the same day in 2009, is an opportunity and encouragement to read and reflect on the writings of Paul the apostle. Paul was a tireless missionary and the first Christian writer, penning his letters to the churches some years before the Gospels were written. He was a great thinker and theologian in the Jewish tradition, who saw Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfilment of the hopes of Judaism. To Paul we owe the development of thought about God, Christ and the Christian life which stands at the beginning of the Christian tradition. By reflecting on his writings we can penetrate ever more deeply into the meaning of the Christian message and how it should shape our lives.

This little book is arranged as a series of 40 readings from Paul, and each is followed by an explanation and reflection on the text. The first four readings are intended as a brief introduction to Paul, his personality and his vision. Then follows a semi-continuous reading of the letters, principally those to the Thessalonians, the Galatians, the Romans and the Corinthians. I have also included some readings from the disputed letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, but not the so-called Pastoral Letters. This is partly for reasons of time and space, partly because most biblical scholars no longer consider the Pastorals to have been written by Paul.

For those who would like to adopt this book as their

reading for Lent 2009, the appendix offers reflections on the (Roman Catholic) lectionary readings for each of the six Sundays leading up to Easter (see pages 130–143).

The Authority of a Servant

2 CORINTHIANS 11:22–30

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I speak in utter folly—I am too, and more than they are: I have done more work, I have been in prison more, I have been flogged more severely, many times exposed to death. Five times I have been given the thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked, and once I have been in the open sea for a night and a day; continually travelling, I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from the gentiles, in danger in the towns and in danger in the open country, in danger at sea and in danger from people masquerading as brothers. I have worked with unsparing energy, for many nights without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty, and often altogether without food or drink; I have been cold and lacked clothing. And, besides all the external things, there is, day in day out, the pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. If anyone weakens, I am weakened as well; and when anyone is made to fall, I burn in agony myself. If I have to boast, I will boast of all the ways in which I am weak.



Paul is writing to the Christians of Corinth, comparing himself to the ‘super-apostles’. The church at Corinth was a community founded by Paul, over which he took special care. Evidently some Christian teachers had arrived in the city, claiming to be superior to Paul and more authoritative than him. Paul replies that his authority is founded on being the Servant of the Lord Jesus. Just as Jesus saw himself as the Servant of the Lord, according to the model of the Servant described by the prophet Isaiah, and particularly the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, so Paul sees himself as the Servant of the Lord Jesus. So he sets out to show that he has served more generously and suffered more than all these ‘super-apostles’. This is the foundation of his claim to be an authentic and authoritative teacher of Christianity.

For us this passage is valuable because it gives us a picture of Paul’s apostolic work. In the dozen or so years of his missionary journeys he must have travelled thousands of miles on foot, sometimes on the fine Roman roads that crisscrossed the empire (although it is likely that he would have been pushed off these when a detachment of military passed). At other times he had to find his way on tracks through the rough bush. There were no handy motels along the way, and often he must have bedded down beside the road. He outlines the danger for the solitary traveller: subject to attacks by robbers (the less kit there was to steal, the better), wild animals, village dogs and so on. The 39 lashes was a punishment imposed in the synagogues by ‘my own

people', perhaps for boldly expressing his attitude to the Law. The beating with sticks was a Roman punishment, perhaps for proclaiming that Christ, not the Emperor, was the Lord. One story of shipwreck comes in Acts 27, but the day and the night in the open sea must have been on another occasion.

Every line of this letter bears witness to Paul's passionate zeal to teach his young communities about the gospel and to lead them along the road to Christ, fostering them like a worried parent.

If I have to bear hardship in witnessing to you and declaring my faith, give me, Lord, courage to do so.

The Lighter Side of Paul

PHILEMON 9–20

I am rather appealing to your love, being what I am, Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for a child of mine, whose father I became while wearing these chains: I mean Onesimus. He was of no use to you before, but now he is useful both to you and to me. I am sending him back to you—that is to say, sending you my own heart. I should have liked to keep him with me; he could have been a substitute for you, to help me while I am in the chains that the gospel has brought me. However, I did not want to do anything without your consent; it would have been forcing your act of kindness, which should be spontaneous. I suppose you have been deprived of Onesimus for a time, merely so that you could have him back for ever, no longer as a slave, but something much better than a slave, a dear brother; especially dear to me, but how much more to you, both on the natural plane and in the Lord. So if you grant me any fellowship with yourself, welcome him as you would me; if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, put it down to my account. I am writing this in my own hand: I, Paul, shall pay it back—I make no mention of a further debt, that you owe your very self to me! Well

then, brother, I am counting on you, in the Lord; set my heart at rest, in Christ.



This little letter, or note, to Philemon gives us a chance to appreciate Paul's light-hearted wit. It is a very personal letter, full of puns and humour. And all this written from prison!

Onesimus was a slave of Philemon, and his name means 'Useful'. Paul plays with the meanings 'useful' and 'useless' throughout the letter. There are two theories about what had happened. Either Onesimus had run away to Paul from Philemon, having possibly stolen from his master too, or Philemon had lent Onesimus to Paul for a limited period, which had now expired. The former alternative is a little unlikely, since the penalty for a runaway slave was normally a gruesome death. Onesimus would have needed a lot of confidence to run away from his master and seek refuge with Paul. In any case, Onesimus had become a Christian, and so was now a 'dear brother' to Philemon. Paul sends him back to Philemon but asks Philemon to let him come again for a further period, during which he can be 'useful' to Paul.

Paul does not question the institution of slavery but the warmth and affection with which he regards Onesimus is most unusual for those times. It was rare indeed for a slave to be treated other than as an expendable chattel, whereas Paul's regard for his brother Onesimus is clear: 'I am sending you my own heart.' It

would be many more centuries before it became clear that slavery was incompatible with Christianity. The full implications of the freedom and brotherhood brought by Christ would take time to mature.

It is amusing also to see how Paul attempts to twist Philemon's arm, promising to put any debt down 'to his own account', stressing his own affection for Philemon and promising to come and stay. He reminds Philemon that he is an old man and that he is in chains for the sake of the gospel. He also gently reminds him that Philemon owes his whole being to Paul, who had brought him to Christianity; for, as a Christian, Philemon—like Onesimus—is a new creation. Paul does not give Philemon much alternative!

Lord, grant me to be light-hearted as well as serious in my total commitment to you.

Strength in Weakness

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1–10

I am boasting because I have to. Not that it does any good, but I will move on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—still in the body? I do not know; or out of the body? I do not know: God knows—was caught up right into the third heaven. And I know that this man—still in the body? or outside the body? I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard words said that cannot and may not be spoken by any human being. On behalf of someone like that I am willing to boast, but I am not going to boast on my own behalf except of my weaknesses; and then, if I do choose to boast I shall not be talking like a fool because I shall be speaking the truth. But I will not go on in case anybody should rate me higher than he sees and hears me to be, because of the exceptional greatness of the revelations.

Wherefore, so that I should not get above myself, I was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself. About this, I have three times pleaded with the Lord that it might leave me; but he has answered me, 'My grace is enough for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness.' It is, then, about my weaknesses that I am happiest of

all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me; and that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions and distress for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong.



In chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us the story of Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. This is often called 'the conversion of Saul', but perhaps a more apt title would be 'Saul's vocation'. Did Saul really convert? He did not abandon Judaism but remained fully committed to it, and proud of his Jewishness. Rather, he came to the realization that Christ was the fulfilment of Judaism, the fulfilment of the promises made long ago to Abraham. It is an attractive idea that, while the account in Acts is an exterior account, this passage in Corinthians gives us the intimate, inner story of Paul's own experience of that event. The date of 'fourteen years ago' would fit this view. If it was not the actual event on the road to Damascus, it must have been an experience of similar significance soon afterwards. Paul is obviously talking about himself, though he delicately avoids using the first person.

Paul tells the story in terms of the world-picture of the times. Above the (flat) earth is a series of domes, the heavens. The visionary penetrates to the most sacred and intimate of these, and there has an inexpressible experience. Like any profound experience—love, fear, contentment—it cannot directly be described but only

hinted at in terms of images. It was the experience of the Lord that formed Paul and supplied the motive force and inexhaustible thrust for his whole missionary endeavour.

At the same time, and no less importantly, Paul was made aware of a contrary or limiting force in himself which made him realize that he must rely not on his own efforts but on the power of Christ. He does not wish to explain to us what this was, and all attempts to guess have been fruitless. We simply do not and cannot know. More important is the fact that although Paul begged to be freed from it, he was finally glad that it made him rely on Christ's power rather than his own resources. It gave him a confidence in his mission despite all difficulties and disappointments.

Lord, give me confidence in your strength and in the knowledge that I do not need to rely on my own ability.