

The Life and Theology of Paul: The Fullness of the Time

Looking Back over the Life of Paul

- Paul lived from approximately AD 5-10 to AD 64-67, a total life of roughly 55-60 years. Converted and called as an apostle in AD 33, his ministry spanned roughly 30 years. It is worth noting: despite the wear of affliction and increasing age, Paul was faithful and fruitful to the end.
- In those 3 decades, he planted numerous congregations across 2 continents, authored 13 letters to young churches, and gathered a band of fellow-workers who would carry on his gospel and missionary labors in generations following his death (1 Tim. 1.18; 2 Tim. 1.13, 2.2, 4.1-2).
- Just as Paul's letters cannot be separate from his life, so his life cannot be separated from his letters: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain," (Phil. 1.21). To understand Paul requires therefore that we study not just his life, but also his letters.
- Yet in his letters Paul does not simply answer questions or give commands. Although always addressed to specific churches in definite situations, Paul's letters contain not just a flow of words about faith and love, but a *pattern* of words: "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you," (2 Tim. 1.13-14).
- In other words, Paul's letters contain a *theology* – an organized system of thought about God, man, Christ, and the Christian life. It is to this theology that we now turn, spending the remaining weeks looking at several of the big ideas in Paul's thought. By studying these big ideas in turn, the goal is to give us a "scaffolding" or "decoder ring" to understand Paul's letters.

"Facts are Stubborn Things." (John Adams)

- The most fundamental aspect of Paul's theology is that it was centered and founded on *facts*:
 "[From the beginning Christianity] was certainly not a way of life as distinguished from a doctrine, or way of life expressing itself in a doctrine, but it was a way of life founded upon a doctrine... upon a proclamation of something that happened." (J. Gresham Machen, *British Weekly*, 11 Sep 1924)
- For Paul, the great fact that changed his life was his encounter with the risen Christ. Remember:
 If you had asked Saul of Tarsus, before the meeting on the road to Damascus, where Israel's story and God's story came together, the two natural answers would have been Temple... and Torah... The Temple indicated that Israel's God desired to live in the midst of his people; the Torah, that he would address his people with his life-transforming word. Saul now came to see that both these answers pointed beyond themselves to Jesus and of course to the Spirit. (Wright)
- But when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, the center of his life changed forever:
 What drove Paul, from that moment on the Damascus Road and throughout his subsequent life, was the belief that Israel's God had done what he had always said he would; that Israel's scriptures had been fulfilled in ways never before imagined; and that Temple and Torah themselves were not after all the ultimate realities, but instead glorious signposts pointing forward to the new heaven-and-earth reality that had come to birth in Jesus. Paul remained to his dying day fiercely loyal to Israel's God, seen in fresh and blinding focus in Jesus. (Wright)
 Formerly, all the elements in his life and thought were organized around the central focus of the law. When the revelation of Jesus Christ showed him in a flash the bankruptcy of the law, the law could no longer be the magnet which drew all those elements together in a well-defined pattern. With the removal of the magnet they would have been dispersed and disorganized, had the law not been immediately replaced at the centre by the risen Lord, around whom Paul's life and thought were reorganized to form a new pattern. (Bruce)
- The important point for us to see here is: the axis of Paul's thought is the fact of the risen Christ. Put another way, the anchor of his theology is the resurrection in history. Like a rock cast into a pond, the fact of Jesus' resurrection rippled outward across his mind – rearranging everything.

The Fullness of the Time¹

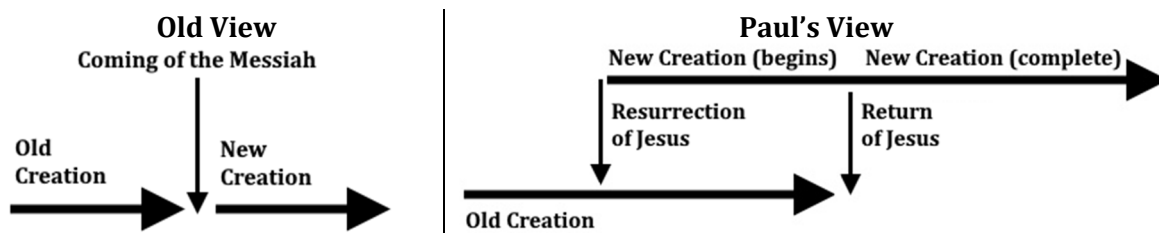
- Given this centrality of historical fact, it should not surprise us that ‘time’ is a big idea for Paul:

Gal. 4.4-5: But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

1 Thess. 5.4-5: But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.

2 Cor. 5.17, 6.2: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come... Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.
- This language echoes Jesus own words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand (Mk. 1.15). But when Jesus or Paul speaks like this, they didn’t mean just another calendar day:

What is to be understood by “the acceptable time” and “the day of salvation” is not merely a certain saving event or opportunity that one must embrace and which may perhaps presently disappear again. Nothing less is intended than that the decisive, long-expected coming of God has dawned, the hour of hours, the day of salvation in the fulfilling, eschatological sense of the word... When he speaks here of “new creation,” this is not meant merely in an individual sense (“a new creature”), but one is to think of the new world of the re-creation that God has made to dawn in Christ, and in which everyone who is in Christ is included... It is a matter of two worlds, not only in a spiritual, but in a redemptive-historical, eschatological sense... He who is in Christ, therefore, is new creation: he participates in, belongs to, this new world of God. (Ridderbos)
- In other words, the cosmic “day of the LORD” foretold by the OT prophets began with the coming of Jesus – and for Paul, this means we need to rearrange our graph of history:



- It is this reoriented view of history that gives Paul’s theology an “already/not yet” character. The new creation has *already* begun: Christ’s resurrection is the ‘firstfruits’ of the final resurrection (1 Cor. 15.20); Christians are raised with him now (Eph. 2.6, Col. 3.1). Yet the new creation is *not yet* complete: both we and the creation itself groan as we wait (Rom. 8.22-23).

Living in the Time Between

- Understanding the “already/not yet” view of history enables us to be *engaged* but *realistic*:

The kingdom of God is already here, but not yet in its fullness. We must not underestimate how present the kingdom of God is, but we must also not underestimate how unrealized it is, how much it exists only in the future... If we overstress the “already” of the kingdom to the exclusion of the “not yet,” we will expect quick solutions to problems and we will be dismayed by suffering and tragedy. But we can likewise overstress the “not yet” of the kingdom to the exclusion of the “already.” We can be too pessimistic about personal change. We can withdraw from engaging the world, too afraid of being “polluted” by it. (Tim Keller, *Hope Times of Fear*)
- Knowing that we already belong to God’s new creation helps Christians live ethically now:

Followers of Jesus, then, must get used to living with a form of theological jet lag. The world all around is still in darkness, but they have set their clocks for a different time zone. It is already daytime on their worldview clock, and they must live as daytime people. This is one of the greatest challenges Paul faced: how to teach people who had never thought eschatologically that time is going somewhere and they must learn how to reset their watches. (Wright)

¹ Much of the material under this heading adapted from Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline*, §7-8.