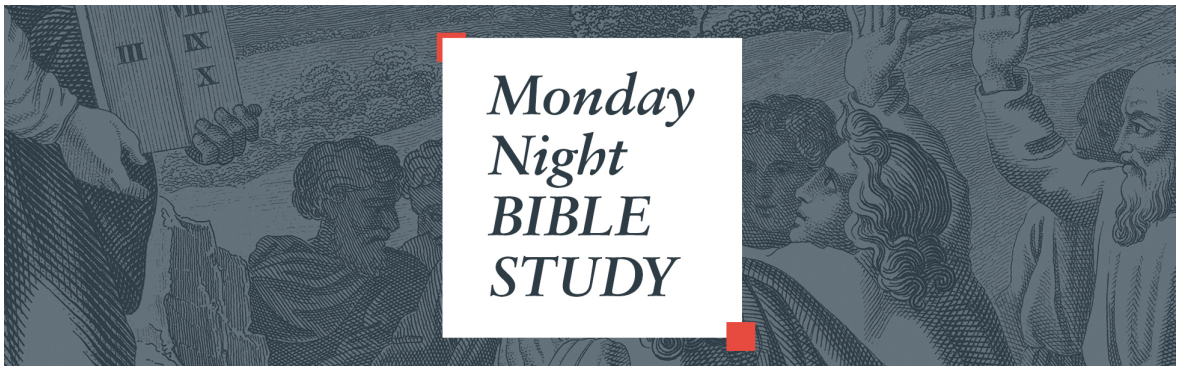


JULY 15, 2019

"Characters of the Bible: Apostle Paul (Part 3)"

Erik Luchetta

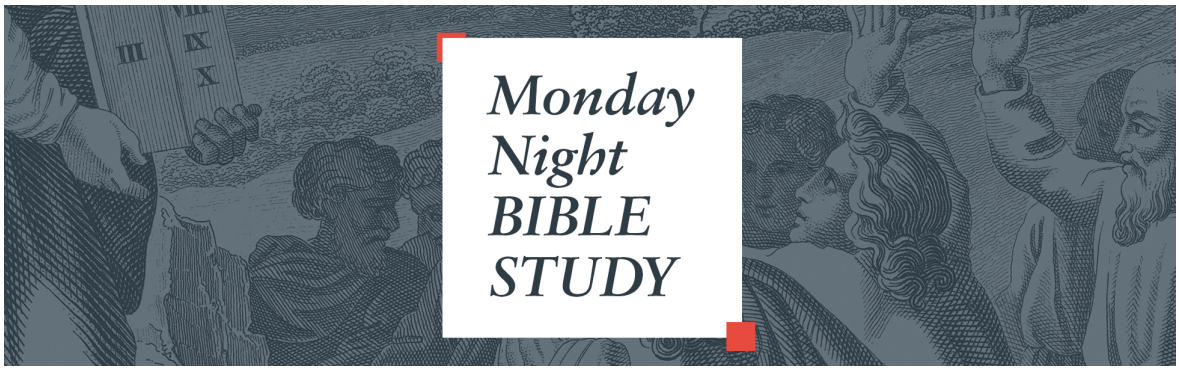
Prior to the Apostle Paul becoming a follower of Jesus, Paul went by his birth name, Saul. How did Saul go from persecuting the church to becoming the great apostle of Jesus Christ? How did his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus cause him to see things differently? What did he preach about Jesus after this encounter? If he preached the resurrection of Jesus, and the future resurrection of the church, what does that mean for how we should live in the present?

The Jews wanted to be freed from their oppression by the Romans and they believed it would happen only when God would send a king that would defeat their oppressors and establish God's rule over them. But as a Pharisee, Saul believed that God wouldn't send a king until they were following the Law to the utmost letter. If disobedience of the law got them in the mess they were in, then the solution, in their minds, would be to fully and radically obey the law. That's why the word Pharisee means "sharp" or "accurate" (sharp and accurate concerning the interpretation and application of the Law).

Many Christians know that the Pharisees were committed to following the Law. However, we typically say they followed the Law because they felt they could earn their way into heaven. However, their strict adherence to the Law wasn't self-righteousness, it was so God would bring heaven down to earth. That was the hope of all Jews – that God's rule would be established on earth as it is in heaven. Think about Jesus's prayer – thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That was the desire of every Jew in Jesus's day.

Saul didn't become Paul because all of his beliefs changed. He was right on what God was going to do, but wrong on how He was going to do it. Saul thought God's people would only be Jews who strictly follow the Law. The "people of God" who would be "freed from their oppressors" turned out to be very different than what he expected. But there is one more thing that Saul believed that will help us understand how he had a change of mind to follow Jesus.

Saul believed, based on what God said, that one day God will invade the earth in a new way and He would transform the earth so that it perfectly reflected heaven. God's will would be done on the earth as it is in heaven. Sin and death would be removed, and because death is removed, the dead would be raised back to life – physically. For Saul, the biggest part of God transforming the



JULY 15, 2019

Characters of the Bible: Apostle Paul Part 3 (Page 2)

earth to look like heaven is the resurrection of the dead. This is called the "last day" or the "Day of the Lord."

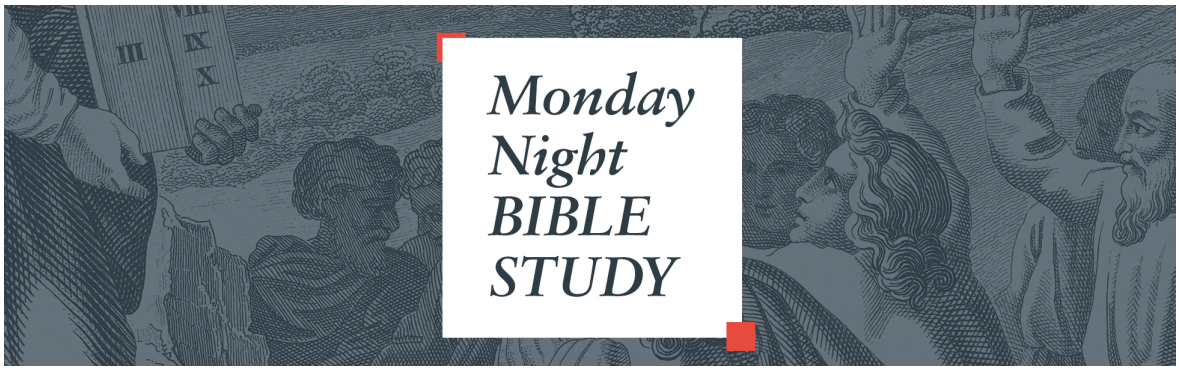
Saul would say that God had to defeat death if He was going to make the world right again. For Saul, to make everything right would mean our physical death would have to be reversed. Nobody escapes death. That's why, in the Bible, death is the greatest, most powerful force in the world. It enslaves every person.

But what if someone escaped death? What if someone went into death itself but then escaped from it – dying physically, then returning physically? What if someone gave Himself over to death for the purpose of coming out of it? What if death was somehow reversed and physical life restored? That would be the greatest victory of all time because the greatest force would be defeated. This is what Saul saw on the road to Damascus. He saw someone who won the greatest of all victories – the victory over death. Saul was waiting for God to defeat death – to win the greatest battle – and he found that Jesus did it Himself.

When Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and saw the great light of Jesus's resurrection, he realized that this Jesus who has been raised from the dead means that death has already been defeated in Him. And that those who believe this, will be united with him in faith, and will also be raised from the dead in the future.

For Saul, when he understood that Jesus defeated the greatest power – death – he realized that Jesus was crowned champion over all things. Saul became the great apostle Paul. His message, his gospel, was simple. Jesus Christ is Lord. God raised Him from the dead. He preached that if Jesus defeated death – mankind's greatest enemy – then all people should submit their allegiance to Him. They should acknowledge that He is Lord over all things since He defeated the most powerful of all things – death itself. And if they do, and only if they do, will they receive salvation from death too.

Romans 10:9 - And if Jesus defeated death, then He must be now in the present and forevermore, superior over all things. The world is now called to acknowledge His victory over death by confessing that He is raised and believing that His victory over death made Him Lord of all. His victory has crowned Him king over all things, over all people, over all powers. All things must bow their knee to name of Jesus as the One who conquered the greatest power – death.



JULY 15, 2019

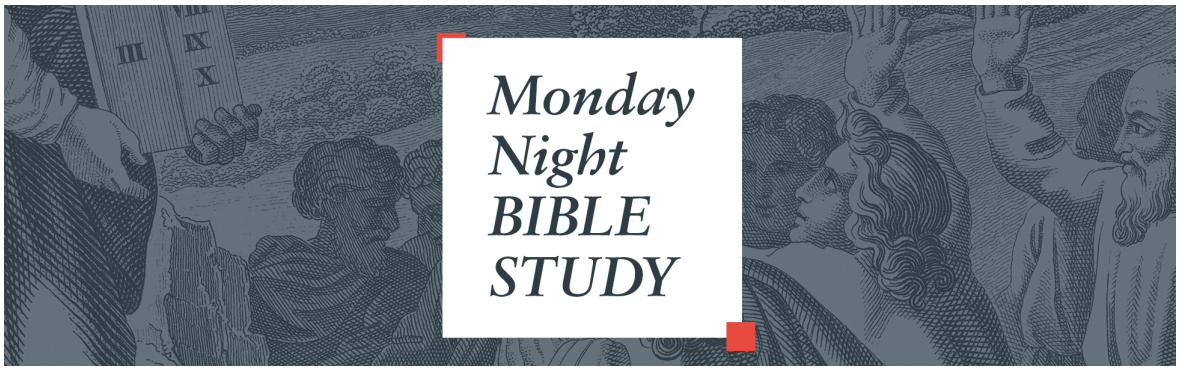
Characters of the Bible: Apostle Paul Part 3 (Page 3)

Ephesians 1:21 - Jesus was raised as Lord over all things, great and small. That's the message Paul preached when He went from town to town announcing the Good News that Jesus is Lord. All who believe He is raised will also be raised too and can begin to live now the blessed resurrected life of the future. This is "salvation" in the Bible. To be guaranteed the future resurrection of the dead – bodily – and to have in the present a foretaste of that future blessed life. Christianity is learning how the live in the present the blessed life that we will receive in fullness at the resurrection.

Philippians 3:21 - We will be raised. But we must understand that Jesus was raised first. That's why Jesus is called the first born from among the dead, and the first fruits of the resurrection. He went first in the resurrection and because of it we can have absolute confidence that God will raise us just like Jesus because we believed the message. We believe God raised Jesus from the dead and confess that He is Lord. This future Day of Lord will be when Jesus comes back to earth. God will raise us and God will permanently remove death from the planet. It will be a time of celebration for us who are raised.

In fact, we will say on that day what is says 1 Corinthians 15:54-55. Jesus went first in the resurrection defeating death within Himself. But we will follow with Him on the Day of the Lord when He appears again and permanently removes sin and death and raises us from the dead. Until then, we live the blessed life in advance of His coming and our resurrection.

Think of the shout of praise that we will give on that Day when we're raised. That shout should be going on now in the present in anticipation of our resurrection. Celebrating His resurrection, and ours with Him, is the basis of worship for Paul. The church, through its praise and worship, thanks God for the resurrection of Jesus and for their own future resurrection. Our praise and worship also announces to the world that there is a reason to sing! Life no longer ends in permanent physical death. There will be a resurrection for those who have put their faith in Jesus. Humans will live in God's world forever and ever just like He planned it. We sing because we know that those who believe that Jesus was raised will also be resurrected (physically) and they will participate in the new earth and new heaven. We sing because God's loving takeover of the world has begun. We sing because we know He will fully transform and renew creation in the future. He will make it last forever, and He wants all people to join in this song in the present.



JULY 15, 2019

Characters of the Bible: Apostle Paul Part 3 (Page 4)

At every turn in his letters, Paul teaches us to look back at the cross and understand that the death and resurrection of Jesus marks the defeat of evil and death. He teaches us to look forward in anticipation of our resurrection. He does this because when we simultaneously look back, and look forward, we also learn how to live in the present – one thing is our worship. But also, if Jesus has been raised, and we will be raised, how should we now live day to day? What should we be doing? If the takeover of the world has begun in Jesus, and will be completed in the future resurrection and renewal of the earth, what should we be doing now? What is the work, the things, we should be doing?

So much could be said about what Paul teaches regarding what the church is and what it does in the world. But one thing stands out about the role of the church in the world. 1 Corinthians 15:58 is one of the most important verses if we want to understand the apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 15:58 - "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor will not be in vain." When we do the work of the Lord here in the world, we're not just greasing the wheels of a car that eventually will be driven off a cliff. We work in the world now for God because the world will last. In other words, you're not doing things in this world for the world to be destroyed in the end. What you do in the world matters because God will see that it lasts forever. Our labor in the world has meaning because the world will last forever. And God is faithful to reward us for our works in His world.

When God takes over the world, what does it look like? God doesn't send in the tanks, bombs, and machine guns. He sends in the meek and merciful. He sends in the justice bringers. And it is those people who go about helping those who are oppressed, healing those who are sick, building orphanages and hospitals. God's takeover happens through our love and acts of justice as we wait for Him to bring the final act of justice at our resurrection. In our acts of love and justice, we show signs of the justice that is yet come. Our seemingly little acts of justice point to the greater justice that is yet to come.