

A LIGHT OUT OF HEAVEN

In Christ is one of the greatest revelations given to us through the beloved Paul. *In Christ* is not something mystical or even mysterious. It is simply how God sees things. He sees all through His Son and in His Son. This was Paul's vision and it is to be ours as well.

Since Paul is the apostle of the nations and the one who has given us much of the objective and absolute truth that is ours *in Christ Jesus*, our Lord, it behooves us to trace a little of Paul's life with Christ, which began on the road to Damascus, for in Paul we discover the heart of a conqueror, an overcomer in Christ, one who was captivated by *the heavenly vision*.

To begin, we need to understand Paul's background prior to meeting the Lord. Unlike the first twelve apostles of the circumcision, Paul never knew Jesus as He walked this earth. He did not have the privilege of walking with Him and being taught by Him. Paul's entire vision of the Lord was heavenly in origin and came after Jesus had ascended back to His Father in heaven.

Thus, Paul's perspective was not of Jesus Christ as He walked this earth in humiliation but of **Christ Jesus** as He is seated among the celestials in glory.

The least of the apostles.

Paul was the finest of the wheat of the Pharisees in his day. By his own admission, Paul was of *the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in relation to law, a Pharisee, in relation to zeal, persecuting the ecclesia, in relation to the righteousness which is in law, becoming blameless* (Philippians 3.5-6 cv). He was so zealous for defending the law and its righteousness that he inordinately persecuted the ecclesia of God and ravaged it, being more zealous than his contemporaries for the traditions of his fathers (Galatians 1.14 cv). When Stephen finished testifying before the religious leaders of Israel and was being stoned to death, Saul (Paul) ¹ was watching and was in hearty agreement with putting him to death (Acts 8.1).

Prior to meeting the risen Christ, Saul's conscience was clear, for he was doing everything that was required under the law. His righteousness was in relation to doing all that the law required, and in this respect, he was becoming blameless. So, in Saul's mind, persecuting the ecclesia of God was justified, for these called-out Jews who believed in Jesus were no longer seeking righteousness according to the law but according to a Person. For Saul, the believing Jews had to be dealt with in

¹ Acts 13.9 records that Saul was also known as Paul. When He spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus, Jesus spoke to him in the Hebrew dialect and thus called him Saul. In Acts 13, when Saul began to take his evangel to the nations, he apparently took on the Greek form of his name, Paul.

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the most severe way, for they were a real threat to the Judaism for which Saul was becoming blameless. They were called *the Way* because their way into the kingdom was far different from the way that Saul knew. To Saul, they were a sect that needed to be destroyed, but little did he know that he was about to join company with *the Way* and be persecuted as well.

Paul's blinding experience of meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus is recorded three times in Acts, two of which Paul personally recounted. We could say this was no small matter to Paul; it was a big deal.

Luke, the writer of Acts, reported: *And Saul, still breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to Damascus to the synagogues; so that if he found any of the Way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem* (Acts 9.1-2 MKJV).

Later, as recorded in Acts, Paul stood before his Jewish brethren and testified of his life in the days leading up to his experience on the road to Damascus.

I am truly a man, a **Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia**, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, **taught according to the exactness of the Law of the fathers, being a zealous one of God**, as you all are today. **I persecuted this Way as far as death, binding and delivering both men and women into prisons**; as also the high priest bears witness to me, and all the elderhood. And receiving letters from them to the brothers, I traveled into Damascus indeed to lead those being bound to Jerusalem, in order that they might be punished. (Acts 22.3-5 MKJV)

Even later, Paul stood before King Agrippa and again testified of the day leading up to his blinding encounter with Jesus.

I truly thought within myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, which I also did in Jerusalem. And **I shut up many of the saints in prisons**, having received authority from the chief priests. And **they being put to death, I cast a vote**. And **I punished them often in every synagogue; I compelled them to blaspheme**; and being exceedingly furious against them, **I persecuted them** even to the outside cities. In which pursuit also traveling to Damascus with authority and power of decision from the chief priests.... (Acts 26.9-12 MKJV)

This was Saul's testimony, and yet, by God's grace, Saul was called to be the ambassador of Christ to the nations.

Paul never made excuse for his persecution of the ecclesia. He readily confessed what he had done, even done with zeal, and for this reason, in his estimation, he was the least of the apostles. He was not fit to be called an apostle because he persecuted the ecclesia of God (1 Corinthians 15.9).

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We need to understand that in his zeal, Saul was tenaciously holding to the truth that he knew according to Scripture. Little did he know at the time that he was about to receive revelation of which the Hebrew prophets that he read in the sacred Scriptures only saw in fragments. Secrets hidden from the preceding generations and the prophets were about to be revealed to Saul.

I am Jesus.

Saul viewed everything from the prism of Judaism; however, this all changed most likely in 33-34 AD as he was on the road to Damascus, seeking to threaten and murder the disciples of the Lord Jesus. On that momentous day, Saul's whole religious view, as well as his world view, was turned upside down as he beheld for the first time the One he was really persecuting.

Now in his going he came to be nearing Damascus. **Suddenly a light out of heaven flashes about him.** And falling on the earth, he hears a voice saying to him, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”** Yet he said, **“Who art Thou, Lord?”** Yet He said, **“I am Jesus Whom you are persecuting.** Nevertheless, rise and enter the city, and it will be spoken to you what you must be doing.” Now the men who are journeying with him stood dumbfounded, hearing, indeed, the sound, yet beholding no one. Now Saul was raised from the earth, yet, his eyes being open, he observed nothing. Now, leading him by the hand, they led him into Damascus, and he was three days not observing aught, and he neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9.3-9 cv)

Saul saw and heard the risen and glorified Jesus in heaven and was blinded by the sight of His glory. The light of Christ was so bright that it threw Saul to the ground. He had little time to react, for the Lord Himself called out Saul's name and asked why he was persecuting Him. To this, Saul asked: *“Who art Thou, Lord?”* He knew that this One who called out from heaven was Lord, but He knew not His name. Then, Jesus identified Himself to this zealous Hebrew of Hebrews, again reiterating that Saul was persecuting Him.

Notice that Saul did not argue with the Lord Jesus. He did not ask Jesus how he was persecuting Him. We can only imagine what thoughts were running through Saul's mind at that moment and for the next three blinding days. At first, there must have been bewilderment as he started to process what had taken place. Perhaps he kept asking himself: “How could I have missed that Jesus is Messiah? How could I have been so deceived? I cannot believe that I so egregiously persecuted my brethren of the Way.” Saul must have felt so unworthy on that momentous day as he was led away by the dumbfounded ones that were with him. He was temporarily blinded, but he was given a vision of something that few men see.

Unapproachable light.

We have no indication that Saul actually looked into the face of Jesus, for the light out of heaven came suddenly and without warning. The glory of Christ was so

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powerful that it caused temporary blindness in Saul. Saul (Paul) would later write to Timothy, his beloved son in the faith, indicating that no mere mortal can gaze upon the Sovereign who dwells in unapproachable light.

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. (1 Timothy 6.15b-16 NASB)

Glory is often presented as light. Paul's testimony to Timothy was that no man can look upon the glory of the Lord. According to Paul's revelation, to do this, we will need to be transfigured to be like our Lord Jesus, to be conformed to the body of His glory (Philippians 3.21). We pray that this glorious day will come soon.

Jesus is the Son of God.

In Damascus, the Lord raised up a disciple to speak to Saul and reveal His plan for this blinded zealot.

Now there was a certain disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias!" Now he said, "Lo! it is I, Lord!" Now the Lord to him, "Rise! Go to the street called 'Straight,' and seek in the house of Judas for a Tarsian named Saul, for lo! he is praying. And he perceived in a vision a man named Ananias entering and placing his hands on him so that he should be receiving sight." Yet Ananias answered, "Lord, I hear from many about this man, how much evil he does to Thy saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who are invoking Thy name." Yet the Lord said to him **"Go, for he is a choice instrument of Mine, to bear My name before both the nations and kings, besides the sons of Israel, for I shall be intimating to him how much he must be suffering for My name's sake."** Now Ananias came away and entered the house, and placing his hands on him, he said, "Saul! Brother! The Lord has commissioned me (Jesus, Who was seen by you on the road by which you came), so that you should be receiving sight and be filled with holy spirit." And immediately fall from his eyes as if scales, and he receives sight. Besides, rising, also, he is baptized, and, obtaining nourishment, is strengthened. Now he came to be with the disciples in Damascus some days. And immediately, in the synagogues, he heralded Jesus, that He is the Son of God. (Acts 9.10-20 cv)

Because of the bad report about Saul and his persecution of the ecclesia, Ananias rightfully hesitated when commanded of the Lord to speak to Saul who was being commissioned by Jesus to bear His name to the nations in addition to the kings and the sons of Israel. So the scales fell off Saul's eyes and he immediately began heralding in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

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Can you imagine the dramatic change in Saul's view? His physical blindness was an indication of his spiritual blindness that had led him on the road to Damascus. Saul had been blind all along to the identity of his Messiah. Although Jesus walked among the house of Israel in which Saul was a major player, he had scales on the eyes of his heart that kept him from seeing. Perhaps he was among the crowd of Pharisees that followed Jesus and tried to trip Him up every step of the way. When the scales fell off his physical eyes, scales also fell off the spiritual eye of his heart. At that moment, what did he see? He saw Jesus as the Son of God! In some respects, this was on the same order as the day Peter declared: ***"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"*** (Matthew 16.16 KJV).

This was Saul's testimony of his conversion to Christ. This one event set the course of his life and began his passion for the One he had persecuted by persecuting the ecclesia of God.

Both the nations and kings, besides the sons of Israel.

Yet the Lord said to him ***"Go, for he is a choice instrument of Mine, to bear My name before both the nations and kings, besides the sons of Israel, for I shall be intimating to him how much he must be suffering for My name's sake."***

The Lord Jesus commissioned Paul to take the evangel not only to the sons of Israel but also to the nations and kings. From his viewpoint, Paul was the most unlikely candidate to be given this revelation to dispense to the nations. However, from our viewpoint, Paul was the most logical and likely candidate. If a gentile or one from among the unbelieving nations were given such revelation, we might wonder whether he made it up so that he could have a part in Christ's kingdom. In His wisdom, the Lord knew that there would be lingering doubt if He chose a vessel from among the nations to dispense such a grand revelation. What better candidate could be put into service than a zealous Jew who desired to see his own people enter the kingdom of God? Paul had no vested interest in seeing the nations enter the kingdom, let alone the celestial realm of the kingdom, something that was not revealed to the prophets of old.

Saul was a believer in God. He must not be considered an unbeliever even as he was persecuting God's ecclesia. He was way off the mark as he strode down the road to Damascus; nevertheless, he belonged to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Apprehended by Christ.

Saul had no choice in the matter. He had no intention of believing that Jesus is the Messiah and, in fact, he tenaciously held that Jesus was not the Messiah of Israel. When He appeared out of heaven, Jesus did not tell Saul to believe in Him; He simply instructed him to get up, enter the city and wait for someone else to instruct him as to what he must do. Literally, Jesus broke into Saul's life and revealed who

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He is and instructed Saul what to do. There was no doubt or hesitation in the mind of Saul at that moment. His response was: “*What shall I do, Lord?*” (Acts 22.10).

By his own admission, Paul was grasped or laid hold of by Christ (Philippians 3.12). It was as if Jesus reached down and grabbed Saul by the scruff of his neck and apprehended him for Himself, making him His prisoner.

This is one of the most glorious examples of the mercy and grace of God in Scripture. Saul did not deserve to meet Jesus. He had done nothing to merit meeting Jesus in such a blinding fashion. If anything, Saul deserved the most severe punishment from the Lord. Instead, Jesus revealed Himself to Saul and chose him from among all the Jews of that day to be the apostle of the nations.

Kicking against the goads.

In his testimony before King Agrippa, Paul revealed a little more detail than previously recorded in Acts.

At midday, on the road, I perceived, O king, a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining about me and those going together with me. Besides, at all of us falling down to the earth, I hear a voice saying to me in the Hebrew vernacular, ‘**Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me? Hard is it for you to be kicking against the goads!**’ Now I say, ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ Now the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet, for I was seen by you for this, to fix upon you before for a deputy and a witness both of what you have perceived and that in which I will be seen by you, extricating you from the people and from the nations, to whom I am commissioning you, to open their eyes, to turn them about from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, for them to get a pardon of sins and an allotment among those who have been hallowed by faith that is in Me.’ (Acts 26.13-18 cv)

Not only was Saul pursuing the wrong thing, but he was kicking against it as well. The term *kicking against the goads* is a reference to a sharp pointed rod that was often used to urge animals to perform certain tasks. If the animal kicked against the sharp rod, it only caused more hurt to the animal; thus, there was incentive to not kick or fight against the goad but to submit to the urging of the master.

Consequently, Saul had been goaded into persecuting his believing brethren. He had been kicking against the goad, but this was futile work, destined to fail, for it was fighting against the Lord Himself. It was only hurting Saul, not the Lord.

Jesus had appeared to Saul for the purpose of appointing him to be a witness of what he had seen *and* to things which Jesus would reveal to him later. In other words, Saul’s blinding experience was only the beginning of Jesus’ appearances to Saul (e.g., see Acts 18.9-10; 23.11). This is an important point, for Saul received subsequent revelation. As his evangel began to form through revelation from

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Jesus, as well as from searching the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul began to preach about justification by faith, reconciliation, and glorification among the celestials, which raises salvation to the height of glory.

Paul's evangel was based not on the earthly walk of Jesus but on His ascension and glorification, which is why Paul extensively referred to *Christ* Jesus. Paul described this first encounter with Jesus as the heavenly vision.

The heavenly vision.

Whereupon, king Agrippa, **I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision** but have, first to those both in Damascus and Jerusalem, and to all the region of Judaea, and to the nations, announced that they should repent and turn to God, doing works worthy of repentance.... (Acts 26.19-20 DNT)

Paul traveled from Damascus to Jerusalem and the area around Jerusalem (Judea), which was a distance of about 260 kilometers from city to city, taking this one message to the Jews and to the nations (gentiles). For this reason, Paul was able to testify before Agrippa that he had discharged this message as entrusted to him by Jesus in what Paul called *the heavenly vision*. Paul was not disobedient to *this* vision; however, he must have had subsequent visions or encounters with Jesus which led to greater revelation as later discharged in his epistles, especially the epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

Progressive vision.

In reading Paul's epistles, it is important to keep in mind that his vision must have been progressive, that is, Jesus revealed more of the pillars of the truth of our faith, including the purpose of the eons, until Paul was given the completed word of God (Colossians 1.25 cv; see Galatians 1.11-24).

To learn of the evangel for the nations, we must read and study Paul's epistles that can be divided into four groups: the *preparatory* epistles (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians); the *perfection* epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians); the *promise* epistles (1 & 2 Thessalonians); and the *personal* epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon).

Another way to study Paul's epistles is to read them in the order in which they were written. Unfortunately, we do not know the exact years they were written and there is some degree of disagreement over the dates. However, the following is one thought on the dates: 1 & 2 Thessalonians (52 AD); 1 Timothy (56 AD); 1 & 2 Corinthians and Galatians (57 AD); Romans (58 AD); Titus (61 AD); Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (61-63 AD); and 2 Timothy (68 AD).

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Unique vision.

We must realize that Paul's vision and his calling were rather unique from the twelve apostles because they were directed not to the Jews entirely but primarily to the nations.

As a side note; anyone today who claims that they have had a vision such as Paul's must be viewed with great suspicion, especially if it adds to or takes away from the word of God that was completed through Paul. Some years ago, a man claimed that he had a vision in which Paul appeared sitting in heaven on a throne and spoke a message to him to give to the "church." Such things must be ignored. This is not how we receive vision in our day.

Spiritual vision.

Our vision must come from the completed word of God. Vision today is not seeing things with our physical eyes or in our minds, such as apparitions. It is seeing with the spiritual eyes of our heart. We see this in Paul's prayer for the saints who are believers in Christ Jesus.

He prayed that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, *may be giving you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the realization of Him, the eyes of your heart having been enlightened*, for you to perceive what is the expectation of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of the enjoyment of His allotment among the saints, and what the transcendent greatness of His power for us who are believing, in accord with the operation of the might of His strength, which is operative in the Christ, rousing Him from among the dead and seating Him at His right hand among the celestials, up over every sovereignty and authority and power and lordship, and every name that is named, not only in this eon, but also in that which is impending: and subjects all under His feet, and gives Him, as Head over all, to the ecclesia which is His body, the complement of the One completing the all in all (Ephesians 1.17-23 cv).

Now, this is a mighty powerful prayer, but notice that it is *spiritual* sight that Paul desired for the saints. He did not pray that they would have a vision like he had but that the eyes of their heart, the spiritual heart, would be opened to see what they had been saved into as revealed in his epistles, especially the letter to the Ephesians.

We are living in days of great darkness. The only thing that can dispel darkness is light. For those who are spiritual, it does not take very long to discern the darkness that is enveloping the world today and devouring many people, even believers. Do not be fooled into seeking after manifestations that many might call visions. Vision does not refer to dreams and apparitions that many are seeking today in what is most likely a false spirituality.

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The only way to dispel darkness is through the light of Christ. We need to see more and more of Christ Jesus, our Lord. We need to see Him for who He is and our position *in* Him. We need the light out of heaven to enlighten the eyes of our heart for us to perceive the glorious expectation that we have *in* Christ. We need vision of our beloved Lord Jesus. He alone is the One who sets us on our feet and sets the course of our life that is destined to be among the celestials *in* Christ.

How do we come into this spiritual sight? It can only come through the word of God and by experiencing His life and knowing His mind in the affairs of life. Most of all, we need spiritual sight or perception of what Paul has given to us in the evangel that was given to him to dispense to the nations. However, let us be clear that vision or spiritual sight is more than just reading or memorizing words and accumulating facts and figures. We need revelation or understanding of what we are seeing in the word. We need revelation of the vision given to Paul.

Paul was blinded by the light out of heaven, but he needed revelation of the meaning of the light. He had to hear the words *I am Jesus, Whom you are persecuting*, before he could make any sense of what was happening to him. *Get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do* (Acts 9.6). And Paul began heralding that Jesus is the Son of God!

We need to see that our emphasis must not be on seeking visions for the sake of visions but on seeking after one vision, *the* vision of Christ. But it even goes beyond this; it is about seeking after, knowing, and experiencing Christ Himself. It is not vision that changes our lives; it is by Christ Himself through His spirit that our lives are so changed that He is formed in us (Galatians 4.19), and we are ultimately fully conformed to His image as His complement. Vision is only the means to see Christ more clearly.

Do not seek after visions. Seek after the one vision that matters, Jesus! Seek after the risen One who was revealed to Paul. Seek after the glorified Christ and pursue Him with a passion that consumes your whole life. We could say that heavenly vision yields passion. This is what it did in Paul's life and what it will do in ours, once we behold the glory of the Lord Jesus. This is the life of the conqueror!

So many brethren in our day are seeking after many things with much passion; however, the one thing that matters most is not pursued with the same passion. The one thing is not even a thing; He is the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just visit any bookstore that sells so-called Christian books and peruse the numerous titles. There are many books written about Christian things, but there are few that are written about the one thing. The vision that is presented in so many books is related more to how to do something or to how to achieve some result. Most material is about how believers are to get things from God, or how they are to live better lives on this earth, whether it is gaining wealth or success or many other things that the world seeks after as well. Much is written on God's purpose for a person's life, how to know this purpose, and how to achieve this purpose. The list of topics is almost endless.

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Dear brethren, we need the one vision that matters in a day that so many of the Lord's people are either without vision or are chasing after the many visions of men. Most vision spoken of today is earthly vision; it is bound to the earth and to today.

We need the light out of heaven to shine on us.

We need heavenly vision, vision of the ascended and glorified Jesus that transcends this earth and reaches the heights of glory among the celestials. We need vision of the One who is the Origin and the Consummation of the eons. We need vision that carries us into the eons of the eons and beyond. We need vision that opens the eyes of our heart to the purpose of the eons in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We need vision that we are *in* Christ, forever secure *in* His life.

Who are the conquerors in Christ? They are the ones with vision, heavenly vision! They are the ones who have seen the light out of heaven! They have seen Jesus!

May the eyes of your heart be enlightened to see and to know...

Scripture Abbreviations:

CV	Concordant Version (Literal New Testament)
DNT	Darby New Translation
KJV	King James Version
MKJV	Modern King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible

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