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*Themes of St. Paul*

Talk #2  
*Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles*



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## 2. Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles

### ***Prophecies that the Messianic Kingdom Will Include All Nations***

In this second talk we shall look at St. Paul's vocation as Apostle to the Gentiles. In earlier talks, we saw that numerous Messianic prophecies stress the universal nature of the Kingdom to be founded by the Messiah. The Messianic Kingdom is to include all nations, incorporated into a new and transformed Israel, constituted by a new covenant (Jer 31:31-33; cf. Ez 36:24-27).

The universal or catholic nature of the Messianic Kingdom was prophesied by Isaiah in one of the canticles of the Suffering Servant (Is 49:6): "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a *light to the nations*, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."<sup>1</sup> Is 60:3-13 further develops the theme:

And *nations shall come to your light*, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar; . . . the wealth of the nations shall come to you. . . . All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. . . . Who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their windows? For the islands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your sons from far, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God. . . . Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you. . . . Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut; that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. . . . The glory of Lebanon shall come to you.

The Messianic Psalm 72 (71):8-17 foretells the future universality of the Messianic Kingdom in similar terms:

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him! . . . May his name be blessed forever; as long as the sun his name shall remain. In him shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed; all nations shall magnify him.

The universality of the Kingdom was also shown in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar interpreted by Daniel, in which

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<sup>1</sup> St. Paul cited this text in his sermon in Antioch of Pisidia, recounted in Acts 13:47.

the Kingdom was symbolized as a rock cut by no human hand which grew into a mountain that "filled the whole earth" (Dan 2:35).

Jesus Himself prophesied the future catholicity of the Church when He said: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12:32). During Jesus' public ministry, the Gospel was directed to the Jews, in fulfillment of the promises to the Patriarchs and the prophecies. After the Passion, however, the Gospel was not to remain confined to Israel. His final commission to the Apostles and disciples directed them to "Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20).

Nevertheless, the first expansion of the Church at Pentecost and for the following decade was almost exclusively Jewish. The nascent Church required a brief time of preparation before the prophecies of the universal Kingdom and the missionary mandate of Jesus could begin to come to fruition.

Gentile believers first began to come into the Church in significant numbers in Antioch around the year 42 AD. At that time Barnabas was sent to the Church in Antioch to further evangelize them, and he sought out St. Paul as his companion in this work. It is at this moment that Paul's full vocation began to manifest itself.

### ***Paul's Vocation as Apostle to the Gentiles***

St. Paul himself had a clear understanding of his extraordinary vocation to take the lead in bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles. In the Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul speaks of his vocation as Apostle to the Gentiles. First he says that God had "set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15-16). Paul also refers to himself as Apostle to the Gentiles in his other letters. In Rom 1:5, he speaks solemnly of his vocation:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, . . . the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh . . . , Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name *among all the nations*, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

He returns to the theme in Rom 11:13: "Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an *apostle to the Gentiles*, I magnify my ministry in order to make my

fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.” He hopes that his ministry to the Gentiles will also redound to the salvation of the Jews, for whom he pours out his heart in Rom 9:1-5.

In 1 Tim 2:5-7, he writes: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a *teacher of the Gentiles* in faith and truth.”

In the Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul goes on to give an invaluable history of his relations with the other Apostles:

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up by revelation; and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. . . . *When they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles), and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do.* (Gal 2:1-10)

What does Paul mean when he speaks of the “Gospel which I preach among the Gentiles”? He is certainly referring, among other things, to the mystery of the incorporation of the Gentile Christians into the Church without the obligation of observing the Mosaic Law, and on an equal footing with the Jewish Christians. It would also include Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith, hope, and charity, independently of the ceremonial precepts of the Law of Moses, and incorporation into the Body of Christ through Baptism.<sup>2</sup> It would also probably include Paul’s understanding of the Mystical Body in general.

The fact that Paul was recognized as Apostle to the Gentiles and Peter to the circumcised does not mean that they did not both preach to both groups of Christians. Peter remained the head of all the Apostles and of all the apostolic activity of the Church, as we can see in the Council of Jerusalem. The difference was one of emphasis.

This division of labor also seems to show that at that moment (c. 49AD or before) the ministry to the circumcised was still numerically more significant than that to the

Gentile Christians. This, of course, was soon to change, and must have been largely completed by the time of the death of James (62AD), Peter and Paul (67AD), and the destruction of Jerusalem (70AD).

### ***Fittingness of Paul’s Election as Apostle of the Gentiles***

It is very interesting that God elected precisely St. Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. One might have thought that he was better fitted to be an Apostle to the Jews. Of all the Apostles, Paul was by far the most learned in the Torah, having received the best education possible, sitting at the feet of Rabban Gamaliel, grandson of the great Hillel and head of his school, the leading light and moral authority of the rabbinical schools of his day. Secondly, Paul was alone among the Apostles in being a Pharisee, and he had the unfortunate distinction of having been one of the leading persecutors of the Church.

All of these elements make his conversion more striking and evidently miraculous. This served to show that his mission to the Gentiles was the work of God’s plan, and not merely a human caprice, a psychological crisis, the result of anti-Semitism, or a lack of appreciation for the value of the Mosaic Law. No one could fairly say that Paul was rejecting the necessity of the observance of the Mosaic Law in the New Covenant on the basis of insufficient understanding of the Law, or a lack of love for it, or through a liberal dislike of rules and regulations, or through anti-Jewish prejudice, or because he felt it to be a burden, etc. His attachment to the traditions of his forefathers made his turn to the Gentiles understandable not as a repudiation of Israel, but as fidelity to God’s plan in revealing Christ to him.

Secondly, it is significant that Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew from the Diaspora, and that he was converted and called by God precisely while he was persecuting the Church in the Diaspora. St. Paul was thus fitted by birth, citizenship, and language to labor for the Gospel in the world outside of Israel.

### ***Mystery of Christ Hidden for All Generations: Gentiles Called to the Body of Christ***

St. Paul was given light by God not only to grasp his vocation of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles, but also to see its momentous place in God’s plan of salvation history. In the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, St. Paul speaks of the catholicity/universality of the Church as a “mystery hidden for ages in God” (Eph 3:9).

To Paul, the Pharisee called to be Apostle to the Gentiles, the most mysterious work of God after the completion of the Paschal Mystery and the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was the superabundance of God’s mercy shown in the ingathering of the Gentiles into the new Israel, which is the Church. We tend to take it for granted

<sup>2</sup> See Fernand Prat, *The Theology of Saint Paul*, trans. John Stoddard (Westminster, MD: Newman Bookshop, 1952), 31.

today as something natural. However, for St. Paul, the engrafting of the Gentiles into the new Israel—constituted as the Body of Christ—was anything but natural: it is “*the mystery hidden for ages and generations.*” It is a miracle of God greater than any other, for it is a miraculous catch, not of fish but of peoples formerly separated from the true faith, “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12).

The engrafting of the Gentiles into the new Israel is a far greater miracle than God’s earlier work of leading Israel out of the Gentiles in the Exodus. It is a far greater work for it is a far greater manifestation of the divine mercy.

Although the ingathering had been foretold by the prophets and Christ Himself, the realization of the prophecy astounds the Apostle as he labors to bring it about. In Eph 2:11-22, Paul writes to the Gentile Christians:

Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, . . . remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The sheer universality of God’s plan of salvation in Christ—which is to include all nations—was an absolutely new thing, and a fitting consequence of the Incarnation of the Word. Thus the calling of the Gentiles shares in the mystery of the Incarnation, as its fruit and purpose.

In Eph 3:1-7, St. Paul continues the same thought:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this you can perceive *my insight into the mystery of Christ*, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace which was given me by the working of his power.

Paul is not boasting when he speaks of his insight into the mystery of Christ. He was called by Christ for this:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

St. Paul states that the mystery of the calling of the Gentiles into Israel was a so great that *even the angels marvel*, as this mystery is revealed to them *through the Church!*

In Col 1:26, the calling of the Gentiles into the Church is likewise “*the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”

### ***The Church Restores the Unity of the Human Race***

For St. Paul, the fact that the Gentiles are called into the Church means that the People of God undoes the divisions introduced into humanity at Babel, bringing mankind into a twofold unity: unity with God and with one another in the Church. The “wall of division” between peoples is thus taken away in Christ.

Above all, Christ has taken away the wall of division between Israel and the nations. This wall of division was formerly willed by God as a means to preserve the purity of faith of Israel as they lived in the midst of idolatrous Gentiles. The ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Law of Moses kept Israel separated from the Gentiles, and thus created a “dividing wall.” Christ took away this wall by establishing the New Covenant in his blood, abrogating the necessity of the observance of the Mosaic Law in its ceremonial and judicial precepts. Paul explains this in Eph 2:13-18:

For he is our peace, who has *made us both one*, and has *broken down the dividing wall of hostility*, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might *create in himself one new man in place of the two*, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in *one body* through the cross, thereby *bringing the hostility to an end*. And he came and preached peace to *you who were far off* and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

The Church is the mystery of God in which the human race regains its unity in Christ, through the merits of His cross. To bring about this unity of Israel and the Gentiles, “the law of commandments and ordinances”—that is, the ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Law of Moses which formerly separated Israel from the Gentiles and

served as a “dividing wall” — are taken away in the Cross of Christ.

### ***The Issue at Stake in the Council of Jerusalem***

The breaking down of the wall of division between Israel and the Gentiles was not accomplished without tremendous controversy and turmoil. This is not at all surprising, for Israel in past centuries had had to make tremendous sacrifices to remain faithful to the Law of Moses in its ceremonial and judicial precepts. Think of the Maccabean martyrs! And now those laws are no longer binding on those grafted into Messianic Israel?!

The first missionary voyage of Paul and Barnabas raised this issue in a decisive way, posing some fundamental questions. The first great question was this: Are the baptized Gentile Christians also bound to observe the Law of Moses? St. Paul decisively and passionately argued for the negative. He saw that imposing the Law of Moses on the Gentile Christians would have two catastrophic consequences. First of all, it would be a tremendous obstacle to the entrance of pagan converts into the Church. Thus it would block the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies that the Kingdom would come to include all nations. The extent of this obstacle could be seen in the existence of large numbers of God-fearing proselytes throughout the Diaspora.<sup>3</sup> These were non-Jews who believed in the Revelation of the Old Testament and abjured idolatry, but did not undertake a complete observance of the Law of Moses.

St. Paul saw that the same reasons for which the proselytes did not embrace the full observance of the Mosaic Law would also apply to the Gentiles who came to believe in the Gospel.

The second reason why St. Paul opposed the Judaizers concerns his understanding of justification through living faith in Christ. The Gospel involves a New Covenant in which salvation is mediated in a new and better way: directly through the merits of Christ, which are appropriated by the faithful through living faith and the sacraments. [We shall return to this subject later in the lecture series.]

Paul’s position was decisively confirmed by the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15. In order to promote peace between the Jewish and Gentile Christians, the Council asked all Christians for a minimal observance of a precept of the ceremonial law of Moses, to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity<sup>4</sup>” (Acts 15:29). These four requirements match those that the book of Leviticus had imposed on Gentiles who sojourned

within Israel.<sup>5</sup> They also, apparently, were expected of the God-fearing proselytes who frequented the synagogues without committing themselves to circumcision and the full observance of the Law.

### ***Paul’s Confrontation with Peter***

The fact that the Gentile Christians were not obliged to observe the Law of Moses left other questions still open. Are the Jewish Christians still bound to observe the Law, and if not, may they continue to do so as a community? Should kosher laws be observed at common meals after the Eucharist? What would this imply for the unity of the Church and the fundamental equality of Jewish and Gentile Christians, as understood by St. Paul? These questions were not directly addressed at the Council of Jerusalem and remained in the background. Not long afterwards, these unresolved questions provoked a clash between Peter and Paul, as Paul tells us in the Letter to the Galatians. After the Council of Jerusalem, Peter was at Antioch for a time with Paul and Barnabas, and there occurred the incident when Paul rebuked Peter:

When Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified. (Gal 2:11-16)

This passage shows that Peter, prior to the arrival of certain men from the party of James, did not habitually observe the full ceremonial law of Moses and the kosher laws, but ate with the Gentiles. Fearing the opposition of these “men from James,” he temporarily reverted back to an observance of the kosher laws so as not to scandalize them. This meant that Peter no longer ate with the Gentile Christians. St. Paul saw this temporary change in Peter as a double threat. On the one hand, it tended to divide the Church into two factions that could not share table fellowship, contrary to the profound unity implied in the doctrine of the Mystical Body. Secondly, it threatened to lead the Gentile converts to adopt the kosher laws and other aspects of the ceremonial law themselves so that they could enter into closer fellowship with Peter and the other

<sup>3</sup> See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 58-59.

<sup>4</sup> Unlike the other precepts of the Council of Jerusalem, the obligation to avoid unchastity, interpreted in the broad sense, is always binding on all Christians, for it is part of the moral law and not the ceremonial.

<sup>5</sup> See Lev 17:8,10,13, 18:26.

Jewish Christians. Thus it led indirectly to a reversal of the decision of the Council of Jerusalem, and to the placing of an obstacle on the mission to the Gentiles.

Peter clearly saw the truth of Paul's reproof, vindicating Paul's position that the Jewish Christians should not put a barrier between themselves and the Gentile Christians through observance of kosher laws and other ceremonial precepts, for their continued observance would tend either to excessively separate the Jewish and Gentile Christians, or lead Gentile Christians to imitate them in their observance of the ceremonial Law.<sup>6</sup>

### ***St. Paul's Apostolic Zeal***

One of the most inspiring aspects of the letters of St. Paul is the ardent zeal to bring Christ to all souls that comes through in every line. Let us look at some examples. In the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul begins by expressing his ardent desire to bear fruit for the Gospel also in Rome:

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish: so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The order, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" reflects the order of Apostolic preaching. Salvation was given first to the Jews because they were the people prepared for two thousand years to receive the Messiah in their bosom, and to transmit His Kingdom and the obedience of faith in His name to all the Gentiles. Thus they were privileged subjects of evangelization, and St. Paul always began his ministry to the Gentiles by preaching first to the Jews. It is tragic that so many Catholics have lost the idea that the Jews have a sacred right to hear the Gospel of the realization of the Promises for whose fulfillment they yearn.

Paul's zeal for the Gospel is also beautifully witnessed in 1 Cor 9:16-23:

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. *Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* . . . For though I am free

<sup>6</sup> Mark Kinzer gives a different reading of Gal 2:14-16 in *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 83-85.

from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law — though not being myself under the law — that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law — not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ — that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

In order to be Apostle of both Gentiles and Jews, Paul must make himself all things to all men, whether Greek or barbarian, learned or simple, Jew or Gentile, so as to save all. Paul has furnished here the fundamental principle of missionary activity. In order to impart the Gospel to others and win them for Christ, one must seek to share their life as much as possible, in all that does not involve sin.

A priceless portrait of St. Paul's apostolic charity and zeal in the initial evangelization of Europe are given by the letters to the Thessalonians, which are the earliest of his letters that we possess. Paul begins the first Letter to the Thessalonians as follows:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians. . . . We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you; for *our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*. . . . You received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit . . . [and] you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thes 1:1-10)

So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. . . . for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, *you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers*. . . . For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. (1 Thes 2:8-20)

The crown of the apostle is his children in Christ, for whom he becomes a father, espousing them as a bride to Christ, the Bridegroom. To the Corinthians he writes: “For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2).

### **St. Paul’s Apostolic Labors**

St. Paul’s zeal for the Gospel is manifested in tremendous labors and sufferings on behalf of the Gospel. The Apostle of the Gentiles speaks of these especially in his letters to the Corinthians, who were showing themselves rebellious to his apostolic authority. In 1 Cor 4:9-13 he writes:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things. I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

St. Paul gave birth to churches among the Gentiles as a mother gives birth to children in travail. In 2 Cor 4:7-12, he writes in a similar vein:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

St. Paul described his labors for the sake of the Gospel with more detail in 2 Cor 11:23-29:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people,

danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the *daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches*. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

Most of the hardships described by Paul here came from persecution on account of his apostolate to the Gentiles.

### **Revelations Received by St. Paul**

A fundamental principle of the spiritual life is that God gives the graces necessary for every mission to which He calls us. The greater and more universal the mission to which He calls a person, the greater the graces which He provides for him. Since Our Lady was called to be the Mother of God, she was the recipient of the greatest spiritual gifts given to any creature, in her Immaculate Conception and throughout her life. The Apostles were likewise given spiritual gifts that were unique: to share intimacy with the Word of God made flesh for three years and witness His miracles, teaching, and Resurrection.

St. Paul was not graced with the gift of the other Apostles in knowing Jesus in the flesh during His public ministry. However, since his mission was no less universal and important than that of the other Apostles—for he was chosen to be the Apostle to the Gentiles—it is fitting that he receive other superabundant spiritual gifts of Revelation. The first of these, of course, was his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. The greatest of Paul’s mystical experiences came almost a decade later and is recounted by Paul himself in 2 Cor 12:

I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I wish to boast, I shall not be a fool, for I shall be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

St. Paul was writing the Second Letter to the Corinthians in about 57AD. This would give us the date of around 43-44AD for the great revelation that he is referring to. This would have occurred before the beginning of his first missionary voyage (about 45AD), so as to prepare him for the great mission to the Gentiles.

St. Thomas Aquinas thinks that St. Paul was given the unique grace of temporarily seeing the beatific vision. The reason for this is that St. Paul speaks of seeing things that “cannot be told” and that transcend all language. The beatific vision is above all concepts and images and thus cannot be communicated in language or imagery.

The magnitude of Paul’s vision suggests a comparison with Moses on Mt. Sinai. In Ex 33:18-23, Moses tells of his vision of the “backside” of God:

Moses said, “I pray thee, show me thy glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

It is fitting that Paul should have been graced with the same kind of extraordinary revelations as Moses, the mediator of the Old Covenant. In comparison with this vision of Moses, however, it seems that Paul’s vision may well have been higher, attaining to the beatific vision for a moment, which apparently was not granted to Moses.

The fact that Paul was the recipient of such a gift of Revelation is in keeping with his mission of revealing Christ to the nations. It is very probable that the core of the Gospel that Paul preached “among the Gentiles” (Gal 2:2) was given to him directly by Christ’s Revelation. This can be seen in St. Paul’s extraordinary claim in Gal 1:11-12: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

### ***St. Paul’s Conception of the Apostolate as Collaboration with Christ***

In 1 Cor 3:5-23, St. Paul develops a magnificent picture of the Apostles as collaborators with Christ, a task to which we are all called to participate:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters

is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. . . . So let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.

God’s condescension and mercy is shown precisely in allowing man to participate in the work of salvation. God alone gives growth in the spiritual life by giving grace, but he uses human instruments. St. Paul, like the Virgin Mary and the other Apostles, is a magnificent example of human collaboration with God in building up the Church. Although God’s plan from the beginning was to have Israel’s faith overflow unto all the nations, He needed human instruments to realize that universal destiny of Israel, and St. Paul was the chosen vessel for that sublime mission of tearing down the dividing wall of hostility between Israel and the nations, uniting Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Christ.

We too, following the model of Paul, are called to collaborate with God in the building up of the Church so that it may reach all peoples and bring them to share more and more deeply in the life of Christ, tearing down the dividing walls of hostility that separate them from the Body of Christ.