

PAUL - “Dealing With Our Past”

“Building Blocks”

1. **(Intro)** One of the most necessary things to possess, to be able to truly “finish the race,” is a long memory of the goodness of God. In our most difficult seasons, when we are tempted to quit, we desperately need to have a “rehearsed list” of all the ways and times God has dealt with us in grace and mercy. Dwelling on life’s pain, the (temporary) injustices of others, and our own sin, shortens our memory of His goodness.
2. **(Q3-Acts 8)** The word translated “approved” (*suneudokō*), is a compound verb meaning “to be pleased” or “to be approving of” + “with others.” It is also in the present tense, which is slightly lost in the ESV’s “approved.” The nuanced meaning here is that Saul was agreeing with the *whole ordeal*, and was pleased that it had happened, and low it turned out.

The four verb forms in 8:3 (i.e. ravaging, entering, dragged, committed) all refer to continuous action. Saul was doing *a lot* of these things to a large number of people, over a sustained period of time. He was on a “mission of extinction.”

3. **(Q3-Acts 9)** The reference to Saul “breathing” threats and murder is an isolated use of this verb in our New Testament. It is used in classical Greek for “inhale.” The reference is a *very strong* one. Killing disciples, attacking the infant church with a goal to destroy it, was Saul’s reason for living! In the words of a popular chorus, it was “the air he breathed.”

Damascus was over 130 miles NE of Jerusalem. This was at least an 8-day journey on foot, allowing for one sabbath layover. We have no idea *why* he picked this city. It may have been because he received “intel” that Damascus was a city where either the Gospel had penetrated, or the persecuted church had fled, or both. **(Note: Paul’s testimony before Agrippa in Acts 26 provides much insight into this period of his pre-conversion days.)**

4. **(Q5-1 Cor 15)** Paul’s description of himself is *very important*. He wrote 1 Corinthians around AD 55, roughly twenty years after his conversion. His language here, especially how he views himself in contrast to the other apostles, is saturated with deep regret over his past.
 - “*last of all...*” (*eschatos*) is from a word that refers to the final point on a line; the last thing
 - “*...as to one untimely born*” (*ektrōma*) is a word that means an abortion, or an aborted birth; it is a strong word that challenges the legitimacy of being considered an “equal” with those living; in this case, the notion of being an apostle on the same level as those who had followed Jesus from the beginning out of love and dedication.
 - “*the least of the apostles...*” (*elachistos*) this is the superlative of the adjective *micros*, meaning “smallest” in size, rank, function, or importance. **(Note:** It is at least interesting that “Paul” means “little” or “small.” It is actually a Roman name; cf Acts 13:7). It is also the same word Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount when he talks about “*the least of these commandments*” (Matt 5:19).

All of the pejorative descriptions that Paul personally applies to himself are rooted in his own explanation in verse 9 of this passage, “*...because I persecuted the church of God.*” His behavior two decades earlier still colors his view of himself. But, it did *not* produce guilt and self-pity. Instead, it yielded humility and tireless service:

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” 1 Cor 15:10

5. **(Q5)** The Greek word Paul chose for “worked harder” is a powerful word. It points to becoming “worn out” for God, to be “weary” from Kingdom toil.
6. **(Q6a)** The verb “forgetting” (epilanthanomai) is in the present tense, indicating ongoing, continuous “forgetting.” Paul is talking here about a lifestyle verb, making something a behavioral habit. And, the word itself, “forgetting,” has *nothing* to do with a lapse of memory. Instead, it’s a reference to the opposite! It has to do with refusing to nourish, nurture, and sustain his past. It means to “neglect” certain memories.



“Stumbling Stones”

1. **(Overall)** This particular chapter assumes some familiarity with the life and ministry of Saul and his conversion and transformation into “Paul.” Be sensitive to the fact that your group members will have varying degrees of knowledge of this story. Tell as much of it as necessary to create a good context.

NOTE: Question #4 is *very* confusing. During the editing process, in an effort to shorten the study to fit space constraints, some questions are always deleted. However, in the case of *my* studies, the inductive nature of the study relies heavily on “question clusters,” *groups* of questions that *together* move the student towards a specific point. It appears that the editor deleted one or more questions *before* our #4, and created an “orphan” question. As a result, it is very confusing because it has no context. I would suggest that you either *skip* this question, or do #5 before it. If group members express confusion over this question, use the above explanation of the editing process to help them understand what happened.
2. **(Q1-2)** We need to be careful here, when we think of the Pharisees. They began as a conservative attempt to protect Torah from abuse and neglect. They were the “good guys.” And, distancing ourselves from them is insufficient. We need to go a step further. We probably have more in common with the Sadducees, a group that gets far less ink in our Bibles. They were wealthy and powerful people, trendy in their spirituality, and were driven more by reason than mystery, in their approach to Scripture. Not being “legalistic” (Pharisee) doesn’t protect me from the tendency to be “modern,” “relevant,” and “enjoy the good life” (Sadducee).
3. **(Q6)** Contextually, Paul is referring to his past *accomplishments*, not his past sin. But, based on what we learned in Question 5, Paul past “zeal” was still very much a part of his memory. His point in this passage is clear: it was his *future*, not his past, that drove and motivated him. And his future was nothing less than the will of God, the Gospel of Redemption, and his place in it. Paul says, in effect, “*I want to give my life to what God gave His life for.*”



“Going Deeper”

1. **(Q3-Acts 9)** In Galatians 1:13-14, we learn that Paul’s zeal to persecute Christians was moving him up the “ladder” of leadership ahead of many his own age. Have you ever found *yourself* doing something “spiritual” to win the approval of significant people?
2. **(Q5a)** When you reflect on your past, does it evoke regret or thanksgiving? What might this tell you about your understanding of grace?
3. **(Q5)** Paul’s “regret” resulted in humility and an energy that “wore him out,” instead of self-pity and resignation. How do you explain that?
4. **(Q8-10)** These 3 questions should produce a powerful discussion. Give group members time to talk and perhaps pray for one another. Begin next week by debriefing on how their “memory diet” went.