

The God of Paul  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9

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*God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 1 Cor. 1:9*

Once when I was in seminary a class period began with the professor running into the classroom almost breathlessly. He hoisted his satchel briefcase up upon the table next to his lectern as if it weighed a ton. He took from it its only contents as far as I could tell: his folder of lecture notes for the class. And he began his lecture by saying, “Friends, we have a lot of material to cover today but the point is not to say everything that can be said. It is to stimulate in the right direction.”

Our subject today is the God of the Apostle Paul. This well is deep and the bucket of time available to us in this hour is small. We cannot say everything that can be said or even everything that should be said. But we can hope to stimulate thought in the right direction.

You know that one of the first and best interpreters of the life and meaning of Jesus was a man by the name of Saul of Tarsus, better known to us as Paul. His writings make up a significant portion of the New Testament. His letters circulated throughout the Christian Church long before the written Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John came into being. These letters shaped the faith of the early church. Paul’s thought has endured through the long centuries and continues to feed, guide, inspire, and sustain the church right down to our own day. This is literature that has never died, fallen out of use, or lost its influence.

Paul’s biography is well-established in your memories. He was a Jewish man, a Roman citizen, a Pharisee, and an early persecutor of people who put their trust in Jesus and claimed to be a Christian. Paul himself was converted to Christianity when the Risen Christ appeared to him along the road to Damascus, and miraculously changed his course from one of persecuting Christians to one of proclaiming, promoting, and perpetuating the gospel. He travelled extensively as a Christian missionary, encouraging Christians, establishing churches, teaching in city after city, and writing occasional letters often in response to problems that developed in churches after he had left them and gone on to another.

What interests us now for the purpose of this course of sermons is the content of Paul’s theology. What was Paul’s understanding of God? As a way of at least opening up an answer to that question I will roam through Paul’s letters the way he travelled around the Mediterranean world and will isolate just three themes out of many.

*Paul’s God is a God of mystery.*

As a Jewish man with the training to become a Pharisee, Paul was a religious scholar. He was raised on the Old Testament faith and loved it. For him, God was the God of Exodus, that

God of deliverance who wore that mysterious nametag “I Am Who I Am” or “I Will Be Who I Will Be.” For Paul, God was the God of Isaiah, that royal and reigning God of majesty so great that just the hem of his robe filled the temple.

So for Paul God was a God who could only be expressed in the feeble ministry of words but the available words in the human lexicon were never enough to express the fullness of the glory and the wonder of God. Paul confessed once to having had some kind of mystical experience of being, as he said, “caught up to the third heaven” where he saw things not to be told. Whether this was another description of the Damascus Road incident, I do not know; all I know is that Paul said he saw truths that were beyond human expression. In one of his letters he came to compose a passage in which his pen couldn’t hardly keep pace with his thought and tears filled his eyes as he wrote to exclaim,

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who who has been his counselor? . . .” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. (Rom. 11:33-34, 36)

Paul’s God was beyond words and inexplicably grand.

Paul saw this glorious God in Jesus. So far as anyone knows, Paul never encountered Jesus in person before Jesus came to his death at Calvary. But Paul came to see the Risen Lord along that Damascus Road and in him he saw the blazing light of light divine. He says in his most autobiographical letter, 2 Corinthians, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:6)

Paul’s God was fully a God of mystery and Jesus was to him the key to seeing the glory and the goodness of the mystery otherwise hidden for ages.

*Paul’s God is a God who bears the name Father.*

I have not made an exact count of it, but it feels to me as though Paul’s favorite term for God is Father just as it was for Jesus.

The name *Father* in reference to God flows from Paul’s pen with ease. It is present at the start of so many of his letters: “Grace to and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” is the way 1 Corinthians opens and several letters join suit. He uses the same language at the end of some of his letters. “To our God and Father be glory forever and ever.” (Phil. 4:20) Dr. Blackwood used to say, in teaching about the task of sitting down with a pen and actually writing a sermon, that when a preacher’s heart is full the words begin to flow. It was like that for Paul often enough. One example of it is the start of 2 Corinthians where there is a cascade of words all about God as Father:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. (2 Cor. 1:3-4)

Christianity, at least our branch of the church, has grown to a point where we do not use the word Father for God as much as our forebears did, and there is good reason for that. On its face it is an exclusive term and we do not want to suggest at all that God is a male. And in sad human experience the name *Father* can carry a host of negative associations, especially for those whose fathers were abusive. But let's not throw the term away so far that we lose out on its beautiful possibilities.

*Father* was a good word for Paul, a word with the finest and best connotations, just as it was for Jesus. Jesus saw that God is one who knows how to give good gifts to his children like a loving Father, and Paul had this goodness of God behind his use of the name Father. Paul's God was loving and full of providential care and he knew he could trust each and every one of his churches to God's loving, fatherly care. "My God will supply every need of yours," he told the Philippians, "according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:19)

And Paul never lost sight of the fact that the Fatherhood of God could hold an otherwise diverse and divided people together when they were tempted to drift apart. Those churches Paul loved were all prone to divide into arguing factions, sometimes along doctrinal lines, sometimes along economic lines, and sometimes along lines having to do more with personality than anything else. Paul labored to hold the fighting factions together, reminding them they should find their unity in God:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:4)

Paul's God is a Father wondrously near and gloriously kind.

I said at the start I was going to isolate three themes in Paul's idea of God. So far I have named God as mystery and God as Father. I come now to the third theme.

*Paul's God is a God of grace.*

If *Father* is Paul's favorite name for God then grace is Paul's most often mentioned gift God gives. Grace is the love of God in action in ways marvelous and undeserved.

Grace saved Paul. His famous confession to the Romans was that he was always at odds with himself. The good he wanted to do, he did not do; the wrong he did not want to do was what he did. He was never the man he wanted to be and he could not rise above himself. He exclaimed, "Who will rescue me from this wretched torment?" "Thanks be to God," he said, "through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25) It was grace who transformed Paul from what he was into the one God wanted him to be.

Grace not only saved Paul, grace kept Paul going. Paul's life was never easy. He faced grave opposition. He was often at risk from his enemies. He was often in anguish over his churches. And to top it all off he had a strange malady he called a thorn in his flesh, a messenger from Satan. He prayed to be rid of it. He prayed and he prayed. It never went away. It was never lifted. The only answer that came to his prayers was, "My grace is sufficient for you." From the moment that answer came we never again find Paul praying for the thorn to be removed. The

grace of Jesus was enough to strengthen Paul and to keep him going under every struggle and hardship, even until he won the victory. No wonder he always wanted his people to know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you know that grace? Do you know the wonderful mystery and friendship of God the Father? Everyone within the sound of my voice stands in need of God's gracious and loving presence in their lives. None of us are as yet as we'd like to be, and the society in which we live stands in need of transformation.

Why not look to God afresh or for the first time as your loving Father who stands ready to bless and to guide. In just a little while you will see parents claim the faith for their infant son and three confirmands claim the faith for themselves. Against the mysteries of time and eternity, affirm your faith in God, too, at whatever level you feel capable just now. Receive God's grace and live in God's love.

That does not say everything that can be said, but it can send you in the right direction unafraid.