

*“He appeared to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also” 1 Cor. 15:8*

The core of Paul's spiritual life is to be found in the revelation of Jesus that he had on the road to Damascus. All genuine Christian spiritual experience begins this way, with revelation. Revelation is described in biblical terminology as an "apocalypse" (an unveiling), a moment when a veil of uncertainty is pulled aside and we see the reality of what lies beyond the norms of human existence and perception. Revelation describes that moment when a person comes face to face with truth which cannot be grasped by the mind, or any other un-aided human faculty. Real contact with God cannot come in any other way.

Revelation is not the result of intellectual or rational thinking, though in the run up to a moment of revelation these may have their place. Even if a person acknowledges the existence of God in their mind there still has to be a moment of revelation when they "see" God or "know" him with that level of certainty and conviction that causes them to start to relate to him. Revelation is beyond believing "about God" or believing that a God must exist; it is knowing that he does exist because of an encounter, and that he has a personal claim on us. In revelation truth is apprehended in such a way that life cannot be the same again: it is the foundation not only of new knowledge but of new living. This is the kind of revelation that Paul experienced. The initiator of revelation is always God, and never man.

### The nature of Paul's revelation

God's moment of revelation for Paul came when Paul was actively at work rounding up the followers of Jesus in order to destroy them (Acts 9:1). Paul was at that point a very sincere believer in God; he had no doubts that he was the great Creator, and that he was a God who had made firm promises to the Jews and had given his Law for his people to live by. Paul actually believed that his persecution of the Christians was what God wanted, since for him Jesus was an impostor. Thus from one perspective Paul had a real mental apprehension of God, but from another he suffered from huge blindness and misunderstanding, particularly in the fact that he could not see what God was doing in Jesus. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he would not see; he was, as Jesus told him, "*kicking against the goads*", in other words fighting against a conscience pricked probably by the preaching of the early Christians. What he needed was a revelation of the living Jesus that would break through his blindness and wilfulness. In the mercy of God, it was this that he received on the road to Damascus.

The revelation was made up of three parts; he first **saw** something, then he **felt something** and finally he **heard** something. Together they brought unassailable conviction. What he saw was a light of huge brilliance that outshone the sun and betrayed a heavenly presence. What he felt was the physical impact of that light, an impact which was sufficient to blind him and knock him off his horse. What he saw and felt, therefore, went beyond a "vision" or even a trance, powerful though visions and trances can be in the process of revelation. He saw more than a vision of the light and actually met the reality of the light. Paul knew that he had seen not just a light but a person of whom that light was a blinding expression, for he heard a voice saying, "*Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me*". So, lying blinded on the floor he asked the question, "*Who are you, Lord?*" A voice came from the light and replied, "*I am Jesus, the one whom you are persecuting*". Paul could not have heard a more important word. Jesus had spoken from his glory and identified himself. Clarity came into the revelation through a communication in words. Thus the revelation was completed. What Paul had never been able to see, what he had consistently refused to believe, what he had violently opposed was now indelibly inscribed on the very depth of his being, a truth that could not be rebuffed, namely Jesus was alive. It was here that Paul's Christian experience began and that his whole life changed. Such is the power of revelation; it is a meeting with reality that is totally self-authenticating. No amount of intellectual endeavour could produce such an experience; God himself had to break in to his life. Only a revelation of such depth would launch and sustain Paul in his future work.

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### A Revelation of Resurrection

There were immense implications in that revelation which was to form the bedrock of everything that Paul was to teach in his ministry. But the central, over-arching truth that had become so evident was that Jesus was alive and risen from the dead. The person whom he had met had identified himself as the Jesus that the Christians were preaching, the one they claimed was alive. This was the cardinal truth he learned, and he had now to proclaim it himself. It became the very core of his gospel, the starting point for everything else. There is no greater revelation than that of knowing that Jesus is alive and risen from the dead. It is the only real starting point for every Christian life.

But it was impossible, however, for Paul to see that resurrection was something that was intended to happen solely to this Jesus. He was immediately aware that his own life and future was bound up with this resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus meant that he, Paul, would be resurrected. There could be no question in his mind from now on that resurrection from the dead was a fact, and that it was something that humanity was intended to experience. Paul, as a Pharisee, had not been unfamiliar with the concept of resurrection for, in contrast to the Sadducees, resurrection was part of Pharisaic belief. But meeting with the risen Jesus himself was of a totally different order. The incarnate Messiah himself had died but had also actually risen from the dead pointing the way for all his followers. And he, Paul, had actually met him! What that Messiah in his earthly ministry had taught his disciples about life after death was utterly vindicated and was undeniably true.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that there are constant references in Paul's letters both to the resurrection of Jesus and to the resurrection of those who believe on him. These references of Paul have two crucial features; first, they are full of conviction and second, they have great clarity. Both features are the outcome of his direct revelation, and both are critically important not only for his own inner assurance, but for his witness. Clarity and conviction are precisely the characteristics that we need in our own

assurance and witness. A clear example of these features is evident in 1 Cor. 15 where Paul is corrected some Corinthians who said that there was no resurrection of the dead (15:12). He first affirmed the resurrection of Jesus, but affirmed it not merely as a matter of belief, but rather as a matter of factual experience. He appealed to the testimony of apostles and saints who actually saw the risen Lord, and then related that Jesus appeared also to him. His position was clear; there is a resurrection from the dead because he had seen Jesus resurrected from the dead, and so had many others. It is a position that is simple, factual and full of conviction. Paul goes on to say that Jesus' resurrection is proof that there is resurrection for his followers. Jesus is the Christ, and no ordinary man; he is the pioneer and we in due course will follow. This is the sort of direct, clear and compelling witness that comes out of personal revelation. The simpler and more precise our own testimony is to our own encounter with Jesus, the more conviction it will arouse.

A further example of the implication of the resurrection is found in 2 Cor. 4:18-5:1; "*so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.. Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not made by human hands*". The words, "*now we know*" are very significant; they speak again of facts rather than "beliefs". They enshrine the conviction of personal knowledge. They come out of revelation. But what is it that he knows? Simply, that if our earthly body (a temporary tent) is destroyed, there is waiting for us a new body (a permanent house). He also knows that the glory he saw in the risen Jesus, though unseen in this world, is the thing which is eternal. It stands in strong contrast to what he sees around him in this world which, as must be obvious to any thinking person, is only temporary and is doomed to pass away. To Paul, reality lies in a world beyond this one. He has been allowed a look into this truth by revelation and that has changed his whole perspective on life. It is on the reality of the unseen and eternal that he keeps his gaze.

### **The Need for Revelation**

Thus Paul joins the ranks of those who have had astonishing revelations from God. Moses in the cleft of the rock saw the glory of God, and so did Ezekiel by the river Chebar in exile. Isaiah saw the glory of God whilst in the temple. Certainly a greater depth of revelation is necessary for those called strenuous and dangerous ministry, but the fact is that some degree of revelation is fundamental for every person wanting a living and consistent walk with Jesus. It has always been God's method of bringing people in touch with him. The truth is that we all face to some degree a demand to believe and proclaim Jesus. From the greatest to the least of us, our spiritual life has to be based on an encounter which confirms that we have met with Jesus and know his presence in our lives, and leaves our witness clear and convinced.

The essence of revelation in fact lies in a deep and powerful self-authenticating conviction by which we are persuaded of the reality of God, and particularly of the fact that Jesus is alive and is the Lord to whom we must bow. There are all sorts of ways in which that conviction may come. It does not necessarily take such a fulsome experience as Paul's to bring about such a conviction. There is no single definitive experience by which revelation and conviction come. It may be the outcome of meditation, of reading, of conversation, of meeting with some godly person, of a moment of "miracle", of vision or some other means. The method is of God's choosing. And revelation can be ongoing.

**For all of us true spiritual life has to be based on an encounter**

### **Some ways in which revelation comes**

The earthly life of Jesus provides many examples of the different ways in which his disciples became convinced of his true nature. Peter, for example, after a prompting from Jesus, threw out his nets into the sea, and the resulting huge catch brought him to his knees and made him cry out, "*Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!*" (Lk. 5:8). That was an extraordinary response to what others might have seen as just a remarkable coincidence of ordinary life. He was overcome at that moment with an awareness of the deeper nature of Jesus' own person, and at the same time was also overcome with an awareness of his own deep sinfulness. There was no compelling reason for him to feel a sinner at that point, or for him to be overcome by the holiness of Jesus, but he did. It was pure revelation out of a miracle moment. Such remarkable "coincidences" of ordinary life are by no means infrequent, and they are real encounters. More often than not they come as a person has made some move to follow Jesus.

Another kind of revelation moment is seen with the centurion at the cross. Watching Jesus, he exclaimed, "*Surely, this man was the Son of God*". This was an exclamation of revelation prompted by the fact that "*he heard his (Jesus') cry and saw how he died*" (Mk 15:39). Clearly the centurion was on a completely different wave length from the other bystanders, many of whom were simply abusing Jesus. The death of Jesus spoke powerfully and deeply to his heart and showed him the truth. It still does so, even through its simple narration.

Throughout Jesus' ministry many believed on him simply by hearing him speak, for his words alone could produce a compelling and authoritative conviction. So when he pronounced in the Temple that "*Whoever believes in me ... streams of living water will flow from within him*", we read that, "*On hearing his words some people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet'. Others said, 'He is the Christ'*". (John 7:38-40) This same authoritative voice is still heard in the reading of scripture and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus; it is the voice of revelation.

Modern rationalism is not open to anything beyond our normal rational processes, and in so far as it influences theology it leads to the denial of the truth of revelation. It closes the door to vital contact with God, and it closes the human mind to the evidence of many testimonies of revelation, no matter how deep and persuasive they may be. Rational thought should, however, open the mind to evidence, not close it. How much more constructive is the prayer of Paul who having received such an outstanding revelation of Jesus, prayed for the Ephesians that God would give them "*the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better*" (Eph. 1:17)