Lecture 4: Paul the Apostle  ©2008 Ronald L. Troxel

Having reconstructed Paul's image both before and after his conversion, today we turn to the prime rubric under which Paul seems to have understood himself: as an apostle. At least, that is the role he defends most vigorously in his letters, although he found other areas in which he had to defend himself.

In fact, Paul encountered opposition early in his work on issues other than his claim to be an apostle. We've already seen that Acts' portrayal of Paul encountering opposition from Jews everywhere he went is at least partly a product of Luke's emphasis on the gospel being offered to the Gentiles because of Jewish rejection of it. But not everything in Acts' depiction of Paul meeting opposition is simply Luke's construction.

In fact, you'll recall that even though Acts asserts that Paul was driven out of Damascus by Jews, Paul himself reports that he was forced to flee Damascus under threat from King Aretas IV of Nabatea, most likely because he caused something of a ruckus when he attempted to preach the gospel in Arabia after his conversion. And there are plenty of other, even clearer indications of opposition to Paul.

The first explicit reference by Paul to opposition comes in the earliest of his surviving epistles, although not necessarily the first he wrote. In recalling his arrival in Thessalonica, he refers to opposition he faced in Philippi, his previous stop: "You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition."

Of course, the Book of Acts, chapter 16, recounts a peril Paul and Silas met in Philippi. After persistent harassment by a medium, Paul exorcised the woman of a spirit that enabled her to be clairvoyant. Those who were her owners and managers were not pleased: "when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks."

The outcome of this incident, as you might be aware, is that a midnight earthquake resulted in Paul and Silas gaining their freedom when they prevented the escape of other prisoners. The jailer (who would have forfeited his life if
prisoners had escaped) became a convert, along with his family, and the pair of missionaries were later released.

This event might well lie behind Paul's statement that they had "already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi." In fact, the verb translated "shamefully treated" is the one from which we get our word "hubris," and could be translated equally well "outrageously treated," which certainly would be the case for a Roman citizen being beaten with rods. And recall that Paul himself reports having been beaten three times with rods.

And so, in writing to the Thessalonians, Paul recalls having faced harsh opposition in Philippi. This sort of opposition was not an isolated event in Paul's career, as he acknowledges in his enumeration of hardships in 2 Corinthians 11.

As for Paul's description of the situation in Thessalonica, the language that follows his reference to difficulties in Philippi has often been taken - as Roetzel takes it - to indicate that opposition also broke out in Thessalonica, in spite of which Paul and Barnabas had the courage to proclaim the Gospel. This, however, proves to be a style of rhetoric that would have been familiar to the audience from the diction of the itinerant philosophers. And it is in this light that we can account for its defensive tenor.

First, however, let's note that Acts 17 reports opposition to Paul's mission in Thessalonica. It portrays Paul and Silas going first to the synagogue, where they argued, on three consecutive sabbaths, that Jesus was the Messiah, resulting in the conversion of a number of Jews and Gentiles (that is, Gentiles who were "God worshippers"). However, as we saw last time, Paul's recollection that the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living God, and the lack of quotations from or allusions to the Hebrew scriptures in 1 Thessalonians suggests that his audience was composed largely of Gentiles without connection to a synagogue.

Nevertheless, in Luke's narrative, these conversions sparked those he refers to as "the Jews" to jealousy, and they, in turn, enlisted the aid of some ruffians, who organized mob action in the city. While Paul and Silas eluded them, the mob seized their host, Jason, and brought him forward on charges that he had entertained men who challenged the supremacy of Caesar. Paul and Silas, meantime, were spirited out of town. This would seem to fit Paul's characterization of his work among the Thessalonians as taking place "in spite of great opposition." The difficulty here has to do with this rendering of the Greek phrase, *en pollo agoni*.

A scholar named Abraham Malherbe, who has worked extensively on 1 Thessalonians, has pointed out that Paul's statement in these two verses conforms to the kind of rhetoric used by Hellenistic philosophers. In fact, the verb translated "we had courage," *eparresiasameth*, was commonly used by philosophers to describe their manner of speaking. In the early days of Athenian democracy (the
early 500's B.C.E.), this verb and its related noun designated the freedom of any citizen to speak in the public assembly. Over time, however, it came to be used by philosophers to denote the freedom and responsibility their knowledge gave them to correct others in friendly discourse. Paul modifies these over-tones, however, by adding the phrase, "in [or 'by'] our God," making clear the source of the freedom and confidence with which he speaks.

Similarly, the phrase translated "in spite of great opposition" accords with language used by the philosophers, who commonly described their work as a "contest" or "struggle," in contrast to the rhetoricians, who spoke merely for the enjoyment of the words. Distinct from them, the philosopher, it was said, struggled like an athlete, although his struggle was against passions or desires inimical to his task and, at times, against hardships put upon him by others. In this case, the expression at the end of v. 2 might well be translated, "in the midst of great struggle."

In keeping with this, the contrast Paul sets up in these two verses is between speech that (potentially) proves ineffective, and his own, that has not. This sort of contrast between ineffectual speech and effective speech is, again, a staple of the philosopher's discourse. In fact, the Hellenistic handbooks on rhetoric described the orator's speech as "vain," i.e. without effect, because it had no aim outside of speech as an art form.

Thus, like the philosophers with whom the Thessalonians would have been familiar, Paul claims to have engaged in effective speech, but he distinguishes himself from the run-of-the-mill philosopher by asserting that his efficacious rhetoric comes from his God.

In the verses that follow, Paul continues speaking in the mode of a popular philosopher: "3 For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. 5 As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; 6 nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, 7 though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. 8 So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. 9 You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers."

The conjunction "for" signals that Paul intends to expound the basis for this confident proclamation of the gospel, and he launches into what appears to be a
defense of his motives. He begins by denying that he has base motives: "our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery." - Malherbe points out that this kind of disclaimer was common among philosophers, who wished to assert that they had engaged in sufficient introspection to avoid the pitfalls of charlatans.

Notice that, as in vv. 1-2, this statement launches a contrast by which Paul highlights his pure motivations: "not to please mortals…[not] with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed…[not seeking] praise from mortals." - This sort of display of moral credentials parallels what was proffered by philosophers.

Malherbe aptly cites as a comparison words written by a younger contemporary of Paul, the Cynic philosopher Dio Chrysostom, who describes himself this way: "But to find a man who in plain terms and without guile speaks his mind with frankness [the same word Paul uses for having courage] and neither for the sake of reputation nor for gain, but out of good will and concern for his fellow-men stands ready, if need be, to submit to ridicule and to the disorder and uproar of the mob - to find such a man as that is not easy, but rather the good fortune of a very lucky city, so great is the dearth of noble, independent souls and such the abundance of toadies, mountebanks and sophists. In my own case, for instance, I feel that I have chosen that role, not of my own volition, but by the will of some deity. For when divine providence is at work for men, the gods provide, not only good counselors who need no urging, but also words that are appropriate and profitable to the listener."

You'll notice that, similar to Paul, Dio Chrysostom attributes to "the will of some deity" his adoption of the ideal character he describes; and yet, Paul's insistence on the divine origin of his role is stronger, inasmuch as he, before showcasing his character in Thessalonica, speaks of having been "approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel." And it is this that motivates his behavior: "just as we have been approved by God…even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts."

The Greek word translated "approved" implies some sort of testing that leads to qualification, even as later in that sentence he refers to God as the one "who tests our hearts." And then slightly later he appeals to God as his witness, i.e. as the one to attest that he tells the truth. For Paul it is not introspective assessment of his motives that qualifies him to speak freely, but God's choice of him as a tested and true messenger of the gospel.

Nevertheless, his use of rhetoric familiar from the philosophers is striking, and confirms the conclusion that Paul was steeped in the Hellenistic traditions taught in Tarsus.

So in this passage that seems defensive - as if Paul were responding to specific criticisms - we find him adopting a style of rhetoric that would have been familiar
to his audience from the itinerant philosophers, although he gives it a distinctive twist by his insistence that he has been approved by God to share the gospel message, and offering as further certification of his mission an acknowledgement that he continues to be subject to "God who tests our hearts." And it is to God he appeals as an intermediary between himself and the people, in the role of witness as to how he and Silas conducted themselves.

This is not to deny that Paul and Silas faced conflict in Thessalonica. When we study that letter we'll see that they did. However, contrary to the opinion of some, these verses do not necessarily mean that Paul faced questions about his character or role there. At the same time, however, we will see the kind of language Paul uses here appear also in cases where Paul clearly has been embroiled in such conflict.

Notice that as part of his claim to have dealt gently with the Thessalonians Paul avers, "nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ." - This is the only mention of Paul's claim to be an apostle in 1 Thessalonians, and it is in something of a throwaway line; that is, it provides the backdrop against which Paul's gentle manner can be best appreciated. The assumption is that apostles like Paul and Barnabas have the right to make such demands, but Paul forsook them in favor of gentle care of the people (another theme commonly used by philosophers).

In this connection, also, we need to note also vv. 8 & 9, where Paul asserts that his and Silas' care for the Thessalonians was exhibited in their determination "to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our selves." Unfortunately, the NRSV has obscured the close connection of v. 9 to this by leaving untranslated a Greek conjunction meaning "for," which here highlights what Paul means by his talk of "sharing their own selves with them": in practical terms, it meant working "night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God." - This is spoken of as another concession, in accord with Paul's assertion that there were demands an apostle was entitled to make, but he and Silas forwent.

This motif arises again in 1 Corinthians 9, where it has sharper edge: "1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 2 If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3 This is my defense to those who would examine me. 4 Do we not have the right to our food and drink? 5 Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? 6 Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?... 11 If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? 12 If others share this rightful claim on
you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ."

Here again Paul speaks of forgoing income from the people he serves. And in succeeding verses he speaks of doing so as providing him with a reward, a claim he explains in vv. 18-19: "What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel. 19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them."

Notice how the issue of rights (the Greek word is more commonly translated "authority") runs through this passage, although Paul offsets this theme by highlighting his refusal to take advantage of such rights. In fact, he speaks of "reaping [the Corinthians] material benefits" as a "rightful claim" that he refuses to utilize, even though others (it appears) have.

And yet, Paul's emphatic claim to have rejected this right in both 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians has to be compared with statements he makes elsewhere, as in Philippians 4, where he gratefully recalls, "15 You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. 16 For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once."

Consequently, Paul's statement to the Thessalonians that he worked "night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God," while doubtless true, is not the full story. He carried on his work in Thessalonica partially through the benefit of financial aid sent by the Philippians.

And the way Paul words his statement to the Philippians - "even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once" - suggests that their contributions aided him after he left Thessalonica (which is still in the Roman province of Macedonia, along with Philippi). Indeed, we have confirmation that he received their help while in Corinth, for in 2 Corinthians 11 he recalls, "And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way."

So Paul's policy does not seem to have been to refuse any help from his churches, but to receive no assistance from the community in which he was working. Most likely, then, lying behind Paul's claim to offer the Gospel "free of charge" and his concern "not to burden anyone" is a more subtle strategy. His willingness to accept monetary support from other churches suggests that his concern was to avoid being indebted to any particular people or groups within the community where he was working.

His first letter to the Corinthians, in particular, reveals that that community contained both people well heeled and those in tight financial straits. Accepting
money from the wealthy would have made them his patrons and would inevitably have divided the congregation. Paul appears to have been sensitive to that pitfall.

And yet, this strategy appears to have backfired, at least in Corinth, as becomes evident in 2 Corinthians, where his refusal to accept Corinthian support while there spawned accusations that he was uppity: "Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God's good news to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you."

And most strikingly, this comes in a context where Paul's status as an apostle is being contested: "As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! And what I do I will also continue to do, in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognized as our equals in what they boast about. For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ."

The question of Paul's opponents in Corinth - at least at the time he wrote 2 Corinthians - is complex, and we'll tackle that when we come to the Corinthian correspondence. But for the moment I'll state simply that it's clear these missionaries were painting themselves as true apostles over against Paul, boasting of their abilities and accomplishments in such a way that prompted Paul to dub them "super-apostles," although he obviously denied their very claim to be apostles. And then in chapter 12 he reasserts his status as a genuine apostle by reminding his audience, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works."

But apparently that was not the first time questions about Paul's means of supporting himself had arisen in connection with his claim to be an apostle. 1 Corinthians 9 hints at the early stages of that issue, with Paul defending his right to refrain from accepting their money. At stake is the question of whether he has the right to be supported by them, and he maintains he does. He has simply decided to forgo that right out of concern for them. In fact, he summarizes his purpose in v. 19: "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." - Notice that his language about being "free" is parallel to his earlier language of having the right to refrain from working for a living and the right to share in the Corinthians' material goods in exchange for proclaiming to them the gospel. And notice, further, that talk of being "free" also introduces the topic of chapter 9: "Am I not free?" And standing parallel to that is the question, "Am I not an apostle?" The "freedom" which Paul claims here is, therefore, tantamount to the "independence" or "independent authority" exercised by an apostle.

That this question of Paul's status as an apostle is key in this discussion is
signaled by his closely-following statement, "If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you."

As Roetzel observes, this already carries hints that Paul's claim to be an apostle was being challenged, although not yet (it would appear from 1 Corinthians 9) in Corinth itself. At this point Paul seems concerned solely with challenges to his refusal to accept support from the community, as though some within it felt slighted by his refusal, and so he offers this defense of his actions.

Nevertheless, Paul seems to be smarting from questions raised elsewhere about his claim to be an apostle. And yet, in addressing the Corinthians at this point, he takes for granted that his role as the founder of the church is sufficient to secure their acknowledgement that he is their apostle.

And so, as in 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul claims apostolic status, but speaks of his modus operandi in the churches as relinquishing the rights and authority he has as an apostle in favor of providing service to these churches. At the same time, we begin to see hints that Paul's claim to apostleship was not accepted by everyone, everywhere.

This hint surfaces again in the 15th chapter, where (as we've noted) Paul refers to the gospel tradition he had delivered, recounting Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances to Cephas and the twelve, and then to James and all the apostles.

Thus far, apparently, is the tradition Paul received and handed on. But to this he appends this statement: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

He recognizes that the risen Christ's appearance to him took place a significant time later than the bulk of the appearances, and thus he speaks of himself as "one untimely born," a term that (as Roetzel notes) means "an abortion," and thus was likely a vulgar slander of Paul used by others. And yet, he places himself in the same category with Peter, the 12, James, and others who witnessed the risen Lord. It is in this temporal sense that he says Christ appeared to him "Last of all."

Equally striking is his description of himself as "the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." This "ah, shucks" or "woe is me attitude" certainly doesn't sound much like the Paul who will later tell this group in Corinth that he will continue to defend himself "in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognized as our equals." That Paul concedes no ground to others claiming to be his equal.

Nor does it sound much like the Paul who writes to the Galatians of his meeting with the pillars of the Jerusalem church, "And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) - those leaders contributed nothing to me." - In fact,
throughout the first two chapters of Galatians Paul is at pains to show himself independent of Jerusalem, asserting that his gospel and his apostleship derived directly from Jesus Christ, so that he didn't feel compelled to consult with those who had been apostles ahead of him before heading off to Arabia.

In this light, the self-deprecation, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle," seems an unlikely concession by him.

One thing we'll see in studying 1 Corinthians is that much of the letter is based on issues about which Paul has been informed by slaves sent to him in Ephesus from one of the church's members. Moreover, Paul responds to specific questions that have been sent to him from Corinth. And in the process of responding, Paul seems to have appropriated language being used in the Corinthian congregation, and at times he does so in a rather sarcastic way.

Consistent with that, the statement, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle" are likely words not native to Paul, but from the mouth of his detractors. Two other features of this passage support that surmise.

First, the reason given as to why Paul is unfit to be called an apostle - "because I persecuted the church of God" - is elsewhere said by Paul to be information others were spreading. In Galatians, where Paul has to deal with outsiders infiltrating the community and challenging both Paul's reputation and his message, Paul writes, "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was vigorously persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it." - Note that Paul does not recite this as something he told them about while he was with them, but as something he assumes others have told them: "You have heard, no doubt...." I.e. Paul expects that by now someone has told them of his past.

Most likely Paul assumes they have heard about his persecution of the Judean church from his detractors. In fact, it is very easy to imagine such a person saying, "Paul? He's unfit to be called an apostle, because he persecuted the church of God."

The second feature of the text supporting the surmise that these are the words of Paul's detractors and not his own is his next set of statements: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been 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. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe."

The assertion, "I worked harder than any of them," does not sound deferential, although he abruptly tones this down by attributing the effort he expended to God. In the end, though, he claims to have played a role equal to the rest in proclaiming the faith, so that it doesn't matter whether he was responsible for bringing the Corinthians to faith or if it was others who did so. His insistent ranking of himself alongside other apostles suggests he would not likely have referred to himself,
then, as "the least of the apostles." More likely, these words are meant precisely as a rebuttal of his detractors' libel that he was, at best, the least of the apostles, and perhaps not even worthy to be called an apostle, given his history of persecuting the church.

Before leaving 1 Corinthians 15 I want to draw your attention to the significant fact that it is in the context of Jesus' appearances that Paul brings up and defends his claim to be an apostle, for this correlates with Paul's pedigree as he exhibits it in chapter 9. Not only does he claim to have the "freedom" of an apostle - meaning the independent authority to make demands of a congregation - but he joins to his claim to be an apostle his having seen the risen Jesus. This, for Paul, is a *sine qua non* of an apostle, as crucial to substantiating his claim to be an apostle as the fact that he established churches.

Likewise, in Galatians 1 it is that encounter with the risen Jesus he claims as the basis of his authority: "15But when God…was pleased 16to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, 17nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus."

Here again, it is Paul's independence that is accented, and (as we have seen) that is very much to the heart of the matter of claims of apostleship. An apostle is one who has been sent by Jesus Christ himself, under his direct authority.

The question we have yet to address, and one important for our study, is what caused Paul to conclude from his encounter with the risen Jesus that he had received a commission to go to the gentiles? Why shouldn't Paul have concluded that his prime mission was to convince his fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, as Luke portrays him doing in Damascus, and again in the synagogue at Thessalonica, and again in Ephesus, where (Acts says) Paul sought to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. The question, quite aside from the issue of Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts, is why Paul didn't conclude from his encounter with the risen Jesus that something along these lines was his mission? Why was this self-confessed Pharisee convinced - apparently from the beginning - that he had received "an apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles"?

Unfortunately, Paul doesn't address that question explicitly, but he has left us some clues. E.g. as we've already noted, Paul's description of his encounter with the risen Jesus is cast in words used by the prophet Jeremiah, and with an equally strong similarity to Isaiah 49, a passage you may recall that Luke has Paul cite in addressing the crowds of Pisidian Antioch, when he concludes that Jewish rejection of the gospel impels him to evangelize the Gentiles. There is no reason to doubt that the passage in Isaiah 49 would have been significant to Paul, whether he quoted it on the occasion Acts depicts or not.
The significance of Paul's appeal to such passages is that there is a strong theme in several of the prophets, Isaiah 40-55 in particular, that in the age to come Gentiles would be included under the umbrella of God's rule. Thus, for example, Isaiah 51 says, "Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope."

That passage deliberately plays off of the expectation expressed in the second chapter of Isaiah: "In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

While there was within first century Palestinian Judaism a strong wariness of Gentiles and an anticipation that they would be vanquished by the arrival of God's rule (while the Jews would be vindicated), that attitude was not as prominent in the diaspora. In fact, some diaspora voices already discounted the distinction between Jew and Gentile, saying that the differences between Judaism and Greek religion amounted to little more than different names for God. Others in the diaspora were more cautious towards gentiles, and yet it is clear that they, more than Palestinian Jews (who had been made wary of foreigners by the events that led up to the Macabbean revolt), were forced to deal with Gentiles more directly; their interactions with Gentiles kept many from just sweeping them away.

It appears that Saul of Tarsus was among those who saw a role for gentiles in God's new age. And what caused him to conclude that now was the time Gentiles would begin filling that role was his encounter with the risen Jesus.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians contains a passage significant for what it reveals of Paul's mindset: "14 For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 15 And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. 16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"
human point of view," for "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." - The new creation anticipated for the future - including the gathering of Gentiles under God's rule - is already a reality for anyone "in Christ" (a phrase equivalent to "anyone who has embraced faith in him").

And Paul indicates there is a corollary to this throwing away the old standards of judgment for those who are members of this new creation: "even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way." - This statement is more particular than Paul's assertion that he no longer regards anyone "from a human point of view." That assertion rests on the new situation brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection. The different assessment Paul claims he now has of the Christ cannot rest on those grounds, insofar as it is a changed assessment of Jesus himself.

There is reason to conclude that the dividing line for Paul between knowing Christ from a human point of view and no longer knowing him that way is the same as the dividing line between Saul, the persecutor of the church, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. For Saul to evaluate Christ according to the flesh was for him to conclude, like many of his compatriots, that the claims of Jesus as Messiah were disproved by his death. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1.23, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." - The idea of a crucified Christ/Messiah was an oxymoron for those expecting the Messiah to arrive as Israel's deliverer from its foes. For Paul to look at claims about Jesus from a "human point of view" led him to deny them and to harass those making such claims. That Paul no longer knows him that way is the result of his encounter with the risen Jesus, which convinced him that claims that Jesus was the Messiah were true.

Moreover, while Paul, as a good Pharisee, would have affirmed that resurrection would one day take place, the message about Jesus had made a more striking claim, one best illustrated by a confrontation Acts reports arose because of the preaching of Peter and John: "While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead."

As we've already noted, the Sadducees had no time for the thought of resurrection of the dead, considering it a pie-in-the-sky belief inadequately grounded in the sacred writings. And yet, for them to get their pants in a bunch because someone was proclaiming resurrection hardly makes sense, since the Pharisees made that claim all the time.

The issue that spurs them to confront Peter and John lies in the intertwined phrases, "in Jesus" and "the resurrection of the dead." Peter and John's claim is not the same as asserting, "Jesus was raised from the dead." Their claim, rather, is that
"the resurrection of the dead," anticipated by many for the dawn of the new age, has already begun in Jesus: the new age is already present.

Similarly, for Paul to become convinced that Jesus had been raised from the dead and exalted was to become convinced that the new age had dawned, bringing with it an open door to the inclusion of the gentiles under God's reign, as the prophets had foretold.

As we'll see, this sort of intense belief that the new age was in the process of dawning was central to Paul's preaching in Thessalonica, as reflected in what he says everyone knows of the Thessalonians' behavior, namely, that they "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God," and now "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming."

Divine wrath is about to break in; but Jesus, whom God has raised from the dead, will rescue from that wrath all who have embraced him in faith. Paul has adopted an explicitly eschatological view of Jesus as the harbinger of the new age, and that has brought in tow the belief that the path is now open to Gentiles to be included in God's people.

Paul's striking belief that he was specially commissioned as the apostle to the gentiles most likely derived from the conclusion to which his vision off the risen Jesus led him: the new age has dawned and the great harvest off the gentiles has begun. Paul understood himself called to be a laborer in that harvest.

Next time we'll turn from reconstructing an image of Paul to attempt a reconstruction of the kinds of people Paul addressed in Gentile cities like Thessalonica and Corinth.