



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for the Conversion of St Paul (25 January)
(*Book of Common Prayer*)

O God, who, through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Saint Paul, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world: Grant, we beseech thee, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may shew forth our thankfulness unto thee for the same, by following the holy doctrine which he taught; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is an ancient prayer, but both its form and content have been changed since it was first written. It featured in the Sarum rite, which prevailed in Britain and Ireland before the Reformation. Originally in Latin, it was translated into English for the 1549 Book of Common Prayer; but then it was amplified into its current shape for the Prayer Book of 1662.

One place Paul writes about the turning-point in his life which we call his conversion is in Galatians 1:11-16. There he explains that the Gospel he preaches was not taught him by human beings but "*by the revelation of Jesus Christ*" (verse 12). Paul reminds his hearers that before that revelation "how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it"; and that he had previously excelled many in his own Jewish nation, having been "*more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers*" (verses 13 & 14).

So, prior to his Damascus Road experience, the Law (the Jewish religious code to be found in the first five books of the Bible) was at the heart of Paul's faith, and he was a self-confessed expert in following the Law, which encapsulated the "*traditions of my fathers*". After that experience, the person of Jesus Christ took centre stage for Paul's faith; and he tirelessly preached Christ, not just to the Jewish nation, but to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples of the Roman world. In that way God through Paul "*hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world*".

Paul still speaks to us through his letters. And he has a lot to convey: out of the twenty-seven books or documents of the New Testament, at least ten are usually attributed to him. "*Following the holy doctrine which he taught*", however, is not as simple as it sounds, with scholars having studied and debated the meaning of Paul's letters for centuries. But we don't have to be scholars to attend to Paul's passionate, urgent words. Letters can speak directly to us.

It is a moving human experience that when we read or re-read a letter, even when (or perhaps especially when) it is written by someone dear to us who has died, we have the sense of that person speaking to us afresh. By attending to Paul's writings, we can rejoice in the turning-point in his life, "his wonderful conversion", on that road to Damascus; and we can also rejoice in the turning-point in the life of the Church that came about through his mission to the Gentiles. But, further, we can let Paul speak directly to us with an immediacy and an intimacy which challenges us to deepen our faith in the one who changed the course of Paul's life, Jesus Christ.

James Graham January 2026