

Did Paul ever meet Jesus in person?

The subject of Jesus Christ and His saving work were at the forefront of the apostle Paul's ministry. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" he said (1 Corinthians 9:16). This great apostle consistently focused his evangelistic efforts on convincing people that Jesus was the promised Messiah of Israel as well as the risen Lord and Savior of the Gentiles. The unique identity of Jesus was at the center of Paul's theology.

But had Paul ever met Jesus during Christ's three-and-a-half year public ministry? Had the future apostle ever seen or heard Jesus in person? While we lack any direct evidence, there are several considerations that may favor the idea that Paul had possibly seen Jesus prior to the crucifixion. First, Paul had been a resident of Jerusalem as a child (Acts 22:3) and was also there years later to approve of Stephen's stoning (Acts 8:1). The presence of Paul's nephew in Jerusalem after Paul's conversion (Acts 23:16) suggests that Paul and his family had resided there for some time. Jesus was known to have visited Jerusalem (Mark 11:11; John 2:13; 5:1). It is quite possible that Paul could have seen Jesus or heard Him speak during one of Jesus' several trips there.

Second, Paul's devotion to the Law would have provided him motivation to be present in Jerusalem during Passover—a time where both he and Jesus would have been in close proximity. Third, as a Pharisee, Paul would have been keenly interested in the teaching of a popular, if unconventional, rabbi. As Paul told Herod Agrippa, the things Jesus did were "not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). Fourth, in one of Paul's epistles, the apostle hints that he may have had a pre-conversion acquaintance with Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:16), although his statement is far from conclusive.

None of these considerations in any way establish that Paul had seen or heard Jesus personally prior to His atoning death at Calvary. We cannot say for sure whether or not Paul had ever met Jesus.

Of course, Paul did encounter the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road after Christ's resurrection. While Jesus' appearance to Paul may have been different in character from Christ's pre-ascension appearances, this encounter with Paul was no merely subjective vision, as both Jesus' voice (Acts 9:7) and the bright light (Acts 22:9) were perceived by Paul's traveling companions. The Lord chose Paul to proclaim His name to both Gentiles and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). Paul later underwent intense persecution for the gospel of Christ (Acts 14:19; 2 Corinthians 11:25-26). It was in part through his tireless efforts that the gospel of grace spread throughout the Mediterranean world.