

Wednesday Evening Bible Study

September 2, 2020

Series - *The Life and Writings of the Apostle Paul*

Lesson One - *Paul's Conversion*

Text Verses

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name: Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ: To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:1-7)

These introductory verses to the Book of Romans paint an accurate representation of Paul's life and purpose after he was saved. He is considered by many to be the greatest missionary, possibly even the greatest Christian that ever lived. Yet, he considered himself to be just a servant of Jesus Christ who was called personally by the Lord to be His messenger.

Introduction to the Series

In the Bible, the first letter written by the Apostle Paul is Romans, and Romans is arguably a very important and foundational letter. However, the Bible order is not the historical (or chronological) order.

In this series of lessons on the life and writings of the Apostle Paul, we will begin by examining Paul's background, including his pre-salvation years as an enemy of Christianity. We will follow his conversion and ministry through the Book of Acts, and we will study each of his fourteen letters within their historical context and in their chronological order. For example, the Epistle to the Galatians is likely the first Canonical letter by Paul, which was probably written after his first missionary journey was concluded, around the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. The letters to the Thessalonians were written during Paul's second journey (Acts 17); the letters to the Corinthians during his third (Acts 19). Romans was written from Corinth at the conclusion of Paul's third journey (Acts 20:2 – 3). The Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) were written after the conclusion of the events contained in the Book of Acts. The Pastoral Epistles (1st and 2nd Timothy, and Titus) were also after Acts. Hebrews is an anonymous book that I believe was likely written by Paul very late in his life.

Our first task will be to consider Paul as an enemy of Christianity:

"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." (1 Timothy 1:12-13)

In this lesson, we will first examine Paul's background: growing up in a devoutly religious Jewish home, and educated by the most respected teacher in Judaism. We will then examine his unique conversion experience, as well as the influencing factors in his life prior to his salvation. We will then learn about his growth as a new disciple of Christ, and how God prepared Paul for his service as an apostle, evangelist, and church-planting missionary. Finally, we will look into how Paul used the rehearsal of the testimony of his salvation experience as a means of witnessing to others.

I Paul's Background as an Enemy of Christ

Paul was born and raised in the City of Tarsus in a devoutly Jewish home. He was the son of a Pharisee.

"For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." - (Philippians 3:3-6)

"But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people." - (Acts 21:39)

It is important to note that Paul was born in Tarsus of Cilicia (see map), and was given the name Saul by his father. (Acts 22:1 – 3) He is not actually referred to as Paul until Acts 13:9.

"Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him," - (Acts 13:9)

The Bible does not indicate that God changed his name to Paul, but that he was known by both names. Though he was Hebrew by both blood and faith, he also had Roman citizenship, which entitled him to many privileges and rights that other Jews did not enjoy. How Paul received this citizenship is unclear. It is believed by some that the city of Tarsus was granted freedom in the years prior to the birth of Saul, and thus every person born in it was automatically granted citizenship. It is also possible that Paul's father purchased citizenship.

It is interesting that Paul never mentions his family in his writings. We know that his father was a Pharisee, and we also know that he had a nephew, the son of his sister, that helped rescue Paul from a plot to kill him in Jerusalem. (Acts 23:12 – 22) He visited Tarsus shortly after his conversion and on both his second and third journeys, yet there is no mention of him visiting or witnessing to family members. It could very well be that his family renounced him after his conversion.

It is possible that Paul was at one time married because he was a Pharisee, a rabbi, and a member of the Council. That leaves us with the question of what happened to Paul's wife. If, in fact, he was married at one time, his wife had probably died prior to the time of Paul's travels and writings.

A His Education as a Pharisee

Paul was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee.

"But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question." - (Acts 23:6)

The Pharisees were a very legalistic sect of the Jews that seemed to have originated in the period of time between the Old and New Testaments, possibly during the revolt of the Maccabees against Antiochus Epiphanes. They are not mentioned at all in the Old Testament. This group held to a strict code of ceremonial laws, and consisted of about 6000 members. They were bitter enemies of the Lord. The name Pharisee means separated ones. Jesus often rebuked them for placing their traditions above the word and will of God. (See Matthew 15:3 – 9; 22:18; 23:13, 23, 25, 29; Luke 12:1)

Notice that there is another group mentioned in Acts 23:6 – the Sadducees. They were the liberals of the day. They denied the existence of angels, and the possibility of a resurrection. Though the Sadducees and Pharisees were almost opposite of each other, Jesus warned His followers to beware of the “leaven” of both groups. (See Matthew 22:23; Acts 23:8)

"I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day." - (Acts 22:3)

He was educated “at the feet of Gamaliel” – a well-respected doctor of the law. (See also Acts 5:34 – 40) Gamaliel was also a Pharisee, and quite possibly the most influential teacher of Paul’s day. As a student of this man, Paul would have become expert in both the Old Testament Law, and Rabbinic traditions.

Paul was probably a member of the Sanhedrin (see Acts 26:10) – a council of seventy-one members made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees, with the High Priest being the chief officer. If he was not yet a member, he certainly was well on his way to attaining that position.

B His Enmity as a Persecutor (See Acts 7:54 – 8:3; 9:1 - 2)

"I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities." - (Acts 26:9-11)

Paul hated Christians. He saw himself as an agent of God in the extermination of all who professed faith in Christ.

John Phillips has this to say regarding the passionate hatred that Saul of Tarsus displayed toward Christianity:

Saul was an intellectual giant, farsighted enough to see that there could be no peaceful coexistence between militant Judaism and militant Christianity. Whatever his teacher Gamaliel might have advised about moderation, Saul saw the incompatibility of the two faiths. Either Judaism was right and Christianity was apostasy, or Christianity was right and Judaism was obsolete. Saul's birth, beliefs, and background all drove him into a head-on confrontation with the Christians. He concluded, logically enough from his own biased point of view, that Christ was a blasphemer and Christianity a cult. Because Jesus of Nazareth was dead, nothing could be done about Him. Christianity, however, was something else; the sooner it was dead and buried too, the better for everyone.¹

J. Vernon McGee had this to say:

The other religious leaders in Jerusalem were satisfied after they had run the Christians out of Jerusalem. They were willing to let it stay at that point. But not Saul of Tarsus! He was the one who was breathing out threatenings and slaughter. He hated Jesus Christ. I do not think that the Lord Jesus Christ ever has had an enemy greater than this man Saul of Tarsus. He went to the high priest and said, "Look, I've heard that a group of them have run off up there to Damascus, and I'm going after them." The fact of the matter is that he intended to ferret them out, anywhere they went. His goal was to exterminate the Christians.²

John Pollock wrote this:

Paul charged like an animal tearing its prey. This was not the sad efficiency of an officer obeying distasteful orders; the heart was engaged, and the mind too, with the thoroughness of an inquisitor unmasking treason, until Paul's operations had reduced a vigorous citywide community to apparent impotence. Its leaders fled or went into hiding. Paul went from house to house, then held formal inquiries at the synagogues when the congregation assembled. Every suspect, man or woman, had to stand before the elders, while Paul, as the high priest's representative, put to them the demand that they should curse Jesus.³

II Paul's Birth into God's Family (Acts 9:1 – 19)

"Paul was a great man," said Charles Spurgeon, "and I have no doubt that on the way to Damascus he rode a very high horse. But a few seconds sufficed to alter the man. How soon God brought him down!"⁴

¹ Phillips, J. (2009). *Exploring Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Ac 9:1a). Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp.

² McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible Commentary* (electronic ed., Vol. 4, p. 548). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ Pollock, John (2012-01-01). *The Apostle: The Life of Paul* (p. 28). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 438). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

A Paul's salvation was powerful - Salvation for anyone is a divine act of God, but Paul's conversion was uniquely miraculous. Jesus personally appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus.

B Paul's salvation was personal – You will notice that the Lord revealed himself only to Paul, not to the men that were travelling with him. (Acts 9:7)

C Paul's salvation was prepared – Another disciple of the Lord – Ananias – received a vision also from the Lord preparing him to assist Paul. It was after Ananias came to Paul that the scales were lifted from his eyes, and he received the Holy Ghost. (Acts 9:10 – 19)

D Paul's salvation was preceded - by the testimony of Stephen – The death of Stephen certainly had a profound impact on Paul. (Acts 6:8 – 7:60)

III Paul's Baptism and Training as a Disciple

A He was baptized by Ananias in Damascus (Acts 9:18)

B He travels to Arabia (Galatians 1:17)

"Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus." (Galatians 1:17)

"But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ."
(Galatians 1:11-12)

The Scripture is unclear as to what happened to Paul in Arabia, but it appears that Paul spent some time learning directly from the Lord Jesus, and contemplating the Old Testament Scriptures that he had known all of his life, and reconciling them to his new faith in Christ. The other apostles spent three years with Jesus, and so would Paul.

F. B. Meyer states this regarding Paul's time in Arabia:

"Immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood; neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went away into Arabia." It is not quite clear whether he began to preach before going; probably not. He wanted to be alone, to reflect on all that he had seen; to coordinate, if possible, the new with the old, the present with the past. For this he must have uninterrupted leisure, and he hungered for the isolation and solitude of the wilderness. Men like Ananias might reassure him; the apostles of the Lord might communicate much of his teaching and wondrous ministry; the holy beauty of the life of the infant Church might calm and elevate his spirit; but, above all things, he wanted to be alone with Jesus, to know Him and the power of his resurrection, the anointing which makes human teaching needless, because it teaches all things. Three years under such tuition would doubtless make him so proficient that when afterwards he met those who were of repute among the apostles they would be able to add nothing unto him.

Arabia probably stands for the Sinaitic peninsula, with its sparse population, its marked

physical features, its associations with Moses, and the Exodus, and Elijah.

How much it must have all meant to that eager spirit, who was to interpret to all time the inner meaning of the momentous events of which those gaunt mountain solitudes had been the scene! Here the bush had burned with the fire that now burned within his heart. Here Moses had seen God face to face, as he had seen Jesus. Here the plan of the tabernacle had been communicated, as to him that of the Church. Here the water flowed from the stricken rock, and that Rock was Christ. Here Elijah stood in the entrance to the cave, and the still small voice stole into his heart; and had he not heard that same voice? Beneath those heavens glowing at noon with sultry heat, and radiant at night with myriads of stars, the cloud had moved, directing the march of the pilgrim hosts—for him, too, it shone. Month after month he wandered to and fro, now sharing the rough fare of some Essene community, or the lot of a family of Bedouins; now swept upwards in heavenly fellowship, and again plunged into profound meditation. The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands upon thousands; and they were all waiting at his beck and call to bear him aloft into the heavenly places.

Probably the most important work of those years was to review the entire course of Old Testament truth from the new standpoint of vision suggested by the sufferings and death of the Messiah. There was no doubt that He had been crucified in weakness, and now lived in the power of God. But how was this consistent with the anticipations of the prophets and seers of the Old Testament, who had been understood by generations of rabbis to predict an all-victorious Prince? How eagerly he turned to all the well-known Messianic passages! What ecstasy must have thrilled him as he discovered that they were all consistent with Christ's suffering unto death as the way to enter His glory! And how greatly he must have wondered that he and all his people had been so blind to the obvious meaning of the inspired Word (2 Corinthians 3).⁵

C His discipleship in Damascus (Acts 9:19)

He immediately began preaching Christ in the synagogues (vs. 20 – 22) He boldly convinced many Jews in Damascus that Jesus is the Christ.

D He escaped the Jews in Damascus only to be shunned by the disciples in Jerusalem. (Acts 9:23 – 26)

E He is defended by Barnabas (Acts 9:25 – 28)

Barnabas has a reputation for defending the underdog. The Christians and even the Apostles were skeptical and very afraid of Paul because of his past, but Barnabas was willing to give Paul a chance. We will later see that Barnabas was also willing to give his nephew John Mark a second chance. (Acts 15:36 – 41)

⁵ Meyer, F. B. (1897). *Paul: A Servant of Jesus Christ* (pp. 66–67). New York; Chicago; Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company.

F He gets into another scuffle with the Grecians (see Acts 6), and they try to kill him.
(Acts 9:29)

G He is sent home to Tarsus. (Acts 9:30 - 31)

H Barnabas finds Paul in Tarsus and brings him to Antioch (Acts 11:19 – 26)

I Barnabas and Saul deliver relief to the saints in Judaea (Acts 11:27 – 30)

J Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch with John Mark (Acts 12:25 – 13:1)

Paul's training was practical in that he immediately put into practice the things that he learned. His training was also personal in that several individuals invested their lives in him, especially Barnabas.

IV Paul's Frequent Boasting of the Grace of God

Every time Paul had the opportunity he rehearsed his testimony before unbelievers. The personal testimony is one of the most effective tools any believer has in witnessing to the lost. New believers may not know all of the Scriptural arguments regarding salvation, but they should know what happened to them.

A Before the Jews at Jerusalem – Acts 21:39 – 22:16

B Before Agrippa – Acts 26: 1 – 23

Conclusion

If you or I lived in the first century and we were given the responsibility of choosing the one who would be the Apostle to the Gentiles, I do not think Saul of Tarsus would have been on the top of our list of candidates, but evidently God knew well what He was doing when He selected Paul. God used all that went into Paul's background and coupled it with His marvelous grace to create a warrior for the gospel.

"The more we understand the darkness of his past the better we will understand his gratitude for grace" - Chuck Swindoll

"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen." - (1 Timothy 1:12-17)

