

Paul – A Man Prepared

It is useful to know something about Paul himself as we start to look at what he said and wrote. If we were to remove all reference to Paul's life story and writings from the New Testament, it would be a very slim volume!

Origins His name was originally Saul, a Hebrew name apparently meaning 'desired' or 'asked', though I have always understood it to mean 'great'. Certainly his namesake, Saul the first king of Israel, was head and shoulders taller than his contemporaries, so maybe that is where the 'greatness' idea has come from (**1 Samuel chapters 9 & 10**). From **Acts 13:9** onwards Saul is called Paul (Greek *Paulos*), which means 'little'.

He was born in Tarsus in south-eastern Turkey, part of the Roman province of Cilicia, and had official Roman citizenship from birth (**Acts 21:39, 22:25-29**). However, he was brought up and educated in Jerusalem and was tutored by Gamaliel, a well-respected Jewish teacher in the sect of the Pharisees (**Acts 22:3, 5:34**). As Saul, he grew up in Jerusalem and was well-known to all there as a Pharisee, 'the strictest sect of our religion' (**Acts 26:5**). At least part of his family continued to live there, as his nephew was on hand in **Acts 23:12-22** to pick up news of a conspiracy to kill Paul and advise the Roman commander, so averting the assassination attempt. But there were probably still some family links with Tarsus, as he was sent on his way there after his early attempts to share the message about Jesus with Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem (**Acts 9:26-30**). There may have been mixed motives for this! It removed Saul from an earlier assassination plot, but also prevented him from stirring things up any more than he already had!

Pharisee Paul's background in strict Pharisaism is a fact that he sometimes refers to. For a Jewish audience, this gives him increased credibility as someone who upholds and seeks to enforce the minutest details of the Law as found in the 5 'books of Moses', Genesis to Deuteronomy (the 'Pentateuch'). See **Acts 22:3 & 26:5**. However, in **Acts 23:6**, he uses it to spark disagreement among those who are accusing him!

The Lord Jesus was scathing in his attacks on the Pharisees because of their blatant hypocrisy, and included their cronies the scribes, 'teachers of the Law', but he found no fault with the Law itself, nor even with the teaching which the scribes and Pharisees delivered. **Matthew 23:13-39** is a blistering attack on their hypocrisy, but he prefaces it by telling the crowds to do all that they instruct the people to do (**Matthew 23:1-12**). See also **Matthew 5:18 – & 24:35!**

For other examples of the Pharisees' legalistic Judaism, see **Luke 11:39-44, Matthew 9:11 & 14, Matthew 12:1-2**. There are many more! They loved the power and position that came with their religious fundamentalism, and used it to criticise, control and manipulate others. (**Matthew 23:4-7, 13-15**)

We could easily take a much longer look at the Pharisees, but the main point here is to realise and remember that Saul / Paul was brought up on this diet of strict legalistic adherence to the Jewish Law, and perhaps with a sense of moral superiority

which sprang from this assiduous religious observance. It was in his family and in his own personality. What a change was coming!

Persecutor Hardly surprising, then, that this young Pharisee would become such a vigorous opponent of the newly-emerging followers of 'the Way' (**Acts 9:2, 19:9 & 23, 22:4, 24:14 & 22**) as taught by that upstart 'prophet' Jesus, who came from Nazareth in Galilee of all places! (**Isaiah 9:1, Matthew 4:15, John 1:46, 7:41 & 52**). 'Galilee of the Gentiles' was despised by many Jews, maybe because it was so closely linked with non-Jewish nations nearby.

Saul would have known all about the confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. Stephen's accusations to the high priest and the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) would have hit him hard, especially the charge of hypocrisy. From Paul's own comments in **Acts 23:1** and **24:16**, we know that he had always had a sensitive conscience. Maybe Stephen's linking of prophecy about the Messiah with the historic persecuting and killing of the prophets who brought those prophecies also touched a raw nerve and made Saul angry. (**Acts 7:51-53**). We know that he was 'furiously enraged' at all the Christian believers and that this fuelled his persecution (**Acts 26:11**).

Whatever the motivation, it was from the time of Stephen's death that Saul 'began ravaging the church' (**Acts 8:3**) and started imprisoning anyone he could lay his hands on. Little did he realise that he was contributing to the spread of the gospel by forcing many disciples out of Jerusalem. They went into the surrounding areas of Judea, even to Samaria (another place despised by the Jews) and had evidently reached Damascus and had become numerous enough there for this young zealot to want to stamp them out – which led to his journey there in **Acts 9**.

The Damascus Road It's worth reading Luke's account in **Acts 9** alongside Paul's own later accounts when he is explaining his history to the mob in Jerusalem in **Acts 22** and to Festus and Agrippa in **Acts 26**. Saul is not merely converted, he is also given his commission as an apostle to the Gentiles. Some key points:–

1) The risen and ascended Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting him. His attacks on the church were effectively attacks on the Lord Jesus himself.

2) He was told to proceed to Damascus, where he would receive further instructions.

3) In the meanwhile, the Lord Jesus outlines Saul's future:

a) As a servant with delegated authority. The word translated here as 'minister' or 'servant' is more often translated as 'officer', as in **John 7:32**, when the chief priests sent 'officers' to arrest Jesus. The officers had no authority of their own, but acted with the authority of those who had sent them. Paul was to be the same, acting under authority delegated from the Lord Jesus.

b) As a witness. To pass on what he had already seen and what would be shown to him later. Witnesses do not describe a theory; they describes events which they have been part of.

c) To go to the Gentiles, to open their eyes to turn from darkness to the light of God, and from Satan's control to God himself, so that they should receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance with God's chosen people. In the process,

the Lord would need to rescue Paul from both his own Jewish people and from the Gentiles. We see plenty of evidence of this in Luke's accounts of Paul's journeys.

That last commission was completely contrary to the way that Saul's life had been until that moment. He had been raised to know that the Jews were God's own specially chosen people, the only ones who were truly included in the divine plan. In a very real way, the whole history of the Jews was bound up with the fact that they – and only they – were worshippers of the one true God.

God's own name, I AM, had been revealed to their ancestors. They were the only ones who truly worshipped and served the One Who Is. Now Saul was being commissioned to open up that inheritance to the Gentiles, the heathen nations whom the Jews hated and despised. Nothing could have been much further from the instincts of this zealous Pharisee!

A Humble Helper A very dazed Saul makes his way into Damascus. No longer the strident persecutor intent on wreaking havoc among the followers of the Way, but now a humbled and temporarily blinded man who needs leading by the hand, so shattered by his experience that he neither eats nor drinks for 3 days.

Meanwhile, the Lord tells Ananias (a Jewish believer in Damascus) to go to where Saul is staying and lay hands on him so that he will get his sight back and also lets Saul know that Ananias is coming. From what Ananias knows of Saul, he would expect to be immediately arrested and imprisoned, but he follows the Lord's instructions.

Ananias confirms part of what the Lord has already told Saul, that he will be a witness for him to all people of what he has seen and heard. Saul's sight is restored, he is baptised and is filled with the Holy Spirit, and has a meal. Having fulfilled his vital role, Ananias slips back into obscurity, but he probably also plays his part in reassuring the other believers in Damascus that Saul's conversion is genuine, as Saul stays with them and starts to proclaim in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah (Christ).

Effective Witness It seems likely that it was shortly after this that Saul spent some time in Arabia before returning to Damascus, and the implication of what he writes in ***Galatians 1:15-17*** is that it was during that time away that the Lord revealed to him the message that he was to proclaim. He insisted that his message was not just something he had picked up from others, but it had been given to him direct from God. He became so effective in proving Jesus to be the Messiah that the Jews in Damascus hatched a plot to kill him, but he escaped and made his way back to Jerusalem, now at least three years since he left there on his original mission of destruction. ***Acts 9:19-25***.

Welcomed Whatever news may have filtered back from Damascus over those years, the believers in Jerusalem wanted nothing to do with their former persecutor. It took a Jew from Cyprus to actually trust Saul's testimony, physically take hold of him and bring him to the apostles to confirm Saul's effectiveness in Damascus. Joseph was such a positive disciple that, from the earliest days, they had nicknamed him 'Son of Encouragement' – 'Barnabas' (***Acts 4:36-37***). He and Paul would soon form a very effective partnership. ***Acts 9:26,27***.

Once again, Saul speaks out ‘boldly in the name of the Lord’ and, once more, some of the Jews try to get him killed. For his own safety (and maybe even for their own peace!), the church arrange for him to go to Tarsus, his old home city. **Acts 9:28-31**.

* * * * *

The beginnings of a ministry Some while later, word reached Jerusalem of exciting developments further north. Some of the Jewish believers who had needed to leave Jerusalem after Stephen was killed had travelled on through Phoenicia, crossed over to Cyprus and reached as far as Antioch – 450 miles away, more than twice as far away as Damascus. Most of them had only spoken to Jews about the news of Jesus the Messiah but, in Antioch, some of them (originally from north Africa and Cyprus) had started sharing the gospel with Greeks and ‘a large number who believed turned to the Lord’ (**Acts 11:19-21**).

Someone from Jerusalem should go and help them, but who? Who better than good old Barnabas, himself from Cyprus, ready to get alongside to help (the real meaning of ‘encouragement’ in Greek). ‘A good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.’ What he saw delighted him, and he did what he was known for – he encouraged them! The church in Antioch grew (**Acts 11:22-24**).

But Barnabas knew who he needed to work alongside him and soon set off to Tarsus to look for Saul – another 300 mile round trip.

For a solid year, Barnabas and Saul devoted themselves to teaching that young church – ‘considerable numbers’ of them. We have no record of what they taught them, but that is where Saul / Paul started his ministry, so probably much of what we can read in his letters will have been developed then. Those believers talked so much about their Lord, the promised Messiah, the Christ (‘Anointed One’) that they got nicknamed ‘Christians’ for the first time. The promise of the returning Messiah was the promise of the coming Kingdom of God. (See ‘[Revolution on Earth](http://www.justonecandle.uk)’ from www.justonecandle.uk for a simple study on the Kingdom of God.)

Thanks to the encouragement from Barnabas, Saul had now become an effective builder in the church in Antioch, and now it was not just he and Barnabas who were teaching and sharing the word of the Lord. **Acts 13:1** names five ‘prophets and teachers’ in the church, and they seem like a cosmopolitan team! Barnabas (from Cyprus); Simeon called Niger, meaning ‘black’, and so possibly from somewhere in Africa, but Simeon is a Hebrew name; Lucius (a Roman name) from Cyrene in present-day Libya; Manaen who had been the childhood companion of Herod the tetrarch, who had executed John the Baptist (**Matthew 14:1-12**); and Saul who, in his former life as a Pharisee, would not have associated with most of them!

Barnabas and Saul had seen a thriving church start from nothing. Now it was all about to change. The Lord had evidently given them a real ministry in church building there in Antioch. Now he was going to move them on . . .

Dave Taylor November 2022

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk