

A Look at the Life of the Apostle Paul

Paul was born in 1 AD in the city of Tarsus, the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia. In Acts 21:39, Paul says, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city.”

A bit about Tarsus:

The Cydnus River (also known as the Tarsus River and currently called the Berdan River) ran through the city. Tarsus was where Cleopatra met Antony in 41 BC. Tarsus is 178 miles north and west of Jerusalem. It had been under Roman rule since 133 BC, having previously been under the rule of the Seleucids following the breakup of Alexander the Great's empire. It is believed by some historians that Seleucid King Antiochus IV {whom we discussed when we studied the Book of Daniel; recall that he called himself Antiochus IV Epiphanes (“God Manifest”)} settled a colony of Jews from Galilee in Tarsus in about 170 BC, and that Paul's ancestors were among them.

Paul's family had Roman citizenship credentials. Either his grandfather was granted the privileges of Roman citizenship, or his father paid a high price for it. Roman citizenship conferred local distinction and hereditary privileges, which each member could claim beneficially wherever he traveled throughout the Roman Empire. It was a part of God's providence in Paul's life and it was a card that Paul played at key points in his ministry.

“Being a Roman citizen meant that Paul had a full Latin name which would have been threefold (i.e. Gaius Julius Caesar). We do not know what the first two names were because his life story was written by his Greek colleague (Luke) and no Greek could understand Latin names. His third and most personal name was Paullus. He was given also a Jewish name at the rite of circumcision on the 8th day after birth: ‘Saul,’ chosen either for its meaning (‘asked for’), or in honor of the most famous Benjamite in history, King Saul.”¹

His father was likely a master tentmaker and taught Paul the trade. Paul (from infancy) could speak Greek and had a working knowledge of Latin, but his family spoke Aramaic (a derivative of Hebrew) in their home. They looked to Jerusalem as Islam looks to Mecca. Their privileges as freemen of Tarsus and Roman citizens were nothing to the high honor of being Israelites, the People of Promise, to whom alone the Living God had revealed His glory and His plans.

Paul is thought to have attended the Tarsus synagogue until he was 13, then was sent by sea to Jerusalem to study 5-6 years at the feet of the famous teacher, Gamaliel (see Acts 5:33-39 and Acts 22:3). “Here he learned to dissect a text and to debate in the question-and-answer style known to the ancient world as the ‘diatribe,’ and to expound. A rabbi was not only part preacher but part lawyer, who prosecuted or defended those who broke the sacred Law.”²

Paul probably returned to Tarsus to work in the family tent-making business. Paul's father could take delight in his son who had followed in his steps as a Pharisee and had the intellectual force to reach the highest office in Israel.

By the time he was 30 he was back in Jerusalem and we find him at the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:58 and persecuting the church in Acts 8:1-3.

But in Acts 9 his life was changed forever on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. The Scriptures provide great detail for us regarding how this happened and shows us that Paul was to be used as God's chosen messenger to take the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles.

Acts 9:1-19a:

The Damascus Road: Saul Converted

¹Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them in shackles to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; ⁴and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He *said*, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶but get up and enter the city, and it will be told to you what you must do." ⁷The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. ⁹And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹And the Lord *said* to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶for I will show him how much he must suffer in behalf of My name." ¹⁷So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

¹⁸And immediately *something* like *fish* scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; ¹⁹and he took food and was strengthened.

According to Galatians 1:16-17, Paul went away to Arabia for a period of three years.

Note: It is important to note that Arabia in Paul's time was not the area we think of as Arabia. Today we think of Arabia as being the Arabian Peninsula where Saudi Arabia is located. However, in the first century the designation could also refer to the Syro-Arabian desert, farther north, which includes portions of modern-day Syria and Jordan.

This is a time that was surely spent in digging deep into the Scriptures and communing with the Lord, Who was preparing him for the journey ahead

The following passage in Acts 9 indicates that he was in Damascus at some point, preaching the Gospel. There is some debate among Biblical scholars regarding the sequence of events described in Acts 9:19b-22 and Galatians 1:16-17:

1. Some believe he went immediately to Damascus following his conversion and then went to Arabia, escaping Damascus "in a basket through a window in the wall" (2 Corinthians 11:32-33).
2. Some believe he went to Arabia for three years and during this timeframe he made a short trip to Damascus.

Acts 9:19b-22:

Saul Begins to Preach Christ

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ All those hearing *him* continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not the one who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" ²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

Upon his return from Arabia, he went to Jerusalem and approached Christ's disciples. Initially, he found himself cold-shouldered. Luke tells us in Acts 9:26 that they were afraid of him.

Acts 9:26-30

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

However, he was rescued by a man who would become one of his closest associates, Joseph Barnabas, known generally as "Barnabas," which means in Aramaic "Son of Encouragement." The apostles soon accepted him, and they began to work together in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Acts 9:27-28

²⁷ But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.

Paul, who had persecuted Christians, and Peter, who had denied Christ - - both transformed by the Risen Christ - - spent 15 days together (Galatians 1:18). We can only imagine the discussion that surely ensued. Peter had lived and walked with our Lord for three years and witnessed His death and walked with Him for 40 days after His resurrection. He saw the resurrected Savior ascend into heaven. Paul wanted evidence that Jesus really had lived a sinless life. He wanted to hear how love and purity had been demonstrated. He wanted as much as he could get of Jesus' sayings. What a great meeting this must have been!

We see the switch from the use of his Hebrew name ("Saul") to his Roman name ("Paul") in Acts 13:9, on the island of Cyprus where the Roman proconsul by the name of Sergius Paulus believed and was saved. Recall that this was his given name. As far as can be determined, Jesus did not make the name change. It is possible that Paul gave up the use of his Hebrew name, *Saul*, with its regal connotation and chose to use his Roman name, *Paul*, meaning "little" or "small," because he desired to become smaller in order to present Christ as greater (John 3:30).

Paul was perhaps 34 years old by this time and decided to return to Tarsus to share his new faith in Christ. He seemed to drop out of history through his later thirties and into his early forties. His parents, being Pharisees were not impressed in the least and his interest in Gentiles threw him into conflict with the elders of the Tarsus synagogue. Writing in 56 AD (at the age of 55) in **2 Corinthians 11:24**, Paul said, **"Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes."** It is probable that he was whipped more than once in these hidden years in Tarsus. Likely he was cast out of home and disappeared into the wild country of the Taurus foothills, where he had a vision:

2 Corinthians 12:1-2

¹No doubt it is not seemly for me to boast. Nevertheless, I will come to visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ about fourteen years ago (whether he was in the body I cannot tell, or whether he was out of the body I cannot tell, God knows) who was taken up into the third heaven.

The revelation threw him more fully on Christ and at the age of 41 he set out to tell others about Christ. It was at this time that the church at Antioch (Antioch of Syria) was experiencing great growth because "the hand of the Lord was with them" (Acts 11:21). Barnabas was a leader in this church, and we see in Acts 11:25 that "he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."

The hearts of Paul and Barnabas were on fire. The church at Antioch was ministering and fasting and that's when the Lord responded:

Acts 13:2-3

²While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Off they went, along with John Mark (Barnabas' cousin and the author of the Gospel of Mark on the **First Missionary Journey (46-48 AD)**, which is described in **Acts 13-14**. Initially, their method of evangelism was to preach in the town synagogues. But when many of the Jews rejected Christ, the missionaries recognized God's call of witnessing to the Gentiles. In Antioch of Pisidian, Paul and Barnabas were stoned for preaching the Gospel. Their beating was witnessed by an elderly Jewess named Lois, her daughter, Eunice, who had married a Greek, and Eunice's son Timothy, a lad of about 17 years of age. They were citizens of Lystra, the next town that Paul and Barnabas was to visit, so they traveled the 130 miles from Antioch of Pisidian to Lystra together. This was surely a bonding time for them, but especially for Paul and Timothy, whom Paul referred to as his “true son in the faith.” (1 Timothy 1:2)

Because of his bold testimony of Jesus, Saul the persecutor became Paul the persecuted. Paul's ministry to Gentiles brought controversy over who could be saved and how to be saved.

“They had covered over 1000 miles on foot - - sixty days entirely consumed in land travel - - and as for the brutalities they had endured, some of Paul's scars were only too evident and his gait more bandy-legged and crooked than before. The emphasis, however, was not on sufferings and adventures but on ‘all that God had done with them.’ Above everything they stressed how He had ‘opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.’”³

Note: John Mark, for an unknown reason, returned to Jerusalem when they reached Perga, Pamphylia on the Gulf of Attalia. His desertion was right after a mostly fruitless time in Cyprus, where only one conversion is recorded (Acts 13:4-12). It's likely that the young John Mark was discouraged at the hardness of the way and decided to return to the comforts of home. Paul saw it as desertion, and it caused a bit of a rift between him and Barnabas as they prepared for the 2nd Missionary Journey.

Between his first and second missionary journeys, he participated in a conference in Jerusalem (**The Jerusalem Council** described in Acts 15) discussing the way of salvation. The final consensus was that the Gentiles could receive Jesus without submitting to Jewish traditions.

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and spent time building up the church there. But Paul was ready to take the Gospel message once again to the lost outside of Antioch, so

plans were made for the 2nd Missionary Journey. Because of their disagreement about whether to take John Mark on this trip, Paul (age 48) and Barnabas went their separate ways in 49 AD. Barnabas and John Mark sailed away to Cyprus and Paul chose Silas to replace Barnabas and went northwest. We find that there was reconciliation between Paul and Barnabas and that John Mark had once again become a valued servant in 2 Timothy 4:11.

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.

On this 2nd **Missionary Journey described in Acts 15:36-18:22**, God providentially redirected Paul and Silas to Macedonia and Greece, bringing the gospel to Europe. Young Timothy joined them in Lystra and in Troas he met a physician by the name of Luke, who became not only a believer, but the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. They met a businesswoman named Lydia in Philippi and stayed with her briefly as they established a church there. They were beaten and imprisoned at Philippi, but God caused an earthquake to open the doors and the jailer and his family to be providentially saved. Traveling on to Athens, Paul preached to an inquisitive audience on Mars Hill, then went to the city of Corinth, just a short distance south of Athens. They met a couple by the name of Priscilla and Aquila, and they became wonderful supporters of Paul and the cause of Christ.

Acts 18:1-3

18 Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had left Italy when Claudius Caesar deported all Jews from Rome. ³ Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was.

They returned to their home church at Antioch of Syria in summer of 52 AD and remained there until the spring of 53 AD, when they embarked on the **3rd Missionary Journey described in Acts 18:23-20:38**.

During this journey, Paul fervently preached in Asia Minor and God confirmed his message with miracles. At the end of Paul's 3rd journey, he knew he would soon be imprisoned and probably killed. His final words to the church at Ephesus display his devotion to Christ.

Acts 20:17-24

¹⁷ From Miletus he sent word to Ephesus and called to himself the elders of the church. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them,

"You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was beneficial, and teaching you publicly and from house to

house, ²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that chains and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of God's grace.

He returned from his 3rd Missionary Journey in 57 AD at the age of 56.

"Some Bible scholars see a fourth missionary journey as well, and early Christian history does seem to attest to the idea. At the same time, there is no explicit evidence for a fourth journey in the Bible, as it would have occurred after the close of the book of Acts.

The purpose of all of Paul's missionary journeys was the same: proclaiming God's grace in forgiving sin through Christ. God used Paul's ministry to bring the gospel to the Gentiles and establish the church. Paul's letters to the churches, recorded in the New Testament, still support church life and doctrine. Although Paul's missionary journeys caused him to sacrifice everything, they were worth the cost (Philippians 3:7-11)."⁴

In Acts 21-28 Luke records arrest in Jerusalem (prophesied in Acts 21:11) and his trials before the Sanhedrin, Governor Felix of Caesarea, Festus (Felix' successor), other Jewish leaders in Caesarea, and King Agrippa. Each trial afforded Paul opportunities to share the gospel. He appealed to Rome in 60 AD and was sent there under house arrest for two years. According to **Acts 28:31**, Paul **"welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance!"**

It was during this house arrest that he wrote the books of Ephesians, Philemon, Colossians, and Philippians, known as "The Prison Epistles." God did not waste His servant's suffering but inspired Paul to write part of what would become our New Testament. Paul was released from his imprisonment around 62 AD.

"Paul's last arrest, which is not detailed in Acts, occurred somewhere around AD 66. Once again, he was held under Roman guard, but this time he was confined to a jail cell. From there, Paul penned his second letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:8-9). In the last of Paul's "prison epistles," his tone is weary, and he realizes the end of his earthly ministry is coming soon (2 Timothy 4:6-8). He encourages Timothy to keep the faith (2 Timothy 1:13; 2:2; 4:2) and to come to see him if at all possible (2 Timothy 4:9, 13). Paul was feeling lonely as many of his co-workers had gone elsewhere for ministry; at least one had even deserted Paul (2 Timothy 4:10-12, 16-18).

In prison, Paul wrote with hopeful confidence, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7–8). He claimed, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (2 Timothy 4:18). At the end of his third imprisonment, Paul was martyred by the Roman Empire. He was, indeed, brought safely to be with the Lord (Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:8). No more would evil men attack him. He would never see a prison again.

Paul’s life after conversion is a picture of total devotion to the purposes and plans of God. His words in Galatians 2:20 explain how Paul viewed his life: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul could endure imprisonment as an innocent man because he counted his life as nothing (Acts 20:24; Philippians 3:7–10). Even though treated unjustly by the nation and people he loved, Paul continued to preach the gospel and used every opportunity to share the truth of Jesus, even with prison guards (Philippians 4:22).

Paul was in prison because people “loved darkness instead of light” (John 3:19) and they “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18). Paul’s accusers did not want to hear the message of salvation, so they imprisoned and eventually killed the messenger. Jesus warned us that we should not be surprised when the world hates Christians because it hated Him first (John 15:18; 1 John 3:13). May we all embrace suffering for Christ with the grace and humility that the apostle Paul showed.”

He was beheaded by the Romans under Emperor Nero on the Ostian Way, dying a martyr’s death in June 67 AD at the age of 66.

Footnotes:

- 1 *The Apostle Paul – A Life of Paul*, by John Pollock, Published by David C Cook, 1985, page 16
- 2 Ibid, page 18
- 3 Ibid, page 100
- 4 “What were the different journeys of Paul?”, GotQuestions.com
- 5 “Why was Paul in Prison?”, GotQuestions.com