



The Life and Writings of St. Paul

Lesson 1

Lesson 1 Commentary

Paul's Childhood through Conversion

Lesson 2 Questions

The First Journey and the Council of Jerusalem

Introduction

Trying to cover St. Paul in an eight-week course is very daunting. Virtually every field of theological study (e.g., Christology, Soteriology, etc.) draws heavily on his writings. Paul is arguably the author of 13 of the 26 books of the New Testament, plus he is the main character in about half of the Acts of the Apostles. His initial and continuing impact to our beliefs cannot be overstated.

Here is the world in which Paul operated.



The Early Life of Paul

Paul was born in Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia.¹ Tarsus was a learning center of the ancient world alongside Alexandria in Egypt and Athens in Greece. It was in the southeastern corner of Asia Minor, which is current day Turkey. It was not far from the Mediterranean. His Jewish name was Saul, probably named after the first king of Israel. He later appeared to have taken on the Roman name of Paul.² It was not uncommon to have multiple names. Other examples in the New Testament include Mark (John or John Mark) and Matthew (Levi). Like King Saul, Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin.³ In addition to being born of Hebrew parents, he was also a Roman citizen,⁴ which entitled him to certain legal privileges. Some have speculated that Paul's parents were released slaves thus making them Roman citizens. He was a tentmaker by trade,⁵ which probably means that his father was also a tentmaker. This fit well in Tarsus as the city was well known for making certain types of felt cloth from the wool of shaggy black goats.⁶ Tents in Paul's time would have been more than a "recreational" product. "[I]n Paul's world then, as in parts of the world today, many people moved from place to place for seasonal work, and even people who stayed put would depend on canvas awnings and shelters to enable them to work under the hot sun."⁷ We really do not know whether Paul's father was a Torah scholar, but we do know that Rabbis in Paul's time period did not get paid. They earned their living by other means.⁸ It is, at least, possible that Paul's father was a Rabbi or scholar of some sort. He was a gifted child as he studied "at the feet of Gamaliel."⁹ Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.¹⁰ Only the most gifted students would have been taught by Gamaliel. "According to later tradition, [Gamaliel] became a Christian, perhaps under the influence of Paul."¹¹ Since Gamaliel taught in Jerusalem, Paul would have spent some time outside of Tarsus in Jerusalem. He was bi-lingual (Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek).¹² This would have served him well. Being a tentmaker in Tarsus, his family's customers would have been more than just Jewish. "We can safely assume, then that Saul grew up in a cheerfully strict observant Jewish home on the one hand, and in a polyglot, multicultural, multiethnic working environment on the other. Strict adherence to ancestral

¹ Acts 9:11, 30; 11:25; 21:39. All Biblical citations are from the NABRE.

² For the purposes of this course, I will always use the name Paul, except when quoting a source that uses the name Saul.

³ Phil 3:5.

⁴ Acts 22:27-28; 23:27.

⁵ Acts 18:3.

⁶ www.bibleplaces.com/tarsus.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 15.

⁸ Wright, *Paul*, 15.

⁹ Acts 22:3.

¹⁰ Acts 5:34.

¹¹ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 301.

¹² Acts 21:37, 40.

tradition did not mean living a sheltered life, unaware of how the rest of the world worked, spoke, behaved, and reasoned.”¹³ Lastly, he was raised as a zealous Pharisee,¹⁴ with the result that he became an energetic persecutor of the followers of Jesus, because he considers belief in Jesus as Messiah to be incompatible with his vision of his faith.¹⁵

Paul, the Zealot

There are several examples of “zealous” people in the Old Testament. While the Israelites were wandering in the territory of Moab, King Balak hired a soothsayer, Balaam, to curse Israel. After that failed, Balaam sent Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men into sexual immorality and into worshipping the Moabite idols. God sent a plague to stop the chaos that resulted, but the Israelite men did not care. A certain Israelite brought his new girlfriend into his tent in front of Moses and all the people. When Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, saw this, he reacted zealously. He took a spear into the tent and killed them both with a single thrust. The plague stopped. Then we read:

Then the LORD said to Moses: Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned my anger from the Israelites by his being as jealous among them as I am; that is why I did not put an end to the Israelites in my jealousy. Announce, therefore, that I hereby give him my covenant of peace, which shall be for him and for his descendants after him the covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was jealous on behalf of his God and thus made expiation for the Israelites.¹⁶

As a result of his zeal, Phinehas is rewarded by God. But this is not the only example.

In the period after the great days of David and Solomon, the Israelites began worshipping a Canaanite fertility god, Baal. Baal worshippers, like those of the Moabites, above, practiced fertility rituals (sexual immorality) and child sacrifice. The prophet Elijah challenges the Baalite prophets to a sacrificial “duel” which he wins. As a result, Elijah ordered the people to seize and slaughter the prophets of Baal. Once again, one sees great zeal and a great victory.

Lastly, just a couple of centuries before Paul’s time, the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem by establishing pagan worship on the site. In addition, many Jews went along with these sacrifices participating in the rituals themselves.

¹³ Wright, *Paul*, 15.

¹⁴ Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6-9; 26:5.

¹⁵ Phil 3:5-6; 1 Cor 15:9; Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1-2; 22:3-5; 26:4-12.

¹⁶ Num 25:10-13.

Mattathias [the father of Judas Maccabeus] sparked this religious revolt when he killed a Jew who made improper sacrifices in accordance with a new decree from the Seleucid ruler. He then killed the officer in charge, destroyed the altar, and called for the inhabitants to fight the Syrian persecution. Mattathias became leader of the resulting uprising, which was carried forward by his sons after his death in 166 BC.¹⁷

As a result of these types of acts from the Old Testament, several people in Paul’s time believed that the only way to be free of the influence of foreign rule was resistance. The Zealots were a party, probably a subset of the Pharisees, founded by Judas the Galilean, the leader of revolt against the Romans around 6 AD. “Both the group’s name and its inspiration can be traced back to the zeal (in Greek, *zēlos*) displayed by **Phinehas** in the wilderness (Num 25:11) and by **Mattathias** and his sons in their revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes in defense of the Mosaic Law (1 Macc 2:24–27).”¹⁸

Whether Paul was a member of the Zealots is unknown, but we know that Paul considered himself zealous to the point that he persecuted those who followed Jesus. Above, we mentioned that Paul was a student of Gamaliel. We see in Acts that Gamaliel believed in more of a “live and let live” approach. Let God sort it out. When faced with what to do with the Jesus followers, Gamaliel responds, “So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God.”¹⁹ If Paul were a student of Gamaliel, why would he persecute the Christians? At the time of Paul, there were two primary schools in Jerusalem – Hillel and Shammai. Gamaliel was adherent to the school of Hillel, which held a “live and let live” attitude towards foreign rule. “If the Romans wanted to run the world, so be it. Jews would study and practice the Torah by themselves. This, broadly speaking, had been the teaching of Hillel, a leading rabbi of the previous generation.”²⁰ On the other hand, Shammai was zealous.

[Shammai] maintained that if God was going to establish his reign on earth as in heaven, then those who were zealous for God and Torah would have to say their prayers, sharpen their swords, and get ready to for action. Action against wicked pagans: yes, when the time was right. Action against renegade or compromising Jews: yes indeed, that too.²¹

¹⁷ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 589–590.

¹⁸ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 970.

¹⁹ Acts 5:38-39.

²⁰ Wright, *Paul*, 36.

²¹ Wright, *Paul*, 36.

N.T. Wright speculates that, at some point, Paul broke from his teacher Gamaliel adhering more to the teachings of Shammai.²² Thus, we are first introduced to Paul as the zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of **a young man named Saul**. As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”; and when he said this, he fell asleep. **Now Saul was consenting to his execution**. On that day, there broke out a severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem, and all were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made a loud lament over him. **Saul, meanwhile, was trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment.**²³

Just as Phinehas and Mattathias killed compromising Jews, Paul was zealously persecuting the followers of Jesus who, in his mind were compromising the Torah.

The Road to Damascus

Zealous Paul heads to Damascus to find those “who belonged to the Way” (the followers of Jesus), “to bring them back to Jerusalem in chains”²⁴ But something happened.

On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He said, “Who are you, sir?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.”²⁵

Some refer to this as the “Saul’s Conversion.” But was it?

One definition of the word “conversion” is “an experience associated with the definite and decisive adoption of a religion.”²⁶ To take this definition and apply it to Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus would be a mistake. Paul probably did not think of Judaism as a religion, as we do today. It was a way of life. “In Paul’s day, ‘religion’ consisted of God-related activities that, along with politics and community life, held a culture together and bound the members of

²² Wright, *Paul*, 36.

²³ Acts 7:58 – 8:3, emphasis added.

²⁴ Acts 9:2.

²⁵ Acts 9:3–6.

²⁶ Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

that culture to its divinities and to one another.”²⁷ Did Paul convert to a different religion? We will see from his writings that he saw the event as the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures.

Three times in Acts, Paul relates what happened to him on the road to Damascus.²⁸ While scholars look at the differences in these texts and try to find fault with the differences, all have three important points in common – (1) a light came from the sky, (2) a voice said “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me, and (3) when asked who was speaking, the voice replied, “I am Jesus.” The basics for his theology can be traced to this event. Since the light came from the sky, the world to come has broken through. Since the voice came from the light in the sky, Jesus Christ is Lord. Lastly, since Paul was not persecuting Jesus, he was persecuting Jesus’s followers. Therefore, all His followers were part of the body of Christ.

What Happened Next?

After the events on the Damascus road, Paul lost his sight and then regained his sight and was baptized. Here is where we come to what some see as a conflict between two texts in scripture. In Acts, Saul preaches in Damascus. Then, “after a long time had passed,” he went to Jerusalem.²⁹ However, in Galatians, one reads:

But when [God], who from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; rather, I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus.³⁰

Some contend that a conflict exists between Acts and Galatians. Others see this as Luke providing an abbreviated summary because he could not possibly fit everything that happened in the early Church in Acts. Accepting the words directly from Paul in Galatians, what did Paul do during those three years? Many suggest that he simply began his ministry to the Gentiles in Arabia. Others believe that he spent the three years praying, meditating and studying scripture to make sense of the events on the road to Damascus. There are also differences of opinion concerning what Paul meant by Arabia. However, Paul says something very interesting later in Galatians:

²⁷ Wright, *Paul*, 36.

²⁸ Acts 9:3-30; 22:6-21; 26:12-18.

²⁹ Acts 9:19-26.

³⁰ Gal 1:15-17.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the freeborn woman. The son of the slave woman was born naturally, the son of the freeborn through a promise. Now this is an allegory. These women represent two covenants. One was from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; this is Hagar. Hagar represents **Sinai, a mountain in Arabia**; it corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery along with her children.³¹

The point that Paul is making is not germane to this discussion, but the fact is that he says Mount Sinai is in Arabia. Two people met intimately with God on Mount Sinai, Moses and the zealous Elijah. Returning to the events related to Elijah defeating the prophets of Baal, directly after defeating the prophets, Elijah receives a message from Queen Jezebel that his life is in danger because he had the prophets of Baal killed. Elijah panics and runs off to “the mountain of God, Horeb.”³² Mt. Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai. There, he tells God, “I have been **most zealous** for the LORD, the God of hosts, but the Israelites have forsaken your covenant.”³³ God tells Elijah to return and take certain actions. The actions themselves are not important to this discussion, but in those instructions, God tells Elijah to return by way of Damascus. “Sinai was where Elijah had gone when it all went terribly wrong. Sinai was where Saul of Tarsus went – for the same reason.”³⁴ Paul went to Mt. Sinai to present himself to God and make the same statement that Elijah made. Paul had been zealous, and things were not going the way he thought they would go. Like Elijah, Paul was given instructions and was told to return by way of Damascus! After Damascus, Paul makes a quick visit to Jerusalem to consult with Peter (Cephas)³⁵ before being escorted to Caesarea and sent home to Tarsus.³⁶

³¹ Gal 4:22-25, emphasis added.

³² 1 Kgs 19:8.

³³ 1 Kgs 19:14, emphasis added.

³⁴ Wright, *Paul*, 63.

³⁵ Gal 1:18.

³⁶ Acts 9:30.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 2

The First Journey and the Council of Jerusalem

Day 1 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Think about this. We have reason to believe that there are letters of Paul that did not survive. In the fourth century, the canon of the Bible was agreed upon and closed. What would happen if another cave was discovered and it contained letters from Paul that we were not included in the current Bible?

Day 2 – Read Acts 13:1-14

Saul would have been a Jewish name. Paul would have been a Roman name. Why do you think Saul changed his name to Paul?

Day 3 – Read Acts 13:15-52, Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 49:6

It seems that Paul always starts in the synagogue when he arrives in a city. Why do you think he does that?

From the speech that Paul gives in Pisidian Antioch (verses 16-46), summarize in a few sentences his message.

Day 4 – Read Acts 14:1-28, Acts 10:10-15, Galatians 2:11-14, and the handout on Galatians (attached after the questions). Scan Galatians.

Who do you think was the leader of the missionary journey and why?

What is going on with Peter? Have you ever done something to avoid conflict, at the expense of your beliefs?

Write down one or two things that jumped out to you about Galatians.

Day 5 – Read Acts 15:1-22

Peter speaks first after a great deal of debate. What does this tell us about Peter?

Given James's position in Acts 15 and given what you read in Galatians 2:11-14, do you think James sent the men to Antioch?

Day 6 – Read Acts 15:23-41

Why do you think that Barnabas takes the position he does with Paul over the inclusion of John Mark? (Hint: Read Colossians 4:10).

Neither the letter described in Acts 15:23-29 nor the provisions, are mentioned in any other New Testament document. What could that mean?

THE LETTER OF SAINT PAUL TO THE GALATIANS

Purpose Paul wrote this letter to defend his gospel against opponents and to dissuade the Galatians from receiving circumcision. Apparently rival missionaries, known as Judaizers, infiltrated the ranks of the Galatian churches during Paul’s absence and stirred up trouble among his Gentile converts. Internal evidence within the letter suggests they preached a false gospel (1:6–7) that pressured Gentile Christians to embrace circumcision and the ceremonial laws of the Old Covenant as indispensable requirements for salvation (5:2–12; 6:12–13). Although they professed to be Christians, they felt that Paul’s gospel of “faith working through love” (5:6) was incomplete without the ritual observances of the Mosaic Law. The success that these Judaizers enjoyed in Galatia forced Paul to respond with a vigorous defense of the gospel (1:11–2:10) and a sophisticated explanation of how the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ dispenses with the ceremonies of the Old (chaps. 3–4). In his view, to add circumcision and other Mosaic requirements to the gospel is to exchange freedom in Christ for spiritual slavery (2:4; 5:1). Stern warnings thus punctuate this letter as Paul appeals to the Galatians to distance themselves from the Judaizers and to disregard their propaganda.

Themes and Characteristics Galatians is clearly the most polemical of Paul’s letters. Although it shares much in common with the more formal Letter to the Romans, the apologetic tone of this letter is heated and, at times, even combative. There can be no question that Paul perceived the Galatian crisis as a great spiritual threat to everyone involved. As he saw it, the issues at stake touched the very heart of Christian identity and demanded a forceful defense of the gospel.

What was the essence of this controversy, and why was it so important for Paul to resolve it quickly and decisively? For the most part, Galatians is Paul’s attempt to define the essence of the New Covenant in Christ over against the Old Covenant that gave birth to it. This is why circumcision is the towering issue of the letter, with the Judaizers promoting it, Paul attacking it, and the Galatians caught in the crossfire. Before the coming of Christ, the rite of circumcision was the doorway into God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:9–14) and the sacrament of initiation into the family of Israel (Lev 12:3). The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, however, marks a turning point in covenant history where circumcision is now set aside, along with the entire body of liturgical and ceremonial legislation promulgated by Moses. Through his Cross, Christ has redeemed us from the curses of the Old Covenant (Gal 3:13) and unleashed the divine blessings of the New Covenant in a powerful way, inaugurating a “new creation” (6:15) and a renewed “Israel” (6:16). As Paul shows from the Scriptures, the New Covenant ratified by Christ *fulfills* the Abrahamic covenant of blessing for all nations even as it *terminates* the Mosaic covenant that was confined to the one nation of Israel in the centuries between Abraham and Christ. Now, whoever embraces Christ in faith (3:7) and receives Baptism (3:27) becomes a spiritual descendant of Abraham and an adopted child of God (4:1–7).

Paul's effort in this letter to define the terms of the gospel has made Galatians one of his most important writings. Although storms of controversy have continued to gather around this epistle throughout the centuries, we would be greatly impoverished without it. Galatians still stands as a thunderous defense of the good news, reaffirming for all time that salvation comes only by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.³⁷

³⁷ *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 329–330.