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THE LIFE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE

Paul, The Persistent Persecutor

Little is known of Paul's birth and early years in life. For example, "we do not know the date of his birth. As he was a 'young man' at the time of the death of Stephen, but old enough to have an official position, he must have been between thirty and forty years old. Hence, it is held that he could not have been born earlier than AD 7."¹ Other writers say that he was born early in the first century, but when Paul was born is not so important. We do know that Paul was born a Jew (see Acts 22:3) and was circumcised the eighth day (see Philippians 3:5) as the Law commanded. His parents traced their tribal ancestry to Benjamin (see Philippians 3:5), and perhaps this was the reason for naming their son after the well-known Benjaminite king—Saul, the first king of Israel. And, "they had maintained their Palestinian Aramaic speech in the Greek-speaking environment of Tarsus, and brought up their son to be proudly conscious of his heritage as a 'Hebrew son of Hebrew parents.'"² Paul also had another heritage—that of free Roman citizenship (see Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-29). How this was obtained we are not sure, but "his father

¹B. W. Johnson, *The People's New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Delight, Arkansas: Gospel Light Publishing Company, n.d.), 7.

²F. F. Bruce, *The Letters of Paul*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 15.

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probably rendered some service to the Roman government for which he was given the right of free Roman citizenship which, under Roman law, descended to his son.”³

Paul was born in the city of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia (see Acts 22:3). Tarsus was the principal city of the region of Cilicia and a great marketplace of the first century. Tarsus as well was “a cultural center which in certain aspects, surpassed Athens and Alexandria.”⁴ These three cities were centers of Stoic philosophy, and although Tarsus surpassed both, “it was not to any of the schools of Tarsus that Paul’s parents sent him to be educated.”⁵ Paul was sent “to the rabbinic academy of Gamaliel in Jerusalem.”⁶ In the past, scholars have assumed that Paul acquired a knowledge of the Greek language, Greek philosophy, and religious cults during his youth in Tarsus. But Paul’s statements about his upbringing and early education in Jerusalem (see Acts 22:3; 26:4) seem to put him in Jerusalem as a small child.⁷ Despite these conjectures, the facts remain the same. Paul “had a thorough knowledge of the Greek language (see Acts 21:37), quoted the Greek poets with the familiarity and correctness of a cultured Greek (see Acts 17:28), showed an intimate acquaintance with Greek philosophy (see 1 Corinthians 15), and

³William C. Martin, “Paul,” *Layman’s Bible Encyclopedia* (Nashville, Tennessee: Southwestern Company, 1964), 587.

⁴Giuseppe Ricciotti, *Paul, the Apostle*, trans. Alba I. Zizzamia (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Bruce Publishing Company, 1953), 2.

⁵Bruce, *Letters of Paul*, 15.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷See E. Earle Ellis, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), 11.

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entered the school of the renowned Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel, and was ‘brought up at his feet.’”⁸ As was customary of Jewish students of the Law, they were taught a trade. Paul was no exception, and his work was that of tentmaking (see Acts 18:3).

Paul first appears on history’s pages not as Paul but as Saul the persecutor. “We can imagine him as a young man full of zeal for the Jewish faith, with nothing but contempt for the religious movement which had sprung up around Jesus and his teachings.”⁹ Saul thought within himself that he ought to do many things to stop the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. He acted on these beliefs and, with the authorization of the chief priests in Jerusalem, had Christians put in prison. Some were even put to death, and Saul testified against them. When followers of Jesus were found in the synagogues, Saul challenged them and charged them with blasphemy. He was so angry with these Christians, he went as far as pursuing them to foreign towns and cities (Acts 26:9-11, paraphrased). The first of these incidents involved the shedding of the blood of the first Christian martyr—Stephen (see Acts 7). Saul stood by and kept the garments of those who stoned Stephen, so by doing this he consented to and helped bring about Stephen’s death (see Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20). Because Saul was mentioned in this incident that followed Stephen’s trial by the Sanhedrin, many believe that Saul was a member of the Jewish supreme council. This cannot be known for sure, but it is certain that Saul was present at the trial (see Acts 22:20; 26:10).

⁸Johnson, *People’s New Testament*, Vol. 2, 7.

⁹Martin, “Paul,” *Layman’s Bible Encyclopedia*, 587.

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As the persecution against Christians increased, Saul “was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison” (Acts 8:3, NLT). “It was Saul’s plan to exterminate Christianity.”¹⁰ And “this was no artificial or superficial excitement. It was rather a profound conviction that he was accomplishing a most noble and holy work.”¹¹ Paul testified to this passion that he had against believers in Jesus. He later told the Christians of Asia Minor, “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:13-14, RSV). Paul considered himself to be blameless according to the Law (see Philippians 3:6). He thought that “every Christian out of the way was one obstacle less for the triumph of the Law, which embodied all justice. Certainly, many individuals have held convictions of this kind in every religion, but rarely with the unshakable firmness of Paul.”¹²

Paul, The Prayerful Penitent

Because the Jerusalem persecution had scattered the church to other regions, Saul felt it necessary to extend his “threatenings and slaughter” outside of Palestine. Saul “went unto the

¹⁰J. W. Shepard, *The Life and Letters of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 61.

¹¹Ricciotti, *Paul, the Apostle*, 205.

¹²Ibid.

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high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way [that is, the way of Christ], whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2, KJV). “As Damascus was the nearest foreign city of great importance, it was at once selected as the first point for the pursuit of the scattered disciples.”¹³ Saul, with the necessary letters (see Acts 22:5; 26:12), set out for Damascus.

On the road to Damascus, the resurrected Jesus confronted Saul. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul answered, “Who are you, Lord?” Jesus answered, “I am Jesus whom you persecute.” Saul then asked, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” And Jesus told the persecutor to go into Damascus and wait there for further instructions (Acts 9:4-6; 22:7-10, paraphrased). Saul obeyed the heavenly vision (see Acts 26:19), and he went into Damascus where he waited without sight and without food for three days (see Acts 9:9). After this period of waiting, God sent Ananias, a Jewish disciple of Jesus in Damascus, to God’s “chosen vessel” to the Gentiles (see Acts 9:10-16). Ananias restored Saul’s sight (see Acts 9:17-18; 22:13) and instructed Saul to be baptized (see Acts 9:18; 22:16).

As McGarvey notes, the change in Saul from persecutor to prayerful penitent was remarkable and contrasts immeasurable with the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch:

It is impossible for a man to be in a frame of mind less favorable to conversion to Christ, than was Saul when he started on this mad expedition. How striking the contrast between him, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of Christ, as he started for a foreign city to arrest and imprison them, and the eunuch, reading thoughtfully the prophet Isaiah as he started on a peaceful journey to his distant home.

¹³J. W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of Apostles*, Vol. 2 (Delight, Arkansas: Gospel Light Publishing Company, n.d.), 169.

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Yet the gospel of Christ shows its wonderful power of adaptation by turning both into the way of salvation.¹⁴

Saul received mercy because he ignorantly and unbelievably persecuted the church (see 1 Timothy 1:13). Overshadowing this was God’s purpose for Saul to make him a minister and a witness both of the things that Saul had seen and of the things that God would reveal to him. Saul was chosen to preach to the Gentiles—to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, to deliver them from the power of Satan, and to bring them to God to receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who had been sanctified by faith in Jesus (Acts 26:16-18, paraphrased).

Paul, The Powerful Preacher

From the very start of his new life in Christ, Paul’s “innate impetuosity thrust him immediately into action as a Christian.”¹⁵ “He plunged into a course of action completely contrary to that which he had been pursuing up to that moment, and became the most zealous champion of the cause which he had hitherto endeavoured to extirpate.”¹⁶ “Immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ And all who heard him were amazed, and said, ‘Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests.’ But Saul increased all

¹⁴Ibid., 169-170.

¹⁵Ricciotti, *Paul, the Apostle*, 226.

¹⁶Bruce, *Letters of Paul*, 16.

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the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 9:20-22, RSV).

After spending a short time in Damascus, Saul left this work to go to Arabia (see Galatians 1:17). We do not know why he went to Arabia or exactly where, but this journey was “perhaps to prepare his mind for the great task which lay before him.”¹⁷ Returning to Damascus, Saul remained there three years (see Galatians 1:18) before the Jews plotted to kill him (see Acts 9:23). The disciples anticipated this and helped Saul escape (see Acts 9:24-25). After this, Saul “went up to Jerusalem” (Galatians 1:18, KJV). “It was not until then that Saul had met any of the apostles and compared his revelation of Jesus Christ with [theirs].”¹⁸ But the disciples in Jerusalem were afraid of Saul. Had it not been for Barnabas, a follower of Jesus from Antioch of Syria, they would not have accepted him (see Acts 9:26-29). Once he was accepted, though, Saul remained in Jerusalem with Peter for fifteen days (see Galatians 1:18). During this period of his life, Saul disputed against some Grecians who stirred up opposition to Saul and tried to kill him. This incident caused the brothers in Jerusalem to send Saul to Tarsus, his hometown (see Acts 9:29-30).

From the time of Saul’s departure from Jerusalem until the time that Barnabas went to Tarsus to find him (see Acts 11:26), nothing is known of Saul’s life. When Barnabas later found Saul, he took him to Antioch where both he and Saul worked with the church there for a full year

¹⁷Martin, “Paul,” *Layman’s Bible Encyclopedia*, 587.

¹⁸John William Russell, ed., *Teachers’ New Testament* (Austin, Texas: Firm Foundation Publishing Company, n.d.), 463.

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(see Acts 11:26). During their stay in Antioch, a great famine spread across the Mediterranean world and made life difficult for many of the disciples. The church in Antioch sent relief by means of gifts to needy Christians in Judea, and Barnabas and Saul carried this relief up to Jerusalem (see Acts 11:28-30).

When they returned from Jerusalem, “Paul and Barnabas, commissioned by the church in Antioch, embarked upon an evangelistic tour.”¹⁹ Accompanying Paul and Barnabas on this tour was John Mark, a disciple whom Paul and Barnabas had brought back from Jerusalem (see Acts 12:25; 13:5). This missionary endeavor started on the island of Cyprus and then went to Perga in Pamphylia where John Mark, for some unknown reason, returned to Jerusalem (see Acts 13:4, 13). Antioch of Pisidia was their next stop. Here they reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue every sabbath, but the Gentile-hating Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas and expelled them from their city (see Acts 13:14-50). In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas were threatened to be stoned, and Paul actually was stoned in Lystra and was thought to be dead (see Acts 14:1-19). Then they continued eastward to Derbe and preached the gospel in that city (see Acts 14:21). Afterwards, they revisited these towns “confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith” (Acts 14:22, KJV). When they got back to Antioch at the close of this missionary tour, they “gathered the church together and rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27, KJV).

¹⁹Ellis, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 12.

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Very soon after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, “conflict with the Judaizers was precipitated,” and this led to an important conference with the apostles in Jerusalem.²⁰ “In this council, God led the apostles to give unanimous and formal expression to the judgment that circumcision was not necessary for Gentiles; and they sent a tolerant letter to that effect to Antioch.”²¹ After this success, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch where they “continued teaching and preaching the word of the Lord” (Acts 15:35, KJV).

After some time back in Antioch, “Paul said unto Barnabas, ‘Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do’” (Acts 15:36, KJV). “Because of differences with Barnabas (over taking John Mark along), Paul took a new companion, Silas, on this second missionary tour.”²² From Antioch, Paul and Silas “went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches” (Acts 15:41, KJV). At Lystra, Paul found Timothy, a young disciple, and took him along (see Acts 16:1). “Timothy ever afterward was Paul’s unfailing companion.”²³ Then Paul steered the missionary team toward Ephesus in the province of Asia, “but God stopped him. Then he started northward into Bithynia, and again

²⁰Shepard, *Life and Letters of St. Paul*, 128.

²¹Henry H. Halley, *Halley’s Bible Handbook*, 24th ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), 547.

²²Ellis, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 13.

²³Halley, *Halley’s Bible Handbook*, 574.

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God stopped him. Then he turned northwest and came to Troas.”²⁴ Here Paul received a vision from a man in Macedonia who said, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us” (see Acts 16:6-9).

In the Roman province of Macedonia, “missions were established in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.”²⁵ Lydia and her household became a small nucleus for the first European church at Philippi (see Acts 16:15). In the same city, Paul and Silas were put in prison, but by God’s help they were released and as a result converted the keeper of the jail (see Acts 16:19-40). In Thessalonica, “some of the Jews who listened were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas” (Acts 17:4, NLT), but the Bereans “were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth” (Acts 17:11, NLT).

In Achaia or southern Greece, Paul visited Athens and Corinth. The Athenians considered Paul “a babblers” (Acts 17:18, KJV), and this limited his effectiveness there. In Corinth, “Paul remained almost two years, founding a Christian fellowship that was to be the source of both joy and trial in the future.”²⁶ When he left Corinth, he departed with Aquila and Priscilla, who were also Jewish tentmakers and converts to Christianity. Paul headed for Syria by way of Ephesus, where he stayed a short time, and finally got back to Antioch after making stops in Caesarea Maritima and Jerusalem (see Acts 18:18-22). This concluded Paul’s second

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ellis, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 13.

²⁶Ibid.

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missionary tour. “This journey was not only the greatest Paul achieved but, perhaps, the most momentous recorded in the annals of the human race.”²⁷ It was great not only for first century Christians but also for believers of subsequent centuries, because Paul’s work on this journey resulted in eight letters that later were canonized in the New Testament—Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 and 2 Timothy.

Concerning Paul’s next or third missionary journey, “Luke’s account . . . begins in the most laconic fashion. It seems that the author’s tendency is to skim over events which occur in regions he has already mentioned and hurry on to new fields.”²⁸ Very little is said by Luke of Paul’s encouraging the disciples in Galatia and Phrygia (see Acts 18:23), but a much fuller account is given of Paul’s work at his next stop—Ephesus. “Ephesus, the greatest city of Asia Minor, was the preeminent strategic center of that territory.”²⁹ This was why Paul anxiously wanted to go there at the beginning of his second tour, but it was not until his third tour that his dreams for an extended ministry at Ephesus were realized. From Ephesus the gospel reached the masses in the province of Asia, and because of Paul’s efforts “the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect” (Acts 19:20, NLT). After three years in Ephesus (see Acts 20:31), Paul visited churches in Macedonia and Greece. After three months in Greece, he

²⁷Shepard, *Life and Letters of St. Paul*, 129.

²⁸Ricciotti, *Paul, the Apostle*, 343.

²⁹Shepard, *Life and Letters of St. Paul*, 193.

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decided to begin his journey back to Palestine from Macedonia because of a plot against his life by some of the Jews.

He sailed from Philippi to Troas where he delayed his journey for seven days to be able to “break bread” with the disciples there before continuing on his way (see Acts 20:1-7). After this, he revisited Miletus and Ephesus before setting sail for Palestine and for Jerusalem which he hoped to reach by Pentecost (see Acts 20:16). One important goal Paul had to get back to Jerusalem by Pentecost was “to deliver the offering of money which he had gathered from Gentile Christians in Greece and Asia Minor for the poor saints in Jerusalem (see Acts 24:17; Romans 15:25, 26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:10; 9:1-15). Another purpose . . . was to keep a vow (see Acts 21:24). A vow had brought Paul to Jerusalem at the close of his second journey (see Acts 18:18), and even though Paul taught Gentiles that they could be Christians without keeping the Law of Moses, he himself, as a Jew, zealously observed all Jewish Laws.”³⁰ At various stops along the way—Ephesus, Cyprus, and Caesarea—Paul was warned not to go to Jerusalem (see Acts 20:23; 21:4; 21:10, 11), but he was determined to get to Jerusalem and was “ready not to be bound only, but to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13, KJV).

³⁰Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 577-578.

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Paul, The Patient Prisoner

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the disciples gladly welcomed him (see Acts 21:17), but some Jews who were visiting the city from the province of Asia did not. They thought that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple court, the area prohibited to non-Jews, and they devised a plot to kill Paul. Fortunately for Paul, the tribune or chief captain of the Roman soldiers in the city rescued him and allowed him to speak to the people (see Acts 21:27-40). The people listened to Paul until he stated his commission to preach good news to the Gentiles. After this, they “cried out, and cast off their clothes, and threw dust into the air” (Acts 22:23, KJV). To coax Paul to confess his “wrong,” the chief captain decided to have Paul scourged, but Paul relied on his Roman citizenship to avoid this punishment (see Acts 22:24-29). Still curious about Paul’s crime against the Jewish people, the chief captain called for the Sanhedrin to convene, and he brought Paul before them. “And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, ‘Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day’” (Acts 23:1, KJV). Paul had acted all his life on what he believed to be right. He had silenced believers in Jesus, because he thought it was right to do so. Now he preached and promoted what he had tried to stop. He believed it was right, and he gladly accepted scrutiny and judgment for it.

Paul’s appearance before the Sanhedrin, though, only worsened matters, because more than forty Jews conspired to neither eat nor drink until they killed Paul (see Acts 23:12-13). To protect Paul, he was taken to Caesarea Maritima under guard of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen (see Acts 23:23). At the coastal port town, Paul “appeared before the governors,

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Felix and Festus, and King Agrippa.”³¹ The Jews desperately tried to get Paul back to Jerusalem where they had planned to kill him, but Paul appealed to Caesar and said, “I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews have I done no wrong. For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die; but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them. I appeal unto Caesar” (Acts 25:10-11, KJV).

After approximately two years in custody at Caesarea, Paul was put on a ship that “set sail for Italy” (Acts 27:1, NLT). During this voyage across the Mediterranean, Paul was shipwrecked, but God’s promise was good and Paul got to the Eternal City (see Acts 27:39-44; 23:11; 27:24). In Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with a soldier who guarded him (see Acts 28:16). From this private dwelling, he called together all the leading Jews in the city, told them his background, and offered them the gospel (see Acts 28:16-29). “Some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not” (Acts 28:24, KJV), but as for Paul, he “lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31, ESV).

Luke’s account of the apostle Paul ends with the close of the book of Acts. After this, we cannot be sure what happened to Paul. Some believe that Paul was released from prison, toured the churches, and went on to Spain as he had planned (see Romans 15:28). He then returned to

³¹Martin, “Paul,” *Layman’s Bible Encyclopedia*, 588.

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Asia Minor and Greece, eventually was arrested, was taken back to Rome, and then beheaded during Nero's reign about AD 67.³² One thing we do know for sure: the apostle Paul was ready to meet his Maker. He wrote to Timothy:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing (2 Timothy 4:6-8, ESV).

³²See Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, 582.

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