

THE WORDS OF THE GOSPEL

The Conversion and Calling of Paul

Lesson 1 | Acts 9:1-31; 22:1-16; 26:9-20

Outline:

- I. Paul's Home (born very near the time of Jesus' birth)
 - A. He Was a Jew, Born in the Important Capital City of Tarsus in Cilicia ("no insignificant city," Acts 21:39)
 - B. He Was a Freeborn Roman Citizen (Acts 22:28)
 - C. His Father Was a Pharisee of the Tribe of Benjamin (Acts 23:6; Philippians 3:5)
 - D. He Was Taught the Law by His Father (Acts 23:6, cf. Deuteronomy 6:7).
- II. Paul's Education/Training
 - A. He Was Taught the Law by His Father (Acts 23:6, cf. Deuteronomy 6:7).
 - B. He Was an Exemplary Student of the Law in the Rabbinic School of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; Galatians 1:14) – probably ages 13-18.
 - C. He Studied Greek and Jewish Literature (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12).
 - D. He Learned a Trade (tent making; Acts 16:3).
 - E. He Was a Hebrew of the Hebrews (Philippians 3:5).
- III. Paul's Career
 - A. He Was Likely Either a Member of the Sanhedrin or at Least a Trusted Aid (Acts 7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1-2; cf. 26:9-12).
 - B. He Was Highly Involved in the Persecution of Christians and Seems to Have Been Based in Jerusalem (8:1; 9:1).
- IV. Paul's Conversion (approximately 35 years old)
 - A. Came in the Heat of His Persecuting Activities
 - B. Came after a period of resistance to conviction
 - C. Was Coupled With a Commission and Message

Introduction: In this lesson we will survey the conversion and apostleship of the apostle Paul. Our purpose in doing so will be to better acquaint ourselves with him as we begin a series on the study of the doctrine of salvation as taught by Paul. For the most part, the core of our study will come from Paul's letter to the Romans (3:21-5:11).

Peter is the person about whom we have the most biographical information in the Gospels (next to Christ), and Paul is the person about whom we have the most biographical information in the rest of the New Testament. In fact, the quantity of information concerning Paul exceeds that of even Peter. A further blessing is the large amount of material we have regarding Paul's conversion. The testimony of his conversion is recorded three different times in Acts (9:1-31; 22:1-16; 26:9-20). In addition, throughout his epistles, Paul makes several references to his pre-conversion life (Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 1:13; Romans 7:7-11; 1 Corinthians 15:19) and to his conversion (Philippians 3:5-8). The salient facts of Paul's life prior to his conversion can be summarized under the following headings:

I. Paul's Home (born very near the time of Jesus' birth)

- A. He Was a Jew, Born in the Important Capital City of Tarsus in Cilicia ("no insignificant city," Acts 21:39)

Being built at the mouth of the Cyndus River, it [Tarsus] commanded a place of considerable importance commercially because of its location on one of the most important overland trade routes of the ancient world—a meeting place for East and West with commerce going in both directions, land and sea . . . He [Paul] had witnessed the slave markets of Tarsus and watched the ownership marks seared on foreheads and hands of slaves being sold there (Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible*, 207).

- B. He Was a Freeborn Roman Citizen (Acts 22:28)

This meant that Paul's father had been a Roman citizen. Citizenship had originally been the privilege of freeborn natives of Rome. Gradually, however, the privilege came to be extended to others. Some obtained it as a political favor, and others, like Claudius Lysias to whom Paul was speaking, were able to purchase it.

- C. His Father Was a Pharisee of the Tribe of Benjamin (Acts 23:6; Philippians 3:5)

Part of the genius of Pharisaism was its passion for preserving Jewish culture and religion. It intentionally countered Greek and Roman paganism. Pharisees were Jewish "laymen" who were intensely interested in perpetuating their faith.

II. Paul's Education/Training

- A. He Was Taught the Law by His Father (Acts 23:6, cf. Deuteronomy 6:7).

This was considered a vital part of any Jewish father's role. No doubt Paul's Pharisee father took this seriously.

- B. He Was an Exemplary Student of the Law in the Rabbinic School of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; Galatians 1:14) – probably ages 13-18.

Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel, a revered rabbi whose teaching elevated him to leadership. Gamaliel himself rose to great authority among the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34-39). The Hillel/Gamaliel School differed slightly from the stricter, less influential Shammai School. The Shammai School tended to emphasize the letter of the law, while Hillel tried to include a balancing emphasis on the spirit of the law. Both, however, were typically Pharisaical.

As a rabbinical student, Paul's studies would have included the Old Testament and the accumulated comments about the Old Testament from intertestamental rabbis.

It consisted entirely of the study of the Scriptures and the comments of the sages and masters upon them. The words of Scripture and the sayings of the wise were committed to memory; discussions were carried on about disputed points; and by a rapid fire of questions, which the scholars were allowed to put as well to the masters, the wits of the students were sharpened and their views enlarged (James Stalker, *The Life of St. Paul*, 29).

B. He Studied Greek and Jewish Literature (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12).

Paul's awareness of the literature of the pagan world does not dictate that we, in turn, need to imbibe the world's mind in order to be better prepared to reach the world. Paul's acquaintance with the literature no doubt came partially because he was immersed in Greek culture and partially because of his intense efforts to counter the influence of Greek culture on the Jewish religion.

D. He Learned a Trade (tent making; Acts 16:3).

The Tarsians traded in leather goods and *cilicium*, a cloth made from the hair of the black goats of the region. This cloth was the basic stuff of the well-known black tents of Tarsus that were popular across the empire. Because a son usually followed his father's trade, we can safely assume that Paul's father was a tentmaker too, no doubt prospering in that business (Robert E. Picirilli, *Paul the Apostle*, 31).

E. He Was a Hebrew of the Hebrews (Philippians 3:5).

This probably is a reference to his being a Hebrew-speaking (Aramaic) Jew rather than having been Hellenized (Greek-speaking).

III. Paul's Career

A. He Was Likely Either a Member of the Sanhedrin or at Least a Trusted Aid (Acts 7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1-2; cf, 26:9-12). If he was a member of the Sanhedrin, he would have been at least 30 years of age and married.

C. He Was Highly Involved in the Persecution of Christians and Seems to Have Been Based in Jerusalem (8:1; 9:1).

IV. Paul's Conversion (approximately 35 years old)

A. Came in the Heat of His Persecuting Activities

The spirit of the inquisition was alive and well within Judaism, and Paul seems to have been among the foremost of the feared inquisitors. There are many similarities between Paul's persecuting work and the Inquisition later initiated within Romanism during the thirteenth century. In substance it is a natural extension of the philosophy of Pharisaism. As the Pharisees sought to preserve their faith, any perceived threat to

their faith, of necessity, needed to be confronted. Threats from outside of their faith were actually easier to confront than perceived threats from within. The threat of Christianity was actually greater than the threat from Paganism. Christianity was not seeking to undo the Law, but rather claimed to be the fulfillment and the perfection of the very Law esteemed so highly by the Jews.

As a result the Sanhedrin agreed to persecute Christianity but then backed off at the recommendation of Gamaliel, Paul's former teacher (Acts 5:34-39). However, the peace could not last, and persecution erupted again when Stephen's preaching proved irrefutable. It is here that we are first introduced to Paul, and in subsequent chapters we see him proceed with a persecuting frenzy (8:1-30: 9:1). In fact, Paul was so integral to the persecution effort that his conversion nearly stifled it altogether (9:31). His later testimonies help us to discover the intensity of his efforts. He forced believers into prison (8:3; 22:4; 26:10), enforced the death penalty on others (9:1; 22:4; 26:10) and, still worse, he compelled some to recant and call their Savior the enemy of their souls (26:11).

Jesus had prophesied to His disciples that people like Paul would arise and *make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God* (John 16:2).

B. Came After a Period of Resistance to Conviction

Philippians 3:5-6 and Romans 7:7-11 probably give us the best pre-conversion glimpse into the thoughts that were brewing in the heart of Paul.

Clearly Paul was going about trying to establish his own righteousness and, admittedly, he seems to have done admirably well. The opportunities to persecute the church were in fact part of his effort to do so. Surely this supreme act of service to God would earn his restless conscience some peace!

But God was to use His Word to keep Paul's heart from finding peace from his own efforts. Paul was to realize that the holy, just, and good law that he was trying to keep would make him increasingly aware of his own sinfulness (Romans 7:7-11). The sin of coveting seems to have been his besetting sin. Whether he was resisting the conviction of the Spirit about the sin of coveting, or whether his acts of persecution were themselves his efforts to *suppress the truth in unrighteousness*, we know that Paul was willfully kicking against the goads with which the Lord was prodding him.

In addition to his strivings for righteousness, Paul had difficulty reconciling the teachings of Judaism with the ministry of Jesus Christ. Paul, like many other Jews of his day and today, could not quite embrace a Messiah who was accursed. The Messiah could never be one who hung accursed by God on a tree (Deuteronomy 21:23). He may have been able to accept a Divine Messiah, but not a human one; and if he could accept a human one, he could not accept One who had endured the scandal of the cross. In many ways,

Paul's inability to embrace the paradox of Christ's Person and work seems to mirror the very struggle we saw in Peter, and could well be reflected in the question he asked of Christ on the road to Damascus, "Who are You, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). Note: Peter and the other disciples were probably "hung up" on the same passage.

C. Was Coupled With a Commission and Message

Probably close to fifteen years passed before Paul's stature among the church began to reach its zenith. Following his conversion he would spend three years in Arabia (Acts 9:20-25; Galatians 1:16-17), take a trip to Jerusalem to see Peter and James (Acts 9:26-29; Galatians 1:18-20), then have approximately 11-12 years of quiet ministry in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 9:30; 11:25; Galatians 1:21-24) before taking his first missionary journey.

The fact that God chose to use Paul in the articulation and revelation of the significance of the Gospel to a measure greater than any of the other apostles would be startling to someone who had read the Gospels and yet never read the book of Acts. Paul would be completely unknown to the reader. The book of Acts, recording the conversion and ministry of Paul, prepares us to accept his thirteen epistles as authoritative.

Luke introduces us to Paul for the very purpose of describing his conversion and ministry. That history, in turn, was no doubt intended by the Holy Spirit to provide grounds for the inclusion of his epistles as the interpretation of the gospel that dominates our New Testament (Picirilli, 39).

Though the lengthy book of Acts contributes to a greater understanding of the apostles' ministry in the early church, its primary purpose spirals much higher. Its primary purpose is to reveal how the now exalted Christ continued the work He began in the Gospels (Acts 1:1, *all that Jesus **begun** to do and teach*) to form His church and make the truth of the Gospel known.

The disciples were involved in a new relation to their now unseen Lord, yet they were able to proceed with confidence in their work of laying the foundation of the church. Their confidence was that their Lord knew the hearts of all men, that He would lead them, even to the point of being able to know His mind about a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:24). Paul himself would enjoy this same relationship and the same specific guidance from heaven (Acts 22:17-18, 21; 16:7, 10; 18:9-10; 23:11; 27:24 [Note: These references are in chronological order, though out of sequence]).

Thus does He, who at the commencement of the history was seen to pass into the heavens, continue to appear in person on the scene. His Apostles act, not only on His past commission, but under His present direction. He is not wholly concealed by the cloud, which had received Him out of their sight. Now His voice is heard; now His hand put forth; and now through a sudden rift the brightness of His presence shines. And these appearances, voices, and visions are not merely incidental favors;

they are, as we have seen apportioned to the moments when they are *wanted*, moments which determine the course which the Gospel takes, and in which a manifestation of the divine guidance proves the divine guidance of the whole. The ship rushes on its way, shunning the breakers, dashing through the billows, certain of its track. The crew work it, but do not guide it. We can see the strong movements of the helm, and from time to time discern a firm hand which holds it. No chances, no winds or currents, bear it along at their will, but He who has launched it guides it, and he knows the course which it takes (Thomas Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine*, 107, original emphasis).

Acts, then, is not so much a record of the formation of the *content* of the Gospel as it is a record of Jesus' advancing of the Gospel to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles through His disciples. In the Gospels Jesus' works substantiated what He taught. Likewise, in Acts His works through His disciples substantiate that He continued to teach through them. In other words, if we believe God was working through these men to advance His kingdom in Acts, then when we read their writings later in the Epistles, we must accept that too as from God. The advancement of the Gospel (Acts) and the articulation of the Gospel (Epistles) must be accepted or rejected together.

As the advancement of the Gospel is recorded in Acts, we can discern many of the historical factors that had a formative hand in crystallizing the substance of the Gospel. As the Gospel progressed geographically and from Jew to Gentile, its depth and ramifications were being understood with deeper perception and definiteness.

Questions arose which compelled decision; new states of mind in receivers of truth called out, not new principles of truth, but new applications of it: and the growth of Churches and the advance of the Christian life led to the settlement of points which could not have been raised till such a state of things had arisen. Under these circumstances, a divine guidance of events was only a means for the divine guidance of doctrine. If the Lord Himself sensibly interfered, to send Peter to Caesarea, and to call Paul to bear His name before Gentiles and kings, then not only those steps, but the doctrinal results of them, are visibly included in the purpose of God and marked with the seal of heaven (Bernard, 109).

The reason we take the time with this is because we must know whether Paul's teaching is an extension of the words of Christ. Are we to grant to His writings the same authority inherent in Jesus' own words? To this question we must answer an emphatic "yes." We do so for two reasons.

First, Paul clearly claims that his apostleship was from Christ.

Paul, an apostle (not sent from [apo, out of] men nor through the agency of man, but through [dia] Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead) [Galatians 1:1].

Second, Paul insists that the content of his message came directly from Christ as well.

²³**For I received from the Lord** that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” ²⁵In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (I Corinthians 11:23-25).

³For I delivered to you as of first importance **what I also received**, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

¹¹For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. ¹²For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it **through a revelation of Jesus Christ** (Galatians 1:11-12).

²You have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you; ³that **by revelation there was made known to me the mystery** (Eph. 3:2, 3).

Notice a difference between the first two passages and the second two. In the first two, Paul is depicting himself as a part of a chain of communication (*I have received, I delivered*). [In I Corinthians 11, the reference to *of the Lord* does not necessarily imply that Paul learned those facts directly from Christ Himself. They could well have been handed to Paul by other men who received them from the Lord.]

In the second set of verses, Paul asserts (seemingly contradicting himself) that the Gospel was not taught him by men, but directly by Christ. To reconcile these, we must understand that the Gospel is really a “combination of historic facts with their spiritual interpretations” (Bernard, 112). The facts of the Gospel came to Paul by those who were eyewitnesses of His passion. It is to this Paul is referring in the Corinthian passages. However, in the other two passages, Paul is referring to the spiritual interpretation and implications of those facts. Christ directly unveiled the mystery of the Gospel’s doctrinal and practical significance to Paul.

The part in the progress of doctrine committed to St. Paul was to define, settle, and to carry out to its practical consequences the principle of free justification in Christ, which (as a principle) was acknowledged and held before his voice was heard; and we learn from his own statements, that, for this special work, not only a special commission, but a special revelation was given him by the Lord Jesus, so as to clear and settle his own mind on those points on which he was sent to clear and settle the minds of others (Bernard, 114).

This corresponds precisely with the message Paul received from the Lord through Ananias immediately following his conversion, *I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but **also to the things in which I will appear to you*** (Acts 26:16).

Through Paul's ministry we have a continuation of the personal administration of the Lord Jesus in founding His Church and perfecting His word.

Conclusion: The question with which we have dealt in this lesson is foundational to the remainder of our series. As we delve into Paul's presentation of the truths of the Gospel, it is imperative that we receive his words as the very words of Christ Himself. They are His words from His chosen vessel given to recipients of His choosing as part of the greater work He was doing of building His church. Through Paul, Christ is establishing the very foundation on which the Church is erected.