

Lorena Chapman

Mr. Aubrey Cochran

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The Apostle Paul's Life

The apostle Paul was an integral figure in the story of early Christianity. Born in the city of Tarsus, located in Turkey, Paul belonged to a tent-making Israelite family of the tribe of Benjamin. Paul was a follower of Judaism and an Israelite by ancestry, but was also a Roman citizen. He spoke Aramaic and Hebrew as a child, but learned other languages like Greek and Latin as well. As a young man, Paul was taken to very good schools in Jerusalem for formal education. He was a passionate student of the Pharisees and a strict follower of the Torah. Acts 22:3 mentions that Paul was trained by Gamaliel. Gamaliel was one of the best Jewish teachers during the days of the Apostles (Acts 5:34). Paul received a very good education in Judaism and subsequently became a strong opponent of Christianity.

Acts 9 tells the story of Paul's change and conversion to Christianity. At the time, he was known by his Jewish name: Saul of Tarsus. He was a persecutor of the early Christian churches in Jerusalem, taking many men and women to prison for their Christian faith. Paul was practicing his anti-Christian work when he left Jerusalem under the authority of the high priest. He was searching for men and women belonging to “the way” so that he could bring them to Jerusalem to be punished. On his way to Damascus in Syria one day, Acts tells that Paul saw a light from heaven flash around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice speak to him saying “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Paul was very afraid and knew that he was hearing the voice of Jesus asking him who he was persecuting. Jesus told him to stand up and

commanded him to go to the city and he would be shown what to do. Paul was blinded by the vision that had appeared to him, so he had to be led by hand into Damascus. Paul continued to have no sight for three days, during which he neither ate nor drank.

There was a Christian disciple named Ananias living in Damascus at that time who was told by God to look for and meet a man named Saul in the city. Ananias was told to touch his hand and restore his vision. Ananias was afraid of doing this because he knew that Saul/Paul was an active opponent of the Christian people and held great authority to arrest and persecute under the high priest. Acts says that “the Lord said to him (Ananias) Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” - “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:15-16) Ananias then healed Paul and Paul understood that he was called to be an apostle – a servant of Jesus Christ. He started his ministry and began preaching the word of Jesus to others instead of persecuting Christians as he had before. Paul became a powerful and passionate figure in the new Christian church.

A significant part of Paul's ministry was his travels to foreign countries to preach about Jesus. The book of Acts describes these travels in detail. Acts 15 specifically describes the journey of Paul and Barnabas, another Christian, to Jerusalem to discuss the Jewish custom of circumcision. Christians who had converted from Judaism were confused about circumcision and salvation. Paul and Barnabas had a meeting with other apostles about this issue, now known as the Council of Jerusalem. They all agreed that circumcision was not a requirement for salvation.

A second of Paul's major travels was his journey to his home-town of Tarsus in Turkey with the apostle Silas. He and Silas traveled to the cities of Derbe and Lystra where they met the apostle Timothy for the first time. While traveling, Paul decided that he wanted to preach in the

western part of Asia, but in Acts 16 it says that the Holy Spirit did not let him go. Paul did not know where to go or what to do, so God gave him a vision of Macedonia (Acts 16:8-9). While in Macedonia, Paul and the apostle Silas took a demon out of a slave. The slave's owner then threw Paul and Silas into prison. Acts 16 says that an earthquake occurred and “loosened their chains” so that they could be free. Paul then went to preach about Jesus in Corinth and Ephesus.

Paul's third mission was to the Galatian churches in order to strengthen and encourage them. This is described in Acts 18. Paul then traveled to the temple in Jerusalem with a few others. He caused a riot at the temple for bringing Gentiles inside and was dragged outside of the temple, where the people tried to kill him (Acts 21:30-31). He was arrested by Roman soldiers, questioned by the Sanhedrin (Jewish council) and imprisoned.

Paul and several other prisoners traveled by boat to Rome for Paul's formal trial for his alleged crimes in Jerusalem. There was a big storm that drove the boat they were on in a different direction, leaving them traveling on the Mediterranean sea for about two weeks. (Acts 27:37-44) When Paul finally arrived in Rome, he was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him for two years while he awaited his trial. Eventually, the Roman authorities dropped all of Paul's charges and set him free. He continued his mission as a preaching apostle.

Paul's fifth and final missionary journey took him to Crete, Nicopolis, Spain and possibly Britain. He was put in prison again. It was during this imprisonment that Paul wrote the epistle to the apostle Timothy that is now the New Testament book of 2 Timothy. The Bible does not tell the exact time or manner of the apostle Paul's death. Paul spoke of his own death (2 Timothy 4:17-18) and was not afraid of it. He expressed that he was ready to go be with Jesus as he had wanted for a long time (Philippians 1:23) It is possible that Paul's death happened after his five missionary journeys ended. Paul was probably beheaded by the Romans under Emperor Nero,

sometime in 68 AD. Nero himself committed suicide in that same year.

Thirteen of the twenty-seven books that comprise the New Testament are written by Paul. These books are mainly epistles (letters) of advice and encouragement to the early Christians and apostles that later became part of the New Testament canon because of their lasting value to the Christian church. The epistles were written to the early Christian churches that had relationships with Paul. The believers received comfort, discipline and guidance from his letters, as well as his instruction on harmony and unity.

Paul's longest and most significant work was the book of Romans, which he wrote in order to re-establish order in the church, introduce himself to the believers in Rome and obtain their help and support in the defense of the truth of the Gospel he was preaching. He tried to encourage his readers to rely solely on God's grace. He wrote in response to a letter from the church. His main themes in this book were faith, grace, righteousness and justification.

The book of I Corinthians was written because the church at Corinth needed to be reprimanded. Paul emphasized their need to get rid of division within the church and instead foster unity. He urged them in this letter to follow Christ, not Paul himself, or any other fallible person. The book of II Corinthians was similarly written to the church at Corinth in order to guide them through conflict and false teachings within the church.

Paul wrote the book of Galatians to the believers in the Roman province of Galatia located in central Turkey. He wrote to denounce and correct false teachings. Paul expressed his special love for the Galatian people, as he had helped to establish the church there.

The book of Ephesians was addressed to the church in the city of Ephesus in Turkey and was written while Paul was in prison in Rome. His main purpose in this epistle was to encourage the believers in Ephesus to think of themselves as a people with a brand new identity.

The book of Philippians was written to the church at Phillipi, a city named after the father of Alexander the Great. This was the first church that Paul had established in Europe. Paul also wrote the book of Philippians when he was in prison. This letter was written to encourage the church. They continued to be altruistic despite their poverty. Paul recognized this quality and encouraged them to persevere through difficult times. He emphasized humility and unity and told the church to not fear the future.

Colossians was another epistle written while Paul was in prison. It was addressed to the group of believers in Colossae, located in southwest Turkey. He wrote to combat the growing ideology of Gnosticism and to reassure them of Christ's supremacy.

I Thessalonians was written to assure the church of Thessalonica that their believing friends who had died were not going to be left out of the final resurrection. Paul and his companions were in Corinth when he wrote the letter. He wrote to express his love for the church and to thank God for his good works. II Thessalonians was written to the same church, but focused on the problem of converts who were still practicing paganism and who refused to work.

I Timothy and II Timothy were written as encouragement to the young preacher Timothy who had a Gentile father and a Jewish mother. Paul instructed Timothy on bringing order to the church, selecting deacons and elders, the roles of men and women in the church and caring for the elderly.

Titus was written to advise the appointing of elders, the order in the church as well as the teaching of sound doctrine, submission to authorities and obedience and readiness for every good work. Philemon was also written from prison, indicating that Paul was sending a man named Onesimus who he loved back to the man Philemon. This was one of Paul's last letters before he

died.

Paul was an ambitious man who was extremely passionate about encouraging others and bringing people to believe in Jesus as the son of God. He endured many trials because of his beliefs and dealt with much persecution, including being whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, bitten by a snake and imprisoned several times. He dealt with the difficulties of being a Christian under Roman rule while helping to start new churches everywhere. His unfailing passion for his calling—evidenced by his earnest letters to fellow believers—as well as his willingness to put up with the persecution that he himself used to inflict on others speaks volumes about the level and strength of faith that he and his fellow believers had in Jesus.

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