

PAUL: THE UNLIKELY APOSTLE

BEFORE HE WAS PAUL THE APOSTLE OF CHRIST...

- Paul was born Saul. During his encounter with the risen Christ, Jesus renamed him “Paul”. His birth year is unknown. He is referred to as being from Tarsus, which was the capital of Cilicia (the southern coast of modern Turkey).
- Paul also claimed citizenship in Rome, which would be verified by the fact that he was transferred to Rome for trial before Caesar in the book of Acts.
- Paul was a descendant of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin (the same tribe as the ancient King Saul). However, he was not born in Israel but in the Diaspora. As such, Paul was raised with the influences of Greco-Roman culture as well as in the Jewish tradition with an education in the Torah.
- Paul/Saul was also a member of the Pharisee, a particularly strict sect of Judaism.
- At some point in his life, Paul also became a skilled tentmaker, a skill he would use to earn his own way while ministering as an Apostle of Christ.
- *Historical: What is the Diaspora? After the death of King Solomon, there was contention for the throne of Israel between David’s descendants and others who would be king. The contention led to the division of Israel into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. David’s descendants remained on the throne of Judah. However, neither nation remained faithful to the Lord amidst pagan influences. After sending many prophets to warn both nations, the Lord finally allowed them to be conquered and enslaved in other nations. Israel went to the Assyrians and Judah to the Babylonians. The great temple of God in Jerusalem was destroyed along with the city walls and much of the city.*
- *This exile to Babylon lasted 70 years, after which time the Lord moved the Babylonian king’s hear to allow the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem to rebuild. Some Jewish people returned to their homeland to rebuild Israel, others chose to remain wherever they had settled among the pagan/Gentile nations. Those who remained among the Gentile were known as Jews of the Disapora (diaspora meaning “dispersion” for the dispersion of the Hebrew people among the Gentile nations). The Jews of the Diaspora even had their own specific synagogue in Jerusalem.*

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON PAUL

Tarsus was located along important trade routes, a center of both commerce (such as tent linens with which Paul was skilled) and Hellenistic culture. It's citizens and visitors included rhetoricians, poets, people of various religious beliefs (Jewish and pagan) and philosophers (particularly Stoic philosophers).

As we study the travels and the letters written by Paul, we will observe how being raised in this environment influenced Paul as an Apostle, evangelist, church planter, and teacher of early Christianity. His time studying Judaism as a Pharisee made him well-familiar with Jewish law (the Law of Moses), which served him as his Christian congregations faced opposition from both Jewish sources and Jewish Christians. His socialization in a Hellenistic society served to help him argue for Christ with philosophers and people of pagan faith in manners relatable and understandable to these groups. We will see evidences of all these influences in the letters Paul wrote for his churches, to fellow missionaries, and to other believers (such as Philemon).

BEFORE HE WAS PAUL THE APOSTLE OF CHRIST...

- Paul/Saul's native language was Greek, and the influence of his Hellenistic upbringing can be observed in his writing styles (such as use of metaphors, quotes, arguments and rhetoric, symbols, etc.). For example: In 1 Corinthians 15:33, Paul cites a proverb of Euripides. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul compares his life to a Greek gym (he often used athletic metaphors in his teachings). Compare Seneca's requirements for philosophers to Paul's practices as an apostle and you will see the influence.
- His common argument style was the diatribe and peristasis catalogues, which is also common to Hellenistic culture (see Philippians 4:12 and 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 for examples). His use of rhetoric can be seen in Galatians and Philemon.
- Paul was also a Pharisee and zealous for God (see Galatians 1:14). This is the most crucial element of his background and the subtext for truly understanding his life, his teachings, and his powerful transformation from persecutor of Christians to Apostle of Christ. Paul received his Pharisaic training in Jerusalem under Gamaliel (a member of the Sanhedrin, meaning "Council", which was the Jewish court of law until 425 AD)
- *PAUL THE PHARISEE:* According to Acts 23:6, Paul was a member of the strictest sect of the Pharisees. Without delving too deep into the history of the Jewish religious sects, we will suffice that the Pharisaic Movement began with those who considered themselves warriors of Israel, prepared to die for the Law of Moses. There were three schools of these defenders of the Law: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes by the years 161-142 BCE. Pharisees initially held great influence and respect in Israel, but by 40 - 4 BCE had a decline in influence and were something of a Jewish minority. In the first century, in the time of Paul, the Pharisees still had great influence over Judaic thought and legalism.
- The Zealots branched from them in 6 CE (AD) under Judas of Gamala and the Pharisee Zadok. They were known for their strict adherences to the One True God, to rigid observance of the Sabbath, rigorous observances of the laws of purity, laws of tithing, particular forms of vows and opposed the Roman rule over the Jewish people. They were considered the most learned among the Jewish people and experts on the Law of Moses. They also had zeal for the traditions of their Jewish ancestors, traditions which were derived from Scripture, and Paul/Saul shared this zeal.
- In discussing his time as a Pharisee, Paul calls himself "blameless" according to the law because of his strict adherence to every requirement of the Law of Moses. He had a love and zeal for the Law, the Torah, and a pride in being a member of God's elected Hebrew people (the fact that he lived in the Diaspora did not nullify his place as a member of the cumulative Jewish nation).

PAUL'S THEOLOGY AS A HELLENISTIC PHARISEE...

Paul was trained in Hellenistic Judaism. Accordingly, he was monotheistic (believing in the One True God, the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob amidst a polytheistic culture that worshipped multiple Greek and Roman gods).

He held faith in the Abrahamic Covenant: The Hebrews were God's chosen people, those set apart to serve the Lord, the descendants of Abraham. He believed God's promise that a Messiah would come from the line of King David and bring salvation to God's chosen people. However, Paul was raised to believe that righteousness was a matter of works, that purity came from obedience to every aspect of the Law of Moses (legalism). Part of Law and Jewish tradition held that all members of God's people were to keep themselves separated from the Gentile nations (the pagan people). The Old Testament recounts many incidents where the influence of Gentile nations caused some of the Jewish people to turn away from God to idolatry, ultimately leading to the Exile to Babylon and Assyria. He would have believed that the salvation of the Messiah was not meant for the Gentile people.

Such deep-rooted beliefs and zeal for the Law ultimately contributed to Paul's persecution of Christian believers. Pharisees like Paul were responsible not only to observe the Law but to protect the Jewish people from being led astray from the Law by false religions, as had happened in the past. They had rejected Christ as the promised Messiah and genuinely believed that Christians were preaching a false religion. Paul recounts his persecution of the church and his life-changing encounter with Christ twice in the book of Acts (Acts 22:6-16 and 26:12-18) and again in Galatians 1.

PAUL'S THEOLOGY AS A HELLENISTIC PHARISEE...(continued)

Paul's encounter with Christ would radically change Paul's perspective, most notably on the Law, salvation, and the Gentile people (in fact, he proclaimed himself the Apostle to the Gentiles). His combined love for the Lord, His Pharisaic education, and his Hellenistic upbringing prepared him well for the missionary life he would lead in bringing the Gospel of Christ to the nations in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. It gave him access to a variety of social groups and classes, and the ability to cross social and geographical boundaries as he worked make the message of Christ real, relatable, and embraceable to people of divergent cultures and beliefs.

Unfortunately, much of his missionary work would be complicated by Jewish and Jewish Christian people who still held to the ideas of salvation by obedience to the law (legalism). Additionally, he would face suspicion and opposition from various groups within the Christian church (for example, those claiming apostleship who preached an incorrect Gospel and questioned the authority and teachings of Paul).

Paul would consider his radical change from persecutor of the Christians to Apostle of Christ to be evidence of the transformative power of Christ the Messiah and the work of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of believers.

Now that we know Paul/Saul's encounter with Christ was a pivotal moment both in his life and in biblical history, let's see what the Bible has to say about the event.

- Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"
- ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.
- ¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."
- ¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."
- ¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.
- Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. (Acts 9:1-22)

NEXT, LET'S EXAMINE HOW PAUL DESCRIBED THE EVENT AT DAMASCUS IN ACTS AND IN GALATIANS

¹¹ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. ¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

¹³ For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. ¹⁷ I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas^l (*Apostle Peter) and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.

²¹ Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. ²² I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they praised God because of me." (Galatians 1:11-24)

² When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said: ³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸ “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“ ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ “‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“ ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’

¹⁷ “When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw the Lord speaking to me. ‘Quick!’ he said. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.’

¹⁹ “‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of your martyr^[a] Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

²¹ “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ”

(Acts 22:2-21)

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.”

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ² “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴ “The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. ⁵ They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. ⁶ And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. ⁷ This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. ⁸ Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

⁹ “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

¹² “On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic,^[a] ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

¹⁵ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ¹⁶ ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

¹⁹ “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. ²⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. ²¹ That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²² But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— ²³ that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” (Acts 26:1-23)

THE TENSIONS IN BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

When we consider any book of the Bible, especially when we are examining the validity, accuracy, and consistency of the different books (especially the Pauline letters), we have to keep a few basic factors in mind: *Who is the author of the book? Who is the intended audience? What theological point was the author intending to convey?* We need to begin on one unalterable foundation: Whenever there is conflict between a message being preached and the words recorded in the Bible, **the Bible is the prime authority**. People can err in their interpretations, translations, and understandings of the Bible, but the Scriptures themselves are never in error. The Holy Spirit guided the writing of every book of the Bible so that it could be called the unerring Word of God. God has the final word about His Word.

As you can see from these examples, sometimes the same story can be recounted in different ways in the Bible, but this does not mean that one account is true and the other contains error. Consider the four different gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each tells the story of Christ, with some consistencies between each book and some differences. The Book of Matthew was written to the Jewish people to emphasize Jesus as the prophesized Messiah and Davidic King. The Book of Mark was written to the Romans (Gentiles) to emphasize Jesus as the Son of God, the envoy of the Lord (for the concept of envoys of a king vested with that king's authority and victory over an insurmountable enemy was relatable to the Roman culture), come to die for the salvation of man and victory over death. The Book of Luke was written to the Hellenists (Gentiles, polytheists, philosophers) to emphasize Jesus as the perfect Son of Man, the prophesized Messiah who came to minister to all nations of mankind through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Book of John was written to the Greco-Roman world (again, Gentiles, polytheists, philosophers) to emphasize Christ's divinity as the Son of God who existed before Creation and came as the Lamb and perfect sacrifice through whom we receive the gift of eternal life. Each author knew his intended audience, which aspects of Christ's ministry and life would be most relevant and relatable to that specific audience that their minds and hearts might be opened to receive the message of the Messiah.

THE TENSIONS IN BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS (continued)

In a similar vein, you will notice that the three different accounts of the events at Damascus have different details and differing emphases. One account (Galatians) comes directly from the mouth of Paul. The accounts in Acts 22 and 26 quote Paul but are authored by Luke but are trustworthy. In each account, the author (whether Paul or Luke) is addressing a different audience and has a different purpose in the writing. Luke wrote the book of Act to detail the events of the early church following the crucifixion of Christ so that they could be shared with future generations of Christians. In Acts 22, Paul is addressing an mob of people enraged by his message about Christ. In Acts 26, Paul is defending his message and his authority to speak the message to King Agrippa before being sent to Rome to appear before Caesar. In Galatians 1, Paul is writing to the church at Galatia to rebuke them for listening to false apostles and defend his own authority as a genuine apostle of Christ. We will examine the letter to Galatia in greater detail in a future lesson.

As we examine the individual letters, we will see that Paul's use of language, metaphors, symbolism, theology, and the overall tone of each letter was carefully crafted for the audience and the intended purpose of the letter. In some cases, Paul was sending notes of encouragement; other times he was correcting errors in a church's theology or rebuking them for following false teachers who preached erroneous messages about Christ. In those instances, Paul would remind them of his call, commission, and authority as the Apostle of Christ to the Gentiles and carefully correct such errors or un-Christian behaviors among the congregations. You will see this in the letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians. In the letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul's tone is personal, for he is writing to them as friends, fellow missionaries, disciples, and even as adoptive sons. These letters were written near the end of Paul's life and their purpose was to encourage Timothy and Titus (and the future generations of Christians) to carry on the work of spreading the Gospel message by following the example of Paul's own life. The letter to Philemon is something of a blend: Paul writes to Philemon as a brother in Christ to ask Philemon's to forgive an escaped slave and, better still, to recognize that slave as a convert and brother in Christ and grant his freedom. Paul's tone is that of a friend speaking to a friend, yet Paul includes reminders of his authority as Apostle of Christ to encourage Philemon to grant the request.

Another thing you will note as we examine the Pauline letters is that Paul's Christian theology grows and evolves as his life progresses. When Paul first started his missionary work, he believed the return of Christ was imminent. As he neared the end of his life, Paul became aware that it might be a long wait for the church before the Second Coming (the Parousia of Christ). His understanding had changed, so his theology developed and evolved according to this new information. These differences, along with the difference in tone and linguistics of each letter, often causes debate among scholars as to whether each letter was actually written by Paul. It comes back to this: The Scripture is the unerring word of God. and its teachings are true and accurate.

PAUL'S CONVERSION

FROM LAW TO GRACE

As a Pharisee, Paul had been raised to rely on the Law of Moses as the path to right relationship with God. In living by the Law, Paul was “blameless” before God. In his zeal to defend God and the Law against blasphemy, he persecuted those who proclaimed Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

After his encounter with Christ, Paul would come to understand that it is faith in Jesus as the Son of God that is the path to being right in the eyes of God. He understood that the Law had fulfilled its purpose of guiding Israel until the arrival of the Messiah. Salvation is not achieved by human works but by the grace of God through the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. Good works became a response of gratitude, not a means of salvation. Paul would come into repeated conflict with Jewish Christians who accepted Christ but still attempted to live by the Law (legalism) and to force the requirements of the Law (particularly circumcision) on the Gentile Christians, often turning them from the faith.

Paul would come to understand that there was a New Covenant between God and the believers in Christ. Salvation was now available to all people, whether Jewish or Gentile. We entered into the covenant by faith in Christ and baptism into His death and resurrection.

A CALL AND COMMISSION AS APOSTLE OF CHRIST

The term “apostle” in biblical terms means “one who is sent by God to spread the gospel of salvation”. An apostle is regarded as vested with the authority of the one who has sent them. Paul considered his encounter with the risen Christ as his commissioning to be the Apostle of Christ and his installation to the office of Apostle. With that commissioning comes the authority to preach and teach on Christ’s behalf as His representative to the Christian churches. Paul considered himself another in the line of prophets of the Lord and considered himself included among the circle of original disciples of Christ. He would at times be in contention with Apostles like Peter, and he would be called to defend the legitimacy of his apostleship. Yet, Paul never wavers from his conviction that he was called by God to service of Christ.

The Son of God

To say that Paul’s understanding of himself, his identity, his purpose, and his beliefs were changed that day would be an understatement. The entire orientation of his life underwent radical transformation. Most importantly, his understanding of Christ—whom he previously dismissed as a blasphemer who died a humiliating criminal’s death on the cross—was changed. Christ had been revealed as the Son of God, belonging in the realm of God. He was the Messiah, raised from the dead by the power of God. He was the Anointed King, the image of God, the mediator between God and man for our salvation. Paul understood himself to now be an integral part of God’s plans for the salvation of man as a messenger of the Gospel. He was not “blameless”, he was a sinner and a persecutor of Christ who had found redemption. Paul would have a new identity as “being in Christ”, which he would impart to other believers. He set to his mission with urgency, knowing that the time of the Parousia and the judgement of man was coming and there were many sinners like himself who needed to hear the word about Christ and also be redeemed. He shared this message boldly and with urgency for the rest of his life.

PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS: Paul travelled over 10,000 miles and started at least 14 churches. He also ministered to churches he did not establish (such as the churches in Rome and Judea).

- **FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY (Acts 13-15)**

- Began in Antioch, capital of the province of Syria, where Paul and Barnabas were singled out by the Holy Spirit and sent on their journey.
- First stopped in Cyprus, where John Mark joined them in preaching at the Jewish synagogues. Next, the group went to Paphos, where they confronted the sorcerer, Bar-Jesus (a.k.a. Elymas). The governor Sergius Paulus had called for Paul to hear the message, but Elymas opposed this and nearly turned the governor from the faith. Through Paul, the Holy Spirit struck Elymas blind. Witnessing this, Paulus believed.
- Next the group went to Pamphylia (modern day Turkey) in the city of Perga. John Mark returned to Jerusalem, his departure later causing a rift between Paul and Barnabas. They moved on to Pisidian Antioch. The resistance of the Jewish leaders there led to the two being driven from Pamphylia. This sparked the pivotal shift of focus of Paul's preaching from the Jewish people to the Gentiles.
- They next traveled to Phrygia to the city of Iconium (now called Konya), where they addressed Jewish and Greek citizens. Some accepted the message, but some Jewish citizens plotted to stone them, forcing both men to flee the city.
- Next, they moved to Lycaonia to the city of Lystra. Paul was mistaken for the Greek god Hermes and Barnabas for Zeus after Paul healed a lame man. The citizens wanted to offer sacrifices to them, despite Paul's attempts to direct their worship towards Gods. Worse, Jewish opponents from Antioch and Iconium arrived to stir up trouble against Paul, leading to Paul being stoned and nearly killed. Surviving this, Paul and Barnabas moved on to Derbe and converted new believers.
- After this, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps back through the cities they had visited. They eventually stopped in the Pamphylian city of Attalia before returning to Antioch in Syria.

THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

During their time in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas came into contention with a group of Jewish Christians from Judea over the subject of circumcision of Gentile Christians. Paul, Barnabas, and a contingent of other believers were appointed to go to Jerusalem where the apostles and church elders would meet to resolve this issue. Paul and Barnabas would speak of the wonders God had performed through them during their journey as evidence that God had accepted the Gentile believers as people of Christ.

Pharisees present at the meeting insisted that Gentiles be circumcised and adhere to the Law of Moses. The Apostle Peter spoke of the law of grace in opposition to the Law of Moses: *“⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” (Acts 15:7-11)*

The Apostle James presented a compromise: *“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” (Acts 15:19-21)*

This compromise was considered acceptable. The Apostles and elders of the Christian church would send a delegation and a letter stating their decisions with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch.

PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY: ACTS 16-20

On this trip, Paul established many of the churches to whom the Pauline letters were addressed. Paul and Barnabas fell into disagreement over the latter's desire to include John Mark in the journey. Paul opposed this as John Mark had abandoned them on the previous missionary trip. Paul had desired to revisit the areas of the first journey but changed his plans after this dispute. Barnabas and John Mark would make that journey. Paul and fellow missionary Silas would travel to Syria and Cilicia.

Their first visits were to Derbe and Lystra. There, Paul first teams with Timothy (who was half Greek and have Jewish). Out of concern that the Jewish population would not receive their message from the half-Greek disciple, Paul circumcised Timothy.

Acts 16 notes that the Holy Spirit prevented Paul, Timothy, and Silas from traveling to preach in Asia. Instead they stopped in Phrygia. Paul moved on to Galatia. Later, the congregations of Galatia would fall under pressure to be circumcised and subject to the Law of Moses (despite the decision of the Council of Jerusalem). Paul would write the Galatians epistle in part to address this controversy. Paul's group then traveled to Mysia province, which was the western border of Asia (modern day Turkey). The Spirit of Jesus is cited to have prevented them from going further, so they headed instead Troas. There, Paul received a vision which he interpreted to be God's call for him to go to Macedonia. The shift to use of pronouns such as "we" and "us" at this point suggests that Luke (author of the book of Acts) had joined the group on their missionary travels.

Next they arrived at Philippi, where Paul cast a spirit out of a possessed slave women, to the annoyance of her owners. Her owners made false allegations against the group to the local magistrates, ending in Paul and Silas being flogged and imprisoned.

PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY: ACTS 16-20 (continued)

Though an earthquake that night opened the doors of the prison, Paul and Silas did not attempt to escape (they even saved the life of the guard, who was set to kill himself until he realized all the prisoners were present. The jailer and his family believed and were baptized. The next morning, Paul and Silas were released.

Paul and Silas visited a few more cities in Macedonia before arriving at Thessalonica, where Paul spent several weeks preaching the gospel at the synagogue. Some Jewish and Gentile citizens received the gospel, others were outraged. The Thessalonian believers sent the group away by night to the city of Berea. The Bereans carefully examined Paul's claims against the writings of the Scriptures to verify Paul's message. Agitators from Thessalonica followed the group to Berea and incited trouble. Timothy and Silas remained in Berea, but Paul was escorted out of Macedonia to Athens in the region of Achaia.

We recall that Paul was raised in Greco-Roman cultures amidst philosophers and people of other religious beliefs. While waiting in Athens, Paul noted the many idols of false gods and began to debate with many philosophers in the city over the subject of the Gospel. He used an idol dedicated "to an unknown god" as a jumping point to bring up the message of the one true God and the gospel of Christ with the Athenians. He used quotes from Greek philosophers to underscore his message, making the message relatable to the Athenians.

Having made some converts in Athens, Paul traveled to Corinth. Where he lived and worked as a tentmaker with Priscilla and Aquilla (whom he would greet later in his letters) and preached at the synagogues. Silas and Timothy rejoined him. Again, there was some opposition from the Jewish citizens of the region, who brought Paul before the governor. The governor dismissed their complaints. When Paul eventually left Corinth, Priscilla and Aquilla went with him. They parted from Paul to remain in Ephesus while Paul moved on to Caesarea and back to Jerusalem.

Paul's Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18-20)

- Departing from Antioch, he first traveled through Phrygia and Galatia, encouraging the believers in places such as Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. From there, he moved to Ephesus, which was the capital of the province of Asia, where he reunited with Priscilla and Aquilla. His teaching there focused on baptism of the Holy Spirit. He was there for two years, and God performed many miracles through him during that time. While his preaching and miracles brought many to faith and repentance (including sorcerers), others were threatened (including a man named Demetrius and craftsmen like him who earned a living making idols). The uproar finally ended with a threat that those offended people would be charged with rioting.
- Paul moved on to Macedonia and traveled then to Greece, encouraging believers along the way. Plots against Paul forced him to cancel plans to go to Syria and to return again to Macedonia and eventually to Troas, stopping at Philippi along the way. Along the way, followers from congregations in Berea, Derbe, Asia, and Thessalonica joined him, traveling ahead to meet him in Troas. In Troas, Paul raised a young man from the dead.
- Paul traveled then to Assos and Mitylene, and then to Miletus. There he met with leaders of the Ephesian church one last time. He prophesized that he would not see them again and warned them against false teachers.
- Paul's desire was to be at Jerusalem for Pentecost. He journeyed through Kos, Rhodes, and Patara, then to Phoenicia in ancient Syria and finally Tyre. It was there that local disciples, having a vision from the Holy Spirit, begged Paul not to return to Jerusalem. Paul traveled on to Ptolemais and Caesarea where an evangelist named Philip again warned that Paul would be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles. Indeed, Paul returned to Jerusalem, was bound by Jewish leaders and handed over to the Romans.

Was there a fourth missionary journey?

We cannot count Paul's journey to trial in Rome (as seen in Acts 23-25) as a missionary journey. We know that he returned to Jerusalem, where his preaching in the temple incited a mob. Paul was arrested, but his Roman citizenship saved him from a scourging. Paul appeared before the Sanhedrin, but Jesus Himself advised Paul that the apostle must witness for Christ in Rome. Paul was sent to appear before Felix and then before Festus in part to keep Paul safe from plots against his life. He sailed for Rome but was shipwrecked on the island of Malta. In time, Paul and the crew were rescued, and the apostle reached Rome. Under house arrest there, Paul spent two years preaching the gospel message without hinderance.

Some of Paul's letters refer to events that are not recounted in the book of Acts. Several early Christian leaders record that Paul made the trip to Spain (as the apostle mentioned in the book of Romans. In the first century, Clement of Rome hinted that Paul had traveled to the west, presumably Spain. In the fourth century, John of Chrysostom indicated that Paul had traveled from Rome to Spain and Cyril of Jerusalem claimed Paul had preached in Spain.

Paul is last seen in Acts heading for trial in Rome before Emperor Nero. In 2 Timothy, Paul references an event called his "first defense" and states he was delivered from the "lion's mouth", which some scholars interpret as meaning that trial before Nero and release in AD 62. Paul wrote the letters to Philemon, the Philippians, the Colossians, and the Ephesians while imprisoned for the first time in Rome. His letters to Timothy and Titus are thought by some scholars to have been written during Paul's second imprisonment, but there is debate on that issue. What we know is that Paul was martyred in Rome after his second imprisonment in AD 66.

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At every point in the believer's life, there comes to a moment of realizing the reality of Jesus Christ, understanding our need for forgiveness through Christ, and recognizing our dependence on the grace of God in Christ as our hope for salvation. This conversion is the moment the believer steps into a new life in Christ. Paul's story is a perfect illustration of this truth.

Consider Paul when we first meet him in the book of Acts: Though Paul has spent his lifetime seeking righteousness in God, he's very much enmeshed in the ways of the world (so much so that he's inadvertently made himself an enemy of the Lord). Paul was a Pharisee, a position of authority and esteem among the Jewish people. He calls himself "blameless" before the Law. This means that he was obeying every tenant of the Law, following every ritual of the Law---in other words, seeking righteousness and salvation by his own self-works. He represented every ideal of the world, but doing things right according to the prescriptions of the world does not amount to being right with God. Paul was probably convinced that he was doing everything right, that he understood what God wanted perfectly, that he was enacting God's will, perhaps he even believed that his status as a Pharisee was proof that the Lord approved him (how often in this world do we see someone with many material goods, a nice home, a successful spouse and children and assumed that the Lord has approved and blessed them?). The Law and the Scriptures had been interpreted according to human understanding and reason.

Paul most likely had the same expectations of a Messiah that other Jewish leaders shared: The Messiah would be a King to redeem Israel from Roman rule while forgetting the Scriptures that prophesized the Messiah would also be a suffering servant who would die. No god had ever come to earth and assumed human form, so it is understandable that Christ's arrival in humble flesh would have been unexpected. For that matter, Jesus had died a criminal's death. What would have seemed "kingly" about that from the perspective of Jewish leaders? Jesus had challenged the Jewish leadership. His teachings contradicted the Law of Moses, which had been given to the Hebrew people by God Himself. Their eyes were on the

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blessings that God had promised Abraham...promises that are still to come at the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ. We also have to understand that the Jewish people had spent centuries obeying a Law that required their separation from pagan nations who worshipped false gods. They had learned from the lessons of their ancestors, who suffered separation from God through the exile to Babylon for their failures at recognizing, worshipping, and obeying the One True God. Naturally, to have a man among them teaching and behaving in ways that were contradictory to that Law (such as performing miracles and eating on the Sabbath) would have elicited suspicion. Those like the Pharisees were recognized as teachers because they followed a course of study carefully established by the Sanhedrin. Jesus and John the Baptist had not done these things. In other words, everything Jesus taught and did was contradictory to every *worldly* standard.

With that in mind, Paul had a genuine desire to please God in the only way that he knew how, by obeying the Law of God, the Word he cherished. However, Paul was so determined that he was doing everything right that he had closed his mind, his heart, and his eyes to the reality that the Lord he so adored and strove so hard to obey, the Messiah he had awaited, had finally arrived. The salvation he sought to achieve by his own works was being offered, yet Paul did not recognize it.

And, tragically, there are many people today who still do not recognize the reality of Jesus Christ's presence or their need for forgiveness, salvation, and hope that can only be attained through faith in Christ. Why? Proverbs 14:12 warns us that there is a way that seems right to man, but that way ends in death. Without Christ, we are following a path to righteousness that was written according to the ways of men. We know that, because of Adam and Eve eating the fruit, sin and rebelliousness has entered the heart of every person. We can read the Bible and think we understand what it means to be righteous. Some of us even believe we can discern God's will and live by it without ever having read a Word that God placed in the Bible. What we are doing is following human ideals of what it means to be a good person; we are trying to attain

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righteousness by doing things our way. We're following a path on a map that is incomplete because we do not have the benefit of God's greater vision. God has laid out the course of history: He knows where creation began, He knows how history will unfold, He knows that path men must take to be redeemed and enter into the kingdom of Christ, and He knows the moment when the establishment of that Kingdom will be completed (for it already began with Christ's death and resurrection) in the Parousia. The map we're using trying to gain our righteousness through our own efforts probably doesn't show the gaping pit about to swallow us or that we're about to tumble off a cliff. We have a wallet-size snapshot compared to God's big picture.

Paul would come to understand that the Law had been given to Israel as a caretaker, as guidelines for their daily living so that they might be the image of God before the pagan nations. It was a temporary "babysitter" of sorts until the arrival of the Messiah. Man by himself cannot hope to fulfill all the requirements of the Law. Our sinful nature interferes with our best intentions and causes us to stumble. This is why no amount of good works can earn our salvation—with our innate sinful nature, we cannot fulfill the Law. Only Jesus could live a human existence that perfectly fulfilled all requirements of the Law on our behalf, including paying the penalty of death for our sins as required by the Law. The moment we accept that Christ is our Savior and choose to live according to His example, we have completed the only work of salvation within our abilities.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those of us who are like the Pharisees: We have our own ideas of how God fits into our world, how God will (and should) act in our lives, and if God doesn't conform to those expectations, we doubt Him (or worse we outright reject Him as the Pharisees rejected the reality of Jesus as the Messiah). Once again, we're trying to navigate life with our own incomplete map. Others of us believe that we have made so many mistakes, sank so far into sin, that there's no possible way that God could ever forgive us. Why would the most holy God choose us for His own?

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Paul must surely have wondered the same thing when he had that moment of realization that Christ Jesus was indeed the Messiah, that he had failed to recognize the God he had tried to serve with diligence and zeal, and that he even had the innocent blood of Christ's believers on his hands. See what happened? God, who is full of grace and mercy, looked into Paul's heart, saw the repentance, knew Paul's great potential to serve His plans, and was faithful to forgive Paul's sins. More than forgiving Paul's sins, God received Paul as His own apostle and prophet. If God can show this kind of mercy to Paul, we can be assured that He is capable to forgive our own sins when we approach Him openly, sincerely, and with genuine zeal for Him.

Modern culture nurtures and fans the embers of the innate rebellious tendencies within man. The word "dependence" carries a negative connotation (it brings to mind being trapped in destructive relationships or addicted to chemicals that harm our bodies and minds). Independence, self-reliance, achievement, success (evidenced in material possessions, diplomas, social status), and self-determination are ingrained goals in the modern psyche. We can accomplish anything we desire if we only try hard enough. Once we do, we should take pride in our status. We deserve recognition and accolades for our achievements.

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Here's the reality: **THIS WAY DOESN'T WORK.** We can't achieve redemption, forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life on our own anymore than we can expect God to conform His plans to our will. We can't do enough good deeds to punch our own ticket into the Kingdom of the Lord. We can't buy our entry with donations to charities. As we see from Paul and the Pharisees, we can't expect that God is going to conform to our expectations. Anything we achieve in this world is doomed because this world will eventually pass away. Only the ways and the people of the Lord will endure. Take a deep breath and accept this truth: It's okay to admit we need and are utterly dependent on Jesus Christ. We can't do it on our own...and you know what? We don't need to be ashamed of that.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. He loves us as His own people, His family, even as His own little children. King David (who has his own story of adoration of God, descent into sin, repentance, and forgiveness of God) reminds us in Psalm 103 that the Lord will put our transgressions as far as the east is from the west when we put aside our worldly ambitions and pride and acknowledge our need and desire for that forgiveness and relationship with the Lord.

If you think about it, Paul got the first recorded "Come to Jesus" moment, and he got it from Jesus Himself. Paul thought he was doing everything right. He was so convinced of it that he inadvertently became an enemy of the very God that he loved and desired to serve. He was so convinced of his place among the chosen people of God that he was in reality persecuting the true chosen people of the Lord, even approving their executions.

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There, on the road to Damascus, Paul was confronted with the reality: He was not the blameless, righteous man he imagined. In fact, he was a sinner (Paul even called himself the worst of sinners).

Give credit to Paul: Once he had that “come to Jesus” moment, he ran with it. He still lived his life with the zeal for the Lord and the desire to live according to God’s will, but this time he was following the path actually established by God instead of the map drawn according to man’s understanding of God. Once Paul let go of pride in himself and surrendered to dependence on God, giving God control over his life, the Lord was able to use him to accomplish great things. Many people were brought to Jesus because of Paul’s tireless efforts to live by the Lord---and people are still reading the teachings God imparted through Paul today, coming to know Jesus better because of these teachings. Paul did many good works for the Lord not because he thought they made him righteous but because doing good works was an expression of his gratitude to God and displayed God’s love to others so that they could be brought to belief in the Lord and His ways.

Each of us needs to have that same gut-check moment: Are we willing to admit our complete dependence on God? Are we willing to acknowledge that we’ve been pursuing the goals of this world according to the ways of this world instead of seeking the true path of the Lord? Are we willing to let go of our own ambitions and control of our lives and surrender these things to God’s perfect will? Are we willing to stop running so hard in the opposite direction from Christ and rest in assurance that he’s already achieved our righteousness and salvation through His death and resurrection? Are we? Are you?

Here are some verses of the Bible to consider as we attempt to set aside the map that the world has given us, telling us where we are to go and how to get there. Let's offer doubts about our worthiness, our usefulness, our readiness up to God and instead seek to follow His lead with confidence.

Psalm 37:23

The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him

Matthew 5:17

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Psalm 103:8-13

The LORD is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

9He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever.

10He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve.

11For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth.

12He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.

13The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.

Isaiah 43:10-12

“You *are* My witnesses,” says the LORD, “And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I *am* He. Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me.

¹¹ I, *even I*, *am* the LORD, And besides Me *there is* no savior.

¹² I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, And *there was* no foreign god among you; Therefore you *are* My witnesses,”

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