

For Such *a* Time As This: The Apostle Paul



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Acts 9:1–9, 22:3–5, 25–29, Rom. 7:19–25, 11:1, Phil. 3:5, 2 Pet. 1:3–8.

Memory Text: “Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God” (*Romans 15:17, NIV*).

Key Thought: The apostle Paul had a powerful impact on the then-known world, spreading Christianity far beyond the geographical confines of Israel and the Jewish people. His life and ministry is a model for our mission today.

The idea that the good news was also good news for the Gentiles was a shocker to people who, despite the teachings of their own prophets, had grown up with a different understanding. God's salvation was for the entire world, not just for Jewish people. Talk about a paradigm shift!

The apostle Paul was a key leader in acting on this revelation. His background, personality, and calling from God made him the right person at the right time to guide the church into this new era of mission to all people.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church went through a similar process during the late nineteenth century, when it began its mission work outside North America. This was a radical step that laid the foundation for today's international Adventist mission work in more than two hundred countries.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 5.*

Paul's Background

The apostle Paul is arguably the most influential person in the New Testament, apart from Jesus Himself. He took the good news about Jesus to much of the then-known world.

Paul was born in Tarsus, then the capital of Cilicia, a Roman province, in what is present-day Turkey. This area was noted for its goats'-hair cloth that was widely used for tent making, which was Paul's trade (*Acts 18:3*).

Read Acts 22:3–5, 25–29, Romans 11:1, and Philippians 3:5. What do these texts tell us about Paul that could help us understand why he could be so effective a witness at this time in history?

Roman citizenship by birth was highly prized. In Paul's day, a person could purchase Roman citizenship for 500 drachmas, close to two years' wages for the average worker. Roman citizenship came with certain privileges—safety from scourging and no death penalty without a trial (*see Acts 22:23–29*); the right to vote, make contracts, and have a legal marriage; and exemption from paying taxes.

And yet, Paul was also a Jew, one with a rich spiritual heritage. In later years, he often referred to his heritage and said, “‘I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today’” (*Acts 22:3, NIV*).

Paul came from the tribe of Benjamin, was reared as a Pharisee, and studied under the great Gamaliel (*vs. 3*), one of the leading Jewish teachers of the time. We learn from Paul's letter to the Galatians that he was “extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (*Gal. 1:14, NIV*). This zeal translated into full-scale persecution of those who became followers of Jesus.

Zealous Jew, Roman citizen, Paul was soon to become the greatest apostle the world has ever seen.

What aspects of your own life (nationality, education, upbringing, etc.) can be of special use in witnessing? How can you take advantage of your background to better witness for the Lord?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Romans 15:17*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that Paul was especially chosen and equipped for a special ministry.

Feel: A desire to use the gifts and talents the Lord has given us for His service.

Do: Inspire each class member to build a discipleship program into his or her lifestyle that will allow time for developing and using their God-given gifts and talents.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Paul the “Zealot” (*Gal. 1:14, 1 Tim. 1:12–14*) See also in Friday’s lesson a quote from *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 214.

A How do you explain that Paul, before and after his conversion, was always a religious zealot?

B Indicate some of the ways in which Paul’s conversion experience changed him from one kind of zealot into another kind.

II. Life and Salvation Through Christ (*1 Cor. 2:2*)

A Why does this week’s lesson categorize Paul as “a man of like passions” as ourselves?

B In your own words, summarize Paul’s concept on the role of Jesus in the Christian faith.

III. Themes of Hope (*1 Tim. 6:11*)

A Why would a “zealot” Jewish-trained rabbi such as Paul be called to take the gospel to non-Jewish people?

B Read Revelation 14:6, 7. Do you see any parallels between Paul’s calling and this message?

▶ **Summary:** If Paul could do it, we can do it! His unique background prepared him for a unique mission. Our personal background prepares us for some unique mission as the Lord shows it to us.

Paul: His Conversion and Calling

The apostle Paul was not always the apostle Paul but Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the early church. He then had an experience that set him on the course that would change not only his own life but history itself.

Read Acts 9:1–9, Paul’s conversion experience. What happened to him that changed him so greatly? How hard must it have been for him to accept that he had been so terribly wrong about Jesus?

Paul did not need any deep theological explanation before surrendering Himself to Jesus. Right then and there Paul gave himself to the Lord, declaring, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (*vs. 6*). The fiery opponent of Jesus was now His humbled and broken servant.

After his conversion, Paul met with Peter, James, and John—the “pillars” among the apostles—and they agreed that Paul’s special calling was to go as an apostle to the Gentiles (*Gal. 2:7–9*).

Read Acts 13:47 and Isaiah 49:5, 6. What title and purpose do Paul and Barnabas apply to themselves that was also applied to Jesus? *Luke 2:30–32*.

Though Paul saw himself as a special envoy or instrument to reach the Gentiles, he also shared the good news with Jewish people. In the same way, other apostles such as Peter preached mainly to Jews, but God also used them to witness to Gentiles. In fact, Peter was the first apostle to reach out to Gentiles (*see Acts 10*).

Most likely, few of us have had the kind of dramatic conversion experience that Paul did. Yet, we all, at some point, need conversion. What has your own conversion experience been? Most important, what have you learned from that experience that could help you lead others toward having their own, as well?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—**Motivate**

Have you ever felt that your inadequacies disqualify you to serve God in any meaningful way? Maybe it's a personality defect that you struggle with. You have a short temper or you procrastinate. Perhaps you look at other people who seem to have more marketable talents. You're not as smart as Stephen Hawking. You're not as attractive as Angelina Jolie or Brad Pitt. Or perhaps your past life shames or embarrasses you. You've done things and been places that forever disqualify you from running for president or being successfully nominated for a high position in your nation's government.

As it turns out, none of these things matter to God. God specializes in taking our weaknesses and making them into strengths.

Based on this, ask class members to talk about things they have done or things that have happened to them that seemed to be negatives but became positives. (Alternative: If this is too personal or revealing, ask for examples from the Bible, history, or the news.)

► **STEP 2**—**Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Confidence in Christ (*Review Rom. 15:17 with your class.*)

Paul spends a large part of Romans systematically deconstructing any reasons his readers might have for faith in themselves and their future. Gentiles are almost uniformly pagans and degenerates dooming themselves to destruction. Jews are almost as bad, possibly worse because they fail to live up to their own standards and add hypocrisy to an already long list. What is there to hope for then?

“Paul’s glorying was not in himself but ‘through Christ Jesus. . . .’ He recognized that he has nothing whereof to boast. . . . but that as a minister of the gospel he did all things in and through Christ.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 645.

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Paul: A Man of Like Passions

It is so easy to envision Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles and, with the exception of Jesus Himself, the greatest force in all Christianity, as some kind of superhuman being, a flawless saint and herald of the faith.

Yet, that is not the picture presented in the New Testament. Scripture puts us all under sin, paints us all as sinners in need of divine grace. The apostle Paul is no exception either.

At times Paul seems impulsive, almost aggressive. He often stood up for his rights. When he and Silas were in jail, he appealed to his rights as a Roman citizen (*Acts 16:35–40*). Later, when in the court of Agrippa, he appealed to Caesar—which was one of his rights as a Roman citizen (*Acts 25:11, 12*). Had he waited and not demanded his rights, he later might have been freed (*Acts 26:32*).

What can we learn about Paul from the following texts? *Acts 15:37–39, Rom. 7:19–25, 1 Cor. 9:27, 2 Cor. 12:7.*

It is a comfort to know that such a giant of faith as the apostle Paul was not perfect. He sometimes made mistakes. He needed the daily grace and forgiveness of Jesus in his life, just as we do. Indeed, from all that we can tell by his writing, Paul was very aware of his own sinfulness. No doubt it was from, partially at least, this awareness of his own weaknesses and faults that made him such a powerful teacher of God's saving grace.

Read Romans 7:24. What does this tell us about Paul's self-understanding? What hope and comfort can you draw from yourself by these words?

Though Paul was not perfect, God used him anyway. Why is it important that, while being aware of our faults and claiming God's promises for victory, we not allow them to discourage us from working for the Lord?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: Why is it so natural for us to look to our own presumed personal qualities or external factors when we really should be focusing on God and the valid sense of confidence and self-worth that He wants to give us through Christ? How might one remind oneself of this in one's daily life?

■ *How do the following verses elaborate on the confidence we are given in Christ? 2 Cor. 10:17, Phil. 4:13.*

II. Christ Here and Hereafter (Review 2 Cor. 1:20–24 with your class.)

Consider This: Our faith in Christ and His plans for us are not some silly fantasy about an imaginary superhero in the sky. What has He already done for us to make Himself worthy of our trust?

“That is, through Christ. All the promises of God became incarnate in Him, they met their fulfillment in Him. He is thus the evidence of the reliability of all the divine promises made to the fathers. . . . The Christian faith is an absolute certainty.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 832.

“Through Christ the promises are proved reliable, and through His people are they proved efficacious. Through the life and ministry of Paul in particular the name of God was being glorified.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 833.

III. The Cross (Review 1 Cor. 1:18 with your class.)

This verse indicates that what would have been regarded as most shameful and difficult about the Christian message Paul preached was really the most central fact of Jesus' life and ministry.

Consider This: To people who don't understand Christ's ministry or what He came to save us from, the concept and image of the Cross might seem wholly depressing, but it's also the only chance we have, because there the Lord did what was needed for us to have the hope of salvation.

Life and Salvation Through Christ

Several major themes dominated and motivated the apostle Paul's life and mission. At the top of the list was the story of Jesus crucified. This event was the basis of everything he taught and did. He wrote to the Corinthians, "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (*1 Cor. 2:2*), and to the Galatians, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Gal. 6:14*). These verses show that for Paul the cross of Christ (which of necessity includes Christ's resurrection, as well) was the central theme of his whole theology.

Throughout his writings, Paul describes in many different ways the enormity of what Jesus did through the Cross to save humanity.

Read the following texts in which Paul describes salvation. What do these verses tell us about what Christ has done for us?

Rom. 5:10

Rom. 6:18

Rom. 7:2–4

Rom. 8:15–17

Gal. 2:16

Eph. 1:7

1 Tim. 2:6

1 Pet. 1:18, 19

Paul uses a number of different images and word pictures to describe what Christ has done for us. Most likely that is because no single image alone can do justice to the grandness of what was accomplished for us at the Cross.

How central is the Cross to your own theology? How focused are you on it? Why is it important to keep the Cross at the center of all our witnessing?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**IV. Themes of Hope** (*Review Eph. 2:8–10 with your class.*)

Consider This: What is missing from many people’s experience of salvation in Christ?

This verse teaches us that salvation does not mean that Christ saves us and simply walks off, leaving us to do whatever we were doing before. On the contrary, we are being sanctified, in a very real sense re-created to be what we were meant to be in the first place. How do we experience this promise of sanctification in our lives on a daily basis?

V. Themes of Truth (*Review Thess. 4:13–15 with your class.*)

Consider This: For all his emphasis on grace and the centrality of Christ, His perfect life, and His sacrifice, Paul apparently thought it was very important that his readers have precisely the correct information on what happens after death, the end of time, etc. Why does Paul think these things are important? How do they fit in with our message to the world?

► **STEP 3—Practice****Thought Questions:**

❶ How was Paul’s background a hindrance or disadvantage to him in the path he later took? In what ways was it an advantage?

❷ What false notions, cultural conditioning, and prejudices did Paul have to overcome? What about ourselves? In what ways has our background, education, and culture worked against us? How can we overcome these barriers?

Application Questions:

❶ One thing most people know about Paul is that he changed his name from Saul. Why do you think he changed it?

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Themes of Hope

In yesterday’s lesson, we saw how Christ’s death on the cross was the key theme in Paul’s life and teachings. Today we will touch briefly on some other major Pauline themes.

Living a godly life (sanctification). Paul makes it very clear throughout his writings that salvation is free, a gift we cannot earn or deserve (*Rom. 5:15, 6:23, Eph. 2:8*). But salvation does not free us to behave as we did before we met Jesus. In response to His grace, we must live as Jesus asks us to live.

Paul writes to Timothy: “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness” (*1 Tim. 6:11, NIV*). We do not do what is right in order that Jesus will save us; we do what is right because we have been saved. In fact, says Paul, we were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (*Eph. 2:10, NIV*).

We do not obey God so that He will love us, accept us, or give us a ticket to heaven. When we accept Jesus’ gift of salvation, we are accepted totally and unconditionally. We obey God because His powerful love leads us to good works. We obey Him because His love compels us (*see 2 Cor. 5:14*).

Read 2 Peter 1:3–8. What reasons does Peter give for living a godly life? What other reasons can you add?

Paul wrote that he did not want us to “be ignorant” about what happens when people die (*1 Thess. 4:13*). Why is it important to understand the truth about life after death?

Paul’s key themes are all linked. Through Jesus’ self-sacrifice and resurrection, He conquered death. He will return to bring His gift of everlasting life to His faithful children (*see vs. 13–18*) at their resurrection. These followers of Jesus have demonstrated their love for Him in the way they have lived their lives (*see Eph. 4:20–32*).

What is the one hope of Christianity that means the most to you? That is, of all the promises we have, which one offers you the greatest hope, and why? Write out your response and bring it to class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

2 One thing that is often emphasized about Jesus is that He did not emphasize His rights, accepting unjust treatment and death. What example does Paul give us here? When is it legitimate for us to fight aggressively for our own rights?

Witnessing

As we see how Paul allowed God to use his unique talents, personality, and life history, how can we make use of our own uniqueness, flaws and all, to call people to Jesus?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Consider This: Ask class members to share ways in which God has shown Himself to them in different circumstances.

Paul had a particularly interesting conversion experience. But it could be argued that all conversion experiences are interesting in their way. Write yours down. Be prepared to share it with others, either in group settings or one on one. How is it similar to, or different from, those you have heard about from other people? How was God uniquely preparing you for service to Him? No matter how different the circumstances might have been, what things did the various experiences have in common with each other?

Do you know yourself as well as you could? Which aspects of your personality and temperament help you in your Christian life, and which hinder you? Find out.

It goes without saying that Paul was a man of prayer. Pray for God's guidance in your service to Him and mean it. Be prepared to follow it.

Paul's path led him to join with the people he initially hated the most. Do you have any prejudices or negative first impressions of individuals or groups you might want to put aside? Think about it.

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “From Persecutor to Disciple,” pp. 112–122, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The belief of a falsehood did not make Paul a kind, tender, compassionate man. He was a religious zealot, exceedingly mad against the truth concerning Jesus. He went through the country, haling men and women, and committing them to prison.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 214.

“The apostle Paul had all the privileges of a Roman citizen. He was not behind in the Hebrew education; for he had learned at the feet of Gamaliel; but all this did not enable him to reach the highest standard. With all this scientific and literary education, he was, until Christ was revealed to him, in as complete darkness as are many at this time. Paul became fully conscious that to know Jesus Christ by an experimental knowledge was for his present and eternal good. He saw the necessity of reaching a high standard.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 18, 1899.

“There is one great central truth to be kept ever before the mind in the searching of the Scriptures—Christ and Him crucified. Every other truth is invested with influence and power corresponding to its relation to this theme. It is only in the light of the cross that we can discern the exalted character of the law of God. The soul palsied by sin can be endowed with life only through the work wrought out upon the cross by the Author of our salvation.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1084.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What beliefs are most important to you? How do they affect the way you live? How do you respond to those who hold other beliefs, maybe even contrary beliefs to your own, just as strongly?
- ❷ How central is the Cross in your own local church? What could you do, as either an individual or a class, to help ensure that as with Paul, Christ and Him crucified are central to your church and its outreach to the local community?
- ❸ In class, share your responses to Thursday’s final question.

Summary: Paul provides a wonderful example of the fact that there is no limit to what God can do through us—human and weak though we may be. Paul’s unique background and gifts enabled him to take the good news about Jesus to an entirely new mission field.