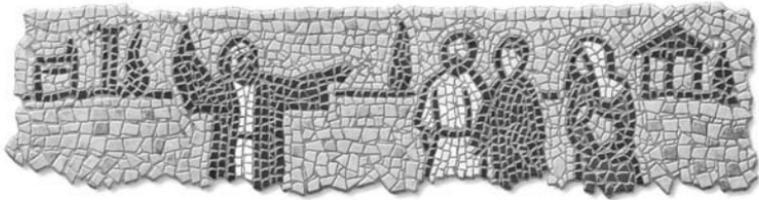


Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 6:9–15; 9:1–9; 1 Sam. 16:7; Matt. 7:1; Acts 11:19–21; 15:1–5.*

Memory Text: “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’ ” (*Acts 11:18, NKJV*).

It's not that hard to understand Saul of Tarsus (also known as the apostle Paul after his conversion) and why he did what he did. As a devout Jew who was taught all his life about the importance of the law and about the soon-coming political redemption of Israel, the idea of the long-awaited Messiah being ignominiously executed like the worst of criminals was just too much for him to tolerate.

No wonder, then, he was convinced that the followers of Jesus were being disloyal to the Torah and, thus, hindering God's plan for Israel. Their claims that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah and that He had risen from the dead were, he believed, rank apostasy. There could be no tolerance for such nonsense or for anyone who refused to give up those notions. Saul was determined to be God's agent to rid Israel of these beliefs. Hence, he first appears in the pages of Scripture as a violent persecutor of his fellow Jews, those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

God, however, had far different plans for Saul, plans that he never could have anticipated for himself: not only was this Jew going to preach Jesus as the Messiah, he was going to do it among the Gentiles!

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 1.*

Persecutor of Christians

Saul of Tarsus first appears in Acts as one involved in the stoning of Stephen (*Acts 7:58*) and then in connection with the more wide-scale persecution that broke out in Jerusalem (*Acts 8:1–5*). Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul play a significant role in the book of Acts because they were involved in events that led to the spread of the Christian faith beyond the Jewish world. Stephen is of particular significance because his preaching and martyrdom appear to have had a profound influence on Saul of Tarsus.

Stephen himself was a Greek-speaking Jew, and one of the original seven deacons (*Acts 6:3–6*). According to Acts, a group of foreign Jews who had come to live in Jerusalem (*vs. 9*) entered into a dispute with Stephen over the content of his preaching about Jesus. It is possible, maybe even likely, that Saul of Tarsus was involved in these debates.

Read Acts 6:9–15. What charges were brought against Stephen? Of what do these charges remind you? (*See also Matt. 26:59–61.*)

The fierce hostility toward Stephen's preaching appears to have resulted from two different things. On the one hand, Stephen drew the ire of his opponents by not placing primary importance on the Jewish law and the temple, which had become the focal point of Judaism and were treasured symbols of religious and national identity. But Stephen did more than merely downplay these two treasured icons; he vigorously proclaimed that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, was the true center of the Jewish faith.

No wonder, then, that he angered the Pharisee Saul (*Phil. 3:3–6*), whose zeal against the early Christians indicates that he probably belonged to a strict and militant wing of the Pharisees, one full of revolutionary fervor. Saul saw that the great prophetic promises of God's kingdom had not yet been fulfilled (*Daniel 2, Zech. 8:23, Isaiah 40–55*), and he probably believed it was his task to help God bring that day about—which could be done by cleansing Israel of religious corruption, including the idea that this Jesus was the Messiah.

Convinced he was right, Saul was willing to put to death those whom he thought wrong. While we need to have zeal and fervor for what we believe, how do we learn to temper our zeal with the realization that, at times, we just might be wrong?

Saul's Conversion

“And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads’ ” (*Acts 9:5, NKJV*).

Although Saul's persecution of the early church begins rather inconspicuously (as he only holds the coats of Stephen's executioners), it quickly intensifies (*see Acts 8:1–3; 9:1, 2, 13, 14, 21; 22:3–5*). Several of the words Luke uses to describe Saul paint a picture of a wild, ferocious beast, or a pillaging soldier bent on the destruction of his opponent. The word translated as “ravaging” in Acts 8:3 (*ESV*), for example, is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (*Ps. 80:13*) to describe the uncontrolled and destructive behavior of a wild boar. Saul's crusade against the Christians was clearly not a half-hearted matter of convenience; it was a deliberate and sustained plan to exterminate the Christian faith.

Look at the three descriptions of Saul's conversion (*Acts 9:1–18, 22:6–21, and 26:12–19*). What role did the grace of God have in this experience? In other words, how much did Saul deserve the goodness that the Lord showed toward him?

Saul's conversion, from a human perspective, must have seemed impossible (hence the skepticism that many expressed when they first heard about it).

The only thing Saul deserved was punishment, but God extended grace to this fervent Jew instead. It is important to note, however, that Saul's conversion did not happen in a vacuum, nor was it forced.

Saul was no atheist. He was a religious man, though gravely mistaken in his understanding of God. Jesus' words to Paul, “ ‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads’ ” (*Acts 26:14, ESV*), indicate that the Spirit had been convicting Saul. In the ancient world, a “goad” was a stick with a sharp point used to prod oxen whenever they resisted plowing. Saul had resisted God's prodding for some time, but, finally, on his way to Damascus, through a miraculous encounter with the risen Jesus, Saul chose to fight no longer.

Think back to your own conversion experience. Maybe it wasn't as dramatic as Paul's (most aren't), but in what similar ways were you the recipient of God's grace? Why is it important never to forget what we have been given in Christ?

Saul in Damascus

During Saul's encounter with Jesus, he was blinded and then instructed to go to the house of a man named Judas and to wait there for another man, Ananias. No doubt Saul's physical blindness was a powerful reminder of the greater spiritual blindness that had led him to persecute the followers of Jesus.

The appearance of Jesus to him on the Damascus road changed everything. Where Saul had thought he had been so right, he had been dead wrong. Rather than working for God, he had been working against Him. Saul entered Damascus a different man from the proud and zealous Pharisee who had left Jerusalem. Instead of eating and drinking, Saul spent his first three days in Damascus in fasting and prayer as he reflected on all that had happened.

Read Acts 9:10–14. Imagine what must have been going on in the mind of Ananias: not only was Saul, the persecutor, now a believer in Jesus, but he was also Paul, God's chosen apostle, to take the gospel to the Gentile world (*see Acts 26:16–18*).

No wonder Ananias was a little confused. If the church in Jerusalem was hesitant to accept Paul some three years after his conversion (*Acts 9:26–30*), one can imagine what questions and concerns filled the hearts of the believers in Damascus only days after the event!

Notice, too, that Ananias was given a vision by the Lord telling him the surprising and unexpected news about Saul of Tarsus; anything less than a vision might not have convinced him that what he was told about Saul was true—that the enemy of the Jewish believers had now become one of them.

Saul had left Jerusalem with the authority and commission of the chief priests to root out the Christian faith (*Acts 26:12*). God had, however, a vastly different commission for Saul, one that rested on far greater authority. Saul was to take the gospel to the Gentile world, an idea that must have been even more shocking to Ananias and the other Jewish believers than was the conversion of Saul himself.

Where Saul had sought to curtail the spread of the Christian faith, now God would use him to spread it far beyond anything that Jewish believers ever would have imagined.

Read 1 Samuel 16:7, Matthew 7:1, and 1 Corinthians 4:5. What is the message of these texts in regard to why we must be careful in how we view the spiritual experience of other people? What mistakes have you made in your judgments about others, and what have you learned from those mistakes?

The Gospel Goes to the Gentiles

Where was the first Gentile church established? What events caused the believers to go there? *Acts 11:19–21, 26*. What does that remind you of from Old Testament times? See *Daniel 2*.

The persecution that broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen's death caused a number of Jewish believers to flee three hundred miles north to Antioch. As capital of the Roman province of Syria, Antioch was second only to Rome and Alexandria in significance. Its population, estimated at five hundred thousand, was extremely cosmopolitan, making it an ideal location not only for a Gentile church but for a starting base for the worldwide mission of the early church.

What occurred in Antioch that resulted in Barnabas's visit to the city and his subsequent decision to invite Paul to join him in Antioch? What kind of picture is presented of the church there? *Acts 11:20–26*.

It is difficult to construct a chronology of Paul's life, but it appears that some five years passed between his post-conversion visit to Jerusalem (*Acts 9:26–30*) and the invitation by Barnabas to join him in Antioch. What was Paul doing during all those years? It is hard to say for sure. But based on his comments in Galatians 1:21, he may have been preaching the gospel in the regions of Syria and Cilicia. Some have suggested that perhaps it was during this time that he was disinherited by his family (*Phil. 3:8*) and suffered a number of the hardships he describes in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28.

The church in Antioch blossomed under the guidance of the Spirit. The description in Acts 13:1 indicates that the cosmopolitan nature of the city was soon reflected in the ethnic and cultural diversity of the church itself. (Barnabas was from Cyprus, Lucius from Cyrene, Paul from Cilicia, Simon presumably from Africa, and also there were all the Gentile converts.) The Spirit now sought to take the gospel to even more Gentiles by using Antioch as the base for more far-reaching missionary activities, beyond Syria and Judea.

Read again Acts 11:19–26. What can we learn from the church at Antioch, a very culturally and ethnically diverse church, that could help churches today emulate the good that existed there?

Conflict Within the Church

Of course, nothing human is perfect, and it wasn't long before trouble began within the early community of faith.

For starters, not everyone was pleased with the entry of Gentile believers into the early church. The disagreement was not over the concept of a Gentile mission but over the basis on which Gentiles should be allowed to join. Some felt that faith in Jesus alone was not sufficient as the defining mark of the Christian; faith, they argued, must be supplemented with circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses. To be a true Christian, they asserted, Gentiles needed to be circumcised. (We can, in Acts 10: 1–11:18, see the extent of the division between Jews and Gentiles through Peter's experience with Cornelius and the reaction that followed.)

The official visits from Jerusalem, which monitored Philip's work among the Samaritans (*Acts 8:14*) and the work with Gentiles in Antioch (*Acts 11:22*), may suggest some concern about the inclusion of non-Jews in the Christian community. Yet, the reaction to Peter's baptism of Cornelius, an uncircumcised Roman soldier, is a clear example of the disagreement that existed regarding the Gentile question among the earlier believers. The inclusion of an occasional Gentile such as Cornelius may have made some feel uncomfortable, but Paul's intentional efforts to open wide the doors of the church for Gentiles on the basis of faith in Jesus alone resulted in deliberate attempts by some to undermine Paul's ministry.

How did certain believers from Judea try to counteract Paul's work with Gentile Christians in Antioch? *Acts 15:1–5*.

Although the Jerusalem Council, in Acts 15, ultimately sided with Paul on the issue of circumcision, the opposition to Paul's ministry continued. About seven years later, during Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, many were still suspicious of Paul's gospel. In fact, when Paul visited the temple, he nearly lost his life when Jews from Asia cried out, "Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place" (*Acts 21:28*; see also *21:20, 21*).

Put yourself in the position of these Jewish believers who were concerned about Paul's teaching. Why do their concern and opposition make some sense? What can we learn from this about how our own preconceived ideas, as well as cultural (and even religious) notions, can lead us astray? How can we learn to protect ourselves from making the same kind of errors, no matter how well-intentioned we are?

Further Study: For the relationship between personal conversion and the church, read Ellen G. White, “Individual Independence,” pp. 430–434, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3. For a helpful map of the early life of Paul and commentary on his conversion, see *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 226–234.

“Paul had formerly been known as a zealous defender of the Jewish religion and an untiring persecutor of the followers of Jesus. Courageous, independent, persevering, his talents and training would have enabled him to serve in almost any capacity. He could reason with extraordinary clearness, and by his withering sarcasm could place an opponent in no enviable light. And now the Jews saw this young man of unusual promise united with those whom he formerly persecuted, and fearlessly preaching in the name of Jesus.

“A general slain in battle is lost to his army, but his death gives no additional strength to the enemy. But when a man of prominence joins the opposing force, not only are his services lost, but those to whom he joins himself gain a decided advantage. Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus, might easily have been struck dead by the Lord, and much strength would have been withdrawn from the persecuting power. But God in His providence not only spared Saul’s life, but converted him, thus transferring a champion from the side of the enemy to the side of Christ. An eloquent speaker and a severe critic, Paul, with his stern purpose and undaunted courage, possessed the very qualifications needed in the early church.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 124.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What lesson can we learn from the fact that some of Paul’s harshest opponents were fellow Jews who believed in Jesus?
- ❷ How can you stand up for matters of religious principle and at the same time make sure that you are not fighting against God?

Summary: Saul’s encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road was the defining moment in his life and in the history of the early church. God changed the one-time persecutor of the church and made him His chosen apostle to bring the gospel to the Gentile world. Paul’s inclusion of Gentiles in the church by faith alone, however, proved a difficult concept for some within the church to accept—a powerful example of how preconceptions and prejudice can hinder our mission.

A Family Affair

Papa greeted his daughter Tamara as she entered his home. During her visit, she noticed an invitation to a Christmas program in another church in their city. She was curious and asked her father to go with her to the concert.

Papa was an elder in the Molokan church—an evangelistic, Bible-centered church in their homeland of Azerbaijan. Polina, Tamara's sister, wanted to attend the concert, too. She had sensed that something was missing from her family's faith and for months had been praying to know more about Bible truth.

The concert opened evangelistic meetings, and Tamara, Polina, and her father decided to attend. Tamara wondered who was sponsoring the meeting; but the greeters were busy, and Tamara forgot to ask.

When Tamara learned that the meetings were sponsored by Seventh-day Adventists, she was curious to know what the name *Adventist* meant and what Adventists believed. Every night she compared what the speaker said with what she read in her own Bible. She realized that these Seventh-day Adventists were preaching the truth.

When the speaker invited people to a more in-depth Bible study, the whole family signed up for the course. Tamara called her sisters who lived in Siberia and told them what they were learning. The Siberian sisters were worried about this new religion onto which their family had stumbled.

The family visited the church on Sabbath for months; but because Papa was an elder in their church, the family hesitated to be baptized out of respect. About this time, Tamara visited her family in Siberia. Her brother and sisters peppered her with questions about this strange new religion in which they had become involved. Yuri, the only brother, had been an interrogator in the military, and as he heard her answers he became convinced that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was based on the Bible.

In time the Azerbaijan family members moved to Siberia to be near the rest of the family, and in time the sisters were baptized together. Several months later, Papa and Yuri were baptized as well. Now they are praying and working to lead their spouses and children to God.

Krasnoyarsk, Russia, where the family now lives, has several house churches but only one small church. Part of a recent Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help to build a large church in the city that will help draw many more people to Christ. Thank you for your part in supporting this special offering and for giving faithfully to the mission offerings every week in church.