

Paul: Background and Call



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 5

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 9:1; Philippians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 15:10; Acts 9:1–22; Acts 26:18; Galatians 2:1–17.

MEMORY VERSE: “But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! I have chosen this man to work for me. He will carry my name to those who aren’t [are not] Jews and to their kings. He will bring my name to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for me’ ” (Acts 9:15, 16, NlrV).

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT WAS PAUL. At first he was called Saul of Tarsus before he became known as Paul. Paul was to the early Christian church what Moses was to the children of Israel. The difference is that Moses brought God’s people away from the Gentiles (Egyptians) in order for Israel to be able to do God’s will. But Paul brought God’s Word from Israel to the Gentiles (non-Jews) in order that the Gentiles could do God’s will too.

Paul is especially remembered for his important work that influenced Christian outreach during the past 2,000 years.

Paul is given credit for lifting Bible truths out of their Jewish culture. In the Jewish culture, laws were so much a part of Jewish life that there was very little difference between Jewish custom and what they thought was God’s everlasting message to the nations.

This week we will take our first look at someone who, other than Jesus Himself, is thought by many to be the most important person in the New Testament.

SAUL OF TARSUS (Acts 22:25–28)

Saul was born in Tarsus, an important town on the trade route between Syria and western Asia (Acts 22:3).

Saul's parents were Diaspora Jews (Jews who were not living in the land of Israel) from the tribe of Benjamin. His birth name was Saul (Hebrew *sha'ul*, "asked for [of God]"). But after he began his mission to the Gentiles (Acts 13:9), he took the name Paul (Latin *Paulus*, name of a prominent Roman family). Also, since he was a Pharisee,¹ Paul probably had had a wife. But we know nothing about her. In fact, we do not know much about his family at all. But a sister and a nephew are mentioned (Acts 23:16). Paul was also a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25–28).

Saul was probably educated in synagogue (Jewish place of worship) school in Tarsus until 12 years of age. Then he followed with study in Jerusalem with the famous Rabban (this honorary title meant "our rabbi") Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Like most Jewish males, he learned a trade (job; skill). His trade was tent making (Acts 18:3).

Paul was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5). The Pharisees (meaning "separated ones") were known for believing that all Jews were required to obey the laws of God (both those written in the books of Moses and those handed down by scribes²). Their strict patriotism (loyalty to country) and obedience to Jewish laws could make them seem hypocritical (two-faced) and judgmental. But Paul did not hide the fact that he and his father were Pharisees (Acts 23:6).

Paul's background as a Pharisee was an important part in his successful missionary work for both Jews and Gentiles. Paul had great knowledge of the Old Testament (the only Bible available to early Christians). He also had knowledge of the later additions by the scribes to the Old Testament laws. So Paul was the apostle (teacher; leader) best qualified to understand the difference between timeless, Bible-based truths and later Jewish cultural additions. These later additions could be ignored by Gentile followers of Jesus. As we have learned, this issue would become a very important one in the life of the early church. Today, too, the importance of culture in the church creates issues for the church to address.

Which of our Christian beliefs seem to disagree with the culture of the people around us? How do you deal with this problem while staying true to what we believe?



Paul was both a Pharisee and a tent maker.

DEFINITIONS

1. Pharisee—Jewish religious leader in New Testament times.
2. scribes—people whose job was to copy manuscripts or books.

PAUL, THE MAN (Philippians 3:6, 8)

Who we are depends on our background, home life, culture, and education. So, our characters (thoughts; feelings; actions) are the combination of those things that make up what kind of people we are.

Read Acts 9:1; Philippians 3:6, 8; 1 Corinthians 15:9, 10; 1 Timothy 1:16; Galatians 1:14; and 2 Corinthians 11:23–33. What do these verses tell us about Paul’s character and personality?



All that Paul lost for Christ he called garbage.

Paul was clearly a man with strong feelings. Before his born-again experience, Paul used his ambition to attack the early church. He supported the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58). He took part in imprisoning Christian women and men (Acts 8:3). He made murderous threats against the disciples (Acts 9:1) and organized a raid on Christians in a foreign country (Acts 9:2; Galatians 1:13).

At the same time, too, we can understand how Paul’s ambitions were meant to be used for good. He dedicated his life to the preaching of the gospel in the face of great hardships and challenges. Only a man totally dedicated to what he believed would have done as Paul did. He lost all things for Christ. But he counted them as “rubbish.” Rubbish comes from a Greek word that means something that is useless, like garbage. Paul understood what was important in life and what was not.

Paul was also a humble man. No doubt, this came from the guilt of his past attacks against Christians. So, Paul thought himself as not worthy of his high calling. And also as someone who preached the righteousness (holy life) of Christ as our only hope of salvation, Paul knew just how sinful he was next to a holy God. And such knowledge was more than enough to keep him humble, surrendered, and grateful.

“One ray of the glory [power and beauty] of God, one sight of Christ’s pure character makes every kind of sin painfully clear, and lays open the weaknesses of the human character. It shows us our unholy desires and the sinfulness of the heart, the impurity of the lips.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, page 29.

None of us can be protected from pride. How should focusing on the Cross, and what it means, cure anyone of that sin?

FROM SAUL TO PAUL (Acts 9:1–22)

Read Acts 9:1–22, the story of Paul’s conversion.³ How was this experience linked to his missionary calling? Read also Acts 26:16–18.

Right from the start, it was clear that the Lord had planned to use Paul to reach both Jews and Gentiles. No other event in Paul’s training as missionary and teacher compared in importance to his conversion. Often in his witness, Paul would talk about that experience.

“ ‘Now get up. Stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you to serve me and be my witness. You will tell others that you have seen me today. You will also tell them that I will show myself to you again’ ” (Acts 26:16, NIV). Paul could not preach or teach about what he did not know. No, instead he would preach and teach out of his own experiences and knowledge of the Lord, always with the Word of God (the Bible) only. (Read Romans 1:1, 2.)

Read Acts 26:18. What would be the result of Paul’s work?

From this we can see five results of true missionary work:

1. Open people’s eyes. Make God and Jesus real, present, active, and likeable.
2. Move from darkness to light and knowledge—a basic gospel theme (idea; topic). (Read Luke 1:78, 79.)
3. Turn from the power of Satan to God.
4. Receive forgiveness of sins. The problem of sin has an answer. This is the basic living, healing message of Christians.
5. Receive a place among righteous (holy) people. This means membership in God’s church, no matter our race, nation, or what our gender (being male or female) is.

If someone were to ask you, “What about your own experience with Jesus? What can you tell me about Him?” what would you say?



True missionary work opens people’s eyes to the truth.

DEFINITIONS

3. conversion—the change from an unbeliever to a believer.

PAUL IN THE MISSION FIELD (Romans 15:19)

What important truth for any kind of mission work can we find in Romans 15:19? Read also 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Corinthians 2:2; Galatians 6:14; and Philippians 1:15–18.

One thing is certain about all of Paul’s missionary work. No matter where he went, the preaching of Christ and Him crucified (put to death on a cross) was the most important part of Paul’s message. By making it so, Paul was being faithful to the call that Christ had first given him—that he should preach about Jesus. The message for missions today is clear: we must keep Christ at the front and center of all our outreach and mission work.

Paul did not preach Jesus just as some sort of truth and then go on his way. He wanted to raise up churches, to start Christian communities, area by area, throughout his part of the world wherever he could. In the truest sense, Paul’s work was “church planting.”

There is another important part of Paul’s missionary work too.

Read Colossians 1:28. What does it seem like Paul is saying? Is this evangelism⁴ or discipleship?

If one reads many of Paul’s letters, it is clear that they often are not evangelistic.⁵ Instead, many of Paul’s letters were written to church communities (groups) that were already established. In other words, included in Paul’s missionary work was the work of a pastor—encouraging and helping the churches to grow spiritually.

So we can see at least three important parts of Paul’s missionary work: (1) preaching Jesus, (2) church planting, and (3) helping established churches grow spiritually.

Think about the last time you witnessed to someone. How important was Jesus in your message? How can you make sure that you always keep Him at the heart of your message to others?



Paul was faithful to his mission to preach Jesus.

DEFINITIONS

4. evangelism—the work of spreading the gospel world-wide.

5. evangelistic—about the work of spreading the gospel around the world.

MISSION AND MULTICULTURALISM⁶ (Galatians 2:1–17)

Multiculturalism is a new word. It first appears in print in the 1960s, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. For many peoples in New Testament times, there were only two classes of humanity—us and them; our tribe and not our tribe. For Greeks, all non-Greeks were “barbarians.” For Jews, all non-Jews were “Gentiles.”

As we have learned already, the success of the Gentile mission forced the early church and its leaders to do something about the Jew/Gentile divide (separation; differences). The important question was whether a Gentile could become a Christian without first becoming a Jew.

Read Galatians 2:1–17. What happened here, and how does this story show the challenge of “multiculturalism” in outreach and mission?

“At a later date, when Peter visited Antioch, he won the confidence of many believers by his wise actions toward the Gentile converts [new believers]. For a time he acted according to the light given from heaven. Peter even overcame his natural prejudice⁷ so that he could sit at the table with the Gentile converts. But when certain Jews who were loyal to the ceremonial law⁸ came from Jerusalem, Peter changed how he acted toward the new converts from paganism [idol worship]. . . . This example of weakness left a most painful impression on the minds of the Gentile believers. The church was threatened with division.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [Teachers and Leaders]*, page 198.

Paul faced the issue with Peter and took a firm stand for what today could be called a multicultural (made up of many cultures) church. His Gentile converts would *not* have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. Paul had a rich background as a faithful Pharisee, student of Rabbi Gamaliel, Roman citizen, one-time attacker of the church, and finally convert and apostle of Jesus Christ. This mixed background made him very qualified to tell the differences between Bible truths and cultural and religious customs of the times.

How do you tell the difference between the truths of our faith and what are cultural, social, or even personal customs?

DEFINITIONS

6. multiculturalism—having to do with including many different cultures.

7. prejudice—an unfair feeling or dislike for a person or group because of race, sex, religion, and so on.

8. ceremonial law—rules or laws dealing with the sanctuary services.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “To those who are weak I became weak. That was to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that in all possible ways I might save some. I do all of that because of the good news. And I want to share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:22, 23, NIV).

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, NIV. Modern missiology (study of the mission of the church) uses the term “contextualization”⁹ in describing Paul’s mission methods. Contextualization is described as “trying to communicate the Gospel in word and action and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural setting. This is so that Christianity may be presented in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and makes their worldview more complete. In this way it lets the people follow Christ and remain within their own culture.” —Adapted from Darrell L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, volume 21 (January 1997), page 2.

“The Jewish Christians living within sight of the temple naturally let their minds go back to the certain rights of the Jews as a nation. They saw the Christian church dropping the ceremonies and traditions of Judaism. Then they felt that the holiness of the Jewish customs would soon be lost sight of because of the new faith. So many grew disgusted with Paul as the one who had caused this change. Even the disciples were not all prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council. Some were very loyal to the ceremonial law. They blamed Paul. They felt that he had become weak in upholding Jewish law.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 197.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

DEFINITIONS

9. contextualization—an effort to adapt (fit) the method to the needs of the people and culture one is trying to reach in order to spread the gospel.

- ① Read 1 Corinthians 9:20. What lessons can we learn from these words that can help us to understand how we do mission, or even how we can do personal ministry (work done for God) and witness?
- ② Paul’s sinful past was shameful. But God forgave Paul and used him in a powerful way. How can we learn to forgive ourselves for what we might have done and seek to be used powerfully by Him too?