

Paul: Background *and* Call



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 9:1; Phil. 3:6, 8; 1 Cor. 15:9, 10; Acts 9:1–22; 26:16–18; Gal. 2:1–17.*

Memory Text: “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. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’” (*Acts 9:15, 16, NIV*).

One of the most central figures in the New Testament was Paul, originally Saul of Tarsus. Paul was to the early Christian church what Moses was to the children of Israel. The difference is that while Moses brought God's people out from the Gentiles in order that Israel would be able to do God's will, Paul brought God's Word from Israel to the Gentiles in order that the Gentiles could do the same; that is, to do God's will.

More is known about Paul than any other first-century Christian. He is especially remembered for his significant contributions that have influenced Christian outreach during the past two millennia. His missionary visits and activities to the nations around the Mediterranean Sea set a powerful example for Christian missions in coming generations.

Paul is credited with lifting biblical absolutes from their Jewish culture, where civil, ritual, and moral laws were so integrated into the fabric of Jewish life that there was hardly any distinction between the 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 figure in the New Testament.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 12.

Saul of Tarsus

Saul was born in Tarsus, an important town on the trade route between Syria and western Asia (*Acts 22:3*). Tarsus was a multicultural center of industry and learning and home for a short time to Rome's most famous orator and senator, Cicero.

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]")—though, 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, Paul probably had a wife, though we know nothing about her. In fact, we don't know much about his family at all, though 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 a synagogue school in Tarsus until 12 years of age, followed by rabbinic study in Jerusalem with the famous Rabban (this honorary title meant "our rabbi") Gamaliel (*vs. 3*). Like most Jewish males, he learned a trade—in his case, tent making (*Acts 18:3*).

As already stated, Paul was a Pharisee (*Phil. 3:5*). The Pharisees (meaning "separated ones") were known for insisting that all the laws of God, both those written in the books of Moses, as well as those handed down verbally by generations of scribes, were binding on all Jews. Their strict patriotism and detailed obedience to Jewish laws could make them appear to their fellow Jews as hypocritical and judgmental. Paul, however, did not hide the fact that he and his father were Pharisees (*Acts 23:6*).

Paul's pharisaic background was an important element in his successful missionary work for both Jews and Gentiles. It equipped him with detailed knowledge of the Old Testament, the only Scriptures available to early Christians. It also acquainted him with the scribal additions to, and expansions of, the Old Testament laws. He was thus the apostle best qualified to discern between timeless, Scripture-based divine absolutes on the one hand and later Jewish cultural additions, which were not binding, and which therefore could be ignored by Gentile followers of Jesus. As we have seen, this issue would become a very important one in the life of the early church. Today, too, the role of culture in the church creates issues for the church to address.

Which of our Christian beliefs seem to conflict most sharply with the surrounding culture? How do you deal with the conflict without compromising what must never be compromised?

Paul, the Man

Personality traits are an individual's typical responses to surrounding domestic, cultural, or educational circumstances. Character is the combination of traits, qualities, and abilities that make up what sort of person an individual is.

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 texts tell us about Paul's character and personality?

Paul was clearly a man of great conviction and zeal. Before his born-again experience, he used his zeal to persecute the early church. He supported the stoning of Stephen (*Acts 7:58*), took the initiative in imprisoning Christian women, as well as men (*Acts 8:3*), made murderous threats against the disciples (*Acts 9:1*), and organized a raid on Christians in a foreign country (*Acts 9:2, Gal. 1:13*).

At the same time, too, we can see how Paul's zeal and fervency were to be used for good, as he dedicated his life to the preaching of the gospel, despite incredible hardships and challenges. Only a man totally dedicated to what he believed would have done as he did. And though he lost all things for Christ, he counted them as "rubbish," which comes from a Greek word that means something that is useless, like garbage. Paul understood what was important in life and what wasn't.

Paul was also a humble man. No doubt, partly from the guilt of his former persecution of Christians, he viewed himself as unworthy of his high calling. And also as someone who preached the righteousness of Christ as our only hope of salvation, he knew just how sinful he was in contrast to a holy God, and such knowledge was more than enough to keep him humble, surrendered, and grateful.

"One ray of the glory of God, one gleam of the purity of Christ, penetrating the soul, makes every spot of defilement painfully distinct, and lays bare the deformity and defects of the human character. It makes apparent the unhallowed desires, the infidelity of the heart, the impurity of the lips."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 29.

None of us is immune to pride. How should focusing on the Cross and what it means cure anyone of that sin?

From Saul to Paul

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

Right from the start, it was clear that the Lord had intended to use Paul to reach both Jews and Gentiles. No other event in Paul’s preparation as missionary and theologian compared in importance to his conversion; indeed, often in his witness he would talk about that experience.

“ ‘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’ ” (Acts 26:16, NIV). Paul couldn’t preach or teach about what he didn’t know. No, instead he would preach and teach out of his own experiences with, and knowledge of, the Lord, all the time in harmony with the Word of God. (See Rom. 1:1, 2.)

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

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

1. Open people’s eyes. Make God and Jesus real, present, active, and appealing.
2. Move from darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge—a core gospel theme. (See Luke 1:78, 79.)
3. Turn from the power of Satan to God.
4. Receive forgiveness of sins. The problem of sin has a solution. This is the living, healing, core message of Christians.
5. Receive a place among the sanctified; this means membership in God’s church, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or nationality.

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

Paul in the Mission Field

“From Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19, NKJV). What crucial element for any kind of mission work can we find in this text? See also 1 Cor. 1:23, 2:2, Gal. 6:14, Phil. 1:15–18.

One thing is certain about all Paul’s missionary endeavors: no matter where he went, the preaching of Christ and Him crucified was central to his message. By making it so, he was being faithful to the call that Christ had first given him, that he should preach about Jesus. The message for missions today is obvious: whatever else we preach and teach (and as Seventh-day Adventists, we have been given so much that needs to be shared with the world), we must keep Christ and Him crucified at the front and center of all our outreach and mission work.

Paul, though, didn’t preach Jesus just as some sort of objective truth and then go on his merry way. Central to his work was to raise up churches, to start Christian communities region by region throughout his part of the world wherever he could. In the truest sense, his work was “church planting.”

There is another element to Paul’s missionary work, as well.

Read Colossians 1:28. What does it sound like Paul is saying? That is, is this evangelism or discipleship?

If one reads many of Paul’s epistles, it’s clear that they often are not evangelistic, at least in the sense that we use the term, that of reaching out to the unchurched. On the contrary, many of the letters were written to established church communities. In other words, included in Paul’s missionary endeavors was the work of pastoral care, edification, and nurturing the churches.

So, we can see at least three central elements to Paul’s missionary activity: proclaiming Jesus, church planting, and nurturing established churches.

Think about the last time you witnessed to someone, in whatever capacity. How central was Jesus to what you said? How can you make sure that you always keep Him central?

Mission and Multiculturalism

“Multiculturalism” is a recent term, first appearing in print in the 1960s, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. For many ancient peoples, there were only two categories 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 seen already, the success of the Gentile mission forced the infant church and its leaders to deal with the Jew/Gentile divide. The question, at heart, 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 account illustrate, in its own way, the challenge of “multiculturalism” in outreach and mission?

“When Peter, at a later date, visited Antioch, he won the confidence of many by his prudent conduct toward the Gentile converts. For a time he acted in accordance with the light given from heaven. He so far overcame his natural prejudice as to sit at table with the Gentile converts. But when certain Jews who were zealous for the ceremonial law came from Jerusalem, Peter injudiciously changed his deportment toward the converts from paganism. . . . This revelation of weakness on the part of those who had been respected and loved as leaders left a most painful impression on the minds of the Gentile believers. The church was threatened with division.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 198.

Paul faced the issue with Peter and took a firm stand for what today could be called a multicultural church. His Gentile converts would not have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. Paul’s complex background as a devout Pharisee, student of Rabban Gamaliel, Roman citizen, fundamentalist persecuting zealot, and finally convert and apostle of Jesus Christ, eminently qualified him to distinguish timeless, unchanging divine absolutes on one hand and their temporary cultural and religious vehicles on the other.

How do you distinguish between the essentials of our faith and purely cultural, social, or even personal preferences?

Further Study: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:22, 23, NIV).

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, NIV. Modern missiology applies the term “contextualization” to Paul’s mission methods stated here. Contextualization is defined as “attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture.”—Darrell L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 21 (January 1997): p. 2.

“The Jewish Christians living within sight of the temple naturally allowed their minds to revert to the peculiar privileges of the Jews as a nation. When they saw the Christian church departing from the ceremonies and traditions of Judaism, and perceived that the peculiar sacredness with which the Jewish customs had been invested would soon be lost sight of in the light of the new faith, many grew indignant with Paul as the one who had, in a large measure, caused this change. Even the disciples were not all prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council. Some were zealous for the ceremonial law, and they regarded Paul with disfavor because they thought that his principles in regard to the obligations of the Jewish law were lax.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 197.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read 1 Corinthians 9:20. What lessons can we draw from these words that can help us to understand and contextualize how we do mission, or even how we can do personal ministry and witness?
- 2 Despite Paul’s sinful, even shameful, past, God forgave Paul and used him in a mighty way. How can we learn to forgive ourselves for what we might have done and, claiming the righteousness of Christ as our own, seek to be used mightily of Him, as well?

The Stolen Sermons: Part 1

by GAMINI MENDIS

I wanted to call a meeting of all the clergy in my town in Sri Lanka. I thought we needed to pray and fellowship together. I reviewed the list to be sure I hadn't forgotten any pastor. I knew that some of the clergy wouldn't be happy that I was inviting the Seventh-day Adventist pastor, for they thought Seventh-day Adventists were part of a cult, but I wanted to include every minister.

I hadn't met many of the clergy before, and it was a good chance to talk with them. I was especially interested to learn more about the Seventh-day Adventist Church. When the Adventist pastor told me that his church worshiped on Saturday instead of Sunday, I was intrigued. But my interest was for a purely selfish reason. I decided to visit the Seventh-day Adventist church on Saturday and listen to the pastor's sermons. Then I could use his material to help me preach a sermon on Sunday. It would save me a lot of work!

The next Saturday I visited the Seventh-day Adventist church. I was warmly welcomed by the pastor and his congregation. I listened closely to the sermon and took careful notes. The following day, I preached the same sermon I had heard in the Seventh-day Adventist church with just a few minor changes. *This makes my life so much easier*, I thought. The next Saturday, I went to the Seventh-day Adventist church again and took notes from the sermon. I used those notes to preach to my congregation on Sunday. The next week it was the same. Saturday night I went to sleep smiling at my brilliant idea to save work.

During the night, I awakened feeling a sudden sharp pain in my shoulder. I jumped up and turned on the light. I had been bitten by a snake. My wife and I frantically searched for the snake in our room, but we couldn't find it. My wife took me to the hospital, but we couldn't tell the doctors what kind of snake it was so they were not able to give me the right antivenom treatment. I lost consciousness, and the doctor thought I had died.

I was taken to the mortuary, and my brother brought a coffin. My family and friends started weeping over my body. After some time, someone touched me. Perhaps they felt warmth where the skin should have been cold, but they checked and found I still had a weak pulse. Excitedly, they rushed me into the hospital's intensive care unit.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 9:1–22*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Consider ways that the apostle Paul’s past life and experience helped shape his mission to the Gentiles.

Feel: Appreciate how the wonderful grace and forgiveness Paul experienced became the major force in his life, motivating his mission strategy and service.

Do: Recall God’s work in his or her life and recommit to being open to God’s leading.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Apostle Paul’s Call

A The apostle Paul could never forget the origins of His Christian journey on the Damascus Road. Why do you think he kept talking about it? How did it shape the rest of his life?

B How did Paul’s background as a Pharisee and respected Jewish leader help his Christian ministry? Did it hinder it in any way?

II. Feel: The Apostle Paul’s Passion

A Paul often “boasts” of the radical changes God has made in his life (for instance, *2 Cor. 11, 12*). Do you feel Paul boasts inappropriately? Do you ever boast of God’s work in your life?

B When you see the tremendous change in Paul from the “worst of sinners” to a great missionary, how does that make you feel? (*1 Tim. 1:12–16*). Do you see any parallels in your spiritual journey?

III. Do: Never Forget.

A Take regular time to reflect on your own spiritual history—the way that God has guided your life—and to pray that you will be open to His continuing leading for the future.

B Have you shared recently with someone else the difference Jesus has made to you? How does this type of witness impact your spiritual walk?

► **Summary:** The apostle Paul drew strength from his experience of God’s mercy and drew on his intimate knowledge of unbelievers to better communicate with them about Jesus.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 9:15, 16*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: There is no safer, more rewarding place to be than within the circle of God’s will. Having heard God’s call, Paul faithfully responded, and the world has never been the same since.

Just for Teachers: Paul was a mission powerhouse for the early church. He was a formidable organizer, strategist, and spiritual leader. Opposition seemed to shift him into high gear. Paul also seemed to relish the chance to engage with different philosophies and worldviews and to find ways to make the message of Christ known and understood in different contexts. On the other hand, his early life experiences had shaped him, making him humble and continually open to God’s leading. Today, examine the qualities that made Paul so effective in mission. But more important, prompt members of your class to consider: What more did Paul need beyond his innate abilities and obvious skills?

Opening Activity: Briefly review with your class the experience of the Old Testament prophet Jonah and then discuss together the parallels and differences between his experience and that of Paul. You should consider, for example, how both Jonah and Paul (then Saul) initially operated outside the will of God. Both were confronted by God; both carried a message from Him. Yet, the experience of each missionary was profoundly different. Concentrate especially on the difference between Jonah’s and Paul’s attitude toward people of different cultures and toward sinners in general.

Thought Questions: Why is our attitude toward people so critical in how we approach mission? Do we see nonbelievers primarily through the lens of their various faults and failings? Or do we first see them as struggling human beings, deeply loved by God? How can we learn to look at others through God’s eyes of compassion? How could our personal spiritual journey shape our witnessing approach and our attitude toward those we’re trying to reach?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: It’s easy to view Paul as a remote figure—a giant of the Christian church, a prodigy of intellect and leadership, incredibly

smart and driven, masterful in his method of communicating God’s message. In short, we think of him as someone far removed from us—in time, experience, and gifts. But Paul also was human, and Scripture provides many insights into the inner dynamics of Paul’s personal transformation into a missionary par excellence. Lead your class in exploring how an understanding of Paul the man can help us today in our mission task. How can trying to “get inside Paul’s skin” better help us to comprehend the foundational values that shape and drive mission?

Bible Commentary

I. The Power of Personal Experience *(Review 1 Corinthians 15:10 with your class.)*

There’s no underestimating the power of a personal testimony. Authentic personal experience makes our communication real and imbues it with power. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “by the grace of God I am what I am” (*1 Cor. 15:10, NIV*), and throughout his ministry he constantly and consistently refers to his own personal experience, especially the story of what happened on the road to Damascus.

Even though Paul had experienced God’s wonderful grace and forgiveness, he could never get over his sorrow for his past life. He remembered the zeal he had for “the traditions of my fathers” (*Gal. 1:14, NIV*) and could never forget “how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it” (*vs. 13, NIV*). He confesses to Timothy: “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man” (*1 Tim. 1:13, NIV*), “the worst of sinners” (*vs. 16, NIV*). And yet, rather than undermining the effectiveness of his mission, Paul’s testimony actually strengthens it. He stands open and vulnerable, a living testimony of the transforming grace that is the central topic of his preaching.

Consider This: Review 2 Corinthians 5:17–20 in light of Paul’s Damascus Road experience and his abrupt, radical transformation and subsequent zeal to preach the gospel. In what ways does this passage take on extra resonance in light of Paul’s conversion experience?

II. Church Gardening *(Review Acts 26:15–18 with your class.)*

With every fiber of his being, the apostle Paul felt a special call to share the good news with Gentiles. There were isolated examples of Gentiles

coming to Jesus, including Cornelius and his family. But the early church had no systematic program or plan for ministry to Gentiles. No doubt Paul had to prayerfully consider how to go about his mission and to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. It's significant that Paul went to Arabia for a period of time (*Gal. 1:17, 18*) to commune alone with God and prepare himself for ministry.

Although Paul used a variety of methods, the key to his mission approach was to start new groups of believers in strategic urban areas. Today we would refer to Paul as a church planter, but this doesn't fully capture his approach to establishing Christian communities. The biblical text reveals him as more of a "church gardener"—intent not just on planting the seed but watering it, pulling out dangerous weeds when necessary, and nurturing the plant into robust bloom. The book of Acts is fundamentally about church planting, and most of the apostle Paul's other writings are basically letters to build up and support new groups of believers that he had established.

Today, Paul's mission approach is just as important for us. Church planting is, after all, a biblical mandate. The Great Commission of Matthew 28 is a call to make disciples—not in isolation but within the context of groups of believers.

Ellen G. White wrote, "New churches must be established, new congregations organized."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 24. From our earliest days, church planting has been seen not as an optional extra but the accepted way that we go about our business as a church. It's a vital part of our Seventh-day Adventist heritage; our church has grown exponentially through the decades primarily because of church planting—intentional efforts to raise up groups of believers in new areas.

Studies show again and again that older, more established churches tend to struggle in attracting new members and nurturing new believers. Church plants tend to be more focused on the broader community, more attractive to unbelievers, and more dynamic in finding creative ways to reach into their communities with the love of Jesus. Today, every four hours a new Seventh-day Adventist church and many more companies and small groups are established somewhere in the world.

Thought Questions: In planning for mission, how much effort do we put into the nurture and discipleship of new believers? How does this effort compare to the amount we invest in the initial outreach event or program?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: In 1990, Foster Cline and Jim Fay wrote a book

called *Parenting With Love and Logic*, coining the phrase “helicopter parenting.” This refers to parents who micromanage their children’s every move to make sure they won’t hurt themselves in some way. For anxious parents it can sometimes be difficult to get the right balance between protection and independence. As the spiritual father of many new congregations, Paul was like a hovering parent, praying night and day for their welfare. This week we see Paul’s love and care for the congregations he had established, many right within the heart of paganism. Through his ministry, they had turned from their idols. Now they were alive in their new life in Christ.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ What are the advantages and disadvantages of spiritual “helicopter parenting”? How do we find the right balance for new believers? Is a bigger danger the “helicopter parenting” of established believers? Why, or why not?
- ❷ What leadership qualities especially stand out for you in the life of Paul?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Invite everyone to reflect on the lessons they’ve learned from Paul’s experience that may be relevant to their own lives. Are there aspects of our spiritual experience that perhaps God can use to help us be more effective witnesses? Do we feel inadequate? In the next activity, remind the class that God specializes in calling people for mission who don’t always feel up to the task. Emphasize that God always equips us with what we need to undertake the mission He gives us.

Activities:

1. Consider the following statement about the qualities an effective witness for God should possess. As a class, rearrange these qualities in order of their importance.

An effective witness must be a logical thinker, humble, an eloquent speaker, sensitive and tactful, a competent organizer, a good debater, authoritative, obedient to God, and a person of prayer.

2. Write out the following verses on separate pieces of paper and hand them out to the class. A big class can separate into groups to discuss their verse, or a small class can just have individual responses: *Isaiah 6:5–7*, *Luke 1:28–38*, *Exodus 4:10–17*, *Jeremiah 1:6–9*.

Ask the class to study their passage and identify each person’s reaction to God’s call and then share how God responded. Remind the class that when they feel inadequate for mission, that’s the way God prefers it.