

What is the story of Saul of Tarsus before he became the apostle Paul?

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of the apostle Paul. He is known worldwide as one of the greatest Christian missionaries. His inspired writings cover a large portion of the New Testament, and it is safe to say that he remains one of the most read authors in human history. His abrupt turnaround from zealous persecutor of Christians to one of Christianity's greatest proponents surely shaped the history of the early Christian church. But who was Saul of Tarsus before he became the apostle Paul? What do we know about his life prior to meeting Christ on the Damascus Road?

Saul of Tarsus was born in approximately AD 5 in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia (in modern-day Turkey). He was born to Jewish parents who possessed Roman citizenship, a coveted privilege that their son would also possess. In about AD 10, Saul's family moved to Jerusalem. Sometime between AD 15–20 Saul began his studies of the Hebrew Scriptures in the city of Jerusalem under Rabbi Gamaliel. It was under Gamaliel that Saul would begin an in-depth study of the Law with the famous rabbi.

There has been some debate over whether Saul was raised in Jerusalem or in his birthplace of Tarsus, but a straightforward reading of his own comments indicates that Jerusalem was his boyhood home (Acts 22:3). We know that Paul's sister's son was in Jerusalem after Paul's conversion (Acts 23:16), which lends weight to the idea that Paul's entire family had moved to Jerusalem when he was young.

It is quite possible that Saul was present for the trial of Stephen—a trial that resulted in Stephen becoming the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:54–60). The historian Luke tells us that Stephen's executioners laid their garments at the feet of Saul (Acts

7:58), who was in full approval of the mob's murderous actions (Acts 8:1). Saul later ravaged the church, entering the homes of believers and committing them to prison. Saul's anti-Christian zeal motivated him not only to arrest and imprison male Christians (the "ringleaders") but to lock up female believers as well (Acts 8:3).

Paul's post-conversion correspondence to various churches reveals even more about his background. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul describes himself as a Hebrew, an Israelite, and a descendant of Abraham (2 Corinthians 11:22). In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul says he was a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5).

While on his way to Damascus to arrest and extradite Christians back to Jerusalem, Saul was confronted by the very One whom he was persecuting (Acts 9:3-9; 22:6-11; 26:12-18). What followed was one of the most dramatic conversions in church history. Saul of Tarsus became the apostle Paul, an ardent missionary to an unbelieving world and a fine example of faithful service in the face of fierce persecution (Acts 14:19; 16:22-24; 2 Corinthians 11:25-26). Saul's education, his background as a Pharisee, his Roman citizenship, and his unflagging zeal all contributed to his success as a missionary, once those credentials and traits had been subjugated to the lordship of Christ.