

Who was Paul in the Bible?

There is much we can learn from the life of the apostle Paul. Far from ordinary, Paul was given the opportunity to do extraordinary things for the kingdom of God. The story of Paul is a story of redemption in Jesus Christ and a testimony that no one is beyond the saving grace of the Lord. However, to gain the full measure of the man, we must examine his dark side and what he symbolized before becoming “the Apostle of Grace.” Paul’s early life was marked by religious zeal, brutal violence, and the relentless persecution of the early church. Fortunately, the later years of Paul’s life show a marked difference as he lived his life for Christ and for the advancement of His kingdom.

Paul was actually born as Saul. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, a province in the southeastern corner of modern-day Tersous, Turkey, sometime in the first decade AD. He was of Benjamite lineage and Hebrew ancestry (Philippians 3:5-6). His parents were Pharisees—fervent Jewish nationalists who adhered strictly to the Law of Moses—who sought to protect their children from “contamination” from the Gentiles. Anything Greek would have been despised in Saul’s household, yet he could speak Greek and passable Latin. His household would have spoken Aramaic, which was the official language of Judea. Saul’s family were Roman citizens but viewed Jerusalem as a truly sacred and holy city (Acts 22:22-29).

At age thirteen Saul was sent to Judea to learn from a rabbi named Gamaliel, under whom Saul mastered Jewish history, the Psalms, and the works of the prophets. His education would continue for five or six years as Saul learned such things as dissecting Scripture (Acts 22:3). It was during this time that he developed a question-and-answer style of teaching known in ancient times as “diatribe.” This method of articulation helped rabbis

debate the finer points of Jewish law to either defend or prosecute those who broke the law. Saul went on to become a lawyer, and all signs pointed to his becoming a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court of 71 men who ruled over Jewish life and religion. Saul was zealous for his faith, and this faith did not allow for compromise. It is this zeal that led Saul down the path of religious extremism.

In Acts 5:27-42, Peter delivered his defense of the gospel and of Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin, which Saul would have heard. Gamaliel was also present and delivered a message to calm the council and prevent them from stoning Peter. Saul might also have been present at the trial of Stephen. He was present for his stoning and death; he held the garments of those who did the stoning (Acts 7:58). After Stephen's death, "a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1). Saul became determined to eradicate Christians, ruthless in his pursuit as he believed he was acting in the name of God. Arguably, there is no one more frightening or more vicious than a religious terrorist, especially when he believes he is doing the will of the Lord by killing innocent people. This is exactly what Saul of Tarsus was: a religious terrorist. Acts 8:3 states, "He began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."

The pivotal passage in Paul's story is Acts 9:1-22, which recounts Paul's meeting with Jesus Christ on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, a journey of about 150 miles. Saul was angered by what he had seen and filled with murderous rage against the Christians. Before departing on his journey, he had asked the high priest for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for permission to bring any Christians (followers of "the Way," as they were known) back to Jerusalem to imprison them. On the road Saul was caught in a bright light from heaven that caused him to fall face down on the ground. He

heard the words, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He replied, “Who are you Lord?” Jesus answered directly and clearly, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (verses 4-5). As an aside, this might not have been Saul’s first encounter with Jesus, as some scholars suggest that young Saul might have known of Jesus and that he might have actually witnessed His death.

From that moment on, Saul’s life was turned upside down. The light of the Lord blinded him, and as he traveled on he had to rely on his companions. As instructed by Jesus, Saul continued to Damascus to make contact with a man named Ananias, who was hesitant at first to meet Saul because he knew Saul’s reputation as an evil man. But the Lord told Ananias that Saul was a “chosen instrument” to carry His name before the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15) and would suffer for doing so (Acts 9:16). Ananias followed the Lord’s instructions and found Saul, on whom he laid hands, and told him of his vision of Jesus Christ. Through prayer, Saul received the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17), regained his sight, and was baptized (Acts 9:18). Saul immediately went into the synagogues and proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God (Acts 9:20). The people were amazed and skeptical, as Saul’s reputation was well known. The Jews thought he had come to take away the Christians (Acts 9:21), but he had in fact joined them. Saul’s boldness increased as the Jews living in Damascus were confounded by Saul’s arguments proving that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:22).

Saul spent time in Arabia, Damascus, Jerusalem, Syria, and his native Cilicia, and Barnabas enlisted his help to teach those in the church in Antioch (Acts 11:25). Interestingly, the Christians driven out of Judea by the persecution that arose after Stephen’s death founded this multiracial church (Acts 11:19-21).

Saul took his first of three missionary journeys in the late AD 40s. As he spent more time in Gentile areas, Saul began to go by his Roman name Paul (Acts 13:9). Paul wrote many of the New Testament books. Most theologians are in agreement that he wrote Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. These thirteen “letters” (epistles) make up the “Pauline Authorship” and are the primary source of his theology. As previously noted, the book of Acts gives us a historical look at Paul’s life and times. The apostle Paul spent his life proclaiming the risen Christ Jesus throughout the Roman world, often at great personal peril (2 Corinthians 11:24-27). It is assumed that Paul died a martyr’s death in the mid-to-late AD 60s in Rome.

So, what can we learn from the life of the apostle Paul? First, we learn that God can save anyone. The remarkable story of Paul repeats itself every day as sinful, broken people all over the world are transformed by God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. Some of these people have done despicable things to other human beings, while some just try to live a moral life thinking that God will smile upon them on the day of judgment. When we read the story of Paul, we are amazed that God would allow into heaven a religious extremist who murdered innocent women and children. Today, we might see terrorists or other criminals as unworthy of redemption because their crimes against humanity are just too great. The story of Paul is a story that can be told today—he isn’t worthy in our eyes of a second chance, yet God granted him mercy. The truth is that every person matters to God, from the “good, decent,” average person to the “wicked, evil,” degenerate one. Only God can save a soul from hell.

Second, we learn from the life of Paul that anyone can be a humble, powerful witness for Jesus Christ. Arguably, no other human figure in the Bible demonstrated more humility

while sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ as Paul. Acts 20:19 tells us that he “served the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to [him] through the plots of the Jews.” In Acts 28:31, Paul shares the good news of Jesus Christ: “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul was not afraid to tell others what the Lord had done for him. Paul spent all his days, from conversion to martyrdom, working tirelessly for the kingdom of God.

Finally, we learn that anyone can surrender completely to God. Paul was fully committed to God. In Philippians 1:12-14, Paul wrote from prison, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” Despite his circumstances, Paul praised God and continually shared the good news (see also Acts 16:22-25 and Philippians 4:11-13). Through his hardships and suffering, Paul knew the outcome of a life well lived for Christ. He had surrendered his life fully, trusting God for everything. He wrote, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Can we make the same claim?