**Introduction to Paul and Ephesus**

At Paul’s birth he was given the name Saul, in honor of Israel’s first king. He was born in the first century, a few years after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, to Jewish parents who happened to also be Roman citizens. Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, in an area that is now modern-day Turkey. Tarsus was a ‘university town’ known as a center of learning. Pythagoras spent time there, as did Parmenides, Zeno, and Democritus. Tarsus was a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-religion city. Jews, Greeks, and Romans all lived, worked and worshipped there. In the early years of the first century, Tarsus had a population of nearly 500,000, which means that from the beginning of his life, Saul lived and worked in an urban/city world. Paul understood the urban world!

At some point in his late childhood, Paul’s family moved to Jerusalem, or at least, they made many long-term visits to the Holy City. In Jerusalem, Saul becomes a student of the Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 5:33-42, 22:3), grandson and successor of Rabbi Hillel (60 BC – 20 AD), one of Judaism’s greatest thinkers and teachers. Saul was an excellent student, rising in the ranks of the scholarly Pharisees. He was in such a high position that when the first Christians were brought to trial, Saul was in a position to be able to cast votes for their punishment (Acts 26:10).

It is important to realize that Saul’s first response to the gospel of Jesus Christ was horror, not belief or joy. The Messiah crucified? No way! Heresy! Blasphemy! And then risen from the dead? Nonsense! So problematic did he find the gospel that he decided it must be stamped out. Those who preached such ‘blasphemy’ and ‘nonsense’ must be destroyed.

He was on his way to the city of Damascus to arrest disciples of ‘The Way’ and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and then punishment. Luke, the medical doctor, tells the story in his Acts of the Apostles. Around noon one day, “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him” (Acts 9:3). Saul fell to the ground. And he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). “Who are you, Lord?” Saul cried out. And the voice says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). And Saul became Paul, one of the greatest of all Christian thinkers and missionaries.

In that Damascus encounter, Paul discovered grace. He hated the name Jesus. He hated all who named the name Jesus. He was trying to erase the name from the pages of history. And yet, Jesus chose to love Paul; Jesus chose to love this man, to make Paul one of His chosen ambassadors (Eph. 6:20). Grace… Sheer Grace!

In that Damascus encounter, Paul discovered that Jesus is alive; the crucified One really is alive. The news from Jerusalem’s cemetery was not nonsense: Jesus is Risen! Paul discovered that Jesus is, therefore, Lord. Paul’s first word to Jesus is “Lord.” Paul knew the meaning of the word he used: *Kurios*. The word was used to refer to Rome’s Emperor, Caesar. *Kurios*, Lord: Jesus is Lord.

In that encounter, Paul discovered the wonder of being the church, “Why are you persecuting me?” Jesus asks him. Was Paul persecuting Jesus? He was threatening and harming disciples of Jesus. But, Jesus? Yes! What we do to Jesus’ disciples, we somehow do to Jesus. Jesus’ disciples make up Jesus’ body in the world. What we do to Jesus’ body, we do to Jesus.

From that day on the Damascus Road, Paul was a Jesus-captured man, a Jesus- apprehended man, a Jesus-enthralled man (Phil 3:7-14). And from that day, Paul was a Jesus-sent man.

Paul introduced himself the rest of his life as “Paul, an apostle of Messiah Jesus.” The word apostle meant, ‘sent one - one authorized by the sender to speak on his behalf.’ Paul the persecutor, the terrorist, becomes one sent by the *Kurios*, to speak the Messiah’s message to the world.

**Ephesus**

Ephesus was located almost four kilometers inland from the Aegean Sea, on the west coast of modern Turkey. Years before, it had been a seaport, but over the decades, silt from the Cayster river slowly forced people to move inland. At the time when the gospel arrived in Ephesus, it had a population between 225,000 – 250,000. From the beginning of the Christian era, believers have lived the gospel in urban centers.

Ephesus was called, ‘the first and grandest metropolis of Asia,’ ranking in importance in the Empire only behind Athens and Rome. It was the largest trading centre in Asia Minor, largely due to the fact that it was situated along major shipping routes. The so-called ‘Royal Road,’ linking East and West, went through the city bringing people from all over the world – people with all kinds of differing philosophical and religious perspectives. This city had a fabulous theatre, with a seating capacity of 24,000. It was so acoustically engineered that a speaker standing at a particular spot on the stage need only whisper to be heard by all 24,000.

The city also had a massive temple, built for the worship of the goddess Artemis, as the Greeks called her, or Diana, as the Romans called her. She was the goddess of sexual fertility, represented by a statue with many breasts. Her temple was larger than any modern-day football field and was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. It was the “largest building known in antiquity and was considered one of the seven wonders of the world.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Life in Ephesus ‘revolved around’ the temple of Artemis, who was spoken of as the ‘wife of Ephesus, the protectress and nourisher of the city.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Maybe this is one reason why Paul speaks so much of ‘temple’ in his letter to the Ephesians? And maybe part of the reason why he speaks of the relationship between Jesus and his church in terms of a husband and a wife?

Ephesus was especially known as a center for magical practices. The city was “obsessed with demons and magic.”[[3]](#footnote-3) People, therefore, spoke a lot about spiritual power. Indeed, the goddess Artemis was thought to be one of the most powerful of all deities and was sought out for defense against other opposing ‘powers’ and ‘spirits.’ Maybe this is why Paul speaks of ‘principalities powers’ in his letter to Ephesians?

Ephesians 1:18-19, “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.”

“Our struggle,” he reminds the Ephesians, “is not against flesh and blood,” not against other human beings, “but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the special forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

Ephesus was also the proud center of the so-called ‘Imperial Cult,’ the worship of the Roman Emperor. Worship of Caesar as a god was the glue that held society together; it permeated all levels of society.[[4]](#footnote-4) The city constructed another temple (between 11-13 AD) and dedicated it to the ‘Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of god’ who was worshipped as the warrior god who had imposed unity and order on the world. The rule of Augustus was thought to be so significant that the calendar needed to be changed. In 9BC, the Ephesian City Council voted to change the calendar to begin on Augustus’ birthday. It was claimed that Augustus had ended the time of suffering, and a city proconsul announced that Augustus had “restored the form of all things to usefulness.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The decree spoke of Augustus as a ‘savior,’ *soter* and as a ‘god,’ *theos*.

And his birthday was the ‘beginning of good tidings to the world.’ The word ‘good tidings’ is *euangelion*, or *evangel*, which we refer to in English as ‘gospel.’

However the people in Ephesus who came to faith in Jesus Christ will have a new understanding of ‘gospel’ a different ‘glad tidings.’ They will have a new understanding of power and authority, unity, and time.’

Paul and Ephesus

Paul lived and served in Ephesus on two different occasions. The first time in 52 AD was quite brief (Acts 18:19-21). The second time in 53-56 AD lasted about two and half years (Acts 19:1-22; 20:31). At first Paul taught and dialogued in the synagogue (Acts 19:8). But when he began to come up against ‘hardened hearts,” Paul worked out of ‘the school of Tyrannus’ (Acts 19:9). Apparently one of the Ephesian philosophers did not need his meeting room part of the day, and made it available to Paul. Luke tells us that Paul met with people in the Hall of Tyrannus, teaching every day for over two years. Paul worked as tent-maker in the heart of the city and then during the siesta (rest time) each day he would teach and disciple through the Scriptures.

During his 2.5 years stay in the city, many people were won to Jesus and His gospel. As a sign of their genuine conversion and intent to be Jesus’ disciples, people broke with the Ephesian obsession with magic and the occult. Many brought their magic and occult books and burned them in the public square. Luke says that they counted up the price of the books (equivalent in todays wages about 10,000,000 – quite a bonfire)! The gospel always starts confronting the idols of the day around which a city revolves.

Paul then left Ephesus. Two years later, he ended up in jail and lived as a prisoner for five years, first in Caesarea on the coast of Syria, and then, after a harrowing trip by sea, in Rome. From Rome, in 62 AD, Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, “I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles” (Eph. 3:1). “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Ephesians 4:1). Paul does not call himself a “prisoner of Caesar,’ but a ‘prisoner of the Lord, of Messiah Jesus.’

1. Harold W. Hoener, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentar*y (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Frank Thielman, Ephesians (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)