



“Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles”

Galatians 1:11–2:10; Acts 13:1-3, 13-41

From Saul to Paul. From Persecutor to Apostle.

And so we begin a long journey with the apostle Paul: his writings, the man, his mission. Paul was on a mission from God – to take the Good News about Jesus to the Gentile world. It didn't start that way for him.

Paul was born Saul in Tarsus on the southern coast of modern-day Turkey. It seems pretty clear that he grew up breathing the air of revolution and zealotry, for the Jews had labored under foreign oppressors for the best part of 500 years. Surely, the zealots thought, it was time for God to bring that to an end. Here is a bit from NT Wright on this:

That was the air breathed by the young Saul, growing up in the early years of the Common Era. The best guess has him a little younger than Jesus of Nazareth; a birth date in the first decade of what we now call the first century is as good as we can get. As for his family, we find later that he has a sister and a nephew living in Jerusalem; there may well have been more relatives there, although Tarsus was probably still the family home. Anyway, it was to Jerusalem that he went, most likely in his teens, his head full of Torah and his heart full of zeal. *Shema Yisrael, Adhonai Elohenu, Adhonai Echad*. One God, whose never-to-be-spoken Name was replaced in the great prayer by *Adhonai*, which went into the ubiquitous Greek as *Kyrios*. One God, One Torah; One Lord, One People, called to utter loyalty. And with that loyalty went the one hope, the Passover hope—freedom, especially freedom from the rule of foreigners. A whole new world, with Israel rescued from danger once and for all. A new creation. A new Eden.¹

We don't know much about Saul's upbringing, though we learn a bit about his family in the New Testament. We know his father was a Roman citizen. And we know from his life and writings that Paul was an intellectual giant and it is not surprising that he became a Pharisee and made his way to Jerusalem as a young man to study under one of the great rabbis of the day Gamaliel, who was, as NT Wright puts it a live and let live sort of Jew. That was not Saul!

The first time we encounter him, he is holding the cloaks for those who were stoning Stephen and saw Jesus as blasphemous and an affront to the temple and to the God of Israel. Saul sought to stamp it out with great zeal, which he admits himself in his letter to the Galatians. He was like a beast tearing through the community of believers in those first years after Jesus' death and resurrection . . . until he was met by Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). Saul becomes Paul – apostle to the Gentiles.

When telling some of his own story in Galatians, Paul does not dwell on the encounter but on its aftermath and his certainty that indeed he had been called by God. He had been changed by God. He had been transformed. So much so that he tended to keep to himself in the immediate years after his encounter with Jesus, heading into Syria and Arabia. And three years later heading back to Jerusalem, but only for a couple of weeks to spend time with some of the apostles. After this, Paul's story goes dark for a decade, until about AD 46 when Barnabas brings Paul to Antioch of Syria.²

One of the things you need to understand about Paul is that he very much believed that his gospel (truth) had been given to him by God and was not simply something taught to him by others. It was the direct revelation from God about the implications and the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.

In the late 40's (AD 47-48) Paul began a series of missionary journeys that would carry him around the eastern end of the Mediterranean for the next fifteen years. During these journeys, Paul would found and later pastor numerous Christian communities. The blessing for the Church is that some of his letters to these communities have been preserved. Indeed, they were copied and shared among the Christian communities in the 1st century, quickly being taken as sacred Scripture alongside the Hebrew Scriptures such as Genesis and Isaiah and the book of Psalms. The Christians saw in Paul's writings the apostolic truth of the Good News.

¹ Wright, N. T. *Paul* (pp. 34-35). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

² Antioch was one of the largest cities in the Roman empire at that time. It is not to be confused with the vastly smaller Antioch visited by Paul on his first missionary journey.

The first journey

Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, embarked on his first missionary journey. It took them from the south central coast of Asia Minor northward into the interior as told in Acts 13-14. Paul and Barnabas founded churches in places such as Derbe and Lystra. It was a difficult ministry, as Paul met stiff opposition. In Lystra, for example, Paul was stoned so badly that his attackers assumed him to be dead.



Paul in his own words

There is a lot of Scripture at the beginning of this study. I hope you will take the time to read it. In Acts 13, we get one of Paul's sermons on the first journey. It is a connect-the-dots message that leans heavily into the truth of Jesus, the resurrected Messiah. And, of course, the Galatians passage is taken from what is probably the oldest of Paul's that have been preserved for us. In the coming weeks, we will do more of this – hearing Paul in his own words.

The Conversion of Saul

In his excellent commentary, *The Message of Acts*, John Stott argues that Saul's conversion into the apostle called Paul was neither sudden nor compulsory. Stott rightly emphasizes that God prepared this zealous Pharisee for his encounter with Jesus. Could Saul really have glimpsed nothing of the truth of Christ? Could he have been unshaken by the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen? Rare is the person whose faith in Christ comes completely out of nowhere. God prepares us for the revelation of the Good News. Stott sums it up this way:

The cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads. Then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable

him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice, and self-centeredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves.

C. S. Lewis, whose sense of God's pursuit of him has already been mentioned, also expressed his sense of freedom in responding to God:

I became aware that I was holding something at bay or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous, but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say, 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, 'I am what I do.'³

³ From Lewis' book on his own conversion, *Surprised by Joy*