

A Brief Biography of St. Paul

By Mark Moore

It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact that Paul had on Christianity. His attacks on the church prompted the first missionary activities. His conversion and subsequent preaching transformed the Jewish messianic movement into a universal religion. His intellectual genius was embedded in his thirteen N.T. letters which became a cornerstone for church doctrine and polity. Next to Jesus, he stands as the greatest founder of Christianity.

I. Background

Saul was born in Tarsus (Acts 22:3) about the year zero. Thus he was a slightly younger contemporary of Jesus. His family apparently moved to the capital city of Jerusalem during his formative years of puberty, where he became a prize pupil of the great rabbi, Gamaliel (Gal 1:14). His parents raised him to be deeply orthodox. He was of the tribe of Benjamin and circumcised on the 8th day (Phil 3:5). He followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a Hebrew speaking Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3). He was also born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28) and was fluent in Greek language and culture (e.g. Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12), both of which he used to his advantage on his missionary ventures.

No one knows whether Saul was actually a member of the Sanhedrin. We can know, however, that he had influence with the Jewish rulers. He took charge of Stephen's stoning – the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:58), and subsequently he became the chief persecutor of the early church. With vicious rage, he invaded homes and synagogues, imprisoning and scourging both men and women (Acts 8:1-3; 22:4; 26:9-11; Gal 1:13). His reputation even preceded him over 100 miles away in Damascus where he arrived with letters of extradition from the High Priest (Acts 9:13-14).

II. Conversion

Suddenly Saul was blinded by a bright light at midday. He was both physically and spiritually knocked to the ground. After three days of fasting and prayer, God sent a certain Ananias to him to baptize him into Christ and inaugurate his ministry as Apostle to the Gentiles, approximately 35 C.E. (Acts 9:1-19; 22:16; Rom 11:13). After preaching in Damascus, he went to Arabia for the better part of three years where he received instruction directly from the Lord through revelations (Gal 1:17). This was apparently his apostolic training. Although we're not told what he did in Arabia, he obviously preached and planted churches and consequently irritated the king of Arabia who put a warrant out for his arrest (2 Cor. 11:42). Thus, after he returned to Damascus, he had to escape through a window in the wall and hot foot it to Jerusalem (Acts 9:25). Of course, it wasn't much better for him there. The apostles wanted nothing to do with him and would have ostracized him had it not been for the intervention of Barnabas (Acts 9:26-27). He only introduced Saul to Peter and James (Gal 1:18) before Jesus, through a trance, ordered him out of the city because of a Jewish plot to take his life (Acts 22:17-18). He escaped to Cilicia where he was silent for nearly 5 years.

III. Paul's Ministry

It was approximately the year 44 C.E. when Barnabas found Saul and enlisted him for the burgeoning work at Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). After Agabus predicted a famine in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul collected an offering for a massive relief effort for the Christian Jews. After delivering the assistance to Jerusalem, the two returned to Antioch with Barnabas' cousin, John Mark (Acts 12:25). Thus he was available to accompany the Apostles of Antioch (Acts 14:4), when the Holy Spirit prompted the leaders of the church to send them out (Acts 13:1-3). It was on this first tour that Saul's name was changed to Paul (Acts 13:9), most likely to relate better to his Gentile audiences, and to remind him that he was "little" (Paul means "dwarfish").

There are four notable missionary tours of Paul. The first encompassed Cyprus and Asia Minor, lasting from approximately 45-48 C.E. From this tour we read his model sermon to the Jews (Acts 13). The second tour took him to Macedonia and Achaia, accompanied by Silas, Timothy and Luke, among a

number of others who constantly joined him along the way (49-51 C.E.). It was from this period that we read Paul's classic sermon to pagans (Acts 17). The third tour took him to Ephesus in Asia Minor, as well as the churches he had previously established around the Aegean Sea (52-56 C.E.). From here we read Paul's sermon to Christians (Acts 20). His fourth missionary journey comes after his imprisonment (2 years in Palestine and 2 years in Rome). He apparently went to Spain and revisited many of his disciples in Crete, Ephesus, Macedonia and Rome. He was put in a dungeon about the year 67 and shortly thereafter was beheaded by Nero on the Ostian way, just outside of Rome.

His travels are characterized by a number of things: (1) Paul preached in synagogues first and then, when rejected, moves into the broader Gentile community. (2) He planted churches through preaching the gospel message of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and then established elders in the local congregation. (3) He targeted major metropolitan centers as strategic platforms for evangelism (Ephesus was the religious center, Athens the educational center, Corinth the commercial capital, and Rome the political epicenter). From these centers the gospel emanated out and planted satellite churches. (4) In nearly every major city, he left one of his associates to train leaders. He also added new personnel to his team and mentored them to become evangelists. (5) Paul never accepted money from churches he was planting. He worked as a tentmaker until gifts arrived from previous churches he had planted. Once he left a location, he expected the church to support his efforts with other church plants and frequently wrote letters of encouragement and/or rebuke to his churches. He also revisited most of the churches he planted. (6) He suffered immensely. His own countrymen beat him out of jealousy, the Gentiles beat him when he interfered with their financial gain. 2 Cor. 11:23-25 says, among other things, that he was imprisoned (cf. Acts 16:23; 21:11; 24:27; 28:30), flogged 5 times, beaten with rods 3 times, stoned once, shipwrecked three times. This was written c. 55 C.E. when Paul was still in Ephesus on the third missionary journey. Thus, this list does not include being attacked in Jerusalem (Acts 21:30-31), being strung up to be flogged (Acts 22:25), or being ship-wrecked for a fourth time (Acts 27). Furthermore, the material in Acts fails to mention any of the five floggings, two of the three times he was beaten with rods, nor any of the three shipwrecks. Likely much of this took place during the three years in Arabia and the five years in Cilicia. Needless to say, a great deal of Paul's biography and probably some of his letters have been lost.

There is one other incident of central importance to Paul. About 49 C.E., a group of Jewish legalists arrived in Antioch. They contradicted Paul's message of grace and argued that all Gentiles had to become Jewish through circumcision or their conversion to Christ was invalid. The issue escalated until it had to be settled by a council in Jerusalem, attended by Peter and presided over by James, Jesus' half-brother. Paul won . . . or should we say, grace triumphed? This indelibly marked the church. It was truly, now, an international body rather than a splinter Jewish sect.

IV. Paul's Theology

Grace in Christ is the key to Pauline theology. It is encapsulated in Galatians and expounded in Romans. It has two corollaries: (1) The supremacy of Christ. Paul unreservedly exalts Christ as the risen Lord, seated at God's right hand. He is creator, redeemer and judge. He is not merely the Jewish Messiah, he is God incarnate. (2) We are saved by grace through faith. All of our works are merely expressions of faith, not means of grace. As a result of these two corollaries, the body of Christ has certain obligations. Three stand out. First, we are to love one another as Christ loved us. This love is radical and absolute. Second, we are to become unified into one body in spite of our diversities. The church is the expression of Jesus' rule – the embodiment of his kingdom. This necessitates unity across racial, economic, and gender lines. Third, if we are truly united with God in Christ, then we will begin to look, act and speak like God. In short, accepting Christ leads to holiness of lifestyle. Paul's theology, then, encapsulates Jesus' two greatest commands: love God and love people. Furthermore, both achieved their aims via the life of the cross – self-abnegation and suffering was the key to their victorious lives.