

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 19 - Paul's Journey of Faith

Key Questions:

- Is Christianity relevant for educated people as well as uneducated people like Simon Peter?
- Can the message of Jesus really change people's lives?

Paul's Background

Paul was born probably some time between 1 and 10 AD in the city of Tarsus (Acts 21:39), which was the capital city of the region of Cilicia, situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the south of modern-day Turkey. Cilicia was part of the Roman Empire at that time. Paul's parents were pure-blooded Jews from the Tribe of Benjamin, and so they gave him the name Saul (the name of the first King of Israel, who was also from the tribe of Benjamin) and had him circumcised when he was eight days old as the Law required (Philippians 3:5). Saul was also a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:22-29), which means that his parents must also have been citizens (this probably also explains why he had two names, his Jewish name Saul and his Roman name Paul). Outside the city of Rome, only people who had a good social standing could become citizens, and so Saul's parents were probably quite wealthy.

Saul's family were Pharisees, members of a group who were very strict about obeying the Old Testament Law (Acts 23:6), and so it was not surprising that they sent him to Jerusalem (probably at age 13 or 14 years) to study the Jewish religion under the leading professor in the city, a man called Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Saul was trained to be a Rabbi, but also learned skills as a tent-maker (it was common for Rabbis to learn other skills so that they could support themselves financially if necessary). He was a very good student, and became one of the leading young Rabbis, full of passion to follow the Old Testament Law and Jewish religion (Acts 22:3, Galatians 1:14). Saul does not seem to have been in Jerusalem during the public ministry of Jesus, since he never mentions having been an eyewitness to His teaching or death. It seems likely that during these years he was somewhere else, perhaps back in Tarsus. However, he was in Jerusalem by later in 33 AD when the apostles were beginning to preach the good news about Jesus. His enthusiasm for the Jewish religion caused him to reject the new Christian teaching and become one of its strongest opponents. For this reason, Saul was one of the official witnesses at the execution of Stephen (Acts 8:1), and was afterwards chosen by the High Priest to be the leading persecutor of the Christians. He carried this mission out with his usual great passion, arresting men and women and even causing the death of some Christians (Acts 22:4&5).

SUMMARY: Saul was a very privileged person – from a wealthy background, highly educated in the leading University, a Roman citizen, and well-respected within Judaism. He was the equivalent of a modern-day upper-class person with a first-class honours degree from the University of Oxford.

Paul's encounter with Christ

On one occasion, Saul made a special journey to the city of Damascus in the Roman province of Syria (to the north of Galilee) to persecute the Christians there. The record of what happened during that journey is in **Acts chapter 9**, and we also have two records of Paul re-telling the story himself (in Acts 22:6-21 he told it to a crowd, and in Acts 26:9-18 he told it to King Herod Agrippa). The events were as follows:

- As Saul neared the city of Damascus at around midday, a light suddenly flashed around him. Saul fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying in the Aramaic language, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*"
- The voice also said, "*It is hard for you to fight against my will.*" This phrase suggests that beneath his outward appearance of unwavering loyalty to Judaism Saul had already begun to question in his heart whether the Christian message might be true. He had been struggling with this issue.
- Saul asked, "*Who are you sir?*" The voice replied, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting". It appears that as well as hearing the voice, Saul also saw the risen Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15:7).
- Jesus gave Saul a special mission to take the Christian message to the Gentile peoples (see Acts 26:16-18).
- Saul's companions saw the light and heard some noise, but could not understand the words spoken by Jesus.
- Jesus told Saul to go on into the city where he would receive further instructions.
- Saul could not see after his encounter with Jesus, but his companions led him into the city of Damascus
- In Damascus a Christian called Ananias came to Saul as God had told him to. After speaking to Saul, God used Ananias to restore his sight and then to baptise Paul.

The importance of this encounter in the life of Saul cannot be underestimated. From this time on his entire priorities changed and his life was transformed. The passion that he previously put into following the Jewish Law and persecuting Christians he now put into knowing Jesus more and serving Him. Paul later wrote about this in **Philippians 3:4-11**. There he lists all the things he used to be proud of and hoped would make him acceptable to God:

- He was a true Jew – descended from the tribe of Benjamin and circumcised on the eighth day (v5a)
- He did his best to obey the Old Testament Law – he was a Pharisee (v5b)
- He was very enthusiastic for his Jewish faith, even persecuting the church (v6a)
- If it had been possible to earn a good relationship with God then Paul would have done so (v6b)

After he became a Christian, however, his priorities changed. Now he realised that:

- Everything he had done was worthless compared to what Christ had done (v7)
- Knowing Jesus was the most important thing for him – worth more than everything else (v8)
- He knew that he could never earn forgiveness for his sins, but could only be saved by Christ through faith (v9)
- Life was now a relationship with Jesus living in the power that raised Him and with hope for the future (vv10-11)

SUMMARY: Becoming a Christian means trusting in Christ alone to forgive your sins and to lead you in your life. As a Christian, obedience to Him becomes more important than culture, education or career. For a Christian the number one priority is to do God's will. The Christian life is a relationship with the living Christ.

Paul becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul's great mission, which was given to Him by Jesus on the Road to Damascus, was to take the good news about Jesus to the Gentile people (see Acts 26:15-18). God used him to bring light to the Gentiles so that they too could share in the forgiveness of sins and be part of God's people (you can follow Paul's journeys in the *Maps* section, and a timeline of his life is found in the *Study Aids*). The Kingdom of God would be for all people from all nations (just as Jesus had said when He was on earth – Matthew 28:19). Paul was at the centre of the debate amongst the early Christians about whether the Gentile Christians should obey circumcision and other aspects of the Old Covenant. The apostles realised that God was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies that the Gentiles would be included in the Kingdom of God (e.g. Amos 9:11-15 and Acts 15:13-21). Paul's preached about the Kingdom of God (see Acts 28:30&31). He rejoiced that God had called Him to reach the Gentiles (see Romans 11:13 & Galatians 2:8), and he worked especially hard to bring Jewish and Gentile Christians together in the churches he worked with. He explained the role of the Law, which was to lead us until Christ came (Galatians 3:24-29) and to show people their sin and need of God's forgiveness (Romans 3:19&20). No one could be made right with God by keeping the Law. The Law no longer applies to Christians as we are set free by God's grace and have the Holy Spirit living in us to give us power to change.

Paul's message about Jesus

a) Preached to intellectuals in Athens

In **Acts 17:16-34** we read an example of how Paul explained the good news about Jesus to a group of Gentile intellectual scholars in the Greek city of Athens. It may be helpful for us in understanding this message today:

- **God is unknown to pagan cultures** – they worship many gods, but the Creator is unknown to them (v23)
- **God is the Creator and Lord over heaven and earth** – He gives life and all good things (v25)
- **God created all human beings** and has been guiding human history as King over all mankind (v26)
- **God is not far from us**, and wants people to know Him and worship Him (vv27-29)
- **God calls people everywhere to repent** – turning from their idols to worship Him (v30)
- **God has set a day when He will judge all people** in justice through Jesus (v31)
- **Jesus is the Saviour and Judge** – this was proved by God in His resurrection from the dead (v31)

The responses of the people of Athens were interesting – some mocked the message of the resurrection, others said they wanted to think about it and hear more, while others became believers in Christ! What about you? How will you respond?

b) Explained in his letter to the Romans

Romans is the most complete explanation of the Christian message in the Bible. It is worth reading and studying the whole book to understand how Paul explains the Good News about Jesus (the gospel). Romans 1:16-17 tells us Paul's attitude to the Gospel message:

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."

Paul was convinced that the message about Jesus was the only way for people to be made right with God and that faith was the only way to receive the gift of life. The message of the Gospel is true for everyone, whatever their culture or background. In the rest of the book of Romans Paul explains what the message is. We can summarise it by reading selected verses from the book:

1. GOD made us to know Him – Romans 1:20

God created the world and He has made it possible for people to know Him. He shows Himself to people through the world that He created (we can see God's power and learn something about what He is like from the orderly world He made). He has also spoken to us through the Bible and through Jesus Christ, His Son.

2. WE sinned against God – Romans 3:23

Sin means that we have rebelled against God and do what we choose rather than obeying Him. Sin has affected all human beings and means that we will die and will face God's judgement.

3. GOD sent Jesus to pay the price for our sin – Romans 5:8-11

Even though we have sinned, God still loved us and so He made a way for us to come back to Him. He sent Jesus to die for our sins so that we could be forgiven for our sins and have a new relationship with God.

4. WE must repent (turn away from our sin) and believe in Jesus – Romans 10:9-10

God's forgiveness and eternal life are offered to us as a free gift because of Christ's death, but if we are to receive them (to be saved) we must believe in Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord over our lives.

5. GOD gives new life to those who believe – Romans 8:1-4

When a person commits their life to God in faith He forgives them for their sins (there is no more condemnation), destroys the power of sin over them, and gives His Holy Spirit to them so that they can live life the way He wants them to. Christian living means a daily relationship with God in which they follow the Holy Spirit.

Key Lesson: Becoming a Christian changes a person's life completely

Paul was transformed by his encounter with the risen Jesus. Instead of being an enemy of the Church he now used his education and gifting to spread the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. The Christian message is relevant for all people from all cultures and races, and it gives us a new priority in life – to do God's will.