

## **Paul**

*One day I was on my way to Damascus with the authority and permission of the chief priests. About noon I saw a light brighter than the sun. It flashed from heaven on me and on everyone traveling with me. We all fell to the ground. Then I heard a voice say to me in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, why are you so cruel to me? It's foolish to fight against me!" "Who are you?" I asked.*

*Then the Lord answered, "I am Jesus! I am the one you are so cruel to. Now stand up. I have appeared to you, because I have chosen you to be my servant. You are to tell others what you have learned about me and what I will show you later."*

*The Lord also said, "I will protect you from the Jews and from the Gentiles that I am sending you to. I want you to open their eyes, so that they will turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then their sins will be forgiven, and by faith in me they will become part of God's holy people."*

*I obeyed this vision from heaven. First I preached to the people in Damascus, and then I went to Jerusalem and all over Judea. Finally, I went to the Gentiles and said, "Stop sinning and turn to God! Then prove what you have done by the way you live." Acts 26: 12-20*

## **Background**

Onesiphoros, a second century writer, shared a unique description of Paul:

*"Paul was a man rather small in size, bald-headed (shaved?), bow-legged, with meeting eyebrows, a large, red and somewhat crooked nose. Strongly built, he was full of grace, for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the countenance of an angel."*

We have no way of knowing if this Onesiphoros is related to the same person mentioned briefly in Second Timothy. His description of Paul is certainly consistent



*Ancient painting of Paul*

with ancient fresco paintings discovered in Roman catacombs (*example above*).

Paul started out in life a "Saul" which means "called" or "to be asked". He was the son of a devout Jew and described himself to be "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" from the tribe of Benjamin. After his conversion he was known as "Paul". The name is certainly consistent with Onesiphoros' description because it is Latin for "little" and was often used to describe the "runt" of the litter. Paul's use of the name shows a certain humility.

Paul was originally from Tarsus, one of the largest trade centers on the Mediterranean coast. The merchants were known for their love of their craft and investment in community (schools, roads, public health, and city beautification). Tarsus was widely known throughout antiquity as a university town. These local merchants made it happen by investing heavily in education by sponsoring scholars there from all over the Roman Empire to teach at this prestigious institution of higher learning. No expense was spared. Teachers came from Greece, Egypt, Rome and Africa as the school developed a world-class reputation.

Paul would have enjoyed an intellectual setting that studied Greek philosophy, rhetoric, law, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, geography, botany, athletics and theater. The Roman historian Strabo ranked Tarsus above the universities at Athens and Alexandria. Even Athenodorus, Caesar Augustus' teacher, had come from Tarsus.

The local mountains were also rich in lumber and minerals. The slopes were populated by huge herds of black goats. Their hair was woven into cloth used in quality cloaks and tents. Travelers, nomads, and armies all over the Mideast used these black tents of Tarsus. The fact that Paul was a tentmaker was certainly consistent with his city of origin. Rabbinical students often worked skilled jobs to finance their education.

Many influential families in Tarsus were granted Roman citizenship because of past loyalty to the empire. Paul inherited this freedom and the special privileges that came with it. Paul had the unique mix of Jewish, Roman, and Greek background that would prepare him for his special mission in life.

Probably at the age of eighteen Paul went to Jerusalem to study theology under Gamaliel, a famed member of the Sanhedrin. This Gamaliel the Elder was the grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel. Gamaliel was also the son of Rabbi Simeon (it is highly questionable whether this was the same Simeon at the presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple). Gamaliel was the first rabbi to bear the title "Rabban" which means "our Master or Great One". Only seven men in Jewish history have ever received that title. Paul must have been an exceptional student to study with such a respected teacher.

Gamaliel the Pharisee was the original compassionate conservative. He was a kindly man that taught tolerance for different people and cultures. Gamaliel's nickname was "The Beauty of the Law". He would have taught Paul respect for the law tempered with a deep concern for the needs of people.

Ever the ambitious man, Paul was an acknowledged defender of Judaism by the age of thirty. He punished Christians with a passion. Many Christians fled Jerusalem and Paul was empowered to pursue them all the way to Damascus. On the journey he was blinded by a light from heaven and fell to the ground hearing Jesus ask "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Conversion is an oft-used word for his transformation but Paul himself called it "a revelation" (Galatians 1: 16) and "a new creation" (II Corinthians 5: 17). Paul may have never seen Jesus in the flesh but he maintained that he had witnessed the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul's turn about in life is story that continues to happen to people to this day.

At the heart of Paul's conversion was the foundation of the Christian teaching of "justification by faith" rather than works. This salvation was brought about through the miraculous power and abundant mercy and love from God alone. Paul became first a Christian and then later an apostle. He spent the rest of his life as a living sacrifice as a thank offering for this gift from God.

At first members of the early church were suspicious of him but ultimately he spent time with Peter and Barnabas became his sponsor and champion. Together Barnabas and Paul ministered to the people in Antioch and then traveled 1,400 miles to share the good news about Jesus Christ.

At times Paul had a short fuse. He sarcastically condemned those who tried to change Christ's message. He refused to let John Mark have a second chance after he abandoned the first missionary journey. Later the two would reconcile. Paul knew the inner peace and joy of being "in Christ." "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Philippians. 4:12-13).

Paul was willing to take risks. His ministry on Mars Hill enabled him to creatively engage people from a different culture and religion. There were few converts in Athens but it helped prepare him for a resounding success in Corinth. Paul had no guarantees when he embarked on the missionary journeys but trusted in God to provide the victory.

Paul was accustomed to conflict and tension. He challenged those who would threaten the foundations of the faith. He lived his life as a Jew, Christian, Roman citizen, and student of Greek culture. Martin Luther would later sum up that Paul's letters acknowledge the tension that exists between being a "sinner" and a "saint" at the same time. Paul regularly phrased things in terms of their opposites: flesh versus spirit, faith versus works, and grace versus merit.

Paul had a great gift for making friendships. Romans 16:1 includes a remarkable list of twenty-seven friends and

acquaintances. His letters begins with the greeting “grace and peace be unto you” and concludes with long lists for colleagues in mission and ministry.

Paul knew his own limitations. He referred to the work of Christians as “treasures in earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7-11). He admitted at times we are like “cracked-pots” for the Glory of God.

Eusebius, the fourth century Bishop and “Father of Church History” wrote that Paul was taken to Rome and killed during Nero’s persecution in 67 A.D. Tertullian, in the second century, wrote that Paul was beheaded and not crucified because of his Roman citizenship. Paul had run the good race and Christ was now and evermore the victor.

### **Reflections**

Paul was God’s agent of change. The early Christian church had become comfortable in Jerusalem and enabling slow and gradual growth. Jesus spoke to Paul and the Spirit empowered his ministry. He helped the church to see new opportunities for evangelism to share the Good News with all people in all nations.

Paul was far from perfect. He could be abrupt, sarcastic, authoritative, and intimidating. Paul is also an example of God’s power to change. Paul’s life completely reversed, and he dedicated himself to sharing these messages of forgiveness, grace, righteousness, justification, faith, salvation, and love.

**Paul was transformed.** He referred to this conversion as “a revelation” (Galatians 1:16) and “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul may have missed seeing Jesus in the flesh but he witnessed the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul’s salvation was made possible by the power of God’s grace. He called this “justification by faith.” His ministry was an ongoing journey in that faith:

- Members of the early church were initially suspicious of Paul. Later he spent time with Peter. Barnabas became his sponsor and

together they ministered to the people in Antioch and then traveled 1,400 miles to share the Good News.

- At times Paul did have a short fuse. He sarcastically condemned those who changed Christ's message. He was passionate for the sake of the Gospel. He refused to give John Mark a second chance.
- Paul had a great gift for making friendships. One chapter has a remarkable list of twenty-seven friends and acquaintances (Romans 16).
- Paul knew his own limitations. He referred to the work of Christians as "treasures in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7-11). He admitted at times we are like "cracked-pots" for the Glory of God.
- Paul was willing to take risks. His ministry on Mars Hill (Acts 17) was a creative way to engage people from a different culture and religion.
- Paul celebrated the inner peace and joy of being "in Christ." "I can do all things 'in him' who strengthens me" (Philippians. 4:12-13).
- Church historian Eusebius wrote that Paul was taken to Rome and killed during Nero's persecution in 67 A.D. Paul had run the good race and Christ was forever the victor.

We conclude this chapter with a selection of scripture from Paul's own hand. It speaks of God's never ending care for all of us.

*What can we say about all this? If God is on our side, can anyone be against us? God did not keep back his own Son, but he gave him for us. If God did this, won't he freely give us everything else? If God says his chosen ones are acceptable to him, can anyone bring charges against them? Or can anyone condemn them? No indeed! Christ died and was raised to life, and now he is at God's right side, speaking to him for us. Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death?*

*In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love--not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!*

Romans 8: 31-39

A man who traveled thousands of miles through hostile areas to share the Gospel wrote these words. He was ridiculed, arrested, beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and finally martyred. Through it all he saw the abiding care of God in his life. The last thing that Jesus said to his followers was "I will be with you always, even until the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

### **Strength Finders talent: WOO**

<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252359/woo-theme.aspx>

Woo is short for "Winning Others Over". Paul had a gift for communicating with others. He also had ability to establish many meaningful friendships. In one letter alone he great some 27 of his old friends and helps introduce them to more friends. Review the quote below...

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Paul was not a fashion model but he was filled with grace and an countenance of an angel. People listened to him. Lives were changed. On his travels he was once compared to Mercury who was the special messenger of the divine ones. Paul used his gifts to win others over to God.

### **Enneagram connections: Three**

Paul was someone who was inherently dedicated to success. He did so as protector of the "old ways" as he supervised the stoning of Stephen. After his transformation, Paul dedicated himself to the Gospel. He worked hard for success. Often he had the perseverance to travel long distances through hostile environments.

Paul's writing celebrates his success in winning overs to Christ. He said; "I have run the good race" and deserve a "stephanie" or the crown of leaves they would give to victors in battle or during Olympic games.

<https://cpenneagram.com/enneagram-type-three>

When I was Saul, and sat among the cloaks,  
My eyes were stones; I saw no sight of heaven,  
Open to take the spirit of the twisting Stephen.  
When I was Saul, and sat among the rocks,  
I locked my eyes, and made my brain my tomb,  
Sealed with what boulders rolled across my reason!  
When I was Saul and walked upon the blazing desert  
My road was quiet as a trap.  
I feared what word would split high noon with light  
And lock my life, and try to drive me mad:  
And thus I saw the Voice that struck me dead.  
Tie up my breath, and wind me in white sheets' anguish,  
And lay me in my three days' sepulcher  
Until I find my Easter in a vision.  
Oh Christ! Give back my life, go, cross Damascus,  
Find out my Ananias in that other room:  
Command him, as you do, in this my dream;  
He knows my locks, and owns my ransom,  
Waits for Your word to take his keys and come.  
Thomas Merton, 1915-1968