

Study 1: The Journey Begins (c. AD 35-45)

Key verses

'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.'
(Acts 22:1-5a)



Aelbert Cuyp, Conversion of Saul, 1645

a) The background to Paul's journey

(Read Philippians 3:4b-6, Acts 18:1-3, Acts 22:1-5a, 25-28)

Paul (or Saul as he was previously known) was a Greek-speaking Jew born in Tarsus, now a city in south-central Turkey but an important stopping place for traders during the time of the Roman Empire. Paul was also a Roman citizen, a highly prized right and possibly a reward for one of his ancestor's loyal services to a Roman administrator. It would, in time, prove to be a very useful privilege.

Paul was possibly not a man of wealth, as he worked as a tentmaker to finance his mission, which helped make valuable contacts on his journeys. Growing up, he was a member of the Pharisees, a devout religious mix of both scribes and laypeople that was flourishing at that time.

The Pharisees were devout students of the Hebrew Bible, upholders of the Jewish Law, believers in life after death and accepting some non-biblical traditions as an important part of

their faith. Paul mentions this in Galatians 1:14, 'I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.'

Paul's teacher in his early years was the well-respected Gamaliel, who later helped when the Apostles were facing danger (Acts 5:34-39). Paul was also familiar with Greek and Stoic philosophers.

For much of the first half of his adult life, Paul readily admitted to persecuting the fledgling Christian movement. At the time, it was the high priest and the Sadducees who were the chief persecutors, rather than the Pharisees, but Paul had reasoned that this new movement was potentially disruptive and dangerous, and needed stamping out before it got out of control.

Q) Paul had all the qualifications for being at the forefront of an anti-Christian movement. Did your own background aid, or make more difficult, your personal journey of faith?

Q) Would Paul's background have suggested he could, one day, become a Christian missionary?

Q) How easy do you find it to engage with the Bible, and particularly the more ancient writings in the Old Testament that Paul was so familiar with?

Sample

b) The turning point

(Read Acts 22:5b-21, Galatians 1:11-12, 1 Timothy 1:15-16)

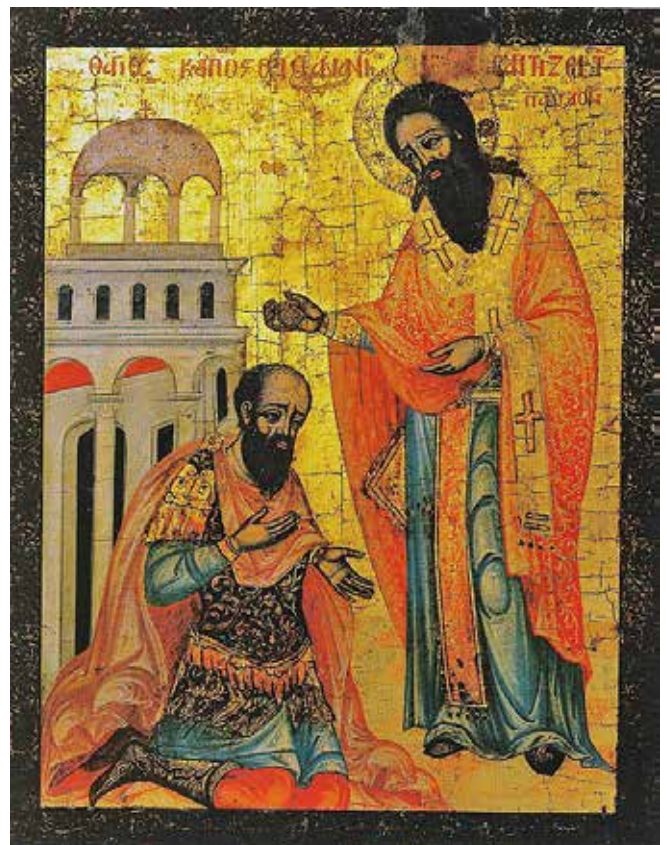
Paul presents a potted history of his conversion following his arrest in Jerusalem, reminding those who were encouraging Roman soldiers to lock him up that they were talking about someone who had been more jealous in upholding the Jewish faith, before his conversion, than many who were now opposing him.

The story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is a precis of that in Acts 9. He is insistent that this change in his life was not of his own doing or imposed on him by others (emphasised in his letter to the Galatians). It was a heavenly confrontation with the risen Jesus of Nazareth that transformed and gave Paul a new understanding of everything Jewish in his life.

Paul, being a good Jew, follows God's instruction to go to Damascus where his sight is restored, and Ananias, also a devout Jew, is chosen for this role. He delivered God's message and encouraged Paul to be baptized and have his sins washed away.

From Paul's letter to Timothy, we know he was aware of the sins of his past life as a persecutor of Christians. No doubt the memory of Stephen being stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60) was still fresh in his memory.

Paul returns to Jerusalem and, whilst at prayer in the temple, discovers the focus of his calling, to be a witness not to the Jews, who would oppose him, but to the Gentiles.



C18 Icon, Baptism of Paul the Apostle

Q) Paul's conversion experience was spectacular, far more so than most of us will have experienced. Did it have to be so for a man like Paul? How does it compare with your own turning point?

Q) Paul had expected that his calling would be to witness to the Jews, the people he knew best, but God had a different plan. Looking back on your own life, was the path God led you toward one that you expected?

Q) Paul says, 'I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life' (1 Tim 1:16). How does this speak into your own experience?

c) Paul's early travels

(Read Acts 9:19-30, Galatians 1:13-24, Acts 11:25-26)

Some things are important and need restating. In writing Acts, Luke includes three passages that specifically relate to Paul's conversion and defend his calling to preach to the Gentiles (in chapters 9, 22, and 26), which the Jews fail to understand. The emphasis again is very much that this call was directly from Jesus Christ and no other source, so Paul had no choice but to obey.

There are discrepancies between Luke's words and Paul's own explanation of the early days of his calling in a letter he sent to the Galatian church, where he mentions travelling to Arabia before spending time in Jerusalem, and then moving on to Caesarea, Syria, and Cilicia. One explanation might simply be that Luke joined the team later and was therefore not so familiar with some of Paul's earlier movements.

But the emphasis is also different. To Paul, it was vital that the Galatians understood his mission was a direct result of the vision of Jesus, and the calling that followed. He was at no point relying on human wisdom or advice. By way of contrast, Luke wanted to emphasise both the heaven-ordained nature of Paul's conversion and the genuine Christian message he proclaimed in the Damascus synagogues,

calling Jesus 'Son of God' – which led to anger and persecution from the Jews, who were unable to reconcile this 'Saul' with the one they had previously known.

The second reading from Acts has an enthusiastic Barnabas reaching out to Paul in Tarsus, looking for help in his own mission work in Antioch. Many believers had fled there and into Phoenicia and Cyprus, due to persecution following the stoning to death of Stephen. The church in Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to encourage them and preach to the Greeks also, 'telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus' (Acts 11:20).

Paul and Barnabas worked together with the local church for a year, and it was in Antioch that the believers were first referred to as Christians (Acts 11:26).

Sample

Q) How important is it for us, as we read our Bibles, to understand the context in which the words were written, and what was included or left out of the message?

Q) Does Paul spending time in Arabia for a while before really engaging with the apostles in Jerusalem seem like a wise move, and if so, why might that be?

Q) Barnabas was quick to see the potential in Paul, despite his past record as a persecutor. But put yourself in the place of the apostles hearing what had happened on the road to Damascus, and how comfortable would you be in embracing this 'new convert'?

Paul on a theme of 'calling'

'He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.' (2 Timothy 1:10)

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.' (Hebrews 12:1-2)

'As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' (Ephesians 4:1-6)

'With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.' (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12)

A thought for prayer

Pray for all those who feel called to the mission of sharing the Good News, whether through the local church or within the community, finding new ways of 'being church'.