

## CHAPTER 3

### EARLY LIFE, CONVERSION, EARLY MINISTRY

Basically, the outline we will follow for the life of Paul is that of Frank J. Goodwin, *Harmony of the Life of St. Paul*. However, there will be some adjustments and changes.

#### Influence of background

There were three basic strains that contributed to Paul's character and work as the Apostle to the Gentiles:

- 1) Born and reared in Tarsus, a busy, cosmopolitan trading center (Acts 21:39)

Gave him interest in and familiarity with people all over the Mediterranean world, a world outlook, and an appreciation for the potential of evangelizing the great cities.

- 2) Born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28)

Gave him protection and encouragement during his travels and confrontations with Jews and pagans; encouraged him to take the gospel to Rome, and around the empire.

- 3) Born, reared, and trained as a strict Jewish Pharisee (Phil 3:5)

Gave him a detailed knowledge of the OT, a love for Israel and its promises, zeal for truth, a sense of self-sacrifice, a concern for Jews of the Diaspora, a sense of unity of the church—Jew and Gentile.

[For an interesting article showing how the Western Diaspora was different from and nearly isolated from the rabbinic traditions of Judea and the Eastern Diaspora, see Doron Mendek, "Why Paul Went West," *BAR* 37:1 (Jan/Feb 2011): 49-54, 68.]

#### Training and Education

## 1) Name

In the book of Acts Paul is known as Saul. Roman citizens normally had three names: the *praenomen* (first name), the *nomen gentile* (family name), and the *cognomen* (additional name or surname; see F. F. Bruce, *NT History*, p. 235). Saul would have been Paul's "Jewish" name, in memory of the first king of the Jews. Paul was his "Roman" *cognomen*, which he later naturally used in his ministry to the Gentiles. We do not know what Paul's other two Roman names were. The transition from Saul to Paul in the book of Acts takes place during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:9).

## 2) Language

Saul was well versed in Greek (Acts 21:37), as the language of the empire, especially outside of Judea. On the other hand, the phrase "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Phil 3:5) indicates he spoke Hebrew and/or Aramaic in his home (cf. Acts 22:1), being brought up knowing the Jews' native tongue. This fluency in both languages was important in linking the OT and NT in his theology.

## 3) Early training

Saul probably learned from his parents and from the synagogue school the Hebrew OT, and a basic zeal for his faith.

## 4) Later training

Saul then traveled to Jerusalem where he became a disciple of the famous Jewish teacher Gamaliel the Elder, who was the most prominent rabbi of the time (Acts 5:34; 22:3). Gamaliel was the chief disciple of the famous Hillel, and seems to have been a kind and moderate, if demanding, teacher. His reasonable approach to the Christians was quite a contrast to the persecuting zeal of his pupil Saul.

## 5) Contact with Jesus?

If Saul was converted in A.D. 36, as a young man, he might have been in Jerusalem in A.D. 27-30, the years of Jesus' public ministry. If so, it is possible that he heard or saw Jesus personally. However, he never makes such a claim in his epistles (for 2 Cor 5:16 in the KJV and NKJV ["know"], cf. in the NIV and ESV ["regard"]), but rather relies on his seeing the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. He certainly seemed to know about the early Christians, and may have studied some of their teachings, which he sought to combat.

## **Saul the persecutor**

Paul often spoke and wrote about his persecuting the church (Acts 22:4-5, 19-20; 26:9-11; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13-14, 23; Phil 3:5-6). Paul said he was “obsessed” against the Christians, although he hated them from ignorance, not simple malice (Acts 26:11; 1 Tim 1:13).

According to Acts, he was the primary mover of that early persecution; and his conversion made a visible difference in the welfare of the church (Acts 8:1-3; 9:31). It is not certain that he was an actual member of the Sanhedrin, as some translate Acts 26:10 (“I gave my vote against them” in NASB, NIV, NKJV, NLT, ESV; “I gave my voice against them” in KJV). Probably he simply approved of the persecution policy initiated by the Sanhedrin, his agreement being equally reprehensible morally.

In one sense, Saul’s persecutions against the church were to be partially atoned for by his own sufferings for Christ:

“But the Lord said to Ananias, ‘Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*’“

—Acts 9:15

Of course, the most famous scene is his holding the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:57 - 8:1). Perhaps Stephen’s gracious words seeking forgiveness for his murderers were still sounding in Paul’s ears when he repeated a similar prayer at the end of his life: “At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them” (2 Tim 4:16).

## Saul’s conversion

- Original account: Acts 9
- Retold to the Jerusalem Jews: Acts 22
- Retold to Herod Agrippa II: Acts 26

The conversion of Paul is one of the great events of human history. It was accomplished very quickly, with probably some background in Saul’s thoughts and conscience (cf. Rom 7:7-13). Saul immediately recognized Jesus as his Lord and Savior, and from that time served him totally.

The historicity and accuracy of the Acts account is confirmed by careful study. See the classic article by Lord Lyttelton (1709-1773), “Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of Saint Paul.”

Note also Goodwin, Appendix 1; F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [hereafter *Paul*], ch. 6.

Paul saw his conversion and the appearance to him of Jesus and the ministry of Ananias as crucial to his calling and place in the Christian church (note the passages in Goodwin, pp. 21-25).

## Saul in Damascus

- Baptism by Ananias--
  - ◆ Original account: Acts 9:10-19
  - ◆ Retold to Jerusalem Jews: Acts 22:12-16

It is interesting that Paul emphasized to these Jews his own connection with the “orthodox” Ananias. Such men were respected by even the non-Christian Jews; cf. James the brother of Jesus.

- Preaching right away in synagogues in Damascus (Acts 9:20; cf. v. 22)

“Jesus, that he is the Son of God [=Messiah]”

During this period Saul spent some time in the wilderness in Arabia (Gal 1:17). Probably he needed to meditate, study, and think. He needed to restructure his doctrine of Christ and the church, and to know God’s will for himself. He says he returned to Damascus and resumed his preaching. The total period lasted three years (Gal 1:18).

Some have suggested that it was during Saul’s time in Arabia that he saw the heavenly vision he described in 2 Cor 12:2-8. Such visions were sought by Jewish mystics (F. F. Bruce, *NIC on Colossians*, new ed., pp. 23-26). Paul was given this privilege by God by the grace of Christ, not because of his personal merit or obedience to the law.

Paul’s ignominious departure from Damascus in a basket is one example of his persecutions and humility as a Christian preacher (Acts 9:23-26; 2 Cor 11:32-33). As noted before, this event can be dated approximately through the reign of Aretas IV as A.D. 37-40 (see above, under the Chronology of Paul, p. 3).

## First visit to Jerusalem

- Account in Acts 9:26-30
- Retold to Jerusalem Jews: Acts 22:17-21
- Retold to Galatians: Gal 1:17-20

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, the disciples were reluctant to receive him. It took the efforts of Barnabas (later to be Saul's companion on his first missionary journey) to convince them of Saul's sincerity. Note the high reputation of Barnabas in the Jerusalem church (Acts 4:36-37).

In Galatians Paul declares that Peter was the only apostle he met there, and that the only other prominent person was James the brother of Jesus. He reports that this visit was only 15 days long. Paul shows by these facts that he did not receive his doctrine or his apostolic commission from the twelve apostles, but directly from God.

In Acts 9 we read that the danger of persecution led Saul to leave Jerusalem and return to his home. Yet in Acts 22 Paul reported that he saw a vision in the temple warning him to flee. As in other times in Paul's life, both his own sanctified reasoning and God's revelation to him agreed in pointing the way for his activities and travels.

## **Years of ministry at home**

According to our chronology, Saul remained in and around his home city of Tarsus A.D. 38-45, about seven years. The NT mentions this time only briefly (Acts 9:30; Gal 1:21-24). It says he "preached the faith which once he destroyed" in Syria and Cilicia, the region around the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea.

It seems likely that it was during these years that Saul endured many of the beatings, imprisonments, and other persecutions and hardships which he refers to in 2 Cor 11:23-26. Most of them are not talked about in the book of Acts.

God used this time in Saul's life to develop his character, his ability as a teacher and preacher, and his knowledge of Scripture. By the end of this period, Saul was ready to become a leader in the church, and then the leader of Gentile Christianity.

## **Called to the church in Antioch**

Acts 11:19-21 explains how Christianity bridged the gap to the Gentiles in far-off Antioch, in Syria. In this case the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to investigate. Finding the church thriving, but many members in need of basic teaching, coming from a pagan background, Barnabas thought of Saul, in relatively nearby Tarsus. He went there and recruited him.

One year they spent there together, and God blessed the work (Acts 11:20-26). It is notable that the term "Christian" was given to the disciples there by the non-Christian population. Coming from a Greek culture and religious background, they did not think of the name Christ as a title (=Messiah), as the Jews would have done. Of course, the Jews would not have chosen that name to identify the disciples. They preferred the name "Nazarene," which did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 24:5).

## Second visit to Jerusalem (“famine visit”)

One of the gifts evident in the NT church was that of prophecy. A group of these prophets came to the Antioch church from Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). Agabus was one of them; he at a later time prophesied to Paul about Paul’s coming imprisonment (Acts 21:10-11). Agabus predicted world-wide famines, which would also affect Jerusalem.

Acts 11:28 says that this famine struck in the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54). Roman historians mention various famines throughout the empire during Claudius’ rule. Josephus states that there was a severe famine in Palestine during the procuratorship of Fadus (A.D. 44-46), and that it became worse under that of Alexander (A.D. 46-48; *Antiquities of the Jews* 20:2:5; 20:5:2). Thus we can date this famine probably during the period A.D. 44-48. According to our chronology, the famine visit took place in the summer or fall of A.D. 46.

In a beautiful expression of Christian fellowship, the Antioch church determined to help, and sent Barnabas and Saul with an offering to the elders in Jerusalem. This was Saul’s second visit to Jerusalem as a Christian.

According to many conservative NT scholars, this visit to Jerusalem is the one described in Gal 2:1-10. Traditionally, the Gal 2 visit has been equated with the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. There are convincing arguments on both sides. This question will be discussed later in the notes.

Nothing is said in Acts about how this offering was received, but we may assume the Jerusalem saints received it joyfully and with appreciation.

According to Acts 12:25 Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, taking young John Mark with them. Sandwiched between their coming to Jerusalem and their return, Luke has inserted an account of the rule and death of Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great and son of Aristobolus (Acts 12:1-24). He introduces the account with the words “about this time.” Actually, Herod died in A.D. 44, two years before the famine visit. It seems that Luke has inserted the account here in order to bring the readers up to date regarding events in Jerusalem, since that city has now been brought back to the readers’ attention, and to introduce the readers to John Mark.

For the career of King Herod Agrippa I, see F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 242-43. Herod ruled the whole territory of Palestine for three years, dying of a terrible disease during special games held after the spring of A.D. 44 (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 19:8:2; Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. by Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar, 1:452, n. 43).

Herod had already killed James the brother of John, and had imprisoned Peter. After Peter’s miraculous escape from prison he apparently left the city or went into hiding (Acts 12:17). It is possible that the famine delegation did not meet Peter or the other apostles in Jerusalem,

according to the traditional view; the Acts record mentions only the “elders.” If Gal 2 is speaking of this visit, then they took Titus with them and they did meet Peter, John, and James the brother of Jesus.

The young John Mark went back with them to Antioch (Acts 12:25). He was to accompany Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary journey. Summary of information on John Mark:

- Was cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10)
- Perhaps the young man in Mark 14:51-53 (not recorded in other gospels)
- Had a house in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12)
- Taken with Barnabas and Paul to Antioch after their famine visit to Jerusalem (Acts 12:25)
- Went on their first missionary journey, deserted the mission (Acts 13:5, 13)
- Traveled home to Jerusalem and back to Antioch
- Caused the quarrel which divided the second mission (Acts 15:37-39)
- Went with his cousin Barnabas to Cyprus (Acts 15:39)
- Was reconciled to Paul and was with him during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment (Col 4:10; Phlm 24)
- Was active with Peter in “Babylon” (probably Rome; 1 Pet 5:13)
- Was with Timothy in Ephesus, sent for by Paul during Paul’s second Roman imprisonment (2 Tim 4:11)
- Wrote the Gospel of Mark, based on the preaching of Peter

For a good study of the life and work of Mark, see A. T. Robertson, *Making Good in the Ministry* (1918).