

*Paul's Life and Ministry***Introduction**

Lesson 6 continues our study in Acts. In Lesson 5 we learned that Acts 1:8 serves as an outline of the book. Jesus' final commission to His followers was, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria." We briefly discussed the first two movements in Lesson 5, and in this lesson we focus on the third movement, "You will be my witnesses in all the world." Luke tells that part of the story in Acts 13–28.

The key character in these chapters is Paul the apostle. He was introduced to us in chapters 9 and 11, but in chapters 13–28 Luke shifts his attention to Paul and his work among the gentiles.

I. Paul, the Person**A. Key Biographical Passages on Paul**

Before we look at the details of Paul's work, let's see who he was as a person. Who was this man who became the focus of Luke's attention in Acts 13–28? There are a few key biographical passages that provide information about Paul. Acts 9 describes his amazing conversion experience and his call to ministry. In Acts 21 and 22, Luke put Paul's story in Paul's own words by having him tell his story. Then in Galatians 1, Paul added some important details about his life and ministry. And in Philippians 3, Paul provided some insight into the source of his deep passion to serve Christ. As we piece these passages together we discover some important facts about Paul that help us better understand his life, his ministry, and his epistles.

B. Important Biographical Information about Paul

1. Paul's Childhood. Who was this man Paul? He was born into a Jewish family in the Gentile city of Tarsus. Although a faithful Jew, he was undoubtedly a Hellenized one, which means he grew up Jewish but in a Greek atmosphere. He was religiously Jewish but had grown up immersed in Greek culture.

2. Paul's Education. Paul lived in Tarsus until age twelve and went to Jerusalem to study the Jewish Law with a man named Gamaliel. Gamaliel was highly respected among the Jewish religious teachers, and it was a great honor for Paul to become one of his disciples. Apparently Paul was a gifted child and demonstrated some passion for studying the Hebrew Scriptures. To acquire the privilege of studying at the Jerusalem temple with a master like Gamaliel was significant preparation for the ministry God had in store for Paul.

C. Paul's Heritage and Citizenship

Paul, a deeply dedicated Jew, described his Jewish heritage in Philippians.

If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh,
I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of
Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews;
as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the
church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found
blameless. (Philippians 3:4–6 NASB)

In statement after statement Paul affirms—and even boasts—of his Jewish roots. And he importantly points out that he was not just another run-of-the-mill Jew. Like some “Christians” who merely claim the name, there were many Jews who were Jews because of their birth. But Paul said he was the real deal. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee, a persecutor of the church. No half-baked Jew, Paul was proud to be 100 percent Jewish to the core.

Paul also enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship. Although he was a Jew and a Pharisee, his family had attained Roman citizenship. This fact served Paul well in his missionary ministry.

1. The Incident in Philippi. We read in Acts 16 that when Paul was in Philippi, he was arrested, beaten, and thrown in prison. The next day when the Philippian jailor came to release Paul, he said, in essence, “You’re free now, so get out of town.” Paul insisted that he was not going to just sneak out of town like some common criminal. He said, in effect, “Do you know that I’m a Roman citizen and you have broken the Roman law by beating and imprisoning me?” The jailor was horrified. He went to the Roman officials and told them that the man they had beaten and jailed was a Roman citizen. Hearing this, the officials came personally and begged Paul

to leave without making trouble for them. As a non-Roman, he could have been imprisoned and run out of town. But as a Roman citizen, he had rights that protected him from such treatment.

2. The Incident in Jerusalem. In Acts 22, after Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, the Romans, seeing he was a Jew, were going to flog and question him. Paul asked, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen?” (Acts 22:25 NIV). And Luke informs us that, “Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains” (Acts 22:29 NIV). Luke emphasized the importance of Paul’s Roman citizenship because it made a difference. It opened advantages for him that, had he not been a Roman citizen, he never could have taken advantage of.

3. Paul’s Appeal to Caesar. In Acts 26:32, Luke recorded a third time when Paul used the privileges of his Roman citizenship. He had expressed in his letter to the Romans that he had a strong desire to visit their church in Rome. By appealing to Caesar, the Roman government was obligated to send him to Rome. Luke described the adventure he and Paul had on their trip to Rome in Acts 27:1–28:10 (note Luke’s use of “we” in 27:1). Because he was a “citizen,” Paul’s desire to visit Rome was fulfilled.

D. God’s Sovereign Preparation of Paul the Apostle

That Paul was a devout Jew and a Roman citizen mattered. His Roman citizenship gave him rights that allowed him to minister without the restrictions placed on noncitizens. He also was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He had a right to enter the synagogue and speak to those assembled there. Because of his excellent education under Gamaliel, he knew the Scriptures like very few others. When he presented Jesus as the Messiah, he could articulately do so using the Hebrew Scriptures. When challenged by a local rabbi or scribe about his claim that Jesus was the Messiah, he could “reason with them from the Scriptures” (see Acts 17:2). Like few others, Paul could quote and argue from the Law and the Prophets to present and to defend his claim that Jesus was God’s Son and that He had come to offer salvation to His people.

E. A True Apostle

In addition to his education under Gamaliel and his Roman citizenship, Paul was a true apostle. What set him apart as an

apostle was that he was personally taught and appointed by Jesus Himself. In Galatians 1, Paul makes it very clear that after his conversion he didn't go to Jerusalem and study the gospel under the apostles. He claimed that for three years Jesus was his teacher. He was emphatic about the fact that the gospel he preached was not the gospel of men but the gospel he had personally learned from the Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul consistently made the claim in his epistles that he was an apostle appointed by God. That's a high claim, but no other apostle ever refuted it. His colleagues, his fellow apostles, accepted Paul as a genuine apostle.

F. Appointed by the Holy Spirit

We also know that Paul was appointed and ordained by the Holy Spirit as the apostle to the gentiles. Acts 13 records Paul's commissioning for his first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas were ministering to the church at Antioch when the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the ministry to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2 NIV). Then when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, the elders sent them out to preach the gospel to the gentiles. So Paul was a man uniquely prepared by God. He had Roman citizenship, he had the finest education in the Hebrew Bible, he was a true apostle taught and appointed by Jesus Himself, and he was appointed and ordained by the Holy Spirit.

II. Paul's Ministry

Now that we have been introduced briefly to Paul as a person, let's take an overview of his ministry. This is an important study because it provides more than an interesting look at his missionary years. It also helps us read many of his epistles with greater insight and interest. By linking some of the churches he wrote to with the story of their origin in the Acts' narrative, we enhance our reading of both that epistle and the book of Acts.

A. Paul's First Missionary Journey

After being appointed and ordained by the elders of the church at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas left for Cyprus and then went on to Galatia. They planted a number of churches in that region and would then write letters to them. We best understand Paul's first missionary journey when we integrate the epistle Paul wrote to the Galatians with Luke's account in Acts 13 and 14. And we

enrich that missionary experience even more when we include the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15. When the apostles and elders in Jerusalem validated Paul and Barnabas' claim that gentiles, along with Jews, could be saved by grace through faith, they affirmed the core of the gospel message.

To read the book of Galatians without Acts 13–15 results in a shallower understanding of Galatians. To read Acts 13–15 without the book of Galatians is to miss the deep theological significance of the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15.

B. Paul's Second Missionary Journey

On his second trip, after his split with Barnabas (Acts 15:36–41), Paul asked Timothy to join the team (Acts 16:1–5). They traveled across the area that was, at that time, known as Asia (and is now known as Turkey) and stopped at the city of Troas on the west coast of that region. That was where Luke joined the team (notice Luke's use of the pronoun "we" in 16:10). In response to a vision, Paul and his companions went to Macedonia and planted the church in Philippi (16:11–40). From Philippi they went to Thessalonica and planted a church there (17:1–9). After ministry stops in Berea and Athens (17:10–34), they went to Corinth where they stayed for eighteen months (18:1–17). Then Paul departed for his home base in Syrian Antioch and on the way stopped briefly in Ephesus and planted a church there (18:18–22). If, when we read the letters Paul wrote to the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus, we integrate their stories from Acts, we gain an enriched understanding of what Paul wrote to them. When we better understand these churches by reading the letters Paul wrote to them, we will read the accounts of their beginnings in Acts with a richer meaning.

C. Paul's Third Missionary Journey

After his second journey and a brief visit in Antioch, Paul returned to Ephesus on a third trip. On that trip, recorded in Acts 18:21–21:26, Paul moved his base of operations from Antioch to Ephesus so he could more conveniently travel to the churches he had planted in that region on his second journey. He lived in Ephesus for about three years (18:23–21:14) and traveled to the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth where he ministered to these new believers. He was also collecting money in these churches for the church in Jerusalem where they were experiencing a severe famine. Paul ended the third journey when

he returned to Jerusalem with the money he had collected. He was arrested there in Jerusalem on the false charge of blasphemy. He spent the next four years in prison.

III. Paul's Imprisonment

After his arrest in Jerusalem (21:15–23:11), Paul was sent to Caesarea where he spent two years in prison (23:12–26:32). He finally appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome where he was placed under house arrest while waiting for his audience with Caesar (chapters 27–28). Luke's record in Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome: "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!" (Acts 28:30–31 NIV).

IV. Paul's Fourth Missionary Journey

What we understand from piecing together some of Paul's letters and from ancient church tradition is that after Paul was released from prison in Rome and went to Spain to preach the gospel there. He revisited Philippi and Corinth and wrote the books of 1 Timothy and Titus. In AD 67 Paul was arrested again. He wrote 2 Timothy while in his final imprisonment, and in AD 67 he was martyred for the cause of his beloved Savior, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

What we take away from Paul's life is an amazing understanding of what God is capable of doing with somebody who is totally sold out to Christ; somebody filled with the Spirit, who lived his life with the compelling passion to fulfill the destiny God had for him. Paul wrote, "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind . . . I press on to achieve what God has given me to do" (see Philippians 3:13–14 NRSV). Quite a calling, isn't it? Life gets complicated as we fulfill our various God-given responsibilities. But in the midst of it all, we can claim our own "This one thing I do." Whatever form God's call takes, we can live our life every day as people of destiny.