

THE LIFE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE: PART ONE THE BOOK OF ACTS SERIES

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TEXT: Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.”

INTRO: I want to spend two weeks on the life of Paul. First, because he was the most important and impactful apostle in the New Testament. In my opinion, he was arguably the greatest church leader in all of church history. In Acts 17:6, the people said in Thessalonica, **“These men who have upset the world have come here also.”** And Paul was just getting started in planting churches and writing the 13 letters that are now part of the Canon of the New Testament.

The second reason why I want to focus on Paul for two weeks is that starting from Acts 9 through the end of the book (Acts 28), Luke writes primarily about Paul’s ministry. This will give us a good survey of the rest of the book of Acts.

People have asked me who my heroes are in church history. Apart from my Lord and God Jesus, Paul is at the top of the list. My modern-day hero would be Billy Graham.

I. THE BACKGROUND TO PAUL

A. PAUL THE ROMAN CITIZEN

1. Saul who is called Paul was born about the beginning of the Christian era in Tarsus, the principal city of Cilicia in the southeast Asia Minor. Paul says that Tarsus was a significant city. **Acts 21:39 But Paul said, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city.”** The ranking of Greek cultural centers during the time of Paul: 1) Athens, 2) Alexandria, and 3) Tarsus (F.F. Bruce). So, Paul was multicultural. He was Jewish, a Pharisee at that, and he was raised up in Greek culture. That is why he could quote Greek philosophers as well as Scripture.
2. **Acts 9:11 And the Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.”**
3. Paul’s description of himself as a **Hebrew of Hebrews (Philippians 3:5)** shows that his parents were not assimilated Hellenistic Jews but remained culturally and linguistically Palestinian Jews. His primary language was

Hebrew (most likely Aramaic), not Greek. Because on the road to Damascus, when he was confronted by our Lord Jesus, Jesus speaks to him in his mother tongue, Hebrew. **Acts 26:14** “**And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the *Hebrew* dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”**

4. Paul was fluent in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and he knew Latin.
5. **Paul was born a Roman citizen. Acts 22:27** **The commander [*chiliarch*: overseeing 1,000 soldiers] came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman?” And he said, “Yes.” 28 The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born a citizen.”** Thus, his father was a citizen before him. We don’t know how his father, or his grandfather, became a citizen. We do know that Paul came from a lineage of tentmakers, and tents were crucial to the Roman army, so it makes sense that someone in government gave the rights to citizenship to Paul’s father or grandfather, but this is only speculation. But Paul would use his citizenship for Kingdom purposes like appealing to Caesar in a court of law that was granted only to citizens.
6. His Hebrew name was Saul. Since he came from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5), he was named after King Saul, the first King of Israel. But his Roman name was Paul. All Roman citizens had to have a Roman name. Saul switched to being called Paul as his ministry shifted toward reaching Gentiles who lived in the Roman Empire.
7. How did one prove one was a citizen? Obviously, it was a capital offense to claim falsely that one was a citizen. The Roman soldiers who were enfranchised, set free as a slave, were given a certificate that one was a citizen. Those who were born a citizen had to register within 30 days of birth and a birth certificate was given to those who were citizens. It was placed in a diptych, an ancient writing tablet that contained the certificate. Just like you carry your passport when you travel, so Paul carried this with him, as he would need it to travel in the ancient world.

B. PAUL THE PHARISEE

1. **Acts 22:3** “**I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.”**
2. This verse says a lot about Paul. Born in Tarsus, he was sent by his parents to study under the top Pharisee in the world, Gamaliel in the school of Hillel.
3. He was brilliant and excelled in his studies. He was the top student. **Galatians 1:14** **and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my**

contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

4. A Pharisee had to memorize the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. In the School of Hillel, it was required that you had to know the 613 commandments of the Bible and its nuances and application in life. But it seems that Paul had memorized the whole Bible (the Old Testament). While he is writing his letters in prison, Paul freely quotes from the Psalms to the prophets.

II. THE CONVERSION OF PAUL

A. PAUL'S CONVERSION AND EARLY YEARS

1. **PAUL'S COMPLICITY IN THE EXECUTION OF STEPHEN** – Acts 7:58 When they had driven him out of the city, they *began* stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. Acts 8:1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.
1. **PAUL'S PERSECUTION OF THE JERUSALEM CHURCH** – Acts 8:3 But Saul *began* ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Philippians 3:6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church...
2. **PAUL'S CONVERSION** – A.D. 33 – Acts 9:1 Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, 2 and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; 4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He *said*, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, 6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." 7 The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord *said* to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, 12

and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.” 13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” 15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; 19 and he took food and was strengthened.

B. PAUL’S APOSTOLIC CALLING – Romans 1:1 Paul, a bondservant of Christ Jesus, called *as* an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

1. **Paul, a bondservant: Galatians 1:10** If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.
2. **Paul, called to be an apostle: Acts 14:14** But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out. I cite this passage because it is the first time in Acts that Paul is referred to as an apostle. But what is interesting is that Barnabas was called an apostle, too. Luke uses Acts to confirm Paul’s apostolic calling. It is not a coincidence that Peter and Paul are the two apostles highlighted in Acts. No one questions Peter’s apostolic calling, but because Paul was not a part of the original 12, people questioned his calling. So we see throughout Paul’s letters, especially to the Galatians and Corinthians, Paul defends his apostolic ministry.
3. **Set apart for the Gospel: 1 Corinthians 15:1** Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures

C. PAUL’S MISSION – Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” I believe that Ananias gave this prophetic word to Paul.

1. **GENTILES: Galatians 2:7** But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter *had been* to the circumcised... 9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.
2. **KINGS: Acts 25:13** Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and paid their respects to Festus. 14 While they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix." Three people of influence are mentioned: 1) King Agrippa, the vassal King of Israel; 2) Festus, the governor of Israel sent out by Caesar; 3) Festus, the previous governor of Palestine. We too must reach out to people of influence (kings) in our society. My mentor Peter Wagner said, "The harvest is among the poor, but the transformation of society takes place through kings." E.g., William Wilberforce.
3. **SONS OF ISRAEL: Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and to the Greek. Paul's MO (modus operandi) was to go to the city's leading synagogue and preach to them first, and then he would go to the Gentiles.

D. WHAT IS YOUR CALLING?

1. **Your calling must line up with God's, the Great Commission.**
2. **Know the difference between your divine assignment and your destiny.**
E.g. TheCall
3. E.g. Hattie Mitchell: Joy's interview with this amazing woman of God on *Equipping the Saints* TV Show. Hattie knows her calling is to help black homeless kids in South Central LA with her charter school. Knowing that she is doing what God has called her to do, she has received amazing favor from people like Magic Johnson and Chris Paul.

***END OF PART ONE**

BEGINNING OF PART TWO

III. PAUL'S MINISTRY

A. PAUL BEGINS TO PREACH RIGHT AFTER HIS CONVERSION

1. **Acts 9:19** Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, 20 and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the

synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” 21 All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and *who* had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” 22 But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

2. Acts 9:23 When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; 25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through *an opening* in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

B. PAUL GOES INTO ARABIA (A.D. 33-36)

1. Galatians 1:5 But when God, who had set me apart *even* from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to *Arabia*, and returned once more to Damascus. 18 *Then three years later* I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.
2. Paul’s letters give us a few tantalizing glimpses of his life, and this is one of them. Why did he go to Arabia for three years? Paul says that he was “extremely zealous for his ancestral traditions.” What is Arabia known for? That is where Mt. Sinai is located, where God gave Moses the revelation of the Torah. It was also where Elijah went after he was put on the hit list by Jezebel, and Elijah received a fresh commissioning of ordaining Jehu as the new King of Israel and anointing Elisha as his successor.
3. It is N.T. Wright’s opinion that Paul, after escaping for his life in Damascus, did a spiritual pilgrimage to Mt. Sinai in Arabia. It was there he received the revelation of the Gospel. Paul is emphatic that he received the revelation of the Gospel not from men (the other apostles) but from the Lord.
4. Galatians 1:11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but *I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ*.
5. And just like Elijah received a fresh commissioning, Paul received a fresh commissioning to proclaim Jesus as the King of Kings and to ordain not only prophets but apostles and elders wherever King Jesus would send him.

C. PAUL AND BARNABAS – A.D. 36

1. Right after escaping death in Damascus, Paul's goes to Jerusalem.
2. After an indefinite period, Barnabas brings Paul to the church in Antioch and they begin to minister together. **Acts 11:25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**
3. **A FIFTEEN-DAY VISIT TO JERUSALEM – A.D. 36.** The church in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to bring a financial offering to the church in Jerusalem due to a famine that hit Jerusalem at that time. **Acts 11:27 Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up and *began* to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the *reign* of Claudius. 29 And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send *a contribution* for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. 30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders [in Jerusalem].** There is no indication or evidence that Paul met with the Apostles when he brought the relief money. It was at that time, he spent 15 days with Peter. **Galatians 1:18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)**
4. **BARNABAS AND SAUL SENT OUT FROM ANTIOCH FOR PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY TRIP – A.D. 46.** **Acts 13:1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was *there*, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.**
5. **PAUL AND BARNABAS AT THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM – A.D. 47-48.** **Galatians 2:1 Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.** Paul is talking about 14 years after his conversion, and he went to Jerusalem with Barnabas to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem called the Jerusalem Council. He may have brought Titus as an example of Gentiles getting saved and coming into leadership.

6. Galatians 2:2 It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but *I did so* in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.
 7. Galatians 2:7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter *had been* to the circumcised 8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in *his* apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), 9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 *They only asked* us to remember the poor — the very thing I also was eager to do.
- D. PAUL’S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY – A.D. 49-50 (Acts 16)**
1. Paul has a sharp disagreement with Barnabas, and they go separate ways. Acts 15:39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.
 2. Thank God for Barnabas in Paul’s life. Even though Paul and Barnabas went separate ways, God used Barnabas to mentor Paul. We need a Barnabas in our lives. Larry Tomczak, Peter Wagner and Jack Hayford were three Barnabas’ in my life.
 3. With Silas, Luke and others to Philippi, Thessalonica – A.D. 49-50. Acts 16:6 They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; 7 and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; 8 and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. I love this passage because you see how Paul was led by the Holy Spirit.
 4. Corinth – A.D. 50-52 (Acts 18). Acts 18:11 And he settled *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. It is interesting to note that Paul spent three weeks in Thessalonica but one and half years in Corinth and three years in Ephesus.

E. PAUL’S THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY – A.D. 52 (Acts 19)

- 1. IN EPHESUS – A.D. 52-55. Acts 19:8** And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading *them* about the kingdom of God. **9** But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. **10** This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.
- 2. At Troas – A.D. 55 Autumn. 2 Corinthians 2:12** Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, **13** I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.
- 3. IN MACEDONIA AND ILLYRICUM – A.D. 55-56**
- 5. In Corinth – Winter A.D. 56-57**
- 6. ARRIVAL AND ARREST IN JERUSALEM – A.D. May 57 (Acts 21)**
- 7. DETENTION IN CAESAREA – A.D. 57 (Acts 22-25)**
- 8. VOYAGE TO ROME – A.D. 57-59 (Acts 27)**
- 1. UNDER HOUSE ARREST IN ROME – A.D. 59-60 (Acts 28).** Acts ends with Acts 28:30 And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, **31** preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

F. NERONIAN PERSECUTION – A.D. 64

- 1. LAST IMPRISONMENT, TRIAL, AND EXECUTION – A.D. 65?**

IV. PAUL THE MAN: WHAT MADE PAUL A GREAT MAN OF GOD?

A. A MAN WHO PASSIONATELY LOVED JESUS, HIS MESSIAH

- 1. Philippians 3:7** But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8** More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, **9** and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, **10** that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to

His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

2. Ephesians 2:4 But *God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us* 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)
 3. Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me* and gave Himself up for me.”
 4. 1 Corinthians 13:4 Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong *suffered*, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails.
 5. Galatians 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”
 6. Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,
 7. Philippians 1:9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment
- B. A MAN FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**
1. Ephesians 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,
 2. Romans 14:17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
 3. Galatians 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.
 4. Galatians 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
 5. Galatians 5:25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.
- C. A MAN WHO LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR JESUS AND THE GOSPEL**

1. **1 Corinthians 12:23** Are they servants of Christ? — I speak as if insane — I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. **24** Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. **26** *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; **27** *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. **28** Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure on me *of* concern for all the churches. **29** Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?
2. Paul was beheaded by Nero in A.D. 64.