

“Paul’s Paradox”

From the Moment Saul aka Paul showed up on the Biblical scene, he has been controversial.

Rembrant Paul

There are those who see him as a great hero and others who see him as an arrogant, male chauvinistic, self centered villain.

For some, he is the person, perhaps more than any other single individual, who must be credited with exporting the message of Christ not just in Jerusalem and Samaria, but beyond to all areas of the known world.

For others, he is the person who, because of his own agendas or perhaps an unhealed personality, distorted the message out of all recognition- turning a message of simple love into a complex theology or transforming Jesus' kingdom seemingly open to all, into an exclusive organization, now known as the church.

When you bring up the name of Paul....even in the church....you get some who are annoyed or even angry....and you get some who are moved to tears full of sheer admiration for this man.

Some want and have erased all of his letters from their Scripture focusing only on the words of Jesus. There is no doubt that this man is polarizing.....much in the same way that Jesus is.

In his own day. Paul was controversial. But regardless of what people thought of him at that time or today, you can't ignore his gutsy persistence, his determination, his sharpness of mind, and his ability to fight for what he believed was true. And these are qualities that people could admire but also resent.

What no one could doubt however, was the way this brilliant, academically able, Jerusalem-trained rabbi who initially hated Jesus followers had been completely and totally transformed by the conviction that, despite his earlier beliefs, Jesus was the true Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the World....the Jewish and Gentile World.

God prepared Paul

Who is Paul?

He was born at Tarsus (MAP) , in the opening years of the Christian Era. It was a Greek-speaking city of Cilicia, in Asia Minor, famous as a University town, as a port,(**PHOTO 1**) as a caravan city, and as a big lumber and spinning centre. Like all the great commercial cities of the Roman world, Tarsus contained a colony of Jews; and to a family of this colony Paul belonged. His family possessed the privilege of the Roman citizenship. This meant that Paul could never be crucified or scourged, and had the right of appeal to Rome against the sentence of any provincial law-court. (**PHOTO 2**)

How Paul's family obtained this privilege is unknown. Their position as Roman citizens, however, suggests that the traditional idea of Paul as a humble tent-maker, and the son of a poor weaver, is not correct. Some of the greatest authorities to-day believe that Paul sprang from one of the leading families in Tarsus, a family of wealth and influence.

In his home at Tarsus (**PHOTO 3**) Paul would be called by his Hebrew name, Saul, and he retained this name during his youth and for the first thirty years or so of his life. In Roman, or Greek, surroundings, however, he would use his alternative name, Paul. The language which he spoke, and in which his epistles are written, is Greek, which was the common tongue of the world in his day. We know that he spoke Aramaic, the Semitic dialect that was spoken by our Lord and was the language of the Jews in the first century. It is also possible that Paul understood Latin, the language of proclamations and of official intercourse with the Roman authorities.

All we know about Paul's childhood and early life is that he was sent at some period to study theology under the rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem. Thus, Jesus and Paul trod the soil of Palestine at the same time. We do not know whether Paul ever saw Jesus in the flesh. Some scholars believe that Paul may have seen Jesus, but just as many believe that he did not. If Paul were in Jerusalem during the Crucifixion, it would seem impossible that so ardent a young Pharisee would not have followed the crowds to Golgotha. On the other hand, is it feasible that a man of Paul's emotional nature would not have mentioned this in one of his letters or speeches?

Paul's life of sixty-eight years covers a spectacular period of Roman history. He lived during the reigns of five Caesars. He was born in the reign of Augustus, and grew to manhood in the reigns of Tiberius and Caligula; he spent his middle-age in the reign of Claudius, and his old age in the reign of Nero.

God placed Paul in order to prepare him. We first read of Saul in the martyrdom of Stephen.

Acts 7:54–60 (ESV) — 54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Saul had stood by at the execution of Stephen and watched Stephen's faith....Similar words and experience to Jesus on the cross. How did young Saul respond? He became a madman

Acts 8:1–3 (ESV) — 1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

But he had heard Stephen. He had seen him die. The seed had been sown. Stephen had voiced the New Testament; Saul, although he did not yet know it, had already been chosen to take the New Testament out of the hands of Jews and to proclaim it in the far places of the world.

Conversion is often said to be a long, unconscious process of the mind. The subconscious mind goes with hands open to meet conversion, but the conscious mind remains fixed and firm until something happens-some little thing-and a man finds his whole life changed. That seems to have been happening to Paul.

God prepared the World

Gentiles and Jews in the early First Century

Some people imagine-it is difficult to know why-that the Jewish race did not scatter over the earth until the Temple of Herod was destroyed in 70 A.D. This scattering, or Diaspora, spora, as it is called, began centuries before Christ. It was Alexander the Great who gave impetus to it, three hundred years before Christ was born. **MAP of GREEK EMPIRE**

One result of Alexander's brief career was to many Greek aka Hellenistic cities. Safe new roads were drawn across the world, and new opportunities for commerce were opened up. The new world offered enormous attractions to the Jews. Their synagogues were soon to be found everywhere. By the time of Christ, the majority of the Jewish nation was living outside Palestine, and it has been estimated that these Jews numbered seven and a half million, or seven per cent. of the total population of the Roman Empire.

Although the Greek-speaking Jew had to adapt himself to Gentile surroundings and was brought into the main current of Gentile thought, he often retained his Jewish identity with passionate intensity. He looked towards Jerusalem as the Holy City, just as the Moslem looks towards Mecca. He made an annual contribution to the Temple, that was taken once a year to Jerusalem with solemn ceremony. Among the more pious overseas Jews were some who dreamt of retiring to the sanctity of Jerusalem in order to be buried there, and certain of the communities

Therefore the Jews of the Diaspora belonged to the Roman man Empire only in a geographic sense. Just as the Romans planted colonies of retired soldiers about the world, which were really little bits of Rome set down on foreign soil, so the Jewish colonies in the various big cities might be compared to little bits of Jerusalem in a foreign country. And the ordinary inhabitants of such cities resented and disliked this.

The Gentiles hated these Jews....Such closed communities, living apparently eccentric lives, adopting curious diet laws, abstaining from pork and shell-fish, and disappearing into their mysterious synagogues on the Sabbath, were not regarded as pleasant neighbours. As religion and politics were closely related in the mind of classical antiquity, the refusal of the Jews to make even a formal genuflection towards the municipal pal or Imperial deities led to constant charges of disloyalty to the city and to Caesar.

We have to understand the attitude of the Roman world toward the Diaspora before we can understand the time of Paul. These Jewish people were an enigma to the Romans and yet many Jewish people were leaving the Roman and Greek Gods for the central God of the Jewish faith. Even before Jesus, the Jewish church was growing in these Roman colonies.

Each synagogue throughout the Diaspora had attached to it a ring of proselytes, some who were merely friends of the Jewish faith, who observed the fasts and the Sabbath, and believed in God; others who actually became Jews, changed their names, and were in the course of three generations indistinguishable from the people who had adopted them.

Think about how this expansion of the Jewish faith set up the Roman world for the spread of Christianity.

They gave the Apostle a starting-place for his preaching. St. Paul knew that the whole Roman world was studded with such synagogues, that wherever there was a Jewish colony there would he find a prayer-house willing to give him a hearing. He was invariably driven away as a blasphemer; but that did not matter. Sometimes the seed fell on good ground. Often, even though the Jews drove him away, the proselytes became Christians.

Therefore, among the main factors in the westward spread of Christianity, were the synagogues of the Diaspora; the universal character of the Greek language, which St. Paul spoke and in which his epistles were written; the unity of the Roman man Empire, which made his journeys safe; and the splendid Roman roads which made such journeys possible. These were some of the reasons why a missionary, in the short space of probably less than twenty years, could found a chain of churches across Asia Minor, in Macedonia, in Greece; and testify to the Divinity of Christ in the Imperial Capital itself.

Every day of Paul's life as a believer he has had to defend his status as an apostle.

Everywhere he went...Jewish leaders....those who he used to call colleagues and no doubt friends....would go behind him and tell people that he wasn't true to the Jewish faith and those who were believers said of him that he is not one of the 12, didn't even know Jesus or follow him during his 3 year ministry, and declared himself to be a disciple.....

So you remember in Acts when the disciples needed to appoint an apostle to replace Judas? Do you remember their criteria?

Acts 1:21–26 (ESV) — 21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” 23 And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. 24 And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

The remaining 11 disciples decided that the 12th disciple must have been one of the men who followed them all the time that Jesus was involved in His earthly ministry....starting with the baptism of Jesus by John....until visibly seeing Jesus after His resurrection.They set the criteria and allowed God to direct them on His choice for the 12th disciple.

Now along comes Saul the destroyer of Christians.....and he essentially says, "Hey guys, just letting you know....I am the 13th disciple....I met Jesus on the road to Damascus and he told me....I didn't follow Jesus while He was on earth....I didn't see John baptize Him....Didn't see any of the miracles...Didn't listen to any of his fire side chats....didn't see him after the resurrection...didn't see His ascension. But Trust me....Jesus Himself said I am an apostle.....

Think about thiswould you believe Him? Would you trust Him? At this point...neither would I. Let's go back to that moment on the Road to Damascus and see what Paul claims.

Saul begins His journey....Out of Jerusalem toward Damascus up along the east side of the Sea of Galilee.

MAP

Paul was not looking for Jesus....He was looking for His crazy and deranged followers. He is on the Road to Damascus hunting for bear.

Paul came that way with his heart full of hate against Christ,

It is important to understand that Paul was not just some guy who favored Judaism....he was the gestapo....rooting out those he was seeking in order to destroy them. He was the leader of the most zealot the most conservative of the Jewish leaders.

Acts 9:1–4 (ESV) — 1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

That's odd. You would expect that Jesus would have said, Saul why are you persecuting my followers? And yet.....Jesus clearly understood that Paul's persecution was aimed at him.....through His disciples.

Note that Paul found himself exactly where everyone finds themselves in the presence of God.....Falling to the Ground. .. Humans can't stand in the presence of Holy.

Acts 9:4–9 (ESV) — 4 And falling to the ground, he 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 rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

From that hour Paul was a changed man. Everything he thought, everything he did, was by virtue of that moment. He was charged with God.

His conversion almost had to be miraculous because he was so far from God and running from God....when he ran right into Jesus. It takes a lot to change a man of strong convictions. Where Paul was...the only thing that likely would have reached him....is a direct encounter with Jesus Himself. But it is important to realize....Paul never sought to encounter Jesus....It was Jesus who decided to encounter him.

This specific incident is one often used to defend the idea that followers of Jesus have been prechosen....predestined....Saul didn't desire Jesus at all....He wasn't seeking Him....didn't believe in Him....Didn't think he needed anything from Him.....He wasn't repentant....wasn't necessarily broken...didn't have goosebumps....He was just blinded by the light...

Paul's conversion was completely the desire, will and action of Jesus. Paul had been prepared from birth for the destiny of taking the message of Christ to the world. Jesus was in a powerful way, calling him into that destiny. Setting him apart...for something new. Something that had always been his destiny.

So Paul is converted to Christ and by Christ on the road to Damascus. There were few witnesses to this "conversion". Those with him thought something had happened but they didn't know what it was.

In order to understand the letters of Paul we must dwell in this moment for a while.....The conversion of Paul would be like in 1940 Germany.....for Heinrich Himmler to one day stop murdering the Jewish People and convert to Judaism

If Heinrich came knocking on your door and you were Jewish would you believe him? From the moment Paul encountered Jesus to this day.....his loyalty to Christ and his conversion are doubted.

Sure...God would have to send person after person to validate Paul's authority to preach the gospel. And it started with a man named Ananias.

Acts 9:10–12 (ESV) — 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” 11 And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, 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.”

Saul from Tarsus...God are you kidding me? Seriously...this is like going on over the Himmler's house and inviting him to your kids Bah Mitzvah. This minor detail is not lost on Ananias.

Acts 9:13–14 (ESV) — 13 But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”

Wow...Ananias is the first of many who will be called by God to risk their life and their reputation to validate God's call on Paul's life.

Think about the most horrific person you can think of. Now imagine that this person was responsible for killing your friends, your relatives.....your parents....your spouse....maybe your children.....Suppose you were told that this person had turned over a new leaf....Had an encounter with God that changed them.....What would it take for you to believe them?

Would you ever believe them? Who would have to vouch for them? What would they have to do? What would you need to see in their lives before you would believe them? Before you would trust them? Before you would allow them to lead you? Answer those questions and you are beginning to understand Paul and the challenges that faced his ministry.

Oh and remember....Paul had no New Testament Scriptures to hold up as truth.....to claim as God's Word....they had not been written yet.

This greatest of all missionaries had not read the Gospels because they didn't exist in written form yet. Unlike all missionaries aries from the end of the first century onward, he advanced across the world preaching the good news, but without the written Gospel in his hand.

I can stand up here and share the good news with you and I can point to these ancient manuscripts as the authority. I can point you to these words and dare you to try to prove that they are not directly from God;s lips to our hearts.

So Paul the Christian chaser....says....I had an encounter with Jesus and I am changed....not scriptures to point to....no real witnesses...the people that were with him knew something had happened...but they did not hear the voice. All they knew is that a bright light blinded Paul for a few days.

So this man....make an incredible claim....and it seems to get worse. If Paul, wasn't there to see Jesus and learn from His teaching, how did he learn all that he wrote in the letters of the New Testament? Where does his authority and knowledge come from? Well, Paul would later tell the Corinthians... clearly referring to himself..

2 Corinthians 12:2–7 (ESV) — 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast,.....7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Galatians 1:11–12 (ESV) — 11 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. 12 For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

So Paul says...not only did I have this incredible blinding encounter on the road to Damascus.....but I was taken up to heaven and given revelations....some that he was not allowed to tell....in fact he says, I have surpassing greatness of revelations given to no one else. I didn't learn about God from man....I got it straight from God Himself...specifically for me.

Ready to jump on the Paul train?

It gets worse...

Galatians 1:15–17 (ESV) — 15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Pauls says....not only did I not follow Jesus when he was here....but I had this encounter with Him....was taken to heaven....learned directly from Jesus Himself...He made me an apostle.....and when I got back....I didn't rush to the other disciples with this information....I went into the desert of Arabia for 3 years. I didn't consult with anyone!

He sounds like a cult leader right? Would you follow this guy? If this guy came to our church...I would along with the elders run him out. I have absolutely no doubt about that....

Unless....God Himself told me otherwise.....and that is exactly what happens to Ananias.

Ananias was the first, but certainly not the last, to doubt Paul's sincerity. But the key to understanding Paul's life....mission...purpose...and destiny...is in the answer that God gives to Ananias....

Acts 9:15–16 (ESV) — 15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

God says specifically to Ananias that this man Paul was His...note these words carefully....CHOSEN.....INSTRUMENT....

An instrument does nothing until the one who owns it....plays it....works through it.....Paul is not incredible....God is incredible when He manifests Himself through Paul. And again Paul didn't do this...this is all God. He is MY chosen. But there is something just as significant about to be revealed by God.

The great paradox of Paul's life? The one thing that will define and bring authenticity to Paul's message?

Yes. Paul is Jesus' chosen instrument...Yes Jesus says He is mine...my chosen instrument....for what purpose? To carry my name before the Gentiles....the kings...and the children of Israel...the Jews.

That is all fine and dandy. But who is going to believe him and why? Short of Jesus revealing this to each and every person in a dream...the Saul guy has been killing people...killing Jesus' people.....He is going around making everyone suffer because of your name.....How God will you put your stamp of approval on Paul's message?

The Great Paradox.....

Acts 9:16 (ESV) — 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Paul is chosen by God....Paul is God's instrument.....for what purpose? To SUFFER.....and to suffer for a purpose....for the name of Jesus.

Woa....So God....somehow through suffering....people will believe the message of Jesus. It is through Paul's repetitive suffering....that people will begin to understand his sincerity?

Would you suffer for something that you knew was a lie?

Have you ever seen anyone who would repetitively subject themselves to suffer...to be tortured....to be stoned....and they knew what they were standing for was a lie?

You see we often think that if we are called by God that we will live a wrinkle free life....but Paul's call was to suffer and suffer a lot. Paul who made everyone else suffer for what they believed about Jesus would find the tables flipped and He MUST suffer for the sake of Jesus' name.

Something else....that is easy to miss in this verse....God did not say that Paul must suffer so that we can all see it....He says that God Himself will show PAUL how much HE MUST suffer for the name of Jesus.

Ok so it is through suffering that Paul is validated....It is through suffering that through Paul people will see Jesus....It is through suffering that the message God has given Paul will be moved across the world. Why did God call Saul?....Because I will show him how much he MUST suffer for my name.

Let's flash forward and look at a review of where Paul is headed.

2 Corinthians 11:23–28 (ESV) — 23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

After Paul's incredible claim of apostleship.....Why did people begin to believe the message of Paul and embrace the Gospel? Because he was called to a life of suffering for the gospel. Yes God gave Paul the power to do some miracles....but it was through his constant determination in the midst of suffering that validate the truth of his claims.

Jesus asked Saul....why are you persecuting me? many times, I am sure that Paul easily could have asked God the same question.

And that is the first lesson that we must learn from Paul in this series.....A key part of evangelism that has never changed....and is the centerpiece of Paul's life and missionary journeys.

It was not Paul's words that brought people to Jesus....yes they were listening to him....to what God was saying through Him.....

But what convinced the people around Paul to believe the crazy words he was speaking....was the way he lived his life and more importantly how consistent what he did aligned with what he said.

In fact, no one should have listened to what Paul said and followed him on the basis of his crazy outlandish claims about an encounter with God on a dusty road in the desert.

God proved the message to be true by revealing Himself through Paul....essentially God was playing His truth....His song....for us...through the life of His instrument....Paul.

It is through Paul's persistence despite the challenges of life that drew people to Jesus through Paul.....and it is the same thing that God is doing through us today.

Most people are not drawn here because of our words....in fact even God says our words make no sense to those who don't know Him.

1 Corinthians 1:18 (ESV) — 18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

2 Corinthians 4:2–5 (ESV) — 2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Paul tells them....WE are not going to manipulate what we say or God's word to try to manipulate you into believing us. We know all this sounds crazy....that is why it is SUPER....Natural....it is from another place....

WE commend ourselves to your conscience.....In other words....what does your heart of hearts say about how we are living in light of what we are saying.

And our witness.....to everyone who comes into Remnant..to everyone who watches your life....to everyone who is matching up who you are and what you do with what you claim about Jesus.....is that we too are God's instruments.....hoping that you can hear the music and see Him as He plays through us.

This journey with Paul is just beginning.....invite everyone you know to come join us.....We will study Paul...and his words in the letters, but as it was for those in the first century it is for us.....as we journey, it is God who is being revealed. Lets Pray.