

Tracing the Steps of the Apostle Paul

The Uniqueness of the Apostle Paul:

I think it is fair to say that Saul of Tarsus was a unique man, chosen for a very special mission. In fact, Acts 1:23 shares the details of how the Apostles chose a successor to Judas Iscariot. Essentially the choice came down to two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (surnamed Justus) and a follower of Jesus known as Matthis. The latter (Matthis) was chosen, but was never heard about again in the writings of the Christian Scriptures. Some argue the leaders may have been “out of step with God” (though the narrative does not appear to be a statement of disobedience). One thing is certain, waiting in the wings for a Divine meeting was “Shaul of Tarsus” whose conversion and writings would powerfully impact the Disciples from the first century until now (as we will see in our study of Acts 9 and beyond). Scholars have argued that Paul was unique in the record in five ways.

First, Paul was the most **controversial** of the early leadership. The record of Church History reveals that he was called an “illegitimate charlatan” by Pseudo Clement, but highly regarded by others. He was widely followed and bitterly disputed all at the same time. In other words, he was a dynamic leader! A second uniqueness was the incredible expansive view of Paul – he was a **visionary** in many ways unique to the time. Though Jesus spoke mainly to Jews and called on them to follow their King, Paul (by the direction of the Holy Spirit) recognized the expanded definition of “spiritual kingdom” – stretching that definition even into the Gentile world. He recognized the shifted pattern of God’s work, and followed after the movement of the Spirit. His chief argument with the other leaders was that the Spirit indicated a change in the direction of the outreach (Gal. 3:2), and the church must follow that direction. He saw it well before most of his peers (cp. Acts 15) and argued when he saw a conflict in the leadership over the new direction (Gal. 2:1ff).

Another uniqueness of the “Apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13) can be seen in the way God used him to communicate **revolutionary** new ideas to the young churches. Paul broke ground on a number of issues: divorce, inter-ethnic marriage, acceptable style of dress in worship, behavior of women, family issues and eschatology. His use of the holy principles of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Revelation offered to the church by the Spirit through his pen offered the window not only into the Roman world and its problems, but into the method and principles of problem solving for the church of every age!

Though often thought of as a domineering leader (perhaps because of some very hard words to the Corinthian Church), Paul was actually very **relational** and caring. He openly praised the good in others (Phil. 1) and thought of the people of God as related in every way. It is no accident that the Spirit of God used Paul to explain the “body concept” of the church, with Messiah as the Head (1 Cor. 12:12ff). He obviously felt that his life was an example to believers everywhere (Phil. 3:4ff) and expressed deep emotion in his dealings with their sin and troubles (2 Cor. 2:4; Phil. 4:1).

In another way Paul was unique in the early leadership of the church - he was uniquely **exposed**. Though we have other records about the foundations of the church and its leaders, we have nothing so complete as the record of and by Paul. Though the Gospels offer a reasonably complete picture of Jesus, we have no physical writings of Jesus. In the case of Paul, we have both the writings about him (i.e. the Book of Acts) and the letters written by him to the young churches and leaders.

What We Know About Paul:

How does one summarize the life of an influential and important person? The essential facts about Paul's life are, for the most part, documented in the Christian Scriptures. Yet, these facts are but a shadow of the man that stood the test of brutal beatings, shipwrecks, homeless wanderings and many rejections for the cause of proclaiming Jesus. Let's review some significant things about Paul that we know.

First, we know something about his various **names**. He was named at his circumcision after the first king of Israel ('**Shaul**'). Bible students recall that King Saul was selected by his peers in part because of his physical stature. He was known as the king that stood "a head above" other men of his day, and that appealed to the insecure Israelite tribal leaders. In contrast, the Apostle Paul was short in stature. A possible reference to this was his Gentile name "**Paulus**" which loosely has been translated as "short, stubby one". Though some writers and Bible teachers unfamiliar with Jewish customs offer the notion that Saul was the "unregenerate" name of the Apostle, Paul did not exchange one name for another after his conversion. On the contrary, every Jew of the diaspora was traditionally named according the formula, "And his name shall be named among the Jews as ____, but among the Gentiles he shall be called ____." Saul possessed both names from the time of his parent's naming ceremony. We have become accustomed to calling him by the "name among the Gentiles" because most of the ministry record we have comes from the time of his service outside the land of Israel, among the Gentiles that came to faith. It is worth noting that his size and name left little restriction on his impact. John Chrysostom, (c. 345-407) a leader of the Byzantine Church is quoted as saying, "He was barely five feet tall, with a reach that touched the stars."

In addition to the knowledge concerning his names, we surmise the **date** of Paul's birth to be about **3-5 CE**, during the reign of Augustus Caesar. It is certain that he was born during the first decade of the first century, making him a younger contemporary to Jesus. By the Scriptural record we know that Paul never met Jesus before the Resurrection. Additionally, we know he was a young man at the time he was "holding the cloaks" at the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem (perhaps about 32 years old, Acts 6:1ff).

Paul's **hometown** was the city of **Tarsus**. (Acts 7:58; 9:11, 30; 11:25; 21:39; 22:3; 22:28; 26:9-10; Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:4-7; 2 Tim. 3:14ff). Tarsus was the capital of the Roman Province of Cilicia (cp. Acts 22:3), situated between the Taurus Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. The Province of Cilicia varied between

30 to 60 miles wide and was about 300 miles long. The city of Tarsus was about 10 miles inland of the Mediterranean on the alluvial plain, watered by the Cydnus and may have had as many as one half million inhabitants in the time of Paul. Ramsey described the city as about 70 feet above sea level on a level plain. The lower Cydnus was made navigable and a port had been built to carry goods to and from the sea. A major road lead to the north where the famous mountain pass known as the "Cilician Gates" lay less than 29 miles inland. Sir William Ramsey described the pass as "one of the most famous and important passes in history".

The origins of the city are shrouded in mystery, but it appears the city was a native Cilician town taken over by Ionian settlers of antiquity. Josephus attributes the city to the Tarshish of Genesis 10:4, but this is by no means certain. It is mentioned several places in historical record with certainty. The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser says this city was taken by the Assyrians (mid C9 BCE). Xenophon passed through in 401 BCE, and found the ruler to be a local. Alexander found the rulership in the hands of the Persians, and he replaced the ruler (334 BCE). Coins found in excavations of the region make no claim of autonomy until after the defeat of Antiochus the Great at the hands of the Romans (189 BCE). Syria appears to have undergone some reorganization at this time, allowing autonomy in some of the regions. Tarsus appears to have grown into autonomy at this time establishing a constitution as a free city. The city became part of the Roman Empire with the arrival of Pompey the Roman General and the defeat of the pirates that often harassed the city by about 64 BCE.

Some scholars speculate that Paul may be a descendant of some of those who were promised free citizenship if they moved to the Cilician city in 171 BCE. Another claim for the citizenship ancestry of Paul can be found in some who raise the possibility that Paul's father or grandfather helped Marc Antony (and thus Rome) during Cleopatra's renowned visit to Tarsus in 41 BCE. The historian Strabo mentions the splendor of the event, as Cleopatra sailed her gilded barge in the Cydnus into the city. In addition, there is reason to believe that Antony and Octavian used some resources of the city in their struggle against Brutus and Cassius, who they later defeated at Philippi in Macedonia. Some have even suggested that a tent maker's gift could have been repaid in citizenship (cp. Acts 18:3), though this is mere speculation. Autonomy meant that Tarsus was able to govern itself under its own laws, impose import taxation and a variety of other freedoms. Strabo mentions that the city was excited by education, and was home to the third largest university, after Athens and Alexandria. One teacher or note that came from Tarsus was the famous Athenodorus, a Stoic Philosopher that tutored Augustus at Apollonia, and later became his advisor from 44 to 15 BCE. This probably accounts for August's favor on the city. Athenodorus returned to Tarsus and established a reform to the city in 15 BCE. Along with the reforms, he **established a patrician class that probably included the family of Paul**, who boasts of his association with the city (Acts 21:39).

In addition to being the hometown of Paul (Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3), it was also the city Paul returned to after his escape from Jerusalem (Acts 9:30). Barnabas found Paul in the city and enlisted him to service at Antioch (Acts 11:25ff). Paul may well have visited

on the Second and Third Mission Journeys (Acts 15:41; 18:22-23). Paul was proud of this important city (Acts 21:39) and his free citizenry, a sentiment common to Roman citizens who often had significant rivalries between cities in athletics, etc.

Paul's **occupation** was also recorded in the Bible (Acts 18:3, 20:34; 1 Cor. 4:12) as that of a tentmaker or leather worker. The Greek term "Skenopoios" was used to refer to a variety of binding and weaving crafts. The area of Cilicia, the region of Tarsus, was noted in antiquity for the quality goat hair tents (called "cilicum"). Some scholars even suggest that Paul's family may have secured citizenship by providing tents to the Roman army (instead of the settlement of 171 BCE) as this type of arrangement was noted in other families of the day.

Students of the Bible can also reasonably identify the key elements to the **education** of the Apostle Paul. His early life in Tarsus was no doubt impacted by the university in town that was legendary in the time. When he moved to Jerusalem and out of the shadow of the university, Paul studied under the moderate Pharisaic instructor Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was learned enough to become a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). His quotations of the Hebrew Scriptures are usually from the Septuagint version (250 BCE), a possible sign that his memorization of the Word was done from the Greek translation. He apparently could speak the Hebrew language (Phil. 3:5; Acts 21:40) and Greek (Acts 21:37) and perhaps Latin (though this is not certain).

Near to the heart of any Jew of antiquity was his **tribe** affiliation. Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin, the ancient possessors of the heartland of Israel. The area of the hill country is north of Jerusalem and is centered on the ridge route of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The territory was the dwelling of King Saul of old, and included such important Biblical places as Gibeon, Bethel, Ai, Mizpah and Shiloh (the place the Tabernacle was placed for much of the pre-Temple times).

We know only a few things about Paul's **family**. By his own admission he was brought up by observant Jewish parents in the Diaspora (i.e. "son of a Pharisee"- Acts 23:6). He no doubt had a number of brothers and sisters, but only mentions one sister indirectly in Acts 23:16. He alluded to his father on a few occasions, but never made any mention of his mother in any of his Epistles (see Rom. 16).

Paul's **successes** are also well known. He has been called a fanatic (defined as "he can't change his mind, and he can't change the subject!"). He was usually followed by a riot or a revival! Yet, one third of the Christian Scriptures were written at his hand. We know of 14 letters to young churches and Pastors, and there were no doubt others. His style was sometimes complex enough to draw the observation by Peter "some of Paul's words are hard to understand!" (2 Peter 3:15-16). In addition to his writings, his energetic travel schedule took him to more on journeys totaling more than 10,000 miles. His travels were often met by troubles (Acts 16:22) and he was asked to leave on a number of occasions (as in Acts 16:39).

We have only a traditional record of his **death**. The “Apocryphal Acts of Paul” (a dubious source in many respects) offers the detail that Paul was beheaded along a main shopping district on the west side of Rome at the hand of the executioners of Emperor Nero in 67 CE. A general persecution was raised against the Christians by Nero, after 64 CE (because of the great fire of Rome), “under pretence that they had set Rome on fire, both St. Paul and St. Peter then sealed the truth with their blood; the latter being crucified with his head downward; the former being beheaded, either in A.D. 64 or 65, and buried in the Via Ostiensis.” EUSEBIUS, Hist. Eccles. lib. ii. cap. 25, intimates that the tombs of these two apostles, with their inscriptions, were extant in his time; and quotes as his authority a holy man of the name of Caius, who wrote against the sect of the Cataphrygians, who has asserted this, as from his personal knowledge. Caius of Rome, (c. C 2nd CE), named the grave of St. Peter on the Vatican, and that of St. Paul on the Ostian way. Eusebius himself entirely adopts the tradition that St. Paul was beheaded under Nero at Rome. Amongst other early testimonies, we have that of Tertullian.

Anchor Dates in the Life of Paul:

There is a distinct lack of detail on Messianism and the Messianic letters (Hebrews and James) outside of Acts 1-8. The new leader was added (1); Pentecost and the beginning shadow of the New Covenant began (2); The local ministry of Peter and John in Jerusalem was recorded (3-4), the challenge of truth in the Ananias and Sapphira story is unfolded (5), the testing and stoning of Stephen gave rise to the spread of the church (6-7), the moving ministry of Philip is recorded (8). Persecuting the church was a Tarsian Jew that God had big plans for!

Paul was likely **born about 4 or 5 CE**, the son of a Free Roman Jew of Tarsus (Acts 22:28).

Conversion 36 CE (Acts 9): Paul was saved near the age that a priest became consecrated (30) and about the age the Savior was at His Crucifixion. Half of Paul’s life was already gone when he came to Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:32 records Paul’s escape from Damascus shortly after his salvation (the basket and wall story). The calculation for this date is based on Josephus, who offers the detail that Aretas was king of Arabia between 36-39 CE, and Eusebius that tells us the events in Paul’s life came shortly after Aretas ascended to the throne in 36 CE.

Three Years in Arabia (36/37 – 39/40; cp. Acts 9:23): Since Galatians includes the detail that Paul was three years in Arabia (or that it was three years total from his leaving to his return – cp. Galatians 1:15-18 with Acts 9:26 closes this description with a trip to Jerusalem). If Paul left Damascus in 36, the return to Jerusalem could be dated at 39. If it was later, the return may be as late as 40 CE.

First Mission Journey (45-47 CE, cp. Acts 13-14): The journey took place shortly after the death of Herod Agrippa I (44 CE according to dates established by Josephus Flavius Antiquities 19.8.2 – A festival to celebrate the ascension of Claudius to the Imperial role, cp. Acts 12). Since Sergius Paulus was the proconsul in Cyprus (it was a Senatorial province) only in the year 45 CE, the beginning date seems certain. Bear in mind the Roman year begins in March, so the current reckoning of time must be open to 46 CE as well. Paul was about 40 or 41 years of age in 45 CE, for the beginning of the journey.

The Jerusalem Council (50 CE, cp. Acts 15; Gal. 2:1-10): If the reference in Galatians 2:1 is to suggest that the council met fourteen years after the conversion of Paul, the date of the council would be 50 CE. Paul was about age 45 or 46 at that time.

The Second Mission Journey (51-54 CE, cp. Acts 15:36-18:22): Paul was about 46 or 47 years of age when he left on the second mission journey and finished the journey at about age 49 or 50. According to an inscription found in Delphi in 1908, Gallio was proconsul in Achaia in the year 51/52 (March to March). Gallio was at the bema in Corinth when Paul was brought there (cp. Acts. 18:12). Paul appeared to stay on until the next man took the office, dating the journey. Though Paul is rightly regarded in Church History as a great writer, his career in that regard began during the second journey, a mere seventeen or eighteen years before his death.

Stage One Writings: Prophetic -- During second mission journey between 51-54 CE when Paul was in his upper 40's. (Image: Shofar).

- **1 Thessalonians-** Personal and Biographical (relational) – Paul was worried and then relieved with Tim's report about them, (1-3); Instructional (three marks of distinction of a believer: Sexual Purity; Proper work life; Proper view of death and resurrection) – (4-5).
- **2 Thessalonians-** Inspiration to oppressed (notes to suffering followers (1), Instruction to perplexed (concerning faked writing and man of sin (2), Injunction to disorderly (face disorderly among you (3).

The Third Mission Journey (54-58 CE, cp. Acts 18:23-21:14): With very little break, Paul moved into the Third Mission Journey in his early 50's for the next three years. The ministry included a swift pass through what is now central modern Turkey toward the west coast of Asia Minor, for an extended stay in Ephesus (nearly three years). After establishing the work firmly in Asia Minor, Paul moved west to Macedonia and Greece, before returning along the Asian coast (Troas, Mytilene, Assos, Coos, Rhodos, etc. The mission ended back in Provincia Judea.

Stage Two Writings: Polemic -- During third journey between 54-58 CE when Paul was in his lower 50's. (Image: Scalpel of a surgeon).

- **Romans:** Because you were condemned (1:1-3:20), and God justified you (3:21-5:21), empowered you to be distinct (6-8) and explained His plan to keep His promises to Abraham (9-11)- it is right for you to submit your life for Divine inspection (12:1-2), and live the life of a real believer (12:2-16:27).
- **First Corinthians:** I heard from the household of Chloe that you have misplaced your loyalty (men over message- 1-4). It is commonly known you have misplaced values (love over truth-5) and misplaced standards (world over Word/body-6). Here are the answers to your questions concerning relationships and marriage (7), doubtful issues (8-10), symbols of your faith (11), gifts and serving together (12-14), resurrection (15) and financial stewardship (16).
- **Second Corinthians:** There are three issues I wish to share with you - I am not with you and I need to **explain** (one key evidence of truth is transformation! 1-7), I still have an **expectation** of you (giving 8-9), and I need to **exhort** you to follow proper leadership (10-13)
- **Galatians:** You have left the formula of salvation in the Gospel, though it was not human in origin and fully confirmed by the leaders (1-2). The Spirit came through the Gospel without the Law (showing it unnecessary to salvation) and you are bending the purpose of the Atonement Law that has been amended, going backward in faith. Stop! (3-4). Move ahead by faith alone, but walk in the Spirit and not by the flesh, caring for one another.

Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem (58 or 59 CE, cp. Acts 21:17-23:32): Antoninus Felix was appointed under Claudius in 52 CE. He married the Jewish princess Drusilla (daughter of Herod Agrippa 1, cp. Acts 24:24) as his third wife. At 15 years of age Drusilla was married to Azizus, King of Emesa (northern Syrian city of "Hims" today, but she left him for Felix. They had a son named Agrippa that died at Vesuvius in 79 CE. Felix's term overlapped that of Festus for a brief time in 58 CE. Felix was recalled to Rome to answer for disturbances and riots in Syria and Provincia Judea during his term. Since the overlapping dates of Felix and Festus's time in Provincia Judea are known, scholars feel comfortable dating Paul's arrest to about 58, and his incarceration in Caesarea to the time between 58-61 CE. Paul was arrested at about age 53 or 54, and journeyed to Rome at about age 57.

Journey to Rome (61 CE, cp. Acts 27:1-28:16): Festus died after a few years in office. No record of his work before taking office has been found. He was generally judged superior in administration to Felix in his brief leadership. Before he died, as recorded in Acts 25:12, Festus acceded to Paul's appeal to appear

before Emperor Nero which resulted in Paul being deported from Caesarea, shortly after Festus sought help structuring the written appeal from Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25-26). Moved by ship at about 56 years of age to Rome (in 61 or 62 CE - Acts 27 and 28), Paul remained about two years under house arrest while awaiting an appearance before Caesar in the year 63 CE or 64 CE. Paul likely met Nero for his first hearing in the end of the year 61 CE (following William Ramsey's date) or perhaps in year 62 CE. He had been **staying at his own expense under guard in a small area close to the Tiber** (near or at San Paolo alla Regola in Rome) where tanners and dyers had their operations.

Stage Three Writings: Philosophical – During house arrest in 61-63 CE when Paul was near 60. (Image: Square of a builder).

- **Ephesians:** Gentile believers are not second class citizens of the Kingdom. Call (1-3), Conduct (4:1-6:9), Conflict (6:10-20). They were called to a Divine heritage (1) by Divine Initiative (2) for a Divine purpose (3), their conduct should follow five "walks" (4:1-6-9) and the must suit up for conflict (6:10-20).
- **Philippians:** Apostle's Desire (Prayer 1:1-11), Apostle's Diagnosis (Three Ailments 1:12-4:9. Paul saw three problems: Need to identify God's hand at work (1:12-30); Need to use knowledge given by God to set priorities (2:1-30); Need to face that wrong priorities bring wrong fruit (3:1-4:9).), Apostle's Demonstration (Model, 4:10-23).
- **Colossians:** God called the believer with certain goals of life transformation (1:1-12). He has the Divine right to anticipate our obedience (1:13-29). The practical surrender works out in daily choices of obedience, as well as strict defining of my identity in Jesus and His work (2:1-23) brought on by a complete change in the focus of my everyday life (3:1-4:6).
- **Philemon:** Ten steps to repair a breach between two believers.

Paul's Final Travels (62-65 CE, after the record of the Acts of the Apostles):

It seems that while in Rome (or just after) in the year 62 CE, an earthquake (a subduction in the Bay of Naples) caused a tsunami with a tidal wave that swamped the ships at Ostia harbor near to Rome, ruining as much as one third of the Alexandrian grain. Coins were minted to show the people that all was well in spite of the disaster, but Nero must have found himself scrambling to meet the needs of the people for bread in that year. Paul was released to travel more between the years 62 and 65. There is much speculation about where he actually went, though it is *only* speculation.

Paul's Final Arrest and Death (65-67CE): Paul was arrested again (perhaps while traveling in Asia Minor at the behest of a bad report by Alexander the Coppersmith) and was held again in Rome, awaiting an audience with Emperor

Nero. A general persecution was raised against the Christians by Nero, after 64 CE (because of the great fire of Rome), and Paul may have faced no other charges than being a part of a seditious group. Paul was eventually executed by beheading (according to early reports) in about 67 or 68 CE (at age of early 60's).

Stage Four Writings: Pastoral – Between imprisonments about 63-68 CE when Paul was in his low to mid 60's. (Image: Staff of a Shepherd).

- **1 Timothy:** Timothy needed encouragement to focus on his personal leadership and the work of the body by understanding the process and goals of working with other believers (1). He needed to understand and instruct on proper behaviors in the believers (2), as well as identify proper leadership priorities and practices (3). He needed to move the flock through perils (4) while fostering godly relationships and avoiding common enemy traps (5). Finally, he needed to practice godliness in daily life (6).
- **Titus:** The letter outlines six major principles to establishing well-grounded and God-pleasing churches: choose leadership **wisely!** (1:5-9); **protect the truth entrusted to you!** (1:10-16); train a group to become a true church in equipment and functions! (2:1-10); **keep working** with those formed by grace and maintained by obedience in expectation of the Lord's return,! (2:11-15); **be gracious** toward the world and its leaders – a humility bathed in memory! (3:1-7), **Be careful** not to ignore error and contention! (3:8-11).
- **2 Timothy:** To face the changes ahead, Timothy needed to change his thinking (1) and be reassured that victory came from obedience, not schemes of men (2). In spite of the battle, he needed the encouragement that he could see through the darkness with the Word (3) and navigate the dangers that were quickly coming upon him (4).