

Biography of the Apostle Paul

Paul's beginnings are an interesting jumble that highlight the cosmopolitan world of the Roman Empire. He was born in an Asian city now located on the southern coast of Turkey called Tarsus around the year 10. His parents were Jewish, presumably strict Pharisees, but they were also Roman citizens. It is important to note that even though Judea was within the Roman Empire most Jews were not Roman citizens. Citizenship outside of Italy was an honor reserved for people who made great contributions to the Empire. Thus, we may presume that Paul's parents were people of influence and perhaps even moderate, if not greater, wealth.

At the age of twelve or thirteen Paul would have had his bar mitzvah which identified him as a son of Israel under the Law. As a member of a wealthy, prominent family, his mitzvah would have probably taken place at the Temple area in Jerusalem.

Growing up in an important Roman city, Paul would have learned Latin and Greek and would have been taught the classics of literature. But at home he would have learned Hebrew, would have been taught obedience to the Torah, and would have read the writings of the Jewish prophets and historians.

At fourteen Paul was sent to Jerusalem to train to be a rabbi under the teaching of the prominent rabbi, Gamaliel, who was the grandson of another famous rabbi, Hillel. Rabbis of that time were also taught another trade. The idea was to keep teachers from becoming a burden on society. That would also provide them something to fall back on during hard times. So, Paul was trained to be a tent-maker.

Paul grew to be a man of firm convictions and fiery temperament who always acted on his beliefs. Thus, when he was confronted with what he took to be a heresy to Judaism, he worked with all his might to eradicate it. This heresy would one day be known as Christianity and Paul was among the foremost of its persecutors.

Paul was present at the stoning of Stephen, and though he did not participate, he encouraged the violent act that killed the first of the martyrs. He then participated in a general persecution including, "going from house to house, he dragged out the believers, both men and women and threw them into jail." (Acts 8:3)

He then undertook a mission to Damascus, with the approval of the Sanhedrin, where he intended to continue attacking Christians. However, on the way, he had a vision that is described three times in the book of Acts. Paul's vision was a resurrection appearance of Jesus. Jesus asked why Paul was persecuting him and then commissioned him to preach his message to the Gentiles. While this meeting turned Paul a believer, a follower of "The Way," Paul always insisted that he remained both a Jew and a Roman. Before Paul could begin the ministry Jesus gave him, he spent some time in Arabia and then Damascus. He preached to the Jews in Damascus and was so successful proving that Jesus was the Messiah that some Jews determined to kill him. So Paul had to slip out of the city by night by being let down from the wall in a basket.

He went to Jerusalem and there gained official sanction from the elders of the Church, including Peter and James, to bring the message of Jesus to the Gentiles. Along with Barnabas, he then went on his first Missionary Journey to Cyprus, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. During this journey they met many hardships. Paul was even stoned, though not killed, in Lystra. It was an ironic twist that Paul underwent the same gruesome punishment he had sanctioned for Stephen and for the very cause Stephen had died.

Around 50 A.D. Paul returned to Jerusalem to confer with the church elders because some believers from Judea had come to Antioch teaching people that they couldn't be saved unless they were first circumcised according to the Law of Moses. This teaching that Christians had to first become Jews brought Paul into dispute with those Judean believers and Paul wanted to have the Church leaders in Jerusalem decide which side was correct. The controversy was resolved in Paul's favor when Peter and the other elders decided that they should not make it difficult for Gentiles to turn to God by becoming followers of Jesus. So they wrote a letter for Paul to take to

the Gentile believers saying that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.” (Acts 15:28-29)

Paul then went on his second and third missionary journeys to Galatia, Phrygia, Macedonia and Greece. He even went to Athens where he argued with philosophers as well as pagans. It was during this period that he met Luke, a doctor who became a follower of Jesus and eventually wrote one of the gospels as well as the book of Acts. After his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Jerusalem where he ran into a dispute with the Sanhedrin. He was the object of a huge civil disturbance. For this, he was arrested and eventually brought to Caesarea.

While there, he was questioned and tried several times, but his enemies could not seem to make their charges stick. Even so, he was held by the governor, Felix, who was afraid he might again create problems in Jerusalem. The next governor, Festus, seemed to be loathe to come to a decision on his case, so after over two years of house arrest, Paul invoked his right as a Roman citizen to demand a trial before the Emperor.

He was sent on the next ship to Rome. However, the ship met heavy seas and wrecked on the Island of Malta. Paul prayed and was visited by an angel and the entire crew was saved. Paul eventually took another boat and reached Italy where he was met by supporters and was taken to Rome.

Luke’s book, called Acts, largely chronicles Paul's life. It is thought by some scholars that the book may even have been a legal brief based on the recollections of Paul and the diary of Luke to help serve in his defense in his trial before the Emperor. Interestingly, neither the book of Acts nor Paul's surviving letters depicts the results of Paul's trial before Caesar.

It is known that he spent at least two years under house arrest waiting his audience with Nero. Literature from close to that time indicates Paul was either tried and executed by the sword or he died during the persecution that came about after the great fire which Nero was reported to have caused and then fiddled while Rome burned in about 64 AD.

Some tradition has it that Paul was released from prison and went preaching in Spain and then was again put in prison, tried and executed. Whatever his end, it is certain that Paul was a great influence on modern Christianity, both through his missionary work and his writing.