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# Apostle Paul

## PASSIONATE DISCIPLESHIP



(<http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/>).

## 1. Saul of Tarsus Meets Jesus (Acts 8:1-9:18, 33 AD)

by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson (<http://www.joyfulheart.com/about/>).

Audio (46:41) ([http://www.jesuswalk.com/mp3files/paul/01\\_conversion.mp3](http://www.jesuswalk.com/mp3files/paul/01_conversion.mp3)).

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Get ready to meet Paul, or Saul, as he was known in the early days. Though he is a giant figure in the history of our world, he appeared to some as "unimpressive" or "weak" in person.[5] One description (written more than a hundred years after Paul's death) gives him as "a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed, full of grace. For sometimes he seemed like a man, and sometimes he had the countenance of an angel." [6] Beyond that, we really don't know.

What we do know is that Paul was a force to be reckoned with from the time he was a young man, when, driven by hatred for Jesus and his followers, whom he saw as heretics, he persecuted the church without mercy. How God formed him, called him, tamed him, and engaged him in thirty years of Kingdom-building across the Roman Empire – that is what we're about to study.



'Apostle Paul' (494-495 AD), ceiling mosaic, Archiepiscopal Chapel of St. Andrew (oratory), Ravenna, Italy

### 1.1. Background

We'll be using the Book of Acts as our chronological structure, while taking occasional side trips into Paul's thirteen letters or epistles. But before we get deep into the Scripture, we need to understand the setting into which God placed his servant Paul.

#### The Jewish Diaspora

To understand Paul, we need to understand the Jewish Diaspora,[7] that is, the communities of Jews living outside Palestine. Yes, the Diaspora includes the dispersion of Jews following the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. But the Jewish Diaspora began much earlier. During the Hellenistic period (323-31 BC), a great many Jews were dispersed as Jewish mercenaries, military settlers, free wage-earners who worked in agriculture, or as skilled crafts people. When the Roman general Pompey established the Roman province of Syria in 64 BC and conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC, he enslaved many Jews as prisoners of war, and took them to Rome and elsewhere in the Empire.[8]

The largest concentrations of Jews outside Palestine were found in the adjacent countries of Egypt and Syria, where, in some areas, they formed high percentages of the population.[9] Antioch and Damascus had large Jewish communities. Colonies of Jews were located in the cities of Greece and Macedonia.

Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria explains to Roman Emperor Caligula (37-41 AD) that Jews were found in colonies in Egypt, Phoenicia, and Syria, and all over the empire, in,

"those more distant regions of **Pamphylia, Cilicia**, the greater part of Asia Minor as far as Bithynia, and the furthest corners of Pontus. And in the same manner into Europe, into **Thessaly**, and Boeotia, and **Macedonia**, and Aetolia, and Attica, and Argos, and **Corinth** and all the most fertile and wealthiest districts of Peloponnesus. And not only are the continents full of Jewish colonies, but also all the most celebrated islands are so too; such as Euboea, and **Cyprus**, and **Crete**. I say nothing of the countries beyond the Euphrates...."[10]

You may have observed that some of these places are the very ones Paul travels to, so you can see the importance of the Jewish settlements to Paul's later ministry in synagogues throughout the Mediterranean. In addition, the Jews in Rome were said to number between 40,000 and 60,000 in the first century AD.[11]

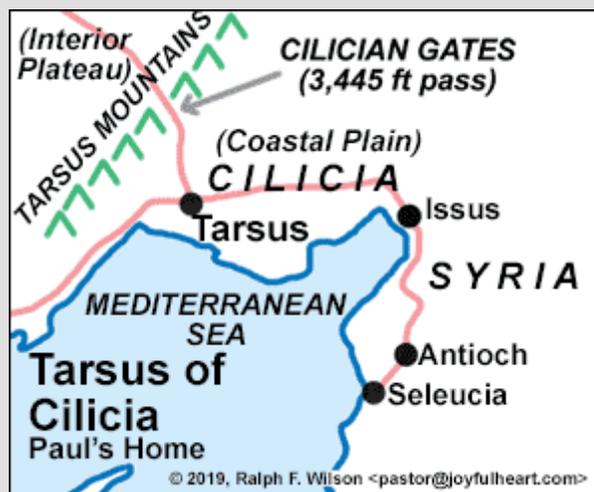
## Tarsus, Paul's Birthplace

One of these Jewish colonies was in Cilicia, with its capital at Tarsus, Paul's birthplace. Paul proclaimed:

"I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary[12] city." (Acts 21:39)

Tarsus was indeed an important city. It was located on the navigable river Cydnus, about 10 miles inland, along a major trade route that wound its way through the Cilician Gates, a narrow pass over the Tarsus Mountains,[13] and on to the interior plateau of Asia Minor. At its largest, Tarsus may have had half a million inhabitants. Early coins of the region display the Greek gods Zeus and his son Heracles.

The city is of ancient origin, probably mentioned in the "table of nations" in Genesis 10:4. It is successively controlled by the Hittites, Assyrians, and Persians. Alexander the Great came through the Cilician Gates to conquer the city in 333 BC, bringing it under Greek influence. The city received a new Seleucid constitution under Antiochus Epiphanes (175-164 BC), which opened the door to Jewish colonists beginning in 170 BC.[14]



Map: Tarsus of Cilicia ([Larger image](#))

(<http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/maps/tarsus-1500x1227x300.jpg>)

## Roman Citizen

Paul was not only a citizen of Tarsus, he was a citizen of Rome, with an hereditary citizenship.[15] Citizenship is probably an indicator that his family was well-to-do. We do know that Paul was a tent-maker by trade, probably a family trade learned from his father before him. (We'll talk more about Paul as a tentmaker in [Lesson 6.3](#) ([http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/06\\_greece.htm#6-3-Corinth](http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/06_greece.htm#6-3-Corinth)).)

Citizenship was of high value in the Roman Empire. When Paul is about to be flogged in Jerusalem,

"The commander went to Paul and asked, 'Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?'

'Yes, I am,' he answered.

Then the commander said, 'I had to pay a big price for my citizenship.'

'But I was born a citizen,' Paul replied." (Acts 22:27-28)

As we'll see, Roman citizenship entitles Paul to special legal considerations when he is in trouble with the authorities in various cities (Acts 16:37-39; 22:25-29; 25:7-12; 26:32).

## **Jew**

Paul is unapologetically Jewish.

"I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin." (Romans 11:1)

Paul's family was part of a tight-knit Jewish community in Tarsus, and, as Jews, had, from time to time, been given special privileges. For example, the Jews were exempted by Julius Caesar from being required to worship Roman gods, and this privilege was extended by Augustus (27 BC-14 AD).<sup>[16]</sup>

## **Pharisee and Son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6)**

Paul states, "I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6, cf. Philippians 3:6), thus he was not raised in a family that was lax about its faith.

"According to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee." (Acts 26:5)

"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely **zealous**<sup>[17]</sup> for the traditions of my fathers." (Galatians 1:14)

"Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to **zeal**,<sup>[18]</sup> a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Philippians 3:5-6)

Pharisees were known for their zeal for the Mosaic Law, as well as the oral law, or "tradition of the elders" (Matthew 15:2). Paul was so zealous that he came to Jerusalem to study under one of the leading rabbis of the day.

"Pharisees" belonged to a lay movement or party that defined righteousness as observing every detail of traditional rules designed to serve as a "hedge" or "fence" around the Torah's commandments. If one kept the traditions, one would not then transgress the law itself. The Pharisees were relatively small in number -- estimated by Josephus to consist of about 6,000 people throughout Palestine -- but had great influence in first century Judaism. Josephus notes,

"While the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them ... the Pharisees have the multitude on their side."<sup>[19]</sup>

In contrast to the Sadducees, Pharisees believed in angels as well as in the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age (Acts 23:6-8). As strict observers of the traditional, oral law the Pharisees formed the foundational, liturgical and ritualistic basis of Rabbinic Judaism that emerged after the temple was destroyed, and are somewhat akin to modern-day Hasidic Jews.<sup>[20]</sup>

We tend to think of Pharisees in negative terms, since they are often seen to be Jesus' opponents in the Gospels, but it's better to see them as zealous, law-keeping Jews -- Nicodemus might be a good example (John 3:1-15). Paul wrote,

"For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge." (Romans 10:2)

Nevertheless, many of the Pharisees had fallen into legalism as a way of righteousness. This is the group that opposed Jesus.

## **Hellenists vs. Hellenizers**

Paul, a native of the Greek-speaking city of Tarsus, is a Hellenist,[21] that is, a Greek speaker. Confusion comes, however, since the word "Hellenism" can sometimes refer to the spread and popularization of Greek culture. "Hellenizers" sought to shape the message of Judaism to be more acceptable to Greek and Roman audiences. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC - c. 50 AD), for example, was a Hellenizer who used philosophical allegory to harmonize Jewish Scripture with Greek philosophy.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that all Greek-speaking Jews were Hellenizers, the way some liberal scholars did in the early twentieth century, characterizing Greek-speaking Hellenistic Judaism as syncretistic in nature and lax in its observance of the Law. Rather, many of these Greek-speaking Jews were quite strict in their careful observance of the Torah. Paul was one of these.

## **Hellenists in the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Acts 6:9)**

One of the seven Hellenists chosen by the apostles to oversee food distribution to widows is Stephen (Acts 6:9). But Stephen is more than an administrator. He ministers in Jerusalem with powerful signs and wonders, as well as powerful clarity of preaching. Together, these are a threat to orthodox Jews. We'll consider him further later in this lesson. Notice that Stephen's opposition comes not from the Temple scholars, but from "members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of *Cilicia* and *Asia*" (Acts 6:9).[22] Saul, of course, is from Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia.

"Freedmen" is *libertinos*, from Latin *libertinus*, "a person who was manumitted." The name describes these people as former slaves or their descendants.[23] As I mentioned previously, many Jews had been taken as prisoners of war to Rome in the time of Pompey (63 BC). After their liberation, they formed a colony on the banks of the Tiber. [24] In 19 AD, the Roman Senate decreed that a number of Jewish freedmen should be transported to Sardinia and that the rest should leave Italy unless they renounced their "profane customs" before a certain date.[25] Many would naturally have sought refuge in their homeland, Jerusalem, and could have formed the Synagogue of the Freedmen.[26]

Whether Paul's forebears came to Tarsus from being Roman prisoners of war or as colonists from Judea, we don't know.

## **Brought Up in Jerusalem, Studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3)**

At some point, Paul's family moves from Tarsus to Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), for Paul says he was "brought up"[27] in Jerusalem. It seems that he has a sister and nephew (and perhaps other relatives) who lived in Jerusalem as late as 57 AD (Acts 23:16).

We don't know when Paul is born. He is a "young man" at the stoning of Stephen.[28] Many scholars assume that Paul is born in Tarsus about 5 to 10 AD. If Jesus' public ministry is about 28 to 30 AD, and Paul's conversion takes place about 33 AD,[29] then almost certainly Paul is in Jerusalem during the last phase of Jesus' ministry. Whether he ever sets eyes on Jesus is impossible to know, but his attitude toward Jesus appears plainly enough in his violent opposition to the infant church of Jerusalem.

Was Paul married? We don't know. In the context of marriage, Paul muses, "I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that" (1 Corinthians 7:7), indicating that he was single at that time. He confirms this in the next verse. On the other hand, marriage and having children was expected of young Jewish men, eager to keep the law. So if Paul was ever married, it had ended prior to his missionary journeys, either by death or divorce. We know of no children.

During his youth, Paul studies under Rabbi Gamaliel I, known later as Gamaliel the Elder (died about 52 AD), son of Simon and grandson (according to the Talmud) of Rabbi Hillel (founder of the more liberal of the two main schools of the Pharisees, with Shammai being the other). We see him in Acts 5:34-40 encouraging tolerance of the new Jesus movement.[30]

Paul is educated as a disciple of one of the most respected leaders of the Pharisees, though it doesn't seem that Paul is as tolerant as his mentor, Gamaliel.

## 1.2. Conversion of Saul

When we meet Paul in the Book of Acts, he is a persecutor of the church – first of Stephen, and then seemingly single-handedly, the whole Christian Church throughout Jerusalem and Judea. Incidentally, he is referred to in the Book of Acts from Acts 7:58 through 13:9 as Saul, his Hebrew name. Saul, of course, was Israel's first king, the best-known member of the tribe of Benjamin. Beginning in Acts 13:9 he is referred to by his Roman name Paul (*Paulus* in the Latin), which means, "little." However, in these lessons I'll use the names interchangeably.

### The Stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8-8:1)

Now, with that background, let's get into the narrative of the Book of Acts at the point where Paul emerges as a major character. The story begins with a man who, like Paul, is a Greek-speaking Jew.

Stephen, whom we mentioned earlier, is one of the Grecian Jews selected by the apostles to make sure that the Greek widows aren't neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1-5). Stephen's name, *Stephanos*, isn't a Hebrew name, but one which goes way back to ancient Greece. Stephen is a man "full of grace and power," preaching in Jerusalem with "great wonders and signs" (Acts 6:8). He threatens the status quo of the Hellenist Jewish community in Jerusalem, and therefore cannot be tolerated.

Notice that the group that attacks Stephen are themselves Grecian Jews, just as he is:

"Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen." (Acts 6:9)

The Synagogue<sup>[31]</sup> of the Freedmen isn't "Hellenized," that is to say, it doesn't soften Judaism to conform to Greek ways. Rather, it seems to be a center of strong Judaism, responsible for "policing" its own members when they get out of line.

So when Stephen begins preaching about Jesus and seeing conversions to the Way (Acts 6:7), members of this synagogue take issue with him. They have him dragged before the Sanhedrin, the body of 70 leaders which the Romans allow to rule Jerusalem.

Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin begins with a very Jewish story, that of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David. But then Stephen chides them for rebelling against God-given leaders, just as they had against Moses.

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51)

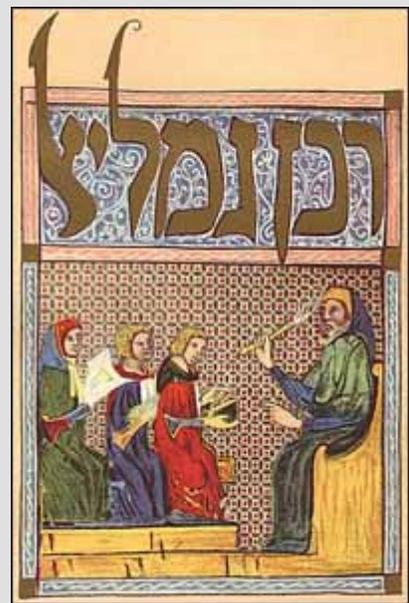
Stephen's enemies are enraged, and – contrary to Roman prohibitions against the Jews exercising the death penalty – they drag him outside the city and stone him in a kind of frenzied mob. Luke tells us of Saul's involvement.

"The witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.... And Saul was there, giving approval to his death." (Acts 7:58; 8:1a)

It is likely that Saul himself is a member of the Synagogue of the Freedmen, since it includes members from Cilicia, where Paul's hometown of Tarsus is located (Acts 6:9; 22:3).

### Sparking Intense Persecution of the Church (8:1, 3)

While Saul doesn't stone Stephen himself, that illegal, brutal act is the trigger that unleashes a wave of intense persecution against the Church, which had, until then, been growing rapidly in Jerusalem (Acts 6:7).



Rabban Gamliel (Gamaliel) as depicted in the Sarajevo Haggadah, an illuminated manuscript (c. 1350).

" On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were **scattered throughout Judea and Samaria**.... But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." (Acts 8:1b, 3)

Notice how God uses the persecution to spread the gospel farther into Judea and Samaria! Satan attacks; God counter-attacks.

"Those who had been **scattered preached the word** wherever they went." (Acts 8:4)

Saul himself is personally caught up in the persecution. In fact, he seems to be one of the prime movers. We catch hints of his hatred elsewhere in the New Testament.

"... How intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy<sup>[32]</sup> it." (Galatians 1:13)

"I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man."<sup>[33]</sup> (1 Timothy 1:13a)

"Isn't he the man who raised havoc<sup>[34]</sup> in Jerusalem among those who call on this name?" (Acts 9:21)

"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession<sup>[35]</sup> against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them." (Acts 26:9-11)

From these passages we get a picture of Saul as an intense, violent, angry man, who will stop at nothing. And yet, he is self-righteous, imagining that he is doing God's will. Paul's zeal will be redirected by God, but his all-out passion continues throughout his life.

## **The Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-8)**

Bible scholars date Saul's conversion at approximately 33 AD, about three years after Jesus' public ministry and crucifixion.<sup>[36]</sup>

Acts includes three tellings of Paul's conversion and call:

1. Where the event occurs in the narrative (Acts 9:1-8);
2. A retelling before a Jewish crowd following Paul's arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 22:5-11); and
3. Before King Agrippa during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 26:13-18).

Additionally, Paul refers to this event in Galatians 1:15-16 and 1 Timothy 1:12-16.

**Stop now and read the account in Acts 9:1-8.** In addition to this account, Paul's retelling of the event before King Agrippa (Acts 26:14-18) adds some important details to our understanding. Outside Damascus, a brilliant light blinds Saul. He is thrown to the ground and a voice speaks. Paul is lying by the side of the road, having an amazing conversation with Jesus. We see these elements in various accounts.

"<sup>4b</sup> 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' <sup>5</sup>

'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked.

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied." (Acts 9:4b-5)

I want to examine several things we learn from Paul's conversion.



(<http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/maps/pauls-early-travels-e-med-843x2000x300.jpg>).

Paul's Early Travels, 33-46 AD ([larger map](#))

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**1. Persecution.** Paul has been persecuting the church – putting people in prison, having them beaten, even killed. The word "persecute" is *diōkō*, which means "to run," then "run after, pursue," then, as here, "to harass someone, especially because of beliefs, persecute."<sup>[37]</sup>

**2. Unity between Christ and his people.** "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," (Acts 9:5). Paul has been persecuting Christian believers. And in doing so, though he doesn't realize it, he is persecuting or harassing Jesus himself. This is another example of Jesus' teaching in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats,

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

and conversely,

"Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." (Matthew 25:40, 45)

There is a strong bond between Jesus and his people, between Jesus and his Church. We are one with him and he with us (Ephesians 5:31-32). For this reason, a person who attacks the Church, attacks Jesus personally.

Dear friend, I know that the Church is often viewed as a human institution – flawed and often disappointing. But it is more than that, and if we treat it as merely human, we err. The Church is Christ's own body, and we must treat it with the reverence due Jesus himself (1 Corinthians 3:17).

**3. Appearance.** There isn't just a light and a voice. The Bible calls it an "appearance."<sup>[38]</sup> Christ "appears" to Paul at this very time (Acts 9:17; 26:16) – which later becomes part of Paul's claim to be an apostle.

"Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Corinthians 9:1)

"Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." (1 Corinthians 15:8)

**4. Goads.** Then Jesus says to Paul, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads"<sup>[39]</sup> (Acts 26:14). The figure is of a donkey that balks at going forward on the path and must be goaded with a pointed stick. When goaded it kicks and tries to resist. But the master continues to goad it until it complies.

The implication is that Paul had been resisting the calls of the Holy Spirit prior to the journey to Damascus. God has been speaking, but Paul isn't listening. He is kicking. But, finally, on the Damascus road, the goad is particularly intense and gets his attention. In an instant, Paul realizes that the Jesus, whose movement Paul is trying to suppress, is indeed the Messiah. He suddenly understands that he has gotten it all backwards.

My friend, has Jesus had to use a goad on you? Have you been kicking? Resisting? When will you listen to what he is trying to say to you?

**One important part of this series of lessons are Discussion Questions. We learn by reflecting on what we have learned, processing it, and thinking through its implications. Don't skip this step, or you will have gained head knowledge without heart knowledge! I encourage you to write out your own answer to each question. If you're studying with others, discuss it. If you're studying online, click on the web address (URL) following the question and read others' answers or post your own. (Note: You'll need to register on the Forum before you can post your own answers. <http://www.joyfulheart.com/forums/instructions.htm> (<http://www.joyfulheart.com/forums/instructions.htm>))**

**Q1. (Acts 9:4-5; 26:14) Why does persecuting Christ's people constitute persecuting Christ himself? What kinds of goads or prods have you seen God use on you to move you along Christ's path? When you "kick against the goads" is it harder on you or on God?**

## **Full-Stop (Acts 9:9)**

Paul spends three days in blindness, fasting. I've often wondered what was going on during this time.

Paul has been knocked from his horse, blinded by a great light, seen Christ appear to him, been rebuked by the Lord, and called to a mighty ministry – all in the space of a very few minutes. Now Paul is trying to process what has happened.

Paul has been going one direction full-steam. Then he is jerked to a full-stop, and turned in an entirely new direction. If you've ever had this happen in some arena of your life, you know that it takes adjustment.

Does Paul have a real choice here? Yes. But you must admit that Jesus has made the issues so crystal clear that Paul knows he would be a fool to walk away and continue along his path. But it is a real choice! Unfortunately, both you and I have met some fools who have met Christ and walked away. Yes, Paul has a real choice. He chooses wisely.

## **Ananias, the Obedient Servant (Acts 9:10-18)**

Notice that God doesn't send Ananias to Paul immediately. He lets Paul work through the issues first. Then he summons Ananias.

Who is Ananias? Ananias is a Hebrew name meaning "Yahweh is gracious." The form the commonly used in the Old Testament is "Hananiah." Ananias seems to have been a Jewish native of Damascus, since he speaks of having heard reports of the persecution in Jerusalem, rather than of being an eyewitness to these events (Acts 9:13-14). He doesn't seem to be a leader, but rather is identified as a regular "disciple" who is part of the newly formed Christian community in Damascus. In Ananias, we see God using "nobodies" just like you and me.

The Lord Jesus himself appears to Ananias in a vision (Acts 9:17b) and calls him by name. He responds, "Here I am, Lord," which is another way of saying, "Yes, sir, ready for duty, sir." Then Jesus tells him to go to a particular street and house to a man named Saul.

Ananias responds by informing Jesus about Saul's reputation and intent -- as if he didn't know. Jesus ignores him, but explains:

"Go, for he is a chosen instrument<sup>[40]</sup> of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:15-16)

Jesus reveals to Ananias something about Saul's call -- though it is not Ananias's job to explain that call to Saul. Jesus has begun to call Saul directly from the time he is struck down (Acts 26:16-18). More on Paul's call in [Lesson 2 \(http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/02\\_arabia.htm#2\\_Arabia\\_Tarsus\\_Antioch\)](http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/02_arabia.htm#2_Arabia_Tarsus_Antioch).

## **Ananias Ministers to Saul (Acts 9:17-18)**

God has already shown Saul a vision of Ananias coming to him, so he is prepared for Ananias when he comes.

Ananias calls him "Brother Saul." Yes, he is a brother Jew. But Ananias recognizes that he is now a Christian brother, as well. Jesus has dealt with him. Jesus has saved him from a course directed by Satan, who wants to destroy Christ's work. And now Jesus is preparing him for his next steps along this new Way, using Ananias to do so. Ananias lays his hands on Saul and Saul's blindness is healed instantly, with something like scales falling from his eyes. Acts tells us that Saul is filled with the Holy Spirit -- though we're not told how this manifested itself. Saul is then baptized by Ananias, presumably in the name of Jesus, his new Lord.

**Q2. (Acts 9:10-18) Why do you think God sends Ananias to Paul rather than revealing directly? Why does Ananias argue with God? Why does it take courage to obey? What does Ananias do and say? Have you ever had God guide you to talk with someone and minister to him or her? Have you followed through?**

## **1.3. Righteousness by Faith (Philippians 3:3-11)**

In the next [Lesson \(http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/02\\_arabia.htm#2\\_Arabia\\_Tarsus\\_Antioch\)](http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/02_arabia.htm#2_Arabia_Tarsus_Antioch), we'll consider what happens to Saul in Damascus and in the years immediately following. However, alongside the study of Paul's life from a chronological point of view, I want to consider Paul's passions and the learnings that his experiences brought him in each of these lessons.

### **Legalism and Boasting (Philippians 3:5-7)**

Judaism in the days of Jesus and Paul included some wonderful saints. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna are examples. But the Pharisees, in their role as zealous keepers of the Torah and the oral tradition, have turned true faith into legalism. They even boast in the degree of their performance of the Law. Paul shares that, if he were so inclined, he can best them boast for boast:

<sup>5</sup> ... Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." (Philippians 3:5-6)

The term translated by the NIV as "legalistic righteousness," is literally "righteousness under the law" (ESV, NRSV). It means that, in terms of keeping both the written law and the oral law (later codified as the Mishnah), Paul is without blame. This doesn't mean that Paul is sinless, just that he believes that he has kept the letter of the law.

However, as Paul reflects on it – perhaps during those three days of blindness in Damascus, perhaps later in his wanderings in Arabia – what he has boasted about is worse than nothing.

It is "loss."<sup>[41]</sup> Disadvantage, not advantage. This is because pride in our own achievements, trusting in our own "inherent goodness," is opposite to what Christ wants for us. He wants to produce in us complete trust and faith in him, and in him alone. Paul calls self-righteousness "rubbish" (NIV, ESV, NRSV), "dung" (KJV), polite translations of *skybalon*. A more accurate phrase might be, "human excrement." One commentator says: "To convey the crudity of the Greek.... 'It's all crap!'"<sup>[42]</sup>

<sup>7</sup> But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish...." (Philippians 3:7-8)

(We'll examine this passage in relation to "knowing" Christ in [Lesson 11.5](http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/11_knowing.htm#11-5-Know) ([http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/11\\_knowing.htm#11-5-Know](http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/11_knowing.htm#11-5-Know)).

**Q3. (Philippians 3:7-8) How do legalism and the resulting spiritual pride prevent us from trusting in Christ by faith, and knowing him? How has your pride in yourself kept you from drawing closer to Jesus?**

## **Righteousness through Faith (Philippians 3:9)**

Now we come to one of Paul's passions, one of the key theological insights that upended his world and can upend ours too:

"... Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (Philippians 3:9b)

What is this righteousness? The Greek noun *dikaïosynē* has three basic meanings: (1) justice or fairness, (2) right standing, and (3) upright behavior, uprightness.<sup>[43]</sup> The verb form of this noun, *dikaioō* carries here the idea of, "to be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous, be justified."<sup>[44]</sup>

Paul contrasts two types of righteousness in verse 9:

	Source	Means
Righteousness in Pharasaic Judaism	Law	Personal obedience
Righteousness in Christianity	God	Faith

Righteousness under law considers a person righteous because of his or her own upright behavior. Righteousness by faith considers a person righteous because God has declared it so and, as Judge, considers that person righteous (that is, having a right standing before Him).

In brief, here's how it works. God agrees with our confession of sins that we are guilty and that there must be a penalty for sin. Once the penalty has been paid (crudely referred to "our debt to society" in the United States), then we are free. Yes, we are ex-cons, but we are free.

The penalty for most crimes against society is imprisonment, but *our* penalty for rebellion and treason against the Most High God is death. That penalty has been paid by Jesus Christ on the cross. Thus, God declares the penalty paid in full and that we are righteous, that is, in a right standing with God once more.

Paul expands on this in his letter to the Romans. I know this is very tightly-packed with theological words, but read it carefully, and you'll see the elements of what we've discussed:

<sup>21</sup> But now a **righteousness from God**, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes **through faith** in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are **justified freely by his grace** through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a **sacrifice of atonement**, through faith in his blood...." (Romans 3:21-25a)

## Righteousness Received by Faith

This concept is difficult to grasp. And it is hard to believe, since it is counter-intuitive and is such amazing news! How can someone else take my sin? Who would do that? Don't I have to bear it and the consequences of it? How can this be? This seems the opposite of the Eastern concept of karma. It is!

The core of the Christian faith is that we believe Jesus died for our sins on the cross and was raised from the dead for our salvation. Either it is true or it isn't. Either the crucifixion and resurrection are merely nice Christian stories or they actually happened in history and are spiritual facts of life.

If the crucifixion and resurrection actually happened – and I believe they did – then Jesus, the Holy One, took all of the degradation of our unholiness upon himself, "the righteous for the unrighteous" (1 Peter 3:18), in order to remove our sin and guilt. Ponder Isaiah 53 to understand this better. This is what Paul means when he refers to "the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" in Philippians 3:9.

But what does faith have to do with it? Though Christ has died for the sins of the whole world (John 1:29; 3:15-17; 1 Timothy 2:4, 6; 4:10; 1 John 2:22; 4:14), that salvation takes effect only for those who put their trust in him. Faith confirms what God has done and activates this salvation for oneself.

The Greek word "faith," which occurs twice in our verse, is the Greek noun *pistis*, "state of believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted – trust, confidence, faith in the active sense = 'believing.'"[45] Throughout the New Testament, and occasionally in the Old, we see this theme.

Paul points to two Old Testament passages to illustrate righteousness by faith:

**1. Abraham:** "**Abram believed the Lord**, and he **credited** it to him as **righteousness**" (Genesis 15:6). Abraham is a moon-worshiper whom God has called and who has believed enough to obey. God counts this faith as righteousness, or right-standing before him.

**2. Habakkuk.** The Prophet Habakkuk says, "The just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). In this verse, the word "just" means "righteous people." They live by faith, not by merits they accrue from obedience. Paul mentions this verse several times (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; cf. Hebrews 10:38).

Notice a clear linkage between faith (believing) and salvation or righteousness in the following verses from the Gospels:

"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever **believes** and is baptized will be **saved**, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16)

"... That everyone who **believes** in him may have **eternal life**. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever **believes** in him shall not perish but have **eternal life**." (John 3:15-16)

"This **righteousness** from God comes **through faith** in Jesus Christ to all who **believe**. There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:22-23)

"For it is with your heart that you **believe** and are **justified**, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." (Romans 10:10)

These verses can be multiplied many times over.[46]

What, then, is the purpose of the Law? Paul answers: "It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come" (Galatians 3:19a). The law served as a kind of "schoolmaster" (KJV), "guardian" (ESV), "disciplinarian" (NRSV)[47] until Christ came (Galatians 3:24). The law is obsolete in this Messianic Age. For now we walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 25; Romans 8:4).

For Paul, who was raised on Torah-obedience, this was an amazing revelation, and I am sure it took some time to work through all its implications, and how it fit into the various Old Testament Scriptures. Of course, the Doctrine of Salvation by Faith is closely related to the Doctrine of Grace (which we'll examine in [Lesson 4.3](http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/04_grace.htm#4-3-Grace) ([http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/04\\_grace.htm#4-3-Grace](http://www.jesuswalk.com/paul/04_grace.htm#4-3-Grace))).

But now Paul is free -- and all those who believe the gospel are too! He is no long under a yoke of obedience to the law, but is saved by faith and walks by the Spirit. It is this amazing truth of salvation by faith alone -- *sola fide* -- that also transformed the life of Martin Luther fifteen centuries later. It is freeing!

## Your Faith in Jesus

Jesus died for your sins. You believe it to be true, thus you speak it with your mouth (that is, confess it, Romans 10:9-11). And as a result of this faith you receive salvation and righteousness in return. Do you deserve this? No. But God counts your faith as righteousness. Yes, your faith is weak when you are a new Christian. Sometimes you are like the man whose son was healed, who said, "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24, NRSV). But you grow in understanding and faith and experience.

Paul, though he was a very righteous man from a religious point of view,<sup>[48]</sup> valued this salvation by faith above all things:

"Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ -- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (Philippians 3:9b)

For Paul this was revolutionary. It's also revolutionary for us. Trust in Jesus and he will wipe away your sins, fill you with the Holy Spirit, and begin to reveal himself to you. He declares you righteous, forgiven. To live believing that revolutionary truth will change your life!

**Q4. (Philippians 3:9; Genesis 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4) Abraham had been a moon-worshipper. According to Genesis 15:6, how does he come into right relationship with the God who created all? How can a person today become righteous by faith? What is involved in really "trusting" Christ?**

## Lessons for Disciples

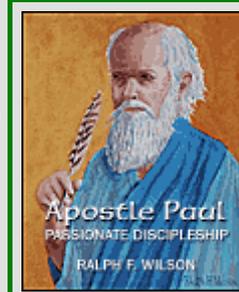
At the conclusion of each lesson, we'll be summarizing the various lessons that will help us be better disciples and more efficient in Christ's work. The problem is that the more minutely one looks, the more lessons there are. So I'll only be highlighting the ones that appear important to me for this series of lessons; I'm not trying to be exhaustive.

1. God uses our natural stations in life, abilities, and skills. For example, Paul was a Jew, Roman citizen, tent-maker, Greek- and Hebrew-speaker, Pharisee, etc. We don't have to become someone we're not, only to be faithful to do what he shows us to do.
2. God can use anyone to perform signs and wonders or to be an effective witness. In this case Stephen, the Grecian "deacon." (Acts 6-7).
3. God is able to convert even those who are violently opposed to Jesus, Saul being the obvious example. God is fully capable of gaining the attention of those who aren't listening, though normally he chooses to nurture openness and receptivity instead.
4. Stephen ministers powerfully. Satan counterattacks, but God uses the persecution to move Jerusalem and Judean believers farther afield to spread the gospel further (Acts 8:1, 4).
5. There is unity between Christ and his people. To persecute the church is to persecute Christ himself (Acts 9:4-5; Matthew 25:40, 45).
6. When we resist Christ, it is like a donkey kicking against his master's goads. Resistance makes it harder for the animal, not easier (Acts 26:14).
7. Ananias is a faithful servant, but even he protests his instructions, assuming that God doesn't know what kind of person Saul is (Acts 9:13-14). God knows what he is doing. Dialog with God is good, but we shouldn't pretend that he has to listen to our explanation to understand. He knows.
8. God declares us righteous by our faith in him, not by obedience to the law. Declaring a person righteous is called "justification" (Philippians 3:9; Romans 3:21-25a; Genesis 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4).

9. Religious pride can keep us from our core need -- knowing Christ in a personal way. We can only draw close by humbling ourselves (Philippians 3:7-8).

## Prayer

Father, thank you that you specialize in changing "hard cases" like Paul. Change me. Help me to humble myself before you, no longer trusting in myself, but in Jesus Christ to save me and lead me. Thank you for your gracious salvation. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.



Available in paperback, PDF, and Kindle formats.

(<http://www.jesuswalk.com/books/paul.htm>)

## Key Verses

"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

"The just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4).

"... That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:15-16)

"This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:22-23)

"... Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ -- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (Philippians 3:9b)

## Endnotes

[5] 2 Corinthians 10:10. "Unimpressive" (NIV), "weak" (ESV, NRSV, KJV) is *asthenēs*, "pertaining to experiencing some incapacity or limitation, weak," here, of physical weakness, "unimpressive" (BDAG 142, 2a).

[6] *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 1.

[7] "Diaspora" is derived from the Greek verb *diaspeirō*, "scatter." The English word, "disperse," is also related.

[8] Jerome (347-420 AD) relates a tradition that Paul's ancestors were from the Galilean town Gischala, taken by the Romans as prisoners of war to Tarsus (Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus*, 5).

[9] W.R. Stegner, "Diaspora," DPL 211-213. Philo, *Against Flaccus* 6.8.

[10] Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, 36 (§§281-282). See also Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.7.2 (§§110-118).

[11] W.R. Stegner, "Diaspora," DPL 211-213.

[12] "No ordinary" (NIV), "important" (NRSV), "no obscure" (ESV), "no mean" (KJV) is the negative particle plus the adjective *asēmos*, "without (distinguishing) mark," pertaining to be unmarked, "insignificant, unimportant" (BDAG 142, 1).

[13] Elevation 3,445 ft. (about 1,000 m.).

[14] "Tarsus," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906).

[15] C.J. Hemer, "Tarsus," ISBE 4:734-736; M. Reasoner, "Roman," DPL 140.

[16] Tertullian (and only Tertullian) wrote that Judaism had the status of a *religio licita* (permitted religion) throughout the empire (Tertullian, *Apology* 21.1). See Wikipedia, "*Religio licita*."

[17] "Zealous" is *zēlōtēs*, "one who is earnestly committed to a side or cause, enthusiast, adherent, loyalist." Also rather in the sense of an "enthusiastic adherent," of a person or a cause (BDAG 427, 1a).

[18] "Zeal" is *zēlos*, "intense positive interest in something, zeal, ardor," marked by a sense of dedication" (BDAG, 427, 1).

[19] Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.10.6.

[20] Stephen Westerholm, "Pharisees," Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (editors), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [DJG] (InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 609-614.

[21] The keyword in Acts 6:1 is *Hellēnistēs*, translated variously as "Grecian Jews" (NIV), "Hellenists" (NRSV, ESV), and "Grecians" (KJV). The word here means "one who uses the Greek language, Hellenist," specifically, a Greek-speaking Israelite in contrast to one speaking a Semitic language (BDAG 319). The word also occurs in Acts 9:29 and 11:20.

[22] Danker argues that this verse may refer to several synagogues in Jerusalem, not just a single one (F.W. Danker, "Freedmen, Synagogue of the," ISBE 2:360-361).

[23] *Libertinos*, BDAG 594.

[24] Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 23 (§155).

[25] Tacitus, *Annals* 2.85.

[26] F.W. Danker, "Freedmen, Synagogue of the," ISBE 2:360-361.

[27] "Brought up" is *anatrephō*, "to provide nurture," here, "bring up, rear, train" (BDAG 74, b).

[28] *Neaias*, "youth, young man" (from about the 24th to the 40th year) (BDAG 667).

[29] See F.F. Bruce, ISBE 3:709 (1979); *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (1977), p. 475; and NT Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (2018), pp. 433-434.

[30] While believing the law of God to be divinely inspired, Gamaliel tended to emphasize its human elements. He recommended that sabbath observance be less rigorous and burdensome, regulated current custom with respect to divorce in order to protect women, and urged kindness toward Gentiles. Scholarly, urbane, a man of great intellect, he studied Greek literature avidly (R.F. Youngblood, "Gamaliel," ISBE 2:394).

[31] Since the time of the Exile, synagogues had arisen as a way of continuing Torah reading and study, as well as providing a center for Jewish community life in a foreign land. When the Jews returned after the Exile and rebuilt the temple, the institution of the synagogue returned with them. According to Jewish traditions there were 400 to 500 synagogues in Jerusalem by the time the city was destroyed in 70 AD (Wilhelm Bacher and Lewis N. Dembitz, "Synagogues," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906)).

[32] "Tried to destroy" (NIV, ESV, NRSV), "wasted" (KJV) is *portheō*, "to attack and cause complete destruction, pillage, make havoc of, destroy, annihilate something" (BDAG 853). The word is also used to refer to Paul's persecution in Galatians 1:23 and Acts 9:21.

[33] "Violent man" (NIV), "insolent opponent" (ESV), "man of violence" (NRSV), "injurious" (KJV) is *hybristēs*, "a violent, insolent person" (BDAG 1022).

[34] "Raised/made havoc" (NIV, ESV, NRSV), "destroyed" (KJV) is *portheō*.

[35] "Obsession" (NIV), "raging fury" (ESV), "furiously enraged" (NRSV), "exceedingly mad" (KJV) is two words: *perissōs*, "marker of exceptionally high degree on a scale of intensity, exceedingly, beyond measure, very" (BDAG 806); and *emmainomai*, "to be filled with such anger that one appears to be mad, be enraged" (BDAG 322, used only here in the New Testament).

[36] F.F. Bruce, ISBE 3:709 (1979); *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (1977), p. 475. NT Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (2018), pp. 433-434.

[37] *Diōkō*, BDAG 254, 2.

[38] The verb is *horaō*, "to perceive by the eye, catch sight of, notice," here, in the passive, "become visible, appear" (BDAG 719, 1d).

[39] "Goads" (NIV, ESV, NRSV) or "pricks" (KJV) is *kentron*, "sharp point," then, as here, "a pointed stick that serves the same purpose as a whip, a goad" (BDAG 539, 2).

[40] The phrase "chosen instrument" (NIV, ESV, NRSV) or "chosen vessel" (KJV) is two words. (1) The adjective *eklogē* means "a special choice, selection, choice, election" from *ek-*, "out of, from" + *legō*, "speak" (BDAG 306, 1). We get our English word "election" from this root word. (2) The noun *skeuos* refers to "a material object used to meet some need in an occupation or other responsibility," then "a container of any kind, vessel, jar, dish," then figuratively, as here, "a human being exercising a function, instrument, vessel" (BDAG 928, 3).

[41] "Loss" is *zēmia*, "in our literature, only having to do with suffering the loss of something, with implication of sustaining hardship or suffering, 'damage, disadvantage, loss, forfeit'" (BDAG 427).

[42] "Useless or undesirable material that is subject to disposal, refuse, garbage (in var. senses, 'excrement, manure, garbage, kitchen scraps'), specifically human excrement" (*Skybalon*, BDAG 932). The Lexicon cites Spicq's commentary on Philipians.

[43] *Dikaioσynē*, BDAG 247-249.

[44] *Dikaioō*, BDAG 197. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1955, reprinted 1972), chapter 7, concludes that declaring someone righteous is the basic idea of *dikaioō*, not making someone righteous.

[45] *Pistis*, BDAG 818-819. In the phrase "by faith" (NIV, KJV) or "based on faith" (NRSV) we find the preposition *epi*, "upon." Depending on the context it can have a number of connotations. Here it is a "marker of basis for a state of being, action, or result -- on." This phrase can be translated, "on the basis of faith" (BDAG 364).

[46] John 1:12; 5:24; 6:47; Romans 1:17; 4:5, 13; 9:30; 10:6; Galatians 2:16 and many others.

[47] *Paidagōgos*, a common loanword in rabbinical literature. Originally in Greek literature, "boy-leader," the man, usually a slave, whose duty it was to conduct a boy or youth to and from school and to superintend his conduct generally. He was not a "teacher" (despite the present meaning of the English derivative "pedagogue." When the young man became of age, the *paidagōgos* was no longer needed. In our literature, "one who has responsibility for someone who needs guidance, guardian, leader, guide" (BDAG 74).

[48] Some have attempted to interpret Romans 7 as autobiographical. For example: "But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire" (Romans 7:8). "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7:15). "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24, ESV). The problem is that this doesn't accord with the account of Paul's inner life that we have from Acts and Paul's letters. I think it is better to view Paul's "I" as representing "all humans" in a personal way, rather than recounting his own particular struggle. Paul doesn't really realize his sin until Christ appears to him on the Damascus road. And then, over those three days of blindness, he has to deal with his sin and repent. I believe it is difficult to work Romans 7 into Paul's biography as we know it.

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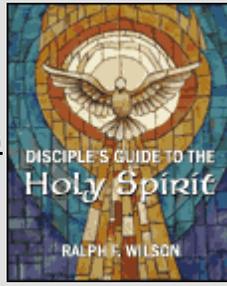
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