

2-8-2026

Who Was Paul? From Religious Zealot to Apostle of Grace:

Opening Prayer:

Father God, we come before You in the powerful name of Jesus. As we open Your Word, we ask that Your Holy Spirit would open our understanding. Teach us who Paul was....not just historically, but spiritually. Show us Your grace. Strengthen believers. Draw the lost. And above all, glorify Your Son. In Jesus' name, Amen.

1. Paul's Background - A Man of Privilege and Passion

Before he was Paul the apostle, he was Saul of Tarsus.

Paul was born in **Tarsus**, a sizable city in the Roman province of Cilicia 🖐️ **sih-LISH-uh** (modern-day Turkey). Tarsus was known for education and culture. It surpassed Athens in philosophy. So Paul grew up in a city influenced by Greek thought, Roman law, and Jewish faith.

But his primary identity was Jewish.

Philippians 3:5-6 (NIV) ⁵ 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; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Paul was:

- A Pharisee (strictest Jewish sect)
- A student under Gamaliel 🖐️ **guh-MAY-lee-əl** (Acts 22:3)
- A Roman citizen (Acts 22:28)

- . Fluent in Hebrew and Greek
- . Trained in the Law of Moses

In today's terms, Paul had the equivalent of multiple degrees, political connections, religious authority, and cultural awareness. He had status. He had respect. He had a future.

And yet....he was spiritually blind.

Introduction: Why Paul Matters

When we ask, "*Who was Paul?*" we are not just asking about a man....we are looking at one of the greatest examples of transformation in history.

The conversion of Paul was one of the great turning points in God's redemptive plan. God used this former persecutor to carry the Gospel to the Gentile world and to write much of the New Testament.

Paul wrote Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Through him, God explained the mystery of the Church.....Jews and Gentiles united in one body through Christ.

But before he was Paul the apostle, he was Saul the persecutor.

I. Paul and the Lord (Acts 9:1-9)

Acts 9 records one of the most dramatic conversions in Scripture.

Acts 9:3-4 (NIV) ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Notice three things about his conversion:

1. He Saw a Light...

Paul was religious....but spiritually blind.
The light from heaven interrupted him.

👉 Every sinner lives in darkness until the Gospel shines.

2 Corinthians 4:6 (NIV) ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

2. He Heard a Voice

Acts 9:5 NIV ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

This is powerful....

When Saul persecuted Christians, Jesus said, *“You are persecuting Me.”*

That tells us the Church was already the Body of Christ. When believers suffer, Christ identifies with them.

3. He Obeyed the Call

Saul got up blind. The mighty Pharisee had to be led by the hand.

God humbled him....

Before anyone is saved, pride must fall. Saul fell physically.....but also in his heart.

Modern example: Sometimes God interrupts our plans....our careers, reputation, religious confidence...to reveal Christ. Salvation is not self-improvement. It is **surrender**.

II. Peter and Paul: Two Different Ministries in Acts

This is important for understanding the Book of Acts.....

Peter and Paul had different roles:

Peter	Paul
One of the Twelve	Called apart from the Twelve
Centered in Jerusalem	Centered in Antioch
Ministered mainly to Israel	Ministered mainly to Gentiles
Called by Christ on earth	Called by Christ from heaven
Saw Christ's glory on earth	Saw Christ's glory in heaven

This does not mean they preached different gospels.... It means they had God-ordained assignments.

Peter focused on Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Paul was commissioned to take the Gospel to the Gentile world.

Galatians 2:7-8 (NIV) ⁷ On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. ⁸ For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Even Peter acknowledged Paul's special authority:

2 Peter 3:15-16 (NIV) ¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

God is orderly. He assigns roles.

III. Paul and Ananias (Acts 9:10–19)

While Saul was blind and praying, God spoke to a disciple named Ananias 👉 an-uh-NYE-əs.

Acts 9:13 NIV¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

Imagine the fear....

So God responded:

Acts 9:15 (NIV)¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

Chosen instrument.

The **persecutor** would become the **preacher**.

Ananias greeted him, “Brother Saul.”

That means Saul was already saved before Ananias arrived. Salvation came when he encountered Christ and surrendered...

When Ananias laid hands on him, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes.

God works at both ends of the line. While Saul was praying, God was preparing Ananias.

Application: When God saves someone, He connects them to the body of Christ.

IV. Paul and the Jews (Acts 9:20–31)

Two evidences of true conversion:

Acts 9:11 NIV ---- He prayed....

¹¹ The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

Acts 9:20 NIV --- He preached.....

²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Immediately, Paul began proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God.

The Jews were stunned.

Acts 9:21 NIV²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?”

Paul spent time in Damascus, then went to Arabia

Galatians 1:17-18 (NIV) ¹⁷ I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.

Likely three years of preparation occurred. God was teaching him directly.

This is important... Paul did not receive his gospel from the apostles.

Galatians 1:12 (NIV) ¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

He later visited Jerusalem. The apostles were afraid of him. It was Barnabas who introduced him.

Barnabas...“son of encouragement.” **Acts 4:36 NIV** ³⁶ **Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”),**

👉 God uses encouragers to connect people to ministry.

Persecution forced Paul to leave Jerusalem. He returned to Tarsus and ministered quietly for years before Barnabas brought him to Antioch.

Sometimes God prepares you in the “shadows of time” before public ministry.

👉 God is so Good!!!

V. The Shift: From Jerusalem to Antioch

The center of ministry moved from Jerusalem to Antioch. This is a Gentile city.

It was in Antioch that believers were first called Christians. **Acts 11:26 NIV ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.**

From there, Paul launched missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire.

He planted churches in:

- . Philippi
- . Corinth
- . Ephesus
- . Thessalonica
- . Galatia

Paul endured:

- . Beatings
- . Imprisonment
- . Shipwreck
- . Rejection

In 2 Corinthians Chapter 11 details his sufferings.

Paul is just a human like you and I... so Why did he keep enduring? The cost seems high.....

👉 Because he met Jesus. This is what Paul says...

Philippians 3:8 (NIV) ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ

VI. Paul: A Model of Grace

Paul never forgot what he used to be.

1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV) ¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

If God can save Saul, He can save anyone.

Modern example: A gang leader becomes a pastor. An atheist professor becomes a missionary. A prison inmate becomes an evangelist.

Grace transforms.

Paul went from persecutor to preacher, from destroyer to builder, from enemy to apostle.

VII. What We Learn from Paul

1. A religious background **cannot** save you.
2. Zeal without **truth** is dangerous.
3. Salvation is by **grace** alone.
4. God can use your past for **His glory**.
5. Suffering does **not** mean failure.
6. **The Gospel** is for Jew and Gentile alike.

Paul was uniquely equipped:

- . Jewish training in Scripture
- . Greek cultural understanding
- . Roman citizenship
- . Personal encounter with Christ

 God wastes nothing... God uses all our talents and all our failures for His Glory...

VIII. Paul's Legacy

Paul wrote much of the New Testament explaining:

- Justification by faith (Romans)
- Unity of the Church (Ephesians)
- Christian liberty (Galatians)
- The resurrection (1 Corinthians 15)
- Christ's supremacy (Colossians)

The life of the Apostle Paul ended in martyrdom in Rome during the reign of the Roman Emperor **Nero**, around A.D. 67.

After years of missionary journeys, imprisonments, beatings, and trials, Paul was arrested again and brought to Rome. Because he was a Roman citizen, he was spared crucifixion and instead was executed by **beheading**. From a dark prison cell, he wrote his final words.

2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV)⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Now Nero intended to silence him, Paul's testimony only grew stronger, and his letters continue to shape the Church to this day. Paul was just a man....fully human, with weaknesses, fears, and struggles like you and me.

He was **not** divine, **not** perfect, and **not** superhuman. Yet God took an **ordinary man** with an extraordinary past and used him in a mighty way to carry the good news of Jesus Christ across the world. His life reminds us that God does not look for perfect people....He looks for surrendered hearts. The same God who transformed and used Paul can use any one of us who are willing to say yes to Him.

Invitation: From Saul to Saved

Maybe you relate to “Saul”. The old Paul...

Religious but empty.

Successful but restless.

Sincere but unsure.

The same Jesus who met Saul on the Damascus road is alive today.

Romans 10:9 (NIV) ⁹ If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Salvation is not church membership.

Not tradition.

Not morality.

It is **surrender to Jesus Christ.**

If you do not know Him, you can today.

Let us Pray:

“Lord Jesus, I confess I am a sinner. I believe You died for my sins and rose again. I surrender my life to You. Be my Lord and Savior. Make me new. Thank you Jesus...”

Closing Prayer:

Father God, thank You for the life of Paul. Thank You that Your grace is greater than our past. Thank You that You call ordinary and even broken people to extraordinary purposes. Strengthen us to walk faithfully. And for anyone who prayed to receive Christ, seal them by Your Spirit and plant them firmly in Your Church. We give You all the glory.

In Jesus' name, Amen.