

Faces In The Bible
The Apostle Paul
Wed, Oct. 14, 2020

Saul's background and mission

Saul was from Tarsus, a busy metropolis of diverse culture and international commerce

- It was strategically located about 12 mi from the northeastern-most coast of the Mediterranean Sea
- It was on a popular east-west trade route that ran all the way from the Orient in the east to Rome in the west

Saul's parents were Pharisees, so he grew up in a strict religious environment where unwavering obedience to the Law of Moses was a major part of daily life

- By the age of thirteen, a boy from a family of Pharisees would have already mastered Jewish history, would have memorized most of the Psalms, and would know most of the things contained in the writings of the prophets
- When he was ready for his higher education, around the age of fourteen, he was sent to Jerusalem to study under the supreme teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3)

Thus, Saul became a rabbi, a preacher who could expound and defend the Scriptures and a lawyer who could prosecute or defend those who broke the sacred law

But, he was also a religious terrorist who had ravaged the church, entered into houses of believers, and dragged off men and women to put them in prison

Saul's conversion

He was on his way to Damascus – Acts 9:1-2

- The journey to Damascus was no small undertaking
- Damascus was over 100 mi north of Jerusalem
- Many Jewish believers had fled from Jerusalem to seek safety and asylum in the city of Damascus
- Saul saw Damascus as a prime and fertile hunting ground for believers
- His plan was to storm the city, capture the Jews who were now following this heresy known as the Way (the followers of Jesus Christ) and bring them to justice before the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem

But, God had a different plan

- On that well-traveled road, just outside the city of Damascus, the Lord stopped him in his tracks by striking him blind – Acts 9:3-4
- That got his attention, and he answered meekly and with respect – Acts 9:5
- He thought Christ was dead; after all, the Lord's crucifixion in Jerusalem was a well-known fact
- But, at that moment, his mind was changed about Jesus, about the Resurrection, and about those who followed Christ
- Saul's life was forever transformed when Christ stepped into his plans, and at that moment, Saul was born again

Lesson: Regardless of one's past, no one is beyond hope – no matter how wretched or sinful they may be

There is no greater example of God's transforming power than the apostle Paul

Lesson: Regardless of one's past, anyone can be saved

When God saved Saul of Tarsus, He gave him a new name (Paul) and made him a new creation in the process

When Saul faced the reality of his own sin, Christ transformed his life and set him on a new path

God's plan for Saul

Immediately following his conversion, God used a man named Ananias in Paul's life

- He was no prominent citizen, nor was he a well-known religious figure
- As far as Scripture is concerned, he was just an ordinary individual
- All we know about him is that his name was Ananias and that he was a disciple – a committed follower of Jesus Christ, and that he resided in Damascus

This was a surprising commission, but Ananias obeyed – Acts 9:10-18

- God's plan for Paul was unfolding and at this time it involved Ananias; he was healed of his blindness and he was baptized
- It is believed that it was probably Ananias who baptized Paul

At any rate, Paul's transformation was dramatic

He began to preach – Acts 9:19-20, and people were amazed – Acts 9:21

Lesson: God can use anyone, even the most obscure saint like Ananias

- Don't ever believe Satan's lie that you are insignificant and unimportant and unable to be used by God

Lesson: Never be afraid to obey God's will regardless of how strange or difficult it may seem

- Be obedient, do what God wants you to do, and watch Him accomplish great things in your life and in the lives of others

Paul's preparation for ministry

In Gal. 1:11-17, we are told by Paul himself what he did next

He did not immediately consult with flesh and blood

- He did not go searching around the city of Damascus in search of others who would advise him concerning what he should do and how he should fulfill his divine calling

He did not rush to Jerusalem to associate himself with Jesus' apostles

- So, he did not learn from, nor was he advised or mentored by those who became Christians and apostles before he did

It was at this point in Paul's life that he went to Arabia

- Arabia was an area that contained a vast expanse of desert wilderness
- Sparsely inhabited, the northernmost part of Arabia was about 100 mi from Damascus

Gal. 1:18 tells us that he remained there for a period of three years

- For Paul, this was a spiritual retreat and a time of reflection, preparation, and training alone with God
- For over a thousand days, Paul spent time alone in a quiet, obscure place where he had time to think, pray, and spend time listening to and learning from the Lord Himself
- This was undoubtedly a time for the Lord to instruct him about all the things he needed to know
- So, Paul received his message and commission directly from the Lord

Lesson: Sometimes we need to slow down and take time to be alone with the Lord

- Paul took time to contemplate what was really important in life
- He probably pondered what he had experienced on the Damascus road
- This was his opportunity to establish his motives, priorities, and commitment to his Lord

Lesson: Sometimes we need time alone with the Lord to re-evaluate and re-assess our relationship and commitment to Him

Lesson: Sometimes we can benefit from a period of silence

- When Paul was in Arabia, he had a retreat and an escape from the daily clamor that was around him
- Alone in the quietness of the desert, he was able to experience silence
- Without doubt, Paul had time to think, read, pray, and reflect
- Out of the silence, he spoke to God and allowed God to speak to him
- Sometimes the noise and activity in our lives are so great that we may even fail to hear the Lord when He tries to speak to us

Lesson: A fruitful and victorious Christian life depends more on the personal time you spend with the Lord than on the time you spend in fellowship with other believers

- Church services, Bible studies, and fellowship activities are wonderful things that can help us grow as Christians
- But, none of those things can or should replace our times of personal communion and fellowship with the Lord
- The most important element of your Christian life and ministry is the time you spend alone with the Lord

Paul returns to Damascus, then on to Jerusalem

When Paul returned to Damascus after his sojourn in Arabia, he began his witness and preaching with more power than before – Acts 9:22

- But, after many days, Paul's opposition and adversity began – Acts 9:23-24
- In the middle of his first ministry opportunity, a threat on his life forced him to escape from the city under cover of night – Acts 9:25

Paul goes to Jerusalem – Acts 9:26

- At that time, the disciples still feared Paul; they still knew him as Saul the persecutor, and they were obviously skeptical of his spiritual condition
- Many could not believe that he was a true believer and fellow-disciple

Paul and Barnabas

It was during that time of rejection and discouragement that God provided a friend and encourager to Paul, a man named Barnabas

- Bar – nabas = “son of encouragement”
- Barnabas took Paul under his wing and Paul was willing to accept his help
- Barnabas made a difference in Paul’s life – Acts 9:28
- He encouraged and affirmed Paul when he needed to be encouraged and affirmed
- He spoke on Paul’s behalf to the other disciples in Jerusalem concerning his genuine conversion

As a result, Paul was accepted by the other disciples and his ministry began. For the first time in his young ministry, Paul was now able to speak freely and boldly about Christ in Jerusalem in the company of and with the approval of the other disciples.

But, the launch of his ministry to the Gentiles was not without adversity.

- Here is Paul’s testimony in his own words – Acts 22:17-21
- Paul evidently shared this message and vision with the church leaders in Jerusalem when the Jews were plotting to kill him – Acts 9:28-30
- They assisted him in returning to his hometown of Tarsus.

Waiting on the Lord in Tarsus

We do not know why Paul needed to return to his hometown, but we know that the Lord makes no mistakes when He leads us to a specific place.

- It is estimated that Paul could have spent five or six years waiting on the Lord in his hometown of Tarsus.
- For all intents and purposes, Paul’s ministry was “on hold” as he was “on the shelf” in Tarsus.

What could the Lord possibly be teaching Paul as he waited in Tarsus?

Maybe God was teaching him lessons about humility

- Undoubtedly, Saul had been a religious celebrity in Tarsus
- But now, he returns to his hometown, not as Saul, but as Paul, a devout follower of Jesus Christ
- He was now a friend of those he had learned to hate and persecute
- What was his testimony going to be before those who knew him well in his former life?
- Would he be able to stand strong in his faith?
- Would he be attracted to his former lifestyle now that he had returned to familiar surroundings?

Acts 9:31 – The church continued to grow and flourish, even without Paul

- The secret to the blessing and health of a church is the Lord; not any one particular individual
- The church was not even dependent on a remarkably gifted and talented individual like Paul
- The church is not all about one single person
- No one is indispensable to the cause of Christ
- The church is not about dynamic personalities or gifted individuals such as Paul
- The church is about Almighty God and the Lord Jesus Christ

Maybe God was teaching him lessons about trust

- God's work is not about us
- Service for the Lord is the work of the Lord, and the Lord's work must be done the Lord's way
- We should not take matters into our own hands and attempt to do God's work our way
- The arm of flesh is weak and we cannot rely on ourselves
- We should allow Him to lead, guide, and direct our lives

Waiting patiently in the shadows is difficult for any believer who earnestly wants to follow God's will obediently

As we wait, we often pray, "Grant me patience, Lord, but hurry"

The call to Antioch

While Paul waited in Tarsus, God began moving mightily in a city called Antioch which was about 150 mi SE of Tarsus

Because of Peter's preaching and ministry, revival was sweeping through the region, and Antioch was right in the midst of it – Acts 11:19-21

The church in Jerusalem heard about the revival fire in Antioch, so they dispatched Barnabas to Antioch – Acts 11:22-24

Soon, Barnabas realized that he needed help in order to handle the enormous growth, and he remembered that Paul was in Tarsus

Paul agreed to join Barnabas in ministry in Antioch – Acts 11:25-26

- For an entire year, Paul and Barnabas ministered effectively in the church at Antioch
- The two men served together side by side in leadership roles in the church
- Once again, Paul had waited patiently on the Lord and obediently followed His will in going to minister with Barnabas in Antioch

The call to missions

In the midst of that fruitful and thriving ministry, something totally unexpected happened – Acts 13:1-3

- At every major juncture of his life, Paul was obedient and willing to accept the change of direction involving God's will for him
- This particular change of direction came without any preliminary warning
- The Holy Spirit simply spoke, and the church listened and obeyed
- In order for Barnabas and Paul to obey, they needed to be released, and that is exactly what the church in Antioch did
- Unselfishly, the church released both of them to follow the Lord's will for their lives