

Galatians

Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles

Lesson #1 for October 1, 2011

Scriptures: Acts 6:9-15; 9:1-9; 1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 7:1; Acts 11:19-21; 15:1-5.

1. Saul was born in the city of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia, of Jewish parents who belonged to a strict order of the Pharisees. He was circumcised on the eighth day and strictly followed all the Jewish ceremonies. (Compare Luke 18:21) He was certain about the preeminence of the law of God and believed that the temple in Jerusalem was the center of His worship. He was certain—along with virtually every other Jew—that the soon-coming Messiah would bring relief from Roman oppression. It was unimaginable to Saul that a Man executed by the Roman authorities and Jewish leaders as one of the worst of criminals could have been the Messiah.
2. Thus, Saul was determined—in line with his strict Pharisaical training under Gamaliel—to root out the followers of this ridiculous new religion. For a chronology of the book of Acts and the life of Saul/Paul, see *Acts - A Teacher's Guide* at www.theox.org or 6SDABC pp. 97-102.
3. But, as we now know, God had very different plans for Saul/Paul. When do we first hear about Saul/Paul in the book of Acts? (Acts 7:57-8:5)
4. The primary characters in the book of Acts are Peter, Stephen (the first deacon), Philip (another deacon), and Saul/Paul. Stephen played a key role, first as one of the deacons chosen by the early church, (Acts 6) followed by his powerful arguments in favor of Christianity in the synagogue of the freedmen—is it possible that Saul/Paul may have been involved in trying to defend Judaism against Stephen?—and then, because of his defense of Christianity before the Sanhedrin where Saul was present. (Acts 7-8:1)
5. On what basis was Stephen condemned? (Acts 6:11-14) Based on Acts, (Acts 6:12,15; 7:54-8:1; 22:5; 26:9-11) we believe that Saul/Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin. Notice that he later stated that he voted against Stephen. Ellen White specifically said that Saul/Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin. Members of the Sanhedrin were required to be at least 30 years of age (compare Luke 3:23) and married. We have no evidence that Saul/Paul was an exception to this rule. (*Education* 64.3; *Acts of the Apostles* 112.1; 410.4; *RH*, March 6, 1900, par. 3)
6. Although struggling with his conscience, Saul/Paul was actually convinced that he was right. He could not believe that all the Jewish leaders who had been his teachers and mentors could possibly be wrong. What is the possibility that we might be wrong about some of our greatest convictions? Are we constantly checking the truth, as we know it, against biblical writings and Spirit of Prophecy facts?
7. Jesus—as one of His toughest challenges—knew that before He left to return to heaven, He must find some way to help His disciples overcome the Jewish prejudice against having anything to do with Gentiles or Samaritans. Look at some of the steps that He took to overcome those prejudices:
 - 1) He intentionally traveled through Samaria, spoke to the woman at the well, and evangelized Sychar for several days while His disciples were with Him. (John 4; compare Luke 10:25-37)
 - 2) He took His disciples across the Sea of Galilee to the area of Gergasa in order to heal one or two demon-possessed individuals. After spending only a short time with them, He sent them forth as the first Gentile missionaries with instructions to tell their story. (Matthew 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39) Later, Jesus Himself returned to the area and carried on a much more extensive mission there. (Matthew 15:29-39; Mark 8:1-10)

- 3) For the last six months of His public ministry, Jesus traveled almost exclusively in Samaritan and Perea (non-Jewish) areas and carried out His ministry there. (Luke 9:51-19:27)
 - 4) After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples, "You will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8, *GNB*)
 - 5) After Stephen's mighty speech as recorded in Acts 7, a terrible persecution of Christians began in Jerusalem. Some of them went to Samaria, but others went to speak to Jews in the diaspora. (Acts 8:1-5; in fulfillment of the prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27)
 - 6) Peter was sent by God to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who was already interested in the Jewish religion. (Acts 10:1-4)
 - 7) The brethren in Jerusalem were ready to condemn Peter for what he had done. However, after hearing how the Holy Spirit had been poured out on Cornelius and his family, they accepted the idea that God was ready to welcome Gentiles as Christians. (Acts 11:1-18)
 - 8) Unidentified Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene (modern Libya) belonging to the multi-cultural church in Antioch began to actively preach to Gentiles in Antioch. (The Greek actually states that they preached to anyone speaking Greek.) It was in Antioch that the believers were first called Christians. (Acts 11:20,26)
 - 9) Under the direction of the brethren in Jerusalem, Barnabas went to Antioch to explore the growth of the church there. Later, he traveled to Tarsus and recruited Paul. (Acts 11:22-25)
 - 10) After working in Antioch for about a year, Paul and Barnabas—directed by God and anointed by the church—set out on their first missionary journey to intentionally evangelize Gentiles as well as Jews in Asia Minor (now Turkey). (Acts 13:1-3)
 - 11) Hearing about the work Paul and Barnabas had been doing, some men from the party of the Pharisees went from Jerusalem to Antioch insisting that Gentiles must follow all the Jewish practices before they could become Christians. (Acts 15:1-5)
 - 12) The apostles and elders met in Jerusalem and after considerable discussion set out the conditions under which Gentile Christians would be allowed to worship alongside Jewish Christians. (Acts 15:6,28,29)
 - 13) After returning to Ephesus and working there for three years, Paul traveled to Corinth. In dealing with the problems at Corinth and later with the problems in Galatia and Rome, Paul made it absolutely clear that Gentiles would be accepted by God on the basis of faith alone and not on the basis of following any Jewish practices. (1 Corinthians 8,10; Romans 14; Galatians 3)
8. The story of Saul/Paul's conversion is told three times. (Acts 9:1-18; 22:6-21; and 26:12-19) (For an interesting comparison of these three accounts, see *6SDABC* in the section for Acts 9:3)
 9. What do you think of God's method of converting Saul/Paul? Did God use force on Saul/Paul? Did God use force on Pharaoh? Or, was He just getting Saul's attention? What should we learn from that experience? Should we expect every Christian to have such a dramatic conversion experience? Remember how intensely Saul/Paul had been opposing Christianity. (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1,2,13,14,21; 22:3-5). In his usual manner, Saul/Paul was carrying out the mission—which he believed was God's mission for him—with intense vigor.
 10. Saul/Paul had to walk about 150 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus. There is no evidence that any of Saul/Paul's group were riding any animal when they all fell to the ground. (Acts 26:14) We need to remember that during this journey, Saul probably had no one with whom he, as a

conservative Pharisee, was allowed to talk! He had a lot of time to think about his conscience!

11. The writ of the Sanhedrin ran wherever there were Jews. Paul had heard that certain of the Christians had escaped to Damascus and he asked for letters of credit that he might go to Damascus and extradite them. The journey only made matters worse. It was about 140 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus. The journey would be made on foot and would take about a week. Paul's only companions were the officers of the Sanhedrin, a kind of police force. Because he was a Pharisee, he could have nothing to do with them; so he walked alone; and as he walked he thought, because there was nothing else to do. *Daily Study Bible*, comment on Acts 9:1-9.
12. Would you say that God was being gentle with Saul/Paul when He knocked him down and blinded him? Didn't Saul deserve to be punished at that point in time? Or, was God, as usual, not looking at his past history but looking at what He knew his future would be?
13. Those who are admitted to heaven will be judged in the same way, not on the basis of their past behavior but on the basis of what God knows it will be in the future. He can only take to heaven those who will be safe to have there. We know that Saul/Paul was a very religious man. It is likely that he had memorized much of the Old Testament in Hebrew. Saul/Paul himself was struggling during this journey. God said, "You are hurting yourself by hitting back, like an ox kicking against its owner's stick." (Acts 26:14, *GNB*)
14. Could we be absolutely sure about some of our beliefs and at the same time be absolutely wrong? French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction." Others have stated, "More wars have been fought in the name of religion than for any other reason."
15. Saul is an example of the fact that God would rather have us be misguided but zealous for what we believe—so long as our minds are open—than to have us apathetic and not willing to put ourselves out for anything. To which category do you belong? Are we a part of Laodicea? Paul would not fit in Laodicea! (Revelation 3:14-22, especially verse 16) So, how can we be fully convinced and zealous for our beliefs and at the same time be humble in the face of truth?
16. Damascus was an ancient city mentioned many times in the Old Testament. (See *6SDABC* on Acts 9:2)
17. After Saul/Paul had been blinded and knocked down by the brilliant light, he got up. Realizing that he was blind, he had to be led by the hand into the city of Damascus. For reasons we are not told about, he was taken to the home of Judas. What happened to the Sanhedrin police who were accompanying Saul? Who took him to the house of Judas? (In *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 118, Ellen White called Judas a "disciple.") We know nothing else about this man except that he lived on Straight Street. Damascus is believed to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. At the time Saul/Paul went there, there were an estimated 10-18,000 Jews living in Damascus. A few years later, Nero butchered 10,000 Jews in Damascus. No doubt, the Christian believers in Damascus were still worshipping in the 30 to 40 synagogues in Damascus at the time.
18. Saul/Paul had left Jerusalem a proud, zealous Pharisee. He entered Damascus as a humble convert to the way of Jesus.
19. Three days later, Ananias was told in vision to go and anoint Saul/Paul. Ananias knew about Saul's mission. What did God say to Ananias about Saul/Paul? (Acts 9:10-16)
20. Which do you think would have been more shocking to the average Christian or Jew in Damascus: 1) That Saul/Paul the persecuting Pharisee had become a Christian? Or, 2) That

God intended for the gospel to go to the Gentiles?

21. Almost immediately, Saul/Paul began to proclaim Jesus. A little while later, he retreated into the deserts of Arabia to think things through. Then, he returned to Damascus and began to preach the gospel with vigor. The Jews became so upset that they intended to kill him, but he was let down over the wall at night in a basket and fled to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:25; 2 Corinthians 11:33)
22. How do you suppose Paul felt returning to Jerusalem after three years? Had he had any communication with his family? He did not mention them at all. The Christian brethren in Jerusalem were still not ready to receive him. Finally, Barnabas accepted Paul and recognized that he was truly a converted Christian and then took him to the other Christians. But after only a short time, the believers realized that Paul must get out of Jerusalem or he would be killed. So, he fled back to his hometown of Tarsus. (Acts 9:26-30) We do not know exactly what Paul did for the next several years. It is very likely that he did his best to spread the gospel around Tarsus in Cilicia and possibly in some areas of Syria as well.
23. Later, Paul (1 Corinthians 15:4-9) explained that Jesus had revealed Himself to him and apparently revealed a number of other things to him as well. When do you think those revelations took place? Was it while he was still in Damascus? In Arabia? Or, in Tarsus? Why do you think God chose Saul/Paul? Was it because God knew that the task of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles would require a champion who was on fire for what he believed?
24. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire; only Rome and Alexandria in Egypt were larger. It was a very cosmopolitan city with people from all parts of the world living there. Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of Syria and had an estimated population of 500,000. In such a city, it would have been very easy for Christians to meet together without raising a lot of suspicion. Christianity had already become something of a cosmopolitan church although the members were all previously Jewish by religion.
25. Paul and Barnabas worked in Antioch for about a year, and the church grew amazingly. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, Paul and Barnabas were set aside and anointed (Acts 13:1-4) to go forth and preach the gospel to Gentiles in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). After a year or more of traveling through Gentile territory, they returned to Antioch. The news of their success in converting Gentiles alarmed some of the Judaizing Christians. They stirred up so much controversy that a conference was called in Jerusalem. (Acts 15)
26. The attitudes of some of those Jewish Christian leaders are pretty evident if you read the story of Cornelius and Peter (Acts 10:1-11:18) or Philip working among the Samaritans (Acts 8:14) and even the unnamed evangelists among the Gentiles in Antioch. (Acts 11:22)
27. Since Old Testament times, the Jewish or Hebrew people had believed that *Yahweh* was almost their personal possession. They claimed all the privileges that God had offered but largely ignored the responsibilities—including being a light to the rest of the world! (Genesis 12:1-3) Even many of the Christians believed that one must be converted to Judaism and practice all of the Jewish rituals and ceremonies before one could become a Christian. (Acts 15:1-5) This issue was to plague the early Christian church for some time.
28. Unfortunately, this issue finally led to Paul's imprisonment and death. (Acts 21:28; 20,21)

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