

Biblical Missionaries

Paul: Background and Call

Lesson #11 for September 12, 2015

Scriptures: Acts 9:1-22; 26:16-18; Philippians 3:6,8; 1 Corinthians 15:9-10; Galatians 2:1-17.

1. This lesson focuses on the early experiences of Paul, his dramatic conversion on the Damascus road, and how that impacted his later ministry.

Paul was to the early Christian church what Moses was to the children of Israel. The difference is that while Moses brought God's people out from the Gentiles in order that Israel would be able to do God's will, Paul brought God's Word from Israel to the Gentiles in order that the Gentiles could do the same; that is, to do God's will. (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Sabbath, September 5)

2. Apart from Jesus, Paul probably has had more impact on the course of humanity than any other 1st-century person. His three missionary journeys plus whatever he accomplished following his first imprisonment in Rome basically took the gospel to the northern Mediterranean.
3. Paul is especially known for his clear separation between the essential Christian truths and those troublesome Jewish customs which the Pharisees had so successfully placed on the Jews.
4. Saul, which was Paul's Hebrew name, was born in Tarsus not far from the Syrian border in Asia Minor. It was an important city, home to a number of people from different areas in the world. Cicero, one of Rome's most important orators, lived there for a period of time. It was at Tarsus that Cleopatra made her dramatic entrance as an introduction to Mark Anthony.
5. Saul, whose name in Hebrew means "asked for [of God]," later took on a Latin name *Paulos* or Paul in English after he began his mission to the Gentiles. (Acts 13:9) We do not know exactly when Paul was born; but, the fact that he was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin almost guarantees that he had a wife and was over the age of 30. We know that his family were Roman citizens since he was born as a Roman citizen. (Acts 22:28) We also know that he had a sister and a nephew who lived in Jerusalem. (Acts 23:16)
6. Growing up in a faithful Jewish family, almost certainly he was educated in a synagogue school until the age of 12. It is possible that he went to Jerusalem at that time for his *bar mitzvah*. In any case, sometime shortly after that, he became a student of the famous *Rabban* ("this honorary title means 'our rabbi'") Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3) As was customary for Jewish males, he learned a manual trade, in his case, tentmaking. (Acts 18:3).
7. Paul was a Pharisee—the term *Pharisee* means "separated one." Scholars believe that there were never more than 6000 Pharisees at any one time. The Pharisees were constantly bickering with the Sadducees who favored accommodating more closely with Greek and Roman cultures and ideas. On the other hand, Pharisees believed that the only hope for the Jewish nation was a very strict adherence to biblical and Pharisaical traditions.
8. As a brilliant student and a Pharisee, it is quite likely that Paul memorized the entire Scriptures—what we now call the Old Testament—in Hebrew. Trained as a Pharisee, he also understood in detail exactly all the Pharisaical traditions and requirements. As such, he was in a preeminent position after becoming a Christian to understand the differences

between true biblical requirements and Pharisaical requirements. Are those differences clear in your mind?

9. When Paul stopped being a Pharisee and a member the Sanhedrin by becoming a Christian, it was like having a general suddenly change sides in a war. No one could claim that they understood Phariseeism any better than Paul! In this respect, Paul was perhaps best known for his insistence that Gentiles who became Christians should not be required to follow all the Jewish traditions including circumcision.
10. How often down through the centuries have culturally-determined ideas been elevated almost to the level of biblical requirements? How many culturally-determined things do we believe and practice that are not biblically-based? On the other side of the coin, how do we relate to biblically-based practices that are in conflict with the practices and beliefs of those in the world around us? What about our beliefs regarding the Sabbath? Or, the nature of man? Which Christian beliefs do you hold that seem to be most evidently in contrast with the beliefs of the people with whom you associate? How do you deal with such issues?
11. What kind of a person was Paul?

Personality traits are an individual's typical responses to surrounding domestic, cultural, or educational circumstances. Character is the combination of traits, qualities, and abilities that make up what sort of person an individual is. (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Monday, September 7)
12. Read Acts 9:1; Philippians 3:6,8; 1 Corinthians 15:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:16; Galatians 1:14; and 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. What can we learn about Paul from these passages?
13. In his early life, Saul/Paul was very zealous for the teachings and practices of the Pharisees. He was trained by the very best—Gamaliel. After becoming a Christian, he suffered just about every kind of persecution and worked very hard so that in every possible way he might win souls for Jesus. If Paul were able to come and did come to your church to work for a while today, how would you relate to him? Was Paul obviously scarred from his beatings and other problems? If we really believe that Jesus is coming soon, shouldn't we begin acting more like Paul?
14. It is obvious from passages like 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 that Paul did a lot of things and had a lot of experiences of which we know nothing. It is very clear from the biblical record that Paul was a man of incredible energy, conviction, and zeal. There were times when he would work all night so that he could preach and teach all day. (AA 352) In his early years, he used that incredible zeal and energy to persecute the church. (Acts 9:1-2; Galatians 1:13) In his later years, he used that energy to preach and teach about Jesus.
15. What do you think Paul was specifically thinking about when he said that he had thrown everything else away apart from his knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord, considering all except the knowledge about Jesus as mere refuse or garbage? (Philippians 3:8)
16. How much of our lives is taken up with things that Paul would consider to be rubbish? Do we clearly distinguish between those things which are really important in life and those which are not?
17. Paul made several statements recorded in the New Testament about how sorry he was and how bad he felt about his former persecution of Christians. (1 Corinthians 15:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:16) How many of us have had Paul-like experiences? What do you think Paul said at that first sermon in the synagogue in Damascus? Did he escape into the Arabian desert? Or, did he go there to sort out his "fruit basket upset"—his new paradigm? Paul was

so driven by his understanding of the gospel that he could not keep quiet about it. That is why he called himself a “slave.”

One ray of the glory of God, one gleam of the purity of Christ, penetrating the soul, makes every spot of defilement painfully distinct, and lays bare the deformity and defects of the human character. It makes apparent the unhallowed desires, the infidelity of the heart, the impurity of the lips.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 29.1.

18. Are we as humble as Paul was? Or, are we proud to be Seventh-day Adventists? Should we be? Focusing on the experiences of Jesus and Paul should give every one of us reason to pause and re-evaluate our lives!
19. Read Acts 9:1-22 and 26:16-18. From Jerusalem to Damascus is at least 150 miles. God struck him down and told him that he was to be His missionary to the Gentiles. What do you think his Pharisaical friends would have thought of that message? Ananias prayed for him, and the scales fell from his eyes. Paul thought that he must work even harder for Jesus because of what he had done to Christians earlier. Paul immediately began preaching for Jesus until the Jewish leaders wanted to arrest him and kill him. He escaped to the Arabian desert, then back to Damascus, then to Jerusalem, and finally, back to Tarsus, his hometown. Why did he wait some fourteen years and for a call from Barnabas before he really took up his real, God-given task? Or, did he? What did he do during the years in Tarsus? (Galatians 1:18,21; 2:1)
20. After having that experience with Ananias and the scales falling from his eyes, Paul immediately began to preach to the Jews in Damascus about Christ. Try to imagine what those first sermons sounded like. How could he convince the Christians that he was not laying a trap for them?
21. Paul apparently took nearly three years in the Arabian desert to rethink all of his Pharisaical ideas in a kind of fruit-basket upset or paradigm shift. (Galatians 1:16-18) What do you think he was doing during those three years? What did his family think had happened to him? Did he send word to them? Or, did he contact them in any way? What did those soldiers who accompanied him to Damascus have to say when they got back to Jerusalem? What about the 10 or 11 years he spent in Tarsus after leaving Jerusalem? (Galatians 1:21; 2:1) What changed after Barnabas called him to Antioch and he associated with others who were preaching to Gentiles? (Acts 11:19-26)
22. Look carefully at Acts 26:18, God’s instructions to Paul. We see five results mentioned there.
23. From this we can see five results of authentic missionary work:
 1. Open people’s eyes. Make God and Jesus real, present, active, and appealing.
 2. Move from darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge—a core gospel theme. (See *Luke 1:78-79*.)
 3. Turn from the power of Satan to God.
 4. Receive forgiveness of sins. The problem of sin has a solution. This is the living, healing, core message of Christians.
 5. Receive a place among the sanctified; this means membership in God’s church, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or nationality. (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Tuesday, September 8)

24. What did Paul say or do that made Christianity attractive to the Gentiles?

25. When speaking to the Jews, was he successful specifically in convincing many of them that Christ was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies? What did Paul say to Gentiles? His speech is recorded in Acts 17:22-31. However, considering his later comments in Corinth, he did not think that approach was his best one.
26. Read Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2; Galatians 6:14; and Philippians 1:15-18. When Paul stated that his mission was to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified, was that to suggest that Paul focused on the crucifixion of Jesus and its meaning for humanity as opposed to His resurrection which is what most Christians want to focus on today? Can we explain the crucifixion of Jesus in a way that makes God look good? How successful are we today at keeping the crucifixion of Christ, in fact, the entire story of His life and death and resurrection, prominent in our interaction with others?
27. Let us be clear. Paul did much more than just introduce his audiences to Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He went on to nurture and correct, where necessary, the churches he planted. If we look carefully at the letters Paul wrote, he dealt with many problems in the churches which he had established and gave a lot of advice on organizing churches and even gave directions to pastors and deacons.
28. All of us are born very egocentric. As we grow, partially depending upon our exposure to people of different cultural habits, we may come to think of all others as different from ourselves. We might develop an us-versus-them attitude. To the Greeks, anyone who did not speak Greek was a “barbarian.” To the Jews, all non-Jews were Gentiles. This became a huge issue in the early Christian church.
29. Read Galatians 2:1-17. In this passage, we have a clear example of Paul’s dealings with anyone, including apostles like Peter, who slipped back into their racial prejudices.
30. When Peter, at a later date, visited Antioch, he won the confidence of many by his prudent conduct toward the Gentile converts. For a time he acted in accordance with the light given from heaven. He so far overcame his natural prejudice as to sit at table with the Gentile converts. But when certain Jews who were zealous for the ceremonial law came from Jerusalem, Peter injudiciously changed his deportment toward the converts from paganism. A number of the Jews “dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.” This revelation of weakness on the part of those who had been respected and loved as leaders left a most painful impression on the minds of the Gentile believers. The church was threatened with division. But Paul, who saw the subverting influence of the wrong done to the church through the double part acted by Peter, openly rebuked him for thus disguising his true sentiments. In the presence of the church, Paul inquired of Peter, “If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?” Galatians 2:13-14.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 197.3-198.0.
31. Paul’s complex background as a devout Pharisee, student of Rabban Gamaliel, Roman citizen, fundamentalist persecuting zealot, and finally convert and apostle of Jesus Christ, eminently qualified him to distinguish timeless, unchanging divine absolutes on one hand and their temporary cultural and religious vehicles on the other. (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Thursday, September 10)

32. How good are we at distinguishing between biblically-based absolutes to our faith and cultural, social, or even personal preferences? Are we truly ready to accept all others as brothers and sisters in Christ?
33. How do you understand 1 Corinthians 9:19-23? Paul was discussing what modern missiologists call *contextualization*. What is *contextualization*?
34. It involves:
- Attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture.—Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 21 (January 1997): p. 2.
35. Jerusalem was the metropolis of the Jews, and it was there that the greatest exclusiveness and bigotry were found. The Jewish Christians living within sight of the temple naturally allowed their minds to revert to the peculiar privileges of the Jews as a nation. When they saw the Christian church departing from the ceremonies and traditions of Judaism, and perceived that the peculiar sacredness with which the Jewish customs had been invested would soon be lost sight of in the light of the new faith, many grew indignant with Paul as the one who had, in a large measure, caused this change. **Even the disciples were not all prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council. Some were zealous for the ceremonial law, and they regarded Paul with disfavor because they thought that his principles in regard to the obligations of the Jewish law were lax.**—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 197.1. [Bold type is added.]
36. Unfortunately, the cultural bigotry of the apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem ultimately led to Paul's arrest and imprisonment. (*Acts of the Apostles* 405.1-2) How should we relate to others even within the hierarchy of our Christian community who are still operating from prejudicial grounds?
37. What is the appropriate way to practice contextualization? Clearly, Paul tried to get as close as possible to his converts so they would feel comfortable with him as they came to accept his new religion.
38. How did Paul's background affect his ministry?
39. No one could say that Paul did not understand the Pharisaical position. He had been at the extremes of that in the past. And he could give his personal testimony about why he changed and the miraculous circumstances that led to that change. It would be very difficult to argue against his story.
40. Do people who have gone deep into the sins of the world and then have been converted and come back to the truth have a more compelling personal experience than those of us who have been Christians, at least in name, all of our lives?
41. Read 2 Corinthians 11-12 and Jeremiah 9:23-24. Is it ever wrong to boast about what God has done in our lives? But, we must be careful not to boast about how good we are even if we admit that it is a result of God's work. Do we clearly perceive and admit that without Jesus Christ every one of us would be a hopeless sinner? Have you tried recently to use your own personal experience as an evangelistic tool? Think of all the skills that Paul brought to his work. He was clearly a formidable organizer, strategizer, spiritual leader, and

soul winner. After the Damascus road experience, he became zealous in his lifetime commitment to Jesus Christ.

42. Consider some of the comparisons and contrasts between Jonah and Paul. Both of them initially seemed to rebel against God's influence in their lives. Both were confronted by God and given a specific message to carry to their audience. What was significantly different about Jonah's experience from Paul's? What was the difference between Jonah's attitude toward his audience and Paul's attitude toward his?
43. When we think about Paul who wrote nearly half of the New Testament, it is easy to think of him as some giant of intellect-driven, skilled, brilliant, and a missionary *par excellence*. But, he was also human.
44. Do you think the time could come when modern Christians might have to go through some of the kinds of experiences that Paul went through? Are you prepared for that?
45. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. What a change had taken place in Paul. No one could say that he had not been changed from an enemy of God into a friend of God! Although we do not know exactly what Paul did during those nearly 3 years in the Arabian desert or even during the 10 or 11 years in Tarsus before being called by Barnabas, Paul used every method he could think of to plant, grow, nurture, and help as well as correct the churches with which he worked as he and Barnabas went to work in Antioch as well as in his later missionary journeys. It is a well-known fact that new churches are much more evangelistic, better at reaching out to others, than are larger, more-established churches. Church statistics tell us that on average every four hours a new Seventh-day Adventist Church and many companies and small groups are established somewhere in the world. How active are we at evangelizing and spreading the gospel to those around us? Do we speak up on behalf of Jesus Christ whenever possible? Or, are we too embarrassed? Are we comfortable in getting close to those with whom we associate so that we might in some way influenced them for the gospel?

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