

The Gospel in Galatians

Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles

Lesson #1 for July 1, 2017

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

1. Saul/Paul was born in the city of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia of Jewish parents who belonged to a strict order of the Pharisees. Although they played a very prominent place in the Gospels, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were never more than a very small percentage of the Jewish population. Saul/Paul 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 God's 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 97-102. That chronology will give you more details than we have time to cover in this lesson.
3. But, as we now know, God had very different plans for Saul/Paul. Preach the gospel to Gentiles? Never! 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. We see him first as one of the deacons chosen by the early church. (Acts 6) Soon, he was giving 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? Finally, Stephen gave 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 6:12,15; 7:54-8:1; 22:5; and 26:9-11, Stephen not only did not focus on the temple and the Jewish laws, but also he vigorously declared that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ was the true Messiah and, thus, should be the center of Jewish worship. We believe that Saul/Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin because he later stated that he voted against Stephen. (Acts 26:9-11) 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. We know almost nothing else about the former life of Saul/Paul. He did have a sister and a nephew. (Acts 23:16) How was he involved in the story of Stephen? Had he argued with Stephen in the synagogues? (*Acts of the Apostles* 410.4; *RH*, March 6, 1900, par. 3)

Prominent among the Jewish leaders who became thoroughly aroused by the success attending the proclamation of the gospel, was Saul of Tarsus. A Roman citizen by birth, Saul was nevertheless a Jew by descent and had been educated in Jerusalem by the most eminent of the rabbis. "Of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin," Saul was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church;

touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” Philippians 3:5, 6. He was regarded by the rabbis as a young man of great promise, and high hopes were cherished concerning him as an able and zealous defender of the ancient faith. His elevation to membership in the Sanhedrin council placed him in a position of power.—Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles** 112.1.

With the faith and experience of the Galilean disciples who had companied with Jesus were united, in the work of the gospel, the fiery vigor and intellectual power of a rabbi of Jerusalem. A Roman citizen, born in a Gentile city; a Jew, not only by descent but by lifelong training, patriotic devotion, and religious faith; educated in Jerusalem by the most eminent of the rabbis, and instructed in all the laws and traditions of the fathers, Saul of Tarsus shared to the fullest extent the pride and the prejudices of his nation. While still a young man, he became an honored member of the Sanhedrin. He was looked upon as a man of promise, a zealous defender of the ancient faith.—Ellen G. White, *Education** 64.3.

6. Although struggling with his conscience, Saul/Paul was still 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 our beliefs against the facts as presented in the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy?
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, the most direct route from Jerusalem to Galilee even though Jews rarely went that way, spoke to the woman at the well, and evangelized Sychar for several days while His disciples were with Him. (See 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 those formerly demon-possessed men 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, after traveling to Tyre and Sidon and Caesarean Philippi, Jesus traveled almost exclusively in Samaritan and Perea (non-Jewish) areas and carried on 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**) Do you think they had any idea what Jesus meant when He said that?
 - 5) After Stephen’s mighty speech as recorded in Acts 7, a terrible persecution of Christians began in Jerusalem. Some of the Christians went to Samaria, but others went to speak to Jews of the Diaspora. (Acts 8:1-5) This fulfilled 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 10:1-48)
 - 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 11:19-26)
 - 9) Under the direction of the brethren in Jerusalem, Barnabas went to Antioch to explore the huge growth of the church there. Later, he traveled to Tarsus and recruited Paul to help him in growing the church. (Acts 11:22-26)
 - 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 believers 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 with Paul and Barnabas 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) That was not a question about how to be saved! The question was: With whom should we be willing to worship?
 - 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. Saul/Paul told the story of his conversion 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.) Remember that Paul had been struggling with his conscience for some time.
 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 140 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus. There is no evidence that any of Saul/Paul's group was riding an 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!

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.—Barclay, W. (Ed.). (1976). Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press. See also *The Acts of the Apostles* 70.

11. 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 rather looking at what He knew his future would be?
12. 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. Compare and contrast what Jesus said as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46 and 7:21-23 which suggest that what we have done will be at least some of the basis for God's judgment. 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*)
13. 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."
14. Saul/Paul 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! (See 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?
15. Damascus was an ancient city mentioned many times in the Old Testament. (See Genesis 15:2; 2 Samuel 8:5-6; 1 Kings 15:18; 2 Kings 8:7-9; Isaiah 7-9; *6SDABC* on Acts 9:2.)
16. 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, he was taken to the home of Judas. What happened to the Sanhedrin police who were accompanying Saul? Who took Saul/Paul to the house of Judas? In *Acts of the Apostles* 118.1, 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. Josephus said that it was founded by one of the sons of Shem. 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 worshiping in the 30 to 40 synagogues in Damascus at the time. (See Josephus, *Bell. Jud. (The Wars of the Jews)* I. 2. 25, ii. 20. 2; Strahan, J. (1916–1918). Damascus, Damascenes. In J. Hastings (Ed.), *Dictionary of the*

Apostolic Church (2 Vols.) (Vol. 1, 274). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.)

17. Saul/Paul had left Jerusalem as a proud, zealous Pharisee. He entered Damascus as a humble convert to the way of Jesus. 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)
18. 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?
19. 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 and with a deep conviction about the truth. 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)
20. 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.
21. 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?
22. 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. 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. What happened at Antioch which caused it to be the site of the first Gentile Christian church?
Acts 11:19-21: ¹⁹ Some of the believers who were scattered by the persecution which took place when Stephen was killed went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message to Jews only. ²⁰But other believers, who were from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and proclaimed the message to Gentiles also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus. ²¹The Lord's power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 11:20–21). New York: American Bible Society.
23. Paul and Barnabas worked in Antioch for about a year, and the church grew amazingly. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas were set aside and anointed (Acts 13:1-4) to go forth and preach the gospel to Jews and 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. (See Galatians.) They stirred up so much controversy that a conference was called in Jerusalem. (See Acts 15.) Paul, as a former Pharisee, was arguing with other formerly-Pharisee Christians!

24. The attitudes of some of those Jewish Christian leaders—from the party of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5)—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) Could we learn some important lessons about cultural diversity from the church at Antioch? When we get to heaven, will we all be blended into some kind of homogenized culture? Or, will we need to learn about people from all parts of the world and all time periods?
25. 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 they largely ignored the responsibilities—including being a light to the rest of the world! (Genesis 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 27&28) 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.
26. Unfortunately, this issue finally led to Paul's imprisonment and death. (Acts 21:20-21,28) Even more sad is that it was the leaders among the Christian believers (Did that include Peter and John?) who asked Paul to take that oath and carry out that Jewish ceremony that led to his arrest and imprisonment. Read the very sad story in *Acts of the Apostles* 400-405.

Many of the Jews who had accepted the gospel still cherished a regard for the ceremonial law and were only too willing to make unwise concessions, hoping thus to gain the confidence of their countrymen, to remove their prejudice, and to win them to faith in Christ as the world's Redeemer. Paul realized that so long as many of the leading members of the church at Jerusalem should continue to cherish prejudice against him, they would work constantly to counteract his influence. He felt that if by any reasonable concession he could win them to the truth he would remove a great obstacle to the success of the gospel in other places. **But he was not authorized of God to concede as much as they asked.**—Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles** 405.1; Compare *Sketches from the Life of Paul** 213.2-214.0. [Bold type is added.]

27. Ellen White had some bad experiences with the Adventist Church leaders in her day. Could that happen again? Do we have any prejudices that could even hamper the work of fellow believers that are trying to press forward the work of God?
28. Are there still new truths to discover? Have we carefully studied all the truths that God has already given us?

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