

Paul, the Apostle

The apostle Paul is a central character of New Testament church history. His birth name was Saul of Tarsus.

Saul was born about 3 A.D. in the Mediterranean sea coast town of Tarsus, a free city of the Romans in Cilicia. This was in modern day southeast Turkey.

In **Acts 21:39** " Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of that important city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people."

In **Acts 22:3** Paul said "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city (of Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today."

Saul was a Jew. Furthermore, he was "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" according to **Acts 23:6**. **Philippians 3:5** says that he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;"

Saul also was free born as a Roman citizen. **Acts 22:25-29** - "²⁵ And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" ²⁶ When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." ²⁷ Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." ²⁸ The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." ²⁹ Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him."

Saul's Jewish parents were probably prominent and wealthy business people in the tent making trade and thus gained their Roman citizenship. Since Saul was born in a free city of the Roman empire he automatically became a free born Roman citizen. It is like when a child of immigrants is born in the new country, they have dual citizenship.

Saul had at least one sister and a nephew. His nephew helped Paul escape assassination - **Acts 23:16-22**.

Saul's early education was in the schools of Tarsus which was known as a "little Athens for learning." This would have exposed him to the philosophy and poetry of the Greeks which he later remembered and used in his preaching. Here are two examples of his knowledge of the Greek culture.

Acts 17:28 says that in Athens Paul preached "²⁸ for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, "For we are also His offspring."

Paul wrote in **Titus 1:12** that "One of them, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."

Saul had the best advanced Jewish education available in that day. **Acts 22:3** says that he was "brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our father's law." Gamaliel was a prominent Pharisee and highly respected "teacher of the law." - **Acts 5:34**.

The traditional age to begin this specialized instruction of the Torah (Jewish law) was 14. Saul was in this school during the same time that Jesus was a carpenter in Nazareth and the apostles were working at their fishing trade or other occupations. Paul said in **Act 26:4** "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know."

Saul was a tentmaker by trade which he probably learned early from his father."

Acts 18:3 tells us "So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers."

Saul, The Persecutor

Exactly when Saul began his bloody mission of savage persecution against the church is unknown. Saul first appears in the biblical record as a witness to the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr to the cause of Christ even "consenting" to Stephen's death - **Acts 7:58-8:1,3**.

The fear of Saul was huge, and those beyond the borders of Palestine trembled at the mention of the name of this "wolf" who stalked "the fold of the Lamb." He pursued the saints even to foreign cities. He had them beaten, imprisoned, and killed.

Acts 9:1-2 - "1-Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

Acts 9:13 - "Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem."

Acts 9:26 - "And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple."

Acts 22:4-5 - "4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, 5 as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished."

Acts 22:19-20 - "19 So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. 20 And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'"

Acts 26:9-12 - "9 Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them 11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. 12 While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,"

Paul wrote in **Galatians 1:13** "how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it."

His persecution of Christians as recorded in the book of Acts was relentless even though he thought he was sincerely doing God's will. **Acts 23:1** states "Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." Even today there are people who sincerely believe they are doing God's will, but they are not. It shows that a person can be sincerely wrong in their religion faith. Let your conscience be your guide is not a safe thing.

The horrible memories of these vicious attacks would linger in his mind for the rest of his life.

1 Corinthians 15:9 - "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

1 Timothy 1:15 - "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."

Saul's personal ambition to exterminate Christianity from the face of the earth would radically change. His conversion story is one of the most amazing and inspiring of all times.

The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

The conversion of Saul about 34 A.D. around the age of 31 is one of the most significant events in the history of the first-century church. In all the history of Christianity no single conversion to Christ carried with it such a powerful impact on the whole world as that of Saul the persecutor, afterward known as Paul the Apostle. Saul's conversion is one of the most important events in the entire course of Christianity.

According to Luke's historical record in **Acts 9:1-18; 22:6-16; and 26:12-19**, Saul obtained arrest warrants from the high priest to capture believers of the Christian Way. He left Jerusalem en route to ancient Damascus, about 140 miles to the north. As he drew near to Damascus, a light from heaven brighter than the sun suddenly engulfed him. A voice inquired: "Saul, Saul, why do you continue to persecute me?"

The double use of his name suggests a reproof. See **Matthew 23:37; Luke 10:41; 22:31**.

Saul responded: "Who are you, Lord?" The title "Lord" was employed at this point as a mere term of respect, for he did not know who had spoken to him.

The voice was identified as Jesus of Nazareth! The stunned persecutor was instructed to enter Damascus where he would be told what he "**must do**." Blinded as a result of this miraculous vision in which Christ actually appeared to him, Saul was led into the city.

For three agonizing days he fasted and prayed. Finally, Ananias, a messenger selected by God, arrived. He restored Saul's sight and commanded him to "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." - **Acts 22:16**. After some days passed, the former persecutor began to proclaim among his fellow Jews that Jesus "is the Son of God." - **Acts 9:19-22**.

Three Conversion Accounts

Some have criticized the book of Acts for containing three accounts of the conversion of Saul. It has been alleged that this makes this New Testament record unnecessarily redundant. It is no more redundant than their being the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to tell the full story of Jesus to four different audiences, or 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, and 1st and 2nd Chronicles recording the history of the Israelites.

Further, some say that the varying accounts conflict with one another in the details presented. These allegations are false as we are going to see.

First, there is the initial historical account of Saul's conversion as recorded by Luke in **Acts 9**. Luke passed the test of being a superb historian. Luke's historical writing is respected for its trustworthiness. The primary purpose of **Acts 9** is to sketch the basic details of Saul's conversion to Christ.

The **second** historical account of Saul's conversion occurs about 58 A.D. **Acts 22** contains this record of Paul's defense of his conversion. This follows a vicious attempt on the part of certain militant Hebrews in Jerusalem, to kill the apostle based upon the false charge that he had defiled the Jews' temple - **Acts 21:28**. When Paul was providentially rescued from the bloodthirsty mob, he asked permission to address the crowd from the stairs of the fortress of Antonio. His request was granted.

The address he delivered on this occasion was a kind of evangelistic message designed to present an argument to his Hebrew kinsmen explaining why he had come to acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. He outlines his extensive background in Judaism, his days as a persecutor of the Christian faith, the details of his conversion, and his commission to proclaim Jesus.

We should be doing the same thing by telling others simply how and why we became a Christian.

Paul describes his conversion from opponent of Christianity to proponent of Christianity, to his Hebrew kinsmen in Jerusalem. This account also is designed to show that there is a connection between his Jewish background and his present religious conviction. He wanted his Israelite brethren to realize that there was no conflict between Judaism and Christianity, as God divinely designed it.

Judaism was intended to prepare for Christianity according to **Galatians 3:23-27**. - "23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.

24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

The book of **Hebrews** also explains that Judaism was to pave the way for Christianity.

The **third** historical account of Saul's conversion is recorded in **Acts 26**. The aim of Paul's defense in **Acts 26** was to argue that Christianity was never intended to be a political rival to Rome. About 60 or 61 A.D. when Porcius Festus became the Roman procurator of Judea under Nero Caesar's authority, he found Paul imprisoned at Caesarea. Not knowing exactly how to deal with his famous prisoner, he sought the counsel of King Agrippa II. After some discussion, the two of them determined they would interview the celebrated apostle.

King Agrippa was appointed by Claudius Caesar to govern certain territories in northern Palestine, Agrippa was a powerful political figure of that day. Agrippa was the last Jewish ruler to wear the title king. He was the last in the bloody Herod line. Agrippa's father, King Herod, executed the first apostle martyred for Christ, James, the brother of John. **Acts 12:1-3** - "1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread."

Agrippa was very familiar with Jewish affairs according to **Acts 26:3**. Therefore he was an ideal source of information for Festus. Paul presented his case before Festus and King Agrippa. Paul's defense was successful as demonstrated by the declaration by King Agrippa that "This man is doing nothing worthy of death or imprisonment." Agrippa also told Festus, "This man might have been set free, if he had not appealed to Caesar." - **Acts 26:31-32**.

In fact, Agrippa said to Paul "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." - **Acts 26:28**.

False Teaching Concerning Paul's Conversion

It is a heartbreaking tragedy that many writers with their personal theological agendas have so misconstrued the events of Paul's conversion.

The three accounts must be viewed together. The Bible, being the word of God, must harmonize because "God is not the author of confusion." - **1 Corinthians 14:33**. Also, a fundamental principle of interpretation is that when two or more texts address the same theme, and one is clearer or more complete than the others, you must consider them all to get the accurate picture. One record may supplement another narrative. But supplementation is not the same as contradiction.

First, it is asserted by some that Paul's conversion occurred on the road to Damascus. There is not a bit of evidence for that theory. Saul saw Christ on the road and was convinced that He was the

resurrected Jesus. Saul asked what he should do and he was instructed to enter the city, where he would be told what he “**must do.**” - **Acts 9:6; 22:10.** There is nothing in any of the three records that would indicate that he received forgiveness on the Damascus road. In fact, we find him still in his sins at the time Ananias arrived - **Acts 22:16.**

Following Christ’s command, Saul went on to Damascus. For three days he neither ate nor drank, but he was praying - **Acts 9:9-11.** It is sometimes alleged that Saul’s prayers were the means of his salvation. But this conflicts with Paul’s later testimony in **Acts 22:16.** He was still in his sinful condition. Ananias, who was sent by Jesus, commanded Saul “And now, why are you waiting? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” - **Acts 22:16.**

Also, some have contended that because Ananias greeted him as "Brother Saul" in **Acts 9:17,** it indicated that Saul was already recognized as a Christian. Not so. “Brother,” was a common form of greeting that any devout Hebrew might give to another Hebrew - **Acts 2:29,37; 3:17; Romans 9:3.**

Some, appeal to **Acts 9:17b** - "be filled with the Holy Spirit", to suggest that Saul was saved by a supernatural outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There are a couple of serious problems with that view. **First,** it assumes what the text does not say. The notion that the reception of Saul’s sight and the endowment of the Holy Spirit occurred at the same time is not proven by this text. **Second, Acts 22:16** makes it clear that Saul had to be baptized to wash away his sins. **Third, Acts 2:38** says that Christians receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit after they are baptized. **Fourth,** the reference to being “filled with the Holy Spirit” here seems to refer to the power that was to be provided to Saul directly by the Lord Himself - **Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:33; 2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11.** The New Testament does not cite the precise time when Saul was filled with this power of the Spirit. While Ananias was a preliminary instrument in the process that would lead to Paul’s spiritual power, the Holy Spirit was not conveyed to Saul by means of Ananias’ hands. As a non-apostle, Ananias did not have such power.

An Analysis of Acts 22:16

Since this text is so critical to our study, we want to give special attention to it. Paul states that Ananias gave him instructions from God and then commanded him: “And now, why are you waiting? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” - **Acts 22:16.** The apostle says he was told to “be baptized.” The original form of the verb is interesting. It is a middle voice form, literally therefore: “have yourself immersed.” (cf. Robertson 1930, 391). In his *New Testament Greek Grammar*, W. E. Vine stated that the aorist tense, together with the middle voice, suggests “a decisive and immediate” action, and that Saul personally had to make the arrangements for his immersion. This language is consistent with the concept that baptism is a personal decision. Washing away one’s sins is here clearly connected with baptism and the calling on Jesus’ name.

In submitting to immersion, Saul was actually “calling on” the Lord’s name. Of course, we know that mere water can not wash away sins. The water of baptism contains no magical essence. It is not a sacrament by which sins are washed away by the simple utterance of certain words. Immersion is, however, God’s appointed means of accessing the blood of Christ according to **Romans 6:3-4** - “³Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?⁴ Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

The New Testament record of the conversion of the apostle Paul is a tremendously important element of Christian history.

If we want our sins washed away by the blood of Christ, we need to be baptized just as Paul was.