

Saul's Transformation into the Apostle Paul

Did you ever wonder how such a humble, obscure man like Jesus of Nazareth gained so many followers? I mean he was a carpenter from a little village on the side of a hill in a small country in the Middle East. He died at a young age with only a few hundred followers. Jesus had no armies, went to no universities, ruled no country, had no possessions, no inventions, and no material wealth. Yet, the world's largest religion is named after Him. More has been written about Him than any other person ever born. All this happened because His followers served Him after His death. Jesus told them at the Last Supper that after He was gone, they would do even greater works than they had seen Him do (John 14:12). By this He meant evangelism and the growth of the universal church. The disciple of Christ who wrote about half of the New Testament was the Apostle Paul. Jesus specifically chose Paul to take the Gospel to the Gentile world. About ten years after Jesus was resurrected and the twelve disciples received the Great Commission, the main church and most of the activity was still in Jerusalem. All of Asia and Europe were polytheistic pagan idol worshippers. The entire Mediterranean world was dominated by Greek philosophic thought, religion, and culture. Paul entered that world about 47 A. D. and turned it upside down—which is to say in God's view right side up! Paul was God's instrument to change the world, but how did his transformation come about? Allow me to tell his story in the first person.

The Road to Damascus Experience

My name is Saul of Tarsus. Tarsus was a Gentile city in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) where there was a small Jewish population as well. I am a Jew raised by a very orthodox Jewish family. After my Bar Mitzpah at the age of 13, my father sent me to live in Jerusalem to receive intense training and education in our law, traditions, religion, and the Hebrew language. You see we spoke Greek in Tarsus, and my family also spoke Aramaic, but priests, Pharisees, and scribes needed to learn our ancient language of Hebrew. My ambition was to become a member of a select group of devout religious men known as the Pharisees. There were only about 4,000 of them out of all the millions of Jews. I showed such great aptitude that the great Rabbi Gamaliel chose me to be his student, and he mentored me in all my studies. I worked very hard and was seriously ambitious, and after about ten years I became a Pharisee. Not long after this everything I believed and had worked for was threatened by a radical group who called themselves followers of Jesus Christ. I was infuriated when these

men came into my synagogue and preached about this Jesus being the long awaited Messiah. A man named Stephen drew away a significant number of Jews to this new way, and I was alarmed that thousands of Jews in Jerusalem were going over to this Jesus. This movement threatened everything I had worked for and achieved, and I felt we had to stop it. We started by grabbing Stephen and dragging him outside the city and stoning him to death. I became very active in arresting all these followers of Jesus, even following them to foreign cities to arrest them. On the way to Damascus something incredible happened to me that TRANSFORMED me forever.

Suddenly a blinding light from heaven flashed around me and I fell to the ground blinded and in fear. I heard a commanding voice from heaven saying, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In a split second all I could think about was that I hoped this wasn't Jesus, because if it was, my whole life was wrong. If this was the risen Christ then my teachers were wrong, my education and training was wrong, and everything I had believed was wrong. Worst of all, I would then be a murderer of the Lord's people. I managed to sheepishly utter, "Who are you Lord?" He answered "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise and enter the city and it shall be told you what you must do". I was blind, but my companions led me in, and a man named Ananias was sent by Jesus to give me my sight back along with instructions from Jesus. The amazing thing was that Ananias was one of the men I was going to arrest and execute, but now he was helping me. The first thing I did was go to the local synagogue and tell what happened. Then the Holy Spirit led me out into Arabia where He ministered to me for over two years—yes I received revelation directly from Jesus illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Then I returned to Damascus where I had a short but productive ministry. So many of the Jews there were believing in Jesus that the leadership tried to kill me, but my disciples snuck me out by putting me in a basket and lowering me down through an opening in the city wall. I went back to Jerusalem after being gone for three years. I tried to associate with the church there, but they did not trust me until Barnabas vouched for me to the Apostles. Persecution arose there and I had to flee to my hometown of Tarsus, where I stayed studying and being ministered to by the Holy Spirit.

It was at this time that I experienced the most awesome thing that only a few men like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John have ever seen—I was taken up to Heaven and I saw the glory of God, and I heard some things which are unspeakable. After such an enlightening experience, God saw fit to keep me humble by giving me my "thorn in the flesh". It is a physical pain that makes

me always aware of my weakness so that I will remain humble and always depend on the Lord.

About 46 AD, a wonderful fast growing Gentile church was emerging in Antioch, Syria. Barnabas came and got me and we ministered to the church there for a year before they sent us out as missionaries to Cyprus and the region of Galatia. The Holy Spirit led us to each of these places and empowered us to do many miracles and preach the Gospel so that many believed including the Governor of Cyprus. I gave my first sermon to a large crowd at Pisidian Antioch in the region of Galatia, and many believed our message. As we went from town to town our M. O. was to speak in the synagogues first, build a core group of believing Jews then go out into the city and preach to the Gentiles also. Before leaving, we would appoint elders for each new church, and I tried to leave a mature disciple there to minister and send me news of their progress. Then I would write letters to the churches answering questions and correcting problems. At the same time, we experienced great opposition during this first missionary trip, and I was beaten and thrown out of Pisidian Antioch and stoned in Lystra, but God comforted us in all the persecution. When our first missionary journey was complete, we returned to our home church in Antioch, Syria. It was at this time that some men who had been Pharisees came from Jerusalem to Antioch. They professed to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but they still held onto the traditions they had grown up with such as Kosher eating. They insisted that all Gentiles had to be circumcised and obey Mosaic Laws in order to be saved. We had great debate on this and decided the issue must be settled once and for all time so we all went to Jerusalem for a church council. All the church elders and Apostles were there, and each side presented its case. Peter spoke, Barnabas and I spoke, and then James the brother of Jesus rendered the final decision—Salvation is only by the grace of God and it is only received by faith/belief. No works or keeping of the law are involved.

The Second Missionary Journey to Macedonia and Greece

We began our second journey by retracing our steps back through Asia Minor visiting the churches we had planted. We continued west all the way to the port city of Troas on the Aegean Sea. At Troas we determined to go northeast into Bythunia but the Holy Spirit made it known to us there were many people waiting to hear the Gospel in Macedonia across the Aegean Sea. At this time no one in Macedonia or Greece had heard the Gospel and there were no churches there. We planted churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and

Corinth. At the same time there was much opposition and persecution. I was flogged in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica, threatened in Berea, laughed out of Athens, and was trembling with fear in Corinth. I settled in Corinth for 18 months as the Holy Spirit told me there were many prospective believers there. I was a tent maker by day and an evangelist by night until Silas and Timothy joined me so I could devote myself to preaching the Gospel full time. Corinth was a wild immoral city and proved to be quite a challenge, but we built a sizable church there. The great challenge with the Corinthians was their spiritual growth. I had to write many letters of admonishment and discipline, as well as revisit it to straighten them out.

The Third Missionary Journey to Ephesus and Corinth

After leaving Corinth, I sailed to Ephesus, a major city in Asia Minor, and after a short visit I promised to return, as I needed to get back to my home church in Antioch Syria. After spending some time in Antioch, I began my 3rd journey through Asia strengthening the churches and I settled in Ephesus for about three years (Acts 20:31). I converted a core group of Jews in the synagogue there, then I began teaching at a large school of rhetoric called the School of Tyrannus for two years reasoning with both Jews and Gentiles so that all in Ephesus and the surrounding area heard the Word of God. I also sent many of my new disciples out to cities all through Asia to spread the Word and plant churches. So many thousands were believing in Jesus and turning away from idols that the large business of idol making was being broken. The idol makers formed a mob to arrest me and all my disciples, and a riot ensued. The town leaders put down the riot, and I decided to go back to Macedonia to strengthen those churches and take up a collection for the destitute church in Jerusalem.

Trouble in Corinth—False Teachers

While in Ephesus I had received news about immoral behavior in Corinth, and I sent them a long letter of admonishment that is in your Bible called 1 Corinthians. They repented for a time, but I found it necessary to write them several letters of correction that were not saved and put in the Bible. While in Macedonia, I received news that there were false teachers in Corinth trying to corrupt the true Gospel, and also trying to turn the church there into rejecting Paul as an Apostle. Therefore I sent Titus ahead to talk to them, and bring me news. When Titus returned, I was filled with joy that most of the church was still holding fast to the

truth. I then wrote my letter known as 2 Corinthians in your Bible. In that letter I explained all the adversity I had encountered that delayed my coming to them, and I wrote a defense of the Gospel and a defense of my Apostleship. I then travelled to Corinth, and was greeted warmly, and received a generous contribution for the church at Jerusalem. I travelled to Jerusalem where I delivered the contribution to the church, but I was arrested and spent four years in jail—first in Caesarea and then in Rome.

Conclusion

Looking back, the Lord was faithful in working through me to do great things. My opponents paid the highest compliment when they saw me and said, “There’s the man who has turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). They had it wrong, God used me to turn the world right side up. I marvel that God would take me, the chief of all sinners, and use me to be an evangelist to the Gentile nations such that the western world would hear the good news and many would be saved. God also inspired me to write about half of the New Testament. Don’t miss that while all these wonderful things were happening, we were also being arrested, beaten, flogged, stoned, and harassed wherever we went. Nevertheless, I consider that these present sufferings were nothing compared to the glory that is soon going to be revealed to us in heaven!

Question—What transformed Saul the Pharisee into Paul the Apostle? Of course having a personal audience with Jesus had something to do with it, but like Peter, John and the other Apostles they were not really transformed until the Holy Spirit indwelt them and changed their heart. Only God can change hearts. The Israelites at Mt. Sinai saw the glory of God and heard God’s voice as thunder when He gave them the Ten Commandments, but their hearts were not changed so they did not keep the law and they were not transformed. After Jesus initiated the New Covenant of Grace through His sacrifice on the cross, all who have believed in Jesus have been transformed, are being transformed, and in the resurrection will be perfected. This is an act of God, and it is a great distinction of Biblical Christianity from all other religions. Paul saw his conversion and ministry as the expression of the contrast between life under religious law and the transforming grace of the new life in Christ.

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