

## **The Life and Theology of Paul, Part One: Paul's Life and Calling**

Few individuals have shaped the Christian faith more than the Apostle Paul. His Spirit-inspired letters form the backbone of much of our understanding of the gospel, the church, and the Christian life. But before Paul became a preacher of grace, he was a persecutor of the church. And to truly understand Paul's theology, we must first understand Paul the man—his upbringing, his background, and the sovereign hand of God that shaped every step of his journey.

### **A Life Transformed by Grace**

If you had encountered Saul of Tarsus in the first century, you wouldn't have admired him—you would have feared him. Zealous for the Jewish law and traditions of his ancestors, Saul stood by approvingly as Stephen was stoned (Acts 7:58). He wasn't just indifferent to the gospel—he was violently opposed to it (Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–2). Yet this was the man God would sovereignly choose, convert, and commission to carry the name of Jesus before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15).

This lesson begins not with Paul's theology but with his life. Why? Because the Bible doesn't separate the two. Paul's theology is deeply personal—woven from the threads of his background, his encounter with Christ, and his lived experience of grace. As we trace his story, we discover not only God's providence but also the foundational truths of the gospel he preached.

### **Scripture Focus**

- **Acts 7:54–8:4** – The martyrdom of Stephen and Saul's approval
- **Acts 9:1–30** – Paul's conversion and call
- **Philippians 3:1–6** – Paul's Jewish credentials and religious zeal
- **2 Corinthians 4:1–6** – The light of the gospel breaking into darkness

### **Key Objectives**

1. To understand how Paul's background shaped his theology
2. To trace God's providential preparation in Paul's life before conversion
3. To connect Paul's story to the gospel's transforming power in every believer's life

### **Summary**

#### **1. A Man of Two Worlds: Jewish Heritage and Roman Citizenship**

Paul was uniquely positioned to be a messenger to both Jews and Gentiles. Born in Tarsus (Acts 21:39), a center of Greek learning, he also held Roman citizenship by birth (Acts 22:28), which granted him protection and privileges others lacked. Yet, despite his cosmopolitan background, Paul's identity was firmly rooted in Judaism. As he states in Philippians 3:5, he was "circumcised on the eighth day," a "Hebrew born of Hebrews," and trained under the esteemed teacher Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3).

His education was thorough—not only in Scripture and Jewish law, but also in rhetoric, philosophy, and literature (Acts 17). Fluent in multiple languages and a skilled thinker, Paul was prepared—though unknowingly—for the gospel mission ahead.

## **2. A Zealot Turned Apostle**

Paul's opposition to the church was not lukewarm. F.F. Bruce writes, *"If Stephen said, 'The new has come; therefore the old must go,' Paul for his part argued, 'The old must stay; therefore the new must go.'"* Saul viewed the followers of Jesus as a threat to the covenantal identity of Israel. His hatred was personal, religious, and unrelenting—until the risen Christ intervened.

On the road to Damascus, Saul was confronted not by a theology but by a Person. A blinding light, a divine voice, and a stunning question: *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"* (Acts 9:4). Saul asked, *"Who are You, Lord?"*—not in polite address, but in recognition that the Sovereign One of heaven was speaking. That moment changed everything. He who once sought to destroy the church now began preaching the gospel of Christ (Acts 9:20–22).

## **3. A Picture of Grace for Every Believer**

Paul's conversion wasn't just personal—it became paradigmatic. In his letters, Paul often links his own experience with the universal gospel pattern. Just as God opened Lydia's heart (Acts 16:14), so too He opened Paul's. Just as the Gentiles were called out of darkness into light (Acts 26:18), so was Paul. He would later write, *"God...has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ"* (2 Cor. 4:6).

Paul was not saved because he sought God—but because God sought him. His story highlights essential gospel truths:

- Salvation is by grace alone (1 Tim. 1:15)
- The saved are brought into the family of faith (Acts 9:17)
- The saved are also sent—to serve and proclaim (Acts 9:20)

## **Theology in Biography: Why Paul's Life Matters**

Studying Paul's life shows us that theology doesn't emerge in a vacuum. Paul's understanding of sin, grace, justification, and union with Christ was forged in real encounters—with Scripture, with suffering, and with the Savior. His life becomes a living testimony to the very truths he taught.

From his background in the law to his passion for the gospel, from his Roman privileges to his Jewish heritage, from his early hatred of Christ to his later love for the church—Paul's life is a portrait of how God sovereignly prepares, redeems, and sends His servants.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. What aspects of Paul's background might have seemed like obstacles—but were used by God for His purposes?
2. How does Paul's conversion encourage us in our own testimony of salvation by grace?
3. In what ways does Paul's story help you better understand the transforming power of the gospel?

### **Prayer**

Father, thank You for the way You work in unexpected people and unexpected ways. As You transformed Saul into Paul, we see the power of Your grace to redeem, restore, and repurpose a life for Your glory. Help us to grasp more deeply the gospel Paul preached—and to live boldly in response to the grace we've received. In Christ's name, Amen.