

The Biography of Paul

A Hebrew of Hebrews Disciplining the Greeks

Introduction

The Apostle Paul was an amazing individual. If you made a list of the top 5 most important people in Christianity, it would be tough not to put him at #2, right behind Jesus.

There is so much that I could cover from Paul's life. There is by no means enough time to cover Paul in one 40 minute class. There are so many lessons and so many examples so follow.

What I will feebly attempt to do today, is highlight 3 or 4 significant events in his life that shaped him or changed him. But first, we need to cover a little background of Paul and a little cultural background.

Background

1. A Roman Citizen

According to St. Jerome, a fourth-century church father who wrote one the earliest biographies of Paul that we have, Paul's parents were born at Gischala. Gush Halav (modern day)

Gischala – one of two great Zealot towns in Galilee

“John of Gischala” – killed 28,000 Jews who weren't religious enough for him.

Jerome states that Paul's parents were Zealots and they participated in a tax revolt in 4 BC or 6 AD (unclear from writing).

They were captured and sold as slaves to a wealthy family in Tarsus. They worked hard as slaves and when their owner died, he manumitted them and set them free. Any children born to a freed slave is considered to be a Roman citizen.

Even though Paul has Roman citizenship, his roots are in a passionate love of God and Jewishness.

2. A Hebrew of Hebrews (Philippians 3:5)

This means two things. First, it means that, even though he was born outside of Israel, both of his parents were pure blood Jews. He knew his heritage and was proud of it. He was of the tribe of Benjamin (the same tribe as the first king of Israel – he may even have been named for him).

Secondly, this is a colloquialism that means he was fluent in Hebrew. Remember, the people of Israel spoke Aramaic, so to know and study Hebrew was a big deal, a sign of a commitment to the Jewish heritage.

3. A Pharisee the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6)

He does not say I WAS...he says I AM a Pharisee.

He did not renounce his Phariseeness – He is proud (as a Jesus man) of being a Pharisee

That ought to make us stop and re-evaluate our view of Pharisees. We judge Pharisees because of Jesus' sharp criticism of them, but a close look at those texts show that Jesus was upset with them, not because of their theology, but because of their practice of it.

The Pharisees had it right, they just weren't living it.

4. A student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3)

Every Jewish boy's dream is to grow up to be a Rabbi. However, only the best of the best of the best students can progress from one level to another. The *Mishnah* describes the steps that a young boy would take to achieve this dream. These are the same steps that both Jesus and Paul would have followed.

First, at age 5 or 6, boys would go to the synagogue to begin their study in *Beth Sefer* (elementary school). The teaching focused primarily on the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible), emphasizing both reading and writing of the scriptures. Large portions were memorized and it is likely that many students knew the entire Torah by memory by the time this level of education was finished (around age 11 or 12).

The best students continued their study (while learning a trade) in Beth Midrash (secondary school) also taught by a rabbi of the community. Here they (along with the adults in the town) studied the prophets and the writings in addition to Torah and began to learn the interpretations of the Oral Torah to learn how to make their own applications and interpretations much like a catechism class might in some Churches today. Memorization continued to be important because most people did not have their own copy of the Scripture so they either had to know it by heart or go to the synagogue to consult the village scroll.

A few (very few) of the most outstanding Beth Midrash students sought permission to study with a famous rabbi often leaving home to travel with him for a lengthy period of time. These students were called talmidim (talmid, s.) in Hebrew, which is translated disciple. There is much more to being a talmid than what we call student. A student wants to know what the teacher knows. A talmid wants to **like** the teacher; that is **to become what the teacher is**. That meant that students were passionately devoted to their rabbi and noted everything he did or said. This meant the rabbi/talmid relationship was a very intense and personal system of education. As the rabbi lived and taught his understanding of the Scripture his students (talmidim) listened and watched and imitated so as to become like him. Eventually they would become teachers passing on a lifestyle to their talmidim.

Paul was talmid (a disciple of) to Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), the Pharisee mentioned in Acts 5 who advised the Sanhedrin not to put to death Peter and John for preaching the gospel. His authority with his contemporaries was so great that they accepted his advice. So, Paul, as Gamaliel's disciple is attempting to **become like Gamaliel** and utterly fails. In Acts 8 we see him watching over the stoning of Stephen,

giving approval to his death. He was, as he described himself, a persistent persecutor of the Church (1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13). *This is a complete rejection of his Rabbi's views and means he is failing at being a talmid.* He is not **becoming like** his Rabbi.

Significant Events

1. The Road to Damascus

I do not believe in the Damascus Road conversion. Paul was not converted because he believed in God. He was persecuting Christians because he thought that was what God wanted.

By making this Paul's conversion, we say that the Jewish system wasn't a God-centered system. We make the focus of our theology an idea that Christianity was a new religion. It isn't. It wasn't. Christianity is the fulfillment of the Jewish System. Christianity only has value in context of the Jewish system because Jesus Christ was the sacrificial lamb.

Therefore, Paul is not converted. He is made more fully aware. I see this as a call to repentance, not a call to conversion. He was not an unbeliever, but rather a believe who was misled.

In Acts 9 Saul repents and decides to follow Christ. In his mind and culture, he is now talmid (a disciple of) Jesus Christ. His number one goal in life is to now **become like** Christ in every mannerism.

Following his stay in Damascus after his conversion, where he was baptized, Paul says that he first went to Arabia (during that time in Arabia, Paul was learning his new "yoke."), and then came back to Damascus (Galatians 1:17).

According to Acts, his preaching in the local synagogues got him into trouble there, and he was forced to escape, being let down over the wall in a basket (Acts 9:23). He describes in Galatians, how three years after his conversion, he went to Jerusalem, where he met James, and stayed with Simon Peter for 15 days (Galatians 1:13–24). He got into trouble for disputing with "Hellenists" (Greek speaking Jews and Gentile "God-fearers") and so he was sent back to Tarsus.

Paul's narrative in Galatians states that 14 years after his conversion he went again to Jerusalem. It is not known exactly what happened during these so-called "unknown years," but both Acts and Galatians provide some details. At the end of this time, Barnabas went to find Paul and brought him back to Antioch (Acts 11:26).

2. Paul's Road to Discipleship

Paul's first missionary journey begins in Acts 13 from Antioch. He, Barnabas, and John Mark travel for 2 years (47-49 AD) and planted 11 churches (Acts 13-14). Paul's second missionary journey was three years long (50-53 AD) and covered about 20 cities (Acts 15:36-18:22). It is during this journey that Paul begins to realize that he is not **following the example** of Jesus to the degree a talmid would want to (for the second time in his life, he is failing as a talmid). Jesus' model of ministry was to take a small group of men and intensely train them for three years. Paul's model of ministry is to enter a city, spend a short

amount of time in intense training and then leave, which appears to be a method that God planned for him (Acts 16:6-9).

Two trips take about 3 ½ years and he has founded 15 churches – that's 5 churches a year and EVERY ONE of them is full of problems.

Now, his next 8 years will be spent either travelling or in two churches. Instead of founding 5 churches a year, he will spend an average of 4 years in a church.

Why the change? I think it is called disciples. I think Paul, in the middle of his second tour decides he wants disciples.

3. Paul and Timothy

This change in Paul appears to be prompted by the special interest he takes in Timothy, a lad he meets during his Second Journey. Timothy is an interesting figure because his mother was Jewish and his father was Greek. Timothy appears to have been similar to all Jewish boys in that he wanted grow up to be a Rabbi. However, no matter how smart he was and how passionate he was, he would have been prevented from being a talmid because he was not pure Jewish blood. Timothy was well known in the area for being one of the top students in his study of scripture (Acts 16:2). Because of Paul's understanding of the grafting of the Gentiles into the branch of Israel, he allowed Timothy to become his talmid and took Timothy with him. The first hints of this change are seen as we see Paul spend 1 ½ to 2 years in Corinth.

4. Paul in Ephesus

This change from church planting to disciple-making is reinforced on his Third Missionary Journey where he spends 3 years in Ephesus.

On Paul's second trip into Ephesus he meets some men and he talks to them. He discovers that they are disciples of John the Baptist. Being disciples, they were probably fiery and enthusiastic as John (Elijah)... Paul teaches them for 3 years.

Then Paul says, I am going to go to Jerusalem for the Feast. Anything sound odd about that? What would you expect a rabbi to say? What did Jesus say? "Let US go to the feast." But Paul says "I am"...his disciples are done being taught

Now, right before he gets to leave a disturbance occurs.

That theater holds 35,000 people and the Bible says that everyone runs to the theater as one people. The people are a mob and don't have a clear purpose

The Jews then push Alexander to the front to speak. When they see he is a Jew, the people shouted for 2 hours. (The people don't see a distinction between Paul's teaching and Judaism)

Now, at this time, Paul wants in. What kind of chutzpa does it take to go stand in front of 35,000 people screaming for your neck.

His disciples, however, won't let him.

The mayor then stands up and says that Paul hasn't done anything wrong...he has done nothing illegal.

Why didn't the disciple want to let him in?

- BECAUSE JESUS DIDN'T MAKE A DEFENSE.
- Paul had already said he was leaving...what if his disciples said, "Paul. We are Ephesians...we are you disciples...we can handle this..."

So, it is here in Ephesus that we see Paul **becoming like** Christ in his ministry. It is in Ephesus that one can infer that Paul takes on 12 talmid (Acts 19:7). His experience in Ephesus is very similar to the 3 years that Jesus spends building his ministry. Because of this intense and lengthy stay, Ephesus becomes a hub through which the gospel is spread throughout all of the provinces of Asia. When Paul left Ephesus (Acts 20:1) he left Timothy to continue the work (I Timothy 1).

Paul has a special and unique connection with the church in Ephesus. It is the city in which he finally succeeded in being like his Rabbi.

5. Paul like Christ

Have you ever heard of a Rabbi who picked disciples who had been with John the Baptist?

Have you ever heard of a Rabbi who chose 12 of them and taught them for three years?

Have you ever heard of a Rabbi who had a young disciples he calls, "My son."?

Have you ever heard of a Rabbi who was falsely accused of blaspheming a temple?

Have you ever heard of a Rabbi who was falsely accused of blaspheming a temple, but a Roman official stood up and said, "He is innocent"?

Have you ever heard of Rabbi who, when he was done teaching, left his disciples to go UP to his Father?

Have you ever heard of Rabbi (if church history is correct) who was executed by the Romans?

Application

It strikes me that this is a call to the Modern Church that it is a call back to disciple making. This makes sense in Montgomery where everyone claims to be a follower of Jesus.

We have to reclaim discipleship. That's not a job for Don and the Shepherds.

How many disciples did the greatest Rabbi ever have? 12

How can we expect our leadership to disciple a church of 400?

Let's make it personal...how many disciples do you have?

How can I call myself a disciple of Jesus, if I don't have a disciple of my own?