

## Paul and his Journeys- Part 1 The Upbringing and Conversion of Saul

This is the first in a series of articles on the apostle Paul, and his missionary journeys. The articles will give a biblical and historical account of his life, so that a better understanding of the biggest single contributor to the New Testament can be gained.

Being born into a Jewish family belonging to the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1, Philippians 3:5) Paul's parents gave him the same name as the most famous member of the tribe of Benjamin – King Saul. His name was not changed from Saul to Paul by God as many think, the Bible simply states that he was called by two names, which was a common practice at the time. Paul was born in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, circumcised when he was eight days old according to Jewish custom, and was educated in the ways of the Law as a Pharisee. His education probably took place between the ages of 13 to 18 according to custom. He was educated in Jerusalem under the Pharisee Gamaliel, a doctor of the Jewish law (Acts 22:3).



The Bible does not give any details about the physical appearance of Paul, but he is usually shown as a short bald-headed man in early religious artwork

The first mention of Paul comes in Acts chapter 7, when an angry mob of Jews had been 'cut to the heart' by the bold preaching of Stephen. Stephen was a man filled with the Holy Ghost and great faith and power, but his message was rejected by the Jews, who considered him to be blasphemous. They laid their clothes at the feet of the consenting Saul while they stoned Stephen to death.

The Pharisees were a highly educated sect of Jews that sought for distinction and praise by outward observance of certain practices such as ceremonial washings, fastings, prayers, and alms giving. They were rebuked many times by Jesus for their 'outward show' of godliness, but on the inside they were full of 'hypocrisy and iniquity' (Mathew 23:28). They were extremely zealous in their practices, and Paul considered himself to be far superior in Judaism in knowledge and zealously than many of his Pharisee contemporaries. This accounts for Paul's harsh persecution of the early Christian church when he considered their beliefs to be blasphemous towards his God.

So Paul, being defensive of his Jewish faith made havock of the Church and sent many of the early Christians into prison, and often to their deaths. Paul describes his actions and attitudes during this time in the book of Acts and in a number of his New Testament letters:

- He 'persecuted...unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women' (Acts 22: 4)
- He 'with surpassing zeal...persecuted the Church of God and ravaged it (Galatians 1:13 Literal Translation)
- He was 'a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious' (1 Timothy 1:13)
- He was the 'chief' of sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15)

The series of events that would ultimately lead to Paul's conversion to the Christian faith begins when Paul obtained letters of authority from the high priest. Paul intended to take these letters to the synagogues of Damascus to allow him to bring any disciples of Christ into Jerusalem for imprisonment. The Lord however, had other ideas.

As Paul journeyed near Damascus there suddenly 'shined round about him a light from heaven' and he fell to the ground. He then heard a voice saying to him 'Saul Saul, Why persecutest thou me?'. Paul inquired who the speaker was, to receive the reply of 'I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks'. The Lord then sent him into Damascus where he would receive further instructions. This astonishing encounter with the Lord left Paul physically blinded and he needed to be led by the hand into Damscus. The blindness lasted for three days, and in that time the Bible records that he did not eat or drink. The Lord sent a vision to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, that he would go the the house wherein Paul was saying and lay his hands upon him that he may receive his sight. Ananias was quite fearful of his task because the fame of Paul's evil towards the Christians had spread across the land. Nonetheless he obeyed the Lord and carried out his task allowing the scales to fall from Paul's eyes, and filling him with the Holy Ghost. (Acts 9:17).

After Paul was baptized he straightaway went forth boldly in the synagogues preaching the true Christian gospel. He was now fulfilling the Lord's words concerning him as a 'chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel' (Acts 9:15). He had obtained mercy of God through the forgiveness of his former deeds which he had done in ignorance and unbelief. The Lord shows forth his abundant love and longsuffering through his conversion of Paul. Despite the grief Paul had caused God's people before he was born again, God demonstrates that any sinner can come into the love of God through the infilling of the Holy Spirit despite past mistakes.