

# Paul's Early Christian Life

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[ 0 : 00 ] Welcome here for the Sunday, October 27th, 2024. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. This morning, we're continuing in this sermon series that we've been going ongoing so far, Acts to All the World.

And through this series, we've been exploring the New Testament book of Acts. So go ahead and take your Bibles out. We'll be looking at some passages this morning, beginning with Acts 9, verses 19 to 30.

And that's our focus passage for this morning. Let's hear that now. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

All those who heard him were astonished and asked, Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on his name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?

Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him.

[ 1 : 11 ] But Saul learned of their plan. Day and night, they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was really a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him.

When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. A few weeks ago, in our sermon titled, Saul the Persecutor, before we considered Saul's persecution of the early church.

[ 2 : 17 ] But before that, we considered his background a bit, and maybe you remember that. Where he was from, his education, his training, and a bit of his thinking, and his focus. And we set the stage for a basic understanding of this man, and what factors came together to make him then the man that he would become.

And then in our sermon titled, The Conversion of Saul, we considered the events of his conversion experience. We looked at how amazing it was that God had accepted the early church's most passionate persecutor, even the church's enemy, in fact, and changed him to a fierce and fearless champion of the gospel.

And as I mentioned a few weeks ago, we were talking about Saul. We know that he comes to be known as Paul, as his ministry to the Gentiles grows.

And remember, we talked about the fact that, oh, maybe this is the time when God changed his name, but then we were reminded that never happened. So why did Saul become known as Paul? Well, that was the Gentile version of his name. So it would have been more appropriate, more familiar, more comfortable to the Gentile audiences to which he would be speaking.

[ 3 : 34 ] And that name caught on for all of us, and so we refer to him as Paul. So technically, that name, that name change, doesn't come for a few chapters yet as we explore the book of Acts, but I'm going to cheat.

And starting this morning, we're going to gradually make the move to referring to Saul as Paul. So you'll hear me say Saul or Paul, same guy, okay? So our sermon this morning is titled, Paul's Early Christian Life.

And we're going to be exploring this period between Saul's acts of persecuting the early church, and then his conversion, and what may be the more familiar events of Paul's ministry.

Because often, there's a gap there that we don't necessarily fill in or seek to fill in. When people think of the life of Paul, of Saul, several things probably come to mind.

His persecution of the church prior to his conversion. His vision of the Lord on the road to Damascus, right? His conversion experience. And then his leaping forward, his three missionary journeys that are recorded later in the book of Acts.

[ 4 : 44 ] But what may not be as well known are the years immediately following his conversion. So scholars suggest that Saul's conversion likely took place around 35, 36 AD, roughly in that period.

And then his first missionary journey began around 45 AD. So there's a big stretch of time there. So what was Paul doing during these early years? Roughly nine years or so.

I'm not always good at math, but I think that's right, nine. So he's a new Christian. He's received a calling from God. He's been given a mission to carry out.

So what happens during this time frame? Well, knowing his passion and his drive, both before his conversion with persecution, right, and later in his life in ministry, we know from all of his letters and all of his church visits, Paul wasn't likely the kind of guy who was just sitting around, right?

He'd been given a mission. He was just waiting for a specific time frame to then get to work. He got to work immediately, and we hear that in our passage from this morning.

[ 5 : 52 ] So we get the sense that Paul spent approximately three years in Damascus and Arabia, between 36 and 39 AD. So there's the time frame.

From our passage this morning, Acts 9, 19 to 20 says, Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. So almost immediately then, it says, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

He wasted no time. He begins to preach the truth of Christ and the gospel immediately. So continuing in Acts 9, 21 and 22, we read, all those who heard him were astonished and asked, wait a minute, isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name?

And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests? Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled, Scripture says, baffled the Jews living in Damascus, by proving Jesus is the Messiah.

So it wasn't lost on Paul's listeners that this was the same man who had been passionately against the same messages that he was now proclaiming to be true.

[ 7 : 11 ] Baffled and astonished, right? No kidding. We get a sense from Scripture that Paul then didn't spend a lot of time in Damascus after his conversion. If you go to Galatians 1, 15 to 17, you can flip over there or listen.

Galatians 1, 15 to 17. Paul writes, But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I may preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later, I returned to Damascus, Paul says.

It's important to determine, I think, what is meant by the term Arabia in our first century context. So we'll look at, just briefly, what it is and what it's not.

So in modern English, we hear the word Arabia, the term Arabia. It generally refers to the Arabian Peninsula where Saudi Arabia is located.

[ 8 : 17 ] But in the first century, this designation could also refer to an area called the Syro-Arabian Desert. So an area further north, which includes portions of modern-day Syria and also Jordan.

So it's a different context than what we might be accustomed to. So we have no idea how far south into the Arabian Peninsula area, south and east of Damascus, Paul may have wandered, but we do know that he later returned to Damascus.

Staying in Galatians, if we go to the next verse, in Galatians 1.18, Paul says, then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him 15 days.

So it's suggested that Paul stayed in the Arabian Peninsula for around three years. And while it's not spelled out what happened during this time, then Galatians 1.11 and 12 suggests it may have

been a time of personal reflection when he was there.

May have been a time when the Lord revealed truth to him. And then Paul returned to Damascus. But it wasn't long before the story gets intense again.

[ 9 : 34 ] Acts 9 verses 23 and 25, 2.25 says, after many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him.

But Saul learned of their plan. Day and night, they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. As I was reminded of this story, as I read it again, what a powerful story of danger and intrigue, right? Have you ever been lowered through a hole in a wall in a basket to keep from dying?

I think the collective answer is no. So Paul later recounted how narrow his escape was. He tells this story himself in 2 Corinthians 11 verses 32 and 33, where we read there, in Damascus, the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me.

But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. I love his wording there. So Damascus was the first place Paul preached. It was also the first place he experienced personal persecution before he then made his first visit to Jerusalem around 39 AD.

[ 10 : 58 ] So remember, this great persecutor of the church finally gets to experience it for himself. And the church community must have been really excited in Jerusalem to receive Paul, right?

To have them join him in their fellowship. Well, not exactly. Acts 9 verses 26 to 28 tells us, when he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. Remember the distinction? Disciples, all of us, apostles 12. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. So the church was skeptical.

They were actually afraid to receive him, we hear there. And it took Barnabas, God bless Barnabas, to bring him to the apostles to bridge the gap, to make the introductions.

[ 12 : 11 ] And remember, the earliest followers of Jesus had trusted who? Judas. We know how that worked out, right? so we can understand their caution and hesitance at receiving this man that they knew to be Saul.

In Galatians 1.18, Paul tells us, then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas, Peter, and stayed with him 15 days.

And during that time, Galatians 1.19 also tells us that Saul saw James, Jesus' older brother. So he made some connections there. Acts 9.28 says, So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem.

We just heard this. Speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. So despite that early caution, the hesitation from church leadership that we've heard about, Saul was ultimately given free access to the church.

And so what was his message? Well, he boldly preached in Jesus' name, we hear. And he even debated with the Grecian, Greek Jews, Hellenistic Jews.

[ 13 : 24 ] And it seems like that might have gone all right at first, right up until they plotted to kill him. So you don't generally debate with someone, have a disagreement, friendly argument, friendly discussion, and then decide you want to kill them.

Doesn't happen too often. Talk about a sudden and extreme response, right? They hated this message. They hated anyone who proclaimed it.

So fortunately for Saul, we learn in Acts 22, 17 to 21, that God gave him a bit of a heads up on this less than warm welcome he was going to get.

Paul says in Acts 22, 17 to 21, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to me. Quick, he said, leave Jerusalem immediately because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.

Lord, I replied, these people that know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.

[ 14 : 42 ] Then the Lord said to me, go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles. And then we also learn that the church community itself was looking out for him.

We learn that in Acts 9, verse 30. It says, when the believers learned of this, the attempt on his life, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

You can picture that, right? Okay, Paul, let's get going. Yeah, yeah. No, you're done. Pack your bags. Let's go. They wanted to get him out of danger. So in this amazing God-style role reversal, God does this all the time, Paul had now become a dangerous enemy to his former friends. It's a tough place to be. His personal testimony about his own conversion, the truth of Christ, was powerful and challenging. So challenging for his critics to refute that they became willing to do whatever it might take to silence him, to shut him up and shut him down.

So it was at this point that Paul returned home to Tarsus. Remember, Paul was born there. And then he spent five years in Syria and Cilicia from roughly 39 to 43 AD.

[16:03] Another bit of that gap filled in. In Acts 22, verse 3, Paul reminds us, I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, Tarsus.

I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. So Tarsus and the surrounding regions of Syria and Cilicia became centers for preaching during that time.

The churches in Judea came to hear of Paul's preaching and his teaching. So not a ton is known more about this period of Paul's life, although it may have included some other important events. Acts 15, for example, talks about churches being established in Antioch, in Syria, in Cilicia. Those things may well have happened during this time.

2 Corinthians 11, 24 to 26, says, Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones.

[17:16] Three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I've been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country.

In danger at sea, and in danger from false believers. A lot of danger. Poor Paul. So this is an account, then, of the personal persecution that Paul experienced.

It's not mentioned in the book of Acts, but it suggests that this may also have happened during this early period in Paul's life, in his ministry. In 2 Corinthians 12, 1 to 4, Paul says, I must go on boasting.

Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven.

Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man, whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know. But God knows.

[18:28] He was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. So that little snippet there, Paul had visions of paradise during his life.

And that may also have happened during this time as well. Busy time, right? Very busy time for him. So then, after that, Paul eventually leaves Tarsus when Barnabas arrives there to fetch him.

Barnabas comes to get him. And remember, it was Barnabas who had introduced Paul to the early church in Jerusalem. They were afraid of him and Barnabas bridged the gap.

And many of you likely also recognize Barnabas as being Paul's companion on his first missionary journey later on. So a bit about Barnabas. Acts 11, 19 to 24 says, Now those who have been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

[19:50] News of this reached the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived, he saw what the grace of God had done and he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. So Barnabas had come from Antioch of Syria, the site of one of the new and growing churches and this partnership between Paul and Barnabas would be one that would change the face and pace of this growing movement, Paul's early Christian life.

It's a period in his life and ministry that we don't often hear much about. We tend to focus on his intense persecution of the church and the followers of Jesus or we focus on his dramatic conversion

or we jump to his powerful ministry and legacy as a defender and champion of our faith.

So as we've seen this morning, this time of relative obscurity was a period when Paul was less in the spotlight than other times in his life. But we've also recognized that God was still at work in his life, guiding his steps in wonderful and amazing ways.

These early years, as we've noticed, were marked with service and experience that was shaping and molding him into someone who would be better equipped for the tasks that God had planned for him.

[ 21 : 27 ] The same things that were true for Paul in this early Christian life are true for us. God will use us wherever we're at, regardless of our skills or our experience.

All he wants is willing hearts that will trust him and be willing to step up and be sent. And in asking to be sent, that doesn't necessarily mean around the world.

It might mean across the city, down the street, or even next door. In our passion and desire to serve God and be used by him, make a difference in serving him, we need to remember not to discount the times that we may be spending in preparation.

Being just as faithful in small ways that he calls and prompts us as big ones. Because, friends, it's how we serve in small things that will determine our usefulness in greater things.

As Jesus told his other apostles as he was teaching and training them, we read this in Luke 16, verse 10. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much.

[ 22 : 44 ] And whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. It's like Jesus knew the nature of humanity and human character.

As you have the ability and opportunity, even if it may seem seemingly insignificant to you, ask God to help you to be faithful so that he may one day use you for even greater service.

Listen for God's voice. That's my challenge to you this morning. Do you hear him saying, whom shall I send and who will go for us? Let's all be people who respond immediately and enthusiastically to that by saying, here am I.

send me. Amen.