



A Ten-Lesson Study of the Life, Work and Impact  
of the Apostle Paul

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# *I, Paul – An Apostle’s Story*

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**Effective Bible Study**

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**I**t could reasonably be argued that no other human, apart from Jesus himself, has had a greater impact on the world than Paul of Tarsus. His theological reflections on the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have had a profound impact upon every branch of the Christian faith. His missionary journeys took the gospel across the Roman world. He mentored many second-generation Christian leaders. Thirteen of the New Testament's twenty-seven books are attributed to him, and one-half of the Acts of the Apostles is devoted to telling his story. Today, one-third of the world's population look to his writings for inspiration, spiritual direction, and ethical guidance, more than follow the teachings of Muhammad, the Buddha, and Confucius combined.

– Adam Hamilton, *The Call: The Life and Message of the Apostle Paul*

# ***1. Growing Up Jewish***

Philippians 3:4-6

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. Like Jesus and all the other apostles, Paul was Jewish.
2. And growing up Jewish had some very distinct effects and influences on a child.
3. But Paul's younger life also had some significant differences as compared to most others.
4. Drawing on statements in Scripture, information from other sources, and reasonable inferences, we can understand better what shaped this man.

## **JEWS IN THE DIASPORA**

1. With the destruction of the northern Jewish kingdom of Israel by Assyria in 722 BC, most of its residents were carried away captive. It is believed that only a few retained their Jewish identity in their new lands.
2. Until the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians (587 BC), almost all other Jewish people lived in Judah, though a few still survived in Israel.
  - a. In this war many thousand captured survivors were deported and resettled.
  - b. Those remaining fled to Egypt.
  - c. With the fall of Babylonia (539 BC), their return began. But even by the days of Nehemiah (445 BC), it seems only a minority had resettled in their ancestral homeland of Israel.
3. About 120 years after the dividing of Alexander the Great's Empire (AD 325), King Antiochus IV (215-164 BC) of Syria moved many Jewish families to the northern edge of his kingdom... to the ancient city of Tarsus.
4. With the expansion of the Republic (and then Empire) of Rome to include the Middle East lands, travel, trade and migration became easier. More Jewish families now voluntarily scattered outside their traditional homeland. See Acts 2:5-11.
5. Some estimate as many as 80% of racially Jewish people lived outside their homeland in the early first century.

## **TARSUS OF CILICIA**

1. Located in the NE corner of the Mediterranean Sea's coastline, Tarsus began as an ancient Hittite port city. It is located about 10 miles inland on the navigable Cydnus River.
2. Later Alexander the Great settled Tarsus with many Greeks. It became the capital of the kingdom of Cilicia, and centuries later was peacefully taken over by Rome.
  - a. Alexander himself almost died here after swimming in the snow-fed Cydnus River (333 BC); after all, "cydnus" was Latin for cold!
  - b. In 41 BC, Cleopatra of Egypt sailed up the Cydnus to meet Marc Antony at Tarsus (his military headquarters)
3. Surrounded on the west and north by the snow-capped Taurus Mountains, Tarsus was a crossroads for trade and had several Roman roads passing through it, including the Roman highway from the interior of Asia Minor (Cappadocia) which passed through the "Cilician Gates," a high mountain pass which cut in the Taurus Mountains.

4. Tarsus was famous in the first century for:
  - a. Large size – estimated anywhere from 50,000 to 300,000, one of the largest in the Roman Empire, though no official ancient records exist of its population.
  - b. Highly prized educational institutions and libraries, matching or exceeding Alexandria and Athens
  - c. Popular cloth called “cilicium” produced from the long hair of a species of large goat that grazed the plains and mountain sides of the region. This cloth was used for coats, boat sails, and tents. It was highly water resistant yet lightweight, and exported throughout the Empire.
  - d. Awarded “free city” status by Rome before Paul’s time, it enjoyed self-rule and exemption from most Roman taxation.
5. A true melting pot of people and cultures, a visitor to the city could hear Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and many local dialects spoken on the street.

### **GROWING UP JEWISH... IN TARSUS**

1. Paul’s family:
  - a. Citizens of Tarsus (Acts 21:39) – meaning his father could participate in the democratic style government of the city. This citizenship was typical of Greek cities, and was reserved for influential, wealthy businessmen and the upper class.
  - b. Citizens of Rome (Acts 16:37) – only about 10% of the Roman Empire’s population held Roman citizenship. Except for Italian born citizens, citizenship was usually gained by paying a huge sum (Acts 22:27-28), or as a reward for some outstanding service to the Empire. Once gained, citizenship passed on to one’s heirs.
  - c. Paul described himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), meaning the family was committed to living and strictly preserving their racial and religious heritage – language, customs, beliefs, and dress (Acts 26:4-5). This even as they lived in a majority Gentile, pagan city; and where the family apparently operated a successful business.
  - d. He also said, “I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6). Despite the conflicts Jesus (and later Paul) will have with them, the Pharisees were the religious group in Judaism most committed to keeping the laws of God which came from Moses. However, they had developed many traditions, rules and regulations to insure they kept it as perfectly as possible. As Paul would say, “As for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:6), and, “According to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee” (Acts 26:5).
  - e. We know nothing more of Paul’s mother or father, but do know he had a sister who probably lived in Jerusalem later in his life (Acts 23:16) and with whom he had contact.
  - f. Their home and associations would have surely been in a “Jewish Quarter” where markets, synagogues, schools, and activities would have all been Jewish. This would allow a Pharisee family to avoid the “uncleanness” associated with contact with Gentiles and unclean foods.
2. Birth and early training:
  - a. With great pride, his father would have welcomed other men from his synagogue to join him as his son was circumcised on the eighth day (Philippians 3:4), and was formally named “Saul” after the first king of Israel – who was of the tribe of Benjamin as they were! He was also given a Gentile (Roman/Latin) name, Paulos,

for his future interaction with the Gentile world. Others we know in the New Testament who were Hebrew but had Gentile names include Matthew, Mark, Philip, Andrew, and Peter.

- b. From his very earliest days Saul would be taught by both his mother and father that they were uniquely God's chosen people, descendants of Abraham (Romans 11:1), and must be faithful to the Law and people of Yahweh, despite being surrounded by Gentiles – see Deuteronomy 11:18-21; 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-15.
- c. At age 5 all Jewish boys and most girls would begin their formal education under the tutelage of a religious teacher. This might either be at their synagogue or a Jewish primary school. From age 5 to 10, they would be taught mathematics and to read and write using the Scriptures. They would commit to memory large sections of the Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy) and the Psalms. They would know every story in the Scriptures along with the basic lessons drawn from them.
- d. By about age 10, the education for most was complete and they would join their families in making a living. A few boys, the brightest, would begin their advanced education of learning the Mishnah, the oral interpretations of Scripture passed down from the great Jewish scholars of the past. This would conclude at about age 13 when they and other young men would go through a formal ceremony to become “men of Israel and of the Law.”
  - i. The most adept young men of this group by this time had committed to memory the entire Torah and Psalms, and much or all the rest of the Scriptures.
  - ii. Those from families of sufficient means had already visited Jerusalem (340 miles from Tarsus) one or more times for Passover and other Great Feasts. If possible, they would also have their Bar Mitzvah ceremonies at the Temple in Jerusalem!
- e. Scholars suggest that by age 13 the exceedingly bright, zealous Saul would have been accepted for the most advanced part of his education in the school of the great Pharisee and teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).
  - i. He would be called a *talmid*, or disciple, of Gamaliel and not just a student.
  - ii. He would be trained in all the intricate interpretations and beliefs of the Pharisees, along with the traditions, customs and practices.
  - iii. He was in effect a rabbi in training, so he could someday have disciples of his own and be a “teacher of Israel.” (Compare to Jesus in John 7:14-15.)
  - iv. Being under Gamaliel, he was on a track to be part of the next generation of leaders of his nation, possibly even a successor to the great Gamaliel, who was also president of the ruling Sanhedrin of the Jews.
- f. Saul's education at this level probably ended around age 18 to 20, and following common practice would have returned to Tarsus as both a teacher for his synagogue as well as rejoin his family's business or trade so he could master that craft.
- g. Any further education would come upon returning to Jerusalem after a few years and perhaps joining the school of Gamaliel as an instructor himself, while still learning and studying himself.

## SAUL THE PHARISEE

1. Our knowledge of the life of a Pharisee comes from mentions in the surviving Jewish writings of the period, references in the first century Jewish historian Josephus, and various comments in the New Testament books of Matthew thru Acts.
2. Josephus the Jewish historian said there were no more than 6,000 in the Pharisee sect in the early first century.
3. We are not able to determine if Saul was guilty of the worst excesses of some Pharisees which Jesus condemned, but it is unlikely he found much fault with their actions.
4. Very structured religious practices:
  - a. Prayer – Matthew 6:5; Mark 12:40; Luke 18:10-14
  - b. Fasting – Matthew 6:16; 9:14; Luke 18:12
  - c. Almsgiving – Matthew 6:1-2;
  - d. Washings – Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:3-4; John 2:6
  - e. Tithing – Matthew 23:23; Luke 18:12
  - f. Clean and unclean – Matthew 15:11-20; Mark 7:5; Acts 10:28
  - g. Dress – Matthew 23:5; Luke 20:46
5. Interactions with others:
  - a. Gentiles – Acts 10:28; John 18:28
  - b. Common people – Luke 18:10-14; John 7:49
  - c. Sadducees – strongly disagreed over the oral law (traditions) and belief in resurrection; shared power on the Sanhedrin; joined together in opposing Jesus – Matthew 16:1,6,11; 26:59; 27:1
  - d. Business practices – Mark 12:40; Matthew 23:25
  - e. Teachers of the Law – Matthew 23:2-3;
  - f. Titles and honors – Matthew 23:6-10; Mark 12:38-39
  - g. Condemnation and violence on those they opposed – Matthew 22:15; 26:59; John 8:59; Acts 6:11-14
6. Beliefs:
  - a. Resurrection of the body – Acts 23:6-8
  - b. Angels – Acts 23:6-8
  - c. Sabbath – Matthew 12:2-8; Mark 3:1-6; John 5:1-16; 9:16
7. Faults:
  - a. Missed obeying the Law – Mark 7:6-13; John 7:19
  - b. Missed the purpose of the Law – See Sermon on Mount; Matthew 15:11-20; 23:23
  - c. Missed the Giver of the Law – Matthew 15:7-9
  - d. Missed the promised Person of the Law – John 5:39-40; Matthew 21:42
  - e. Exhibited pride, arrogance and hypocrisy – Matthew 23:26;
  - f. Missed the basics of the Law... truth, mercy, forgiveness, justice – Matthew 23:23

## CONCLUSION

1. Acts 6:8 to 7:60 – Here we meet Saul for the first time
2. He oversees the murder of Stephen for blasphemy!