

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday March 5, 2023

Lesson 1: Sovereign Foundations and the Capture of a Rebel

Source Reference: Swindoll Chapters 1-2

See Also: Lesson Supplemental – NT Timeline

The Apostle Paul was formally introduced in Scripture in the book of Acts during the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:28). But his presence in biblical events can very likely be traced back as early as the incident and conflict in the Sanhedrin in Acts Chapter 5. This can be inferred when we look forward into the events in the book of Acts, into Chapter 22 when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, and in his reflection upon his past. From Paul's reflection in Acts 22-26, we learned the following about Paul and his sovereign beginnings that:

- He was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, and brought up in that city (Acts 22:3)
- He was born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28)
- He was a son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6)
- He was a disciple of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3)
- He was trained in accordance with the strict practice of the Pharisees (Acts 22:3)
- He was a zealous persecutor of Christ followers (Acts 22:4, 26:10-11)

Insights about his upbringing in Tarsus as referenced by Swindoll's citation:

- He was fluent with Greek, Latin, and Aramaic
- He was well educated and intelligent; that by his thirteenth birthday, he had mastered Jewish history, the poetry of the psalms, and the literature of the prophets
- He was able to dissect Scriptural text into scores of possible meanings.
- He was a master debater – skill necessary to serve as a rabbi (who were not only preachers, but must also be lawyers)

Additional insights about Paul's heritage from FF Bruce¹

- Relevance of Tarsus mention may have to do with proof of citizenship record.
- Being born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28) implies that his parents must have been Roman citizens.
- His parents' choice for his Jewish name "Saul" may have been rooted from the most famous Benjamite of Hebrew history
- Paul's root is that of a Jew, being a descendant from the tribe of Benjamin (Phil 3:5)

Finally, as a Pharisee, Paul and/or his parents were likely not part of the upper Pharisee governing class given how Paul identifies himself as a fellow trade craftsman (1 Thes 2:9; 1 Cor 9:6). Luke identified his craft as a tent maker (Acts 18:3). Trade craftsmen are likely in the middle to lower social class in that first century society². However, despite (likely) not being a part of the rich ruling class of the Pharisees in his upbringing, Paul's family evidently had connections that allowed Paul to gain access to become well educated in matters that concerns the governing of the Jewish people.

¹ Bruce, FF "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free"

² Saldarini, Anthony J "Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees in Palestinian Society"

Events of Acts Chapter 5 – The Conflict at the Temple Courts

Shortly after the Pentecost, the book of Acts records an incident that took place at the temple courts in Jerusalem. Conflict broke out when Peter and the apostles were preaching the message of the gospel against the wishes of the Jewish ruling council. The council was furious enough that they were ready and willing to put the apostles to death. However, a Pharisee by the name of Gamaliel convinced the council to adopt an alternate resolution that does not involve the killing of the apostles (Acts 5:29-39).

At this point in history, given that Paul was a disciple of Gamaliel, it is highly likely that he was present in the Sanhedrin, and heard his mentor persuade the council to adopt this resolution. Given Paul's upbringing with ambitions for a seat in the Sanhedrin, and a zeal to persecute Christ followers (Acts 22:4; 26:10-11), it is highly that he did not approve of his mentor's proposition.

Events of Acts Chapter 7 – The Death of Stephen

Roughly two years later, as the Church continues to expand (cf Acts 1:8), a deacon named Stephen was preaching the gospel message and debating with Jews out just beyond the Judea / Samaria region. He was seized by trouble-making Jews based on false charges (Acts 6:11) and brought into the Sanhedrin for questioning. At this meeting, Paul was present as he oversaw the stoning death of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). Unlike his mentor's actions from two years prior, Paul approved of this decision as it aligns with his zeal to purge the Christ followers from among the Jews.

Events of Acts Chapter 9 – The Damascus Experience

After the death of Stephen, Paul sought and received permission from the Jewish Ruling Council to actively pursue, imprison, and punish Christ followers (Acts 9:1-2, 22:5). But one normal day, while he was on his way to Damascus to pursue such purging, he encountered a life altering experience when Jesus Himself met him head on, and challenged him to account for his actions.

Up until this encounter, Paul's faith, his understanding, and his entire belief system is based on the Pharisee's interpretation of the events surrounding the person of Jesus Christ; most notably, that Jesus is a trouble maker that was justly put to death on the cross. This belief system led to his conviction that all remnants of Jesus' troublemaking message must be removed to cleanse the Jewish nation of this false message. This encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus meant that he will now have to throw away everything he believed to be true – to include his entire understanding of the Pharisees interpretation of the Law.

Swindoll's Principle for all ages

As Luke alluded to in the character of Ananias, whom God called upon to restore Paul's sights (Acts 9:10-19), Paul was well known in those days by all Christ followers to be someone they should fear. This is the same person that God used to write nearly half of the New Testament books, preserved for us to study today. For God to choose Paul – of all people – to be His instrument to preserve His Word, Swindoll offers the following insights regarding Paul's sovereign beginnings as it relates to our own life applications (Chapter 1 Principles):

- No matter how you appear to others today, everyone has a dark side
- Regardless of what you have done, no one is beyond hope
- Even though your past is soiled, everyone can find a new beginning with God

Reflecting Upon the Word

In Acts Chapter 21, Paul was arrested and accused of doing basically the exact same thing as Stephen back in Acts Chapter 6, with both events occurring in the same city, separated by 25 years. Compare Paul's response in Acts Chapter 22 with Stephen's response in Acts Chapter 7.

1. Both Paul and Stephen were falsely accused that led to their arrest, and both were persecuted for spreading the gospel message. While on trial, what was the difference between Paul's message and Stephen's message? What was more effective? Why?
2. What can we learn about the differences between Paul's reaction and Stephen's reaction towards being persecuted as Christians?

Reflecting Upon our World

In Paul's days, there were three schools of thought among the Jews that defines "acceptable" belief – The Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Pharisees were the most influential among this group as representative / experts of true Jewish belief, adhering strongly to Old Testament Scripture. Their influence extends beyond simply defining what is / is not proper belief, but also to enforce proper practices of such belief through the use of legalism. The Sadducees adopted a more worldly practice of Jewish faith, whereas the Essenes effectively isolated themselves from society altogether.

1. In what way(s) has our church follow the principles of Pharisees by being influencers of true Christian faith? In what ways have we failed?
2. In what way(s) has our church followed the practices of the Sadducees by being more friendly with worldly doctrines?
3. In what way(s) do we see an isolationist approach (Essenes) to the practice of our faith among our current worldly systems?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Before Paul became a Christian, before he knew who Christ truly is, Christ already knows everything about Paul. Paul's beginnings before his encounter on the road to Damascus is part of a sovereign foundation laid by God preparing His future instrument. The skills he had learned before his Damascus conversion became the skills he will use to spread the gospel message. His life prior to conversion became one of his most powerful testimonies used by God to reached others.

1. Think back to the time before your own conversion experience. What are some of your own sovereign foundation pieces (skills, culture, people, etc) that God had developed in you, making you who you are?
2. How has God been able to use your past as His testimony in you in order to reach others around you?
3. The major difference in Paul before and after his conversion experience that defines Paul's legacy is in his belief system. What is the major difference in your belief system before and after your conversion experience?