

The Conversion of Saul:

TEACHERS’ BACKGROUND NOTES

From: River Community Church, Rotation Model Lesson Plan, “Saul on the Road to Damascus” posted by Amy Crane.

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Paul (Saul) was born around the year 3 A.D. in Tarsus, the capital city of the province of Cilicia, in southern Asia Minor (in modern-day Turkey). Tarsus was a bustling, commercial center on a well-traveled trade route between the Mediterranean Sea and the highlands of Asia Minor. Tarsus was a city brimming with Greek culture, philosophy, education and trade. When Jerusalem fell to Babylonia around 586 B.C., the Temple was destroyed and the Jews were exiled. During the Diaspora (when the Jews were dispersed or scattered away from Jerusalem) these families settled throughout the Mediterranean area. Separated from the center of their religious culture, the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish families began the practice of creating synagogues where families could maintain some of their religious traditions, coming together to read and study scriptures and worship. Synagogues became the center of Jewish spiritual life. Nearly every synagogue also had a school associated with it. Jesus visited the synagogues in various towns as did later apostles. The established synagogues later became the starting place for the growth of the Christian church.

Once the political climate changed to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, many families chose to remain in their new locations, even as they looked toward Jerusalem as their religious home. Paul’s family was one of these families. His parents traced their lineage back to Benjamin, youngest son of Jacob and Rachel. When Paul was born his parents gave him the Hebrew name, Saul, after the first Old Testament king. They also followed the practice of many Jewish families living in the Gentile world at that time and gave him the Latin name Paul. This also reflected the family’s Roman citizenship. No one knows for sure how this citizenship status was given to Saul’s Jewish family. Relatively few Jewish families were given the privilege of Roman citizenship, which often required compromise with pagan culture and being educated in the Greek gymnasium. Evidently Saul’s father was wealthy enough and had enough status to enjoy Roman citizenship, while remaining a strict Jewish Pharisee. Thus Paul was immersed in three cultures: Greek, Roman, and Jewish which uniquely positioned him for his future ministry as the great Christian apostle.

In the time of Paul, Rome was beginning its four hundred year rule over the Mediterranean area. Rome was definitely the dominant political power, but previous rulers left their cultural mark. Greek culture, the result of Alexander the Great's conquests, had an especially powerful influence. The Roman Empire was comprised of a combination of Greek culture and Roman law. Greek was the common language of the cities throughout the Mediterranean, although villagers spoke their own local languages and dialects.

One of the advantages of Roman rule was the ease and safety of travel it provided. Roman soldiers established a military presence that limited piracy and bandits. The Roman road system provided a means for safe and fast travel never before possible. Pilgrims, traders, government officials, runaway slaves, prisoners, letter carriers and countless others traveled the Roman roads making life much more cosmopolitan than ever before.

Saul was born into a devout Jewish family. Under Roman rule, Jewish families were allowed to maintain their customs under the protection of Roman law. Conflicts often arose and the Jewish people chafed under this foreign rule, looking toward the day when God would re-establish his true kingdom in Jerusalem. They were allowed to organize and gather in their own synagogues for worship according to their customs and experienced a certain degree of freedom, but they were not Roman citizens and were subject to Roman taxation and a Roman governor.

Saul began his education in the synagogue of Tarsus. Tarsus was renowned as an intellectual center, ranking after Athens and Alexandria. Roman education was open only to children of the upper classes and was not free. Primary schools provided instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic. Secondary schools taught rhetoric and philosophy. Rhetoric, in particular, was held in high esteem. Upper class sons were expected to be able to give speeches, be able to defend themselves in court and to persuade others to their point of view. It is not known whether Saul attended a school such as this, but certainly he was surrounded by a culture that exalted such skills. We also know that Saul himself was quite adept in these skills and incorporated them in many of his letters and missionary journeys later.

As was the custom for religious Jewish families, Saul read and studied the scriptures regularly. He was probably familiar with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint. He would have learned to speak, read and write in Greek. Saul's studies led him to a deep devotion to Jewish law, an understanding of the Hebrew scriptures and a passionate desire to serve and please God. Rabbis of the time also encouraged their students to learn a trade. Saul was

taught the trade of tent-making, perhaps like his father. (Tarsus was famous for its manufacture of sail cloth.)

Once Saul’s basic education in the synagogue was completed, he was sent to Jerusalem to study under the renowned rabbi, Gamaliel. Gamaliel urged caution and tolerance in the treatment of the apostles of Jesus, saying, “If this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God.” (Acts 5:34-39) Saul however, did not share his teacher’s view. Rather he was zealous and forcefully opposed to the new ‘cult’ that in his mind posed a serious threat to the Jewish faith he knew.

Saul was a Pharisee. The word ‘Pharisee’ may have two meanings. One is explainer, one who explains the meaning and purpose of scripture. The other is separators, those who separate themselves from evil or impure things. Pharisees were strict religious leaders in the synagogue who believed that all that was necessary for humans to enter into a redemptive relationship with God was obedience to the law. They believed that once everyone followed the law perfectly, the kingdom of God would come. Obedience to God was accomplished by following the written law as given to Moses.

By the time of Jesus, though, the law had been through considerable interpretation. The Pharisees believed that the law needed interpretation in order to be practical for everyday life. These interpretations became the oral law which described the rituals and traditions that had become part of Jewish life. The Pharisees, in attempting to follow God’s laws, multiplied the precepts and instructions until they were so numerous and trifling that the law itself was often obscured. The ‘traditions’ gradually accumulated until they became burdensome. Following this huge system of ritual and law often led to a proud self-righteousness which Jesus criticized often.

Saul is described as a short man, balding with crooked legs and a hook nose. Saul describes himself as “zealous . . . for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:14); “an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin” (Romans 11:1); “... a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless” (Philippians 3:5-6); and “a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6) Saul was a bright, intelligent scholar with a keen memory. His letters contain over two hundred scriptural references. Saul also became a tentmaker by trade. Saul was rigorously loyal to his Jewish faith and fanatical in his determination to stamp out this heresy called Christianity which he believed was an affront to the ancient true faith.

Saul was most likely in Jerusalem during the final period of Jesus’ life, but there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that Saul ever saw or heard of Jesus during his ministry. Evidently as Jesus’ followers became emboldened and grew in numbers, Saul became increasingly alarmed. Saul did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah because Jesus often denounced the Pharisees and seemed to object to many of their rules. Because the rules were so important to the Pharisees, this created terrible conflict. Many of the Pharisees felt Jesus was the true enemy of Israel as were his followers, and that they should all be put to death as Jesus had been. Saul offered his services to persecute the followers of Jesus. Saul’s persecution was so merciless and fierce that all the Christians feared his name.

Saul’s first targets for persecution were the Christians in Jerusalem, including a man named Stephen. We first read of Saul in the Bible in Acts 7:58 at the stoning of Stephen. Stephen had been arrested and brought to trial on charges of profaning the Temple and the law. Stephen’s stirring speech proclaimed his belief that Jesus had brought a new order and an end to the old order. Perhaps Paul was present at this hearing, and as a Pharisee, committed to the defense of the law, Paul would have supported the execution of Stephen. We read that the Pharisees who participated in the stoning of Stephen left their cloaks at the feet of Saul for safekeeping.

Hoping to escape persecution, Jesus’ followers began to leave Jerusalem. God used even this terrible persecution to bring about good. Everywhere the early Christians went, they spread the word about Jesus, increasing the number of believers rather than diminishing them. Saul requested and received authority from the high priests to travel to Damascus (about a week’s journey - 140 miles from Jerusalem) to rout out the Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. It was during this journey to Damascus, when Saul had his life-changing encounter with the risen Christ. This was about five years after the crucifixion of Jesus when Saul was about 30 years old. As Paul and his companions neared Damascus, Saul was surrounded by a blinding light from heaven and a voice calling, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He immediately was struck blind and fell to the ground, asking, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice answered, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:4-5) Imagine his state! Everything he had lived for and fought for, gone in an instant! Saul’s vision was so profound that it could not be denied. Saul knew with absolute assurance that the God he had been serving was one he had radically misunderstood.

Saul, blind and helpless, continued on to Damascus, led by his companions, where he spent three days in unaccustomed darkness, praying and fasting (without food or water), and no doubt doing profound soul-searching. Meanwhile, God spoke to another Jewish Christian, Ananias, telling him to go to the house on Straight Street and speak to Saul, placing his hands on his eyes to restore his

sight. Ananias, was understandably reluctant -- after all, he was one of the Christians Saul was no doubt intending to arrest! But God was insistent, “I have chosen this man to work for me” (Acts 9:15) and Ananias was obedient, and showing great courage and faith he went in to see Saul, even calling him “brother.” Saul’s blindness was healed, he was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately Saul began to proclaim his new faith in Jesus.

Saul’s faith journey was different from that of other apostles who had known Jesus and been his disciples. Saul was confronted by the risen Jesus and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus played a large role in his understanding of his new faith. Saul’s life was totally changed and completely turned around by this encounter with the Messiah.

Few details are known about the next ten years of Saul’s life. Undoubtedly this was a time of much reflection for Saul. As a highly trained Jew, he was forced to rethink much of his understandings of the faith and come to grips with such questions as how the Law, tradition, God’s grace and love all fit into the message of the cross for not just the Jews, but Gentiles as well. Saul understood at last that God had fulfilled all the promises of old in Jesus Christ. In some of Paul’s later letters we read that he himself was persecuted, whipped, stoned, imprisoned, etc. so it seems likely that Saul was preaching during this time. Saul went on to write thirteen of the New Testament letters and to travel throughout the Mediterranean on three separate missionary journeys establishing churches throughout the region. As Saul increasingly went into the Gentile world, he began to be called by his Roman name, Paul by which we know him today.

The focus for this rotation will be the dramatic change and turnaround in Saul’s life on the road to Damascus. We all have things in our lives which we would like to change. God wants all of us to recognize our need for Jesus Christ’s love and forgiveness in our lives. Sometimes this conversion can be a sudden, dramatic event as it was for Saul. Sometimes it can be a slow, growing awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The type of conversion is not the important thing. Recognizing God’s presence and deciding to live according to God’s will is what is important. Following God’s will requires that we remain willing to change with God’s help.

The story of Saul’s amazing conversion gives us hope for our own transformation. If God can change the heart of someone like Saul, God can change anyone! For “with God nothing is impossible.” Saul’s conversion is remarkable for its dramatic impact and profound results.

Paul is known today as the greatest missionary and the first Christian theologian. His letters provided instruction to the budding churches of the time and still give

guidance and leadership today. All this from one of the greatest persecutors of Christians! Truly God can and will use anyone to accomplish His purposes! Truly we are “new creations” in Christ Jesus.

Sources for State Street UMC background notes:

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Paul: His Life, Douglas E. Wingeler, Graded Press, 1987.

Paul: His World, J. Michael Miller, Graded Press, 1987.

Smith’s Bible Dictionary, William Smith, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996.

Who’s Who in the Bible, Reader’s Digest Association, 1994.

Turnabout Paul VBS, Cokesbury, 1995.

Who’s Who in the Bible, Joan Comay and Ronald Brownrigg, Random House, 1980.

Words to Know:

Pharisee - Jewish leaders who were very careful to follow all of God’s laws and rules that they made up that they thought made them

Gentile - someone who is not Jewish

Temple - the center of worship and religious life in Jerusalem

Synagogue - Jewish places of worship and study in cities and towns

Jerusalem - center of Jewish religious life

Damascus - one of the oldest cities in Paul’s time, where he was going when he was blinded and heard Jesus speak

Tarsus - capital city of Cilicia, in modern day Turkey, where Saul was born

persecution - causing other people to suffer because of what they believe

Books for sharing during Shepherd Time:

Look for collections of stories about Paul or other stories from Acts.

Other Resources for Shepherds (just in case you have some extra time to fill):

Word Search:

coloring sheets:

<http://www.itmimg.org/images/youth/Paul.gif>

coloring sheets and puzzles:

<http://www.calvarychapel.org/children/site/pdf/New/Curr252.pdf>

Also look for coloring sheets and puzzles on Paul/Saul in general, many of which are listed at <http://mssscrafts.com/newtestament/paul.htm>