

Paul's Epistle To The Romans Introduction

Many Christians believe that Paul's letter to the Romans is the key to understanding the whole the Bible. John Calvin called it "an open door to understanding all the treasures of scripture." William Tyndale said that it shone "light onto the whole Bible." J. B. Phillips, in his translation of the New Testament, called it "the Gospel according to Paul." Martin Luther, after seeing the meaning of Rom. 1:7, wrote: "The whole of scripture took on a new meaning!" He called it "the chief book of the New Testament and the clearest Gospel, so valuable that a Christian should not only know every word of it by heart, but should take it about with him everyday as the daily bread of his soul." Scholars have suggested many different reasons for Paul's writing to the Romans. But one of the most likely answers is that Paul wanted to remind the Roman Christians about their unity with one another and with the whole Church of Christ. It may be that some disagreements had arisen between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome (see Romans 14:10). Very little is known about the Christians at Rome, and this epistle does not give us a lot of certain information to go on. Scholars have made different suggestions about the church at Rome. One view is that the first Romans to become Christians were probably Jews who were baptised on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:10), and when they returned home, they spread the gospel to their Jewish friends.

What do we know about Paul?

Although the exact date of his birth is unknown, he was active as a missionary in the 40s and 50s of the 1st century A.D. From this we can estimate that he was born about the same time as Jesus (4 B.C.) or maybe a little later. Paul's birth name was Saul and he was born in an Asian city now located on the southern coast of Turkey called Tarsus. His parents were Jews from the tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5), he was a strict Pharisee and was also a Roman citizen. Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, and his birth place of Tarsus, was a free city (see Acts 21:39). The Emperor Pompey made Cilicia a Roman province in 64 BC, and its capital, Tarsus, was a free city from the time of Augustus. Although it is unknown exactly how his parents became citizens of Rome, Paul's citizenship by birth, which was a privilege many did not have. Some could buy Roman citizenship, but it was pricey (see Acts 22:28). The privileges of citizenship explain how Paul escaped flogging in Acts 22:25-27), and was able to appeal for a hearing before Emperor Nero in (Acts 25:10-11). It is important to note that even though Judea was within the Roman Empire most Jews were not Roman citizens. Citizenship outside of Italy was an honour reserved for people who made great contributions to the Empire. So, we can presume that Paul's parents were influential and even moderately wealthy. The Bible tells us a little about Paul's family, but does mention a nephew, his sister's son, in Acts 23:16. Acts also quotes Paul referring to his father by saying he, Paul, was "*a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee*" (Acts 23:6). The family seem to have had a history of religious devoutness (2 Tim. 1:3), and the family lineage had been attached to the Pharisaic traditions and observances for generations (Philippians 3:5-6).

At the age of fourteen Paul was sent to Jerusalem to train to be a Rabbi. His teacher was a prominent rabbi named Gamaliel (see Acts 5:34 & 22:3), one of the most noted rabbis in history. The Hillel school Paul attended was noted for giving its students a balanced education, teaching Paul classical literature, philosophy, and ethics. It is thought that some of his family may have lived in Jerusalem because of the nephew mentioned in Acts 23:16. Nothing more is known of his background until he takes an active part in the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:58-60; 22:20). Paul confesses that "*beyond measure*" he persecuted the church of God before his conversion (Gal. 1:13-14; Philippians 3:6; Acts 8:1-3). In his letters, Paul draws heavily on his knowledge of the O.T. to assist his new Gentile converts in their understanding of the revealed word of God. He also used this knowledge to convince Jews of the unity of O. T. prophecy and covenants with the fulfilling of these in Jesus. The little we know about Paul the Pharisee reflects the character of the Pharisaic movement. Pharisees believed in life after death. They accepted non biblical "traditions" as being as important as the written word of God. Paul refers to his expertise in "traditions" (Galatians 1:14).

Pharisees were devout students of the Hebrew Bible, and Paul was able to quote extensively from the Greek translation. By his own account, Paul was the best Jew and the best Pharisee of his generation (Philippians 3:4–6; Galatians 1:13–14), as later he claimed to be the best apostle of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:22–23; 1 Corinthians 15:9–10), although he attributed his excellence to the grace of God.

Although he trained as a rabbi, Paul was also taught another trade. The idea was to keep teachers from becoming a burden on society. They also wanted to have something to fall back on during hard times, so Paul trained to be a tent-maker which he continued to practice after his conversion to Christianity. It also helps to explain important aspects of his apostleship. He could travel with a few leather-working tools and set up shop anywhere. Paul grew to be a man of firm convictions and fiery temperament. He always acted on his beliefs and when he was confronted with what he took to be a heresy to Judaism, he worked hard to squash it. One particular heresy that came to Paul's attention later came to be known as Christianity, and Paul was among the foremost of its persecutors.

Saul, The Persecutor of the Church

Before becoming the great missionary evangelist, Paul was known as Saul the persecutor of the Christian church. Paul spent much of the first half of his life persecuting the Christian movement, which he refers to several times in his letters. But Paul's motivations for such extreme persecution are unknown, they do not seem to have been connected to his Pharisaism. The chief persecutors of the Christian movement in Jerusalem were the Jewish high priest and the Sadducees, whereas the book of Acts depicts the leading Pharisee, Gamaliel, as defending the Christians (Acts 5:34). It is possible that Paul believed that Jewish converts to the new movement were not sufficiently observant of the Jewish law, or that Jewish converts mingled too freely with Gentile (non-Jewish) converts, and were therefore associating themselves with idolatrous practices. It may have been that the notion of a crucified messiah was intolerable. The young Paul certainly would have rejected the view that Jesus had been raised after his death, not because he doubted resurrection, but because he would not have believed that God chose to favour Jesus by raising Him before the time of the judgment of the world. But whatever his reasons, Paul's persecutions probably involved him traveling from synagogue to synagogue and urging the punishment of Jews who accepted Jesus as the messiah. Disobedient members of synagogues were punished by some form of ostracism or by light flogging, which Paul himself later suffered on at least five occasions (2 Corinthians 11:24), though he does not say when or where. According to Acts, Paul began his persecutions in Jerusalem. As a devout Jew Saul set about putting down the fast growing movement of men and women who followed Jesus. He had permission from the High Priest to persecute those found worshiping the Lord (Acts 9:1, 2).

We first encounter Paul in scripture when he is still Saul of Tarsus. He is standing over the first Christian martyr Stephen, looking on as Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7:58). After this when he was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians in Acts chapter 9, Jesus confronted Saul in a vision that changed his life. Paul says in Galatians 1:16, that God revealed his Son to him. There was a bright light from heaven that caused Saul to fall to the ground. Jesus asked Saul why he was persecuting Him. Jesus explained to Saul that when he persecuted the church then he was persecuting Him. Saul's response was to submit to Jesus and he asked what he should do. Jesus told him to get up and go to the city, and Saul submitted to the Lord's will. Jesus did not tell Saul everything that would happen in his life in the future, only the next step and Saul obeyed. The experience left him blind but obedient. He was led into the city to meet Ananias. Although Ananias had heard much about Saul and was understandably scared, he too obeyed Jesus and took Saul in. Ananias laid hands on Saul and healed him of his temporary blindness. Following this revelation, which convinced Paul that God had indeed chosen Jesus to be the promised messiah, he went into Arabia, probably Cole-Syria, west of Damascus (Galatians 1:17). He then returned to Damascus, and three years later he went to Jerusalem and became acquainted with the leading apostles there.

After this he began his famous missions to the west, preaching first in his native Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:17–24). During the next 20 years or so he established several churches in Asia Minor and at least three in Europe, including the church at Corinth.

By the time we reach Acts 13 Saul had been on the receiving end of the persecution. Others in the church began to hear about Saul and accepted him into their congregations. He also started using his Roman name, Paul, more and more. The church in Antioch wanted to send out missionaries to preach and start new works and Barnabas and Paul were chosen. They traveled together and were known as Barnabas and Paul, Barnabas being the leader and Paul the disciple.

However, by the end of the chapter they were referred to as Paul and Barnabas and Paul begins to take a more active role in leadership and the direction for their ministry. After this, there was only one other time when the team was referred to as Barnabas and Paul, when they returned to Antioch, the church which sent them out. They continued to travel together until Acts 15, when they took opposing views on taking the young John Mark with them on their next journey. John Mark had abandoned them during the first missionary journey and Paul did not want to give him a second chance. Barnabas took the young man and mentored him like he had done for Paul. The result was that two great preaching teams were then starting churches where there previously was only one. Their argument and separation wasn't pleasant, but it was used by God to accomplish His purposes.

Paul's Missionary Journeys

There are three missionary journeys of Paul. The first one was with Barnabas and John Mark. They went to the island of Cyprus before heading to the mainland where Turkey is today. It was shortly after they arrived in Turkey that John Mark returned to Jerusalem.

The second journey is when Silas joined Paul. They also picked up Timothy and Luke in this trip. Though the Bible does not expressly say when Luke joined the team, the language in Acts 16 indicates he joined them in Troas (Acts 16:11). Before this time, Luke, the writer of the book of Acts talks about "them" and "they." But, at this point the language changes to "we." This was when Paul made his first visit to Corinth where he stayed for about a year and a half. It is possible that Silas stayed there since there was no further mention of him traveling with Paul.

The third journey was marked by Paul and his team staying longer at various places, including a long stay at Ephesus for 3 years (Acts 20:31). This third journey ended when Paul was in Jerusalem where he was arrested and spent most of his final 10 years in prisons.

Paul's Writings

We know that Paul wrote many of the epistles of the New Testament. They were written to churches Paul had a relationship with or people that Paul met along the way.

Here is a list of the books in the order they are found in the New Testament.

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

1 Timothy

2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

It is thought that Paul also wrote the book of Hebrews, though this is pure speculation as the book itself does not claim an author.

Paul's Last Days

Paul was taken to the Governor Felix in Caesarea in 58 A.D. where he spent 2 years in prison. Paul appealed to Caesar in Rome before he finally arrived there. In Rome he was under house arrest for about two years in which time he wrote many of his epistles. Paul was released from prison and traveled for a couple more years in much of the same territory that he traveled before.

The Bible doesn't tell us how Paul died but in his writing in 2 Tim. 4:6-8, which was written during Paul's second Roman imprisonment in AD 64-67, Paul seems to be anticipating his death, he writes, *"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."*

There are different Christian traditions in regards to how Paul died, but the most commonly accepted one comes from the writings of Eusebius, an early church historian. Eusebius claimed that Paul was beheaded at the order of the Roman emperor Nero or one of his subordinates. Aged around 62 years old, Paul's martyrdom came shortly after much of Rome burned in a fire, which Nero blamed on the Christians.

It is possible that the apostle Peter was martyred around the same time, during this period of early persecution of Christians. The tradition is that Peter was crucified upside down and that Paul was beheaded due to the fact that Paul was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28), and Roman citizens were normally exempt from crucifixion.

We don't know the accuracy of this tradition because again, the Bible does not record how Paul died, so there is no way to be certain regarding his death. But, from all indications, he died for his faith. We know he was ready to die for Christ (Acts 21:13), and Jesus had predicted that Paul would suffer much for the name of Christ (Acts 9:16).