



The Life of Paul

Part 1 of 5

Paul encounters the Christian faith and becomes a believer.

A.D. 33 - 45

Ascribed to Valentin de Boulogne
of the 17th. Century

Scriptural background for this study is to be found in: Acts 7:54-8:3;
Acts 9:1-31; Acts 11:19-30; Acts 12:25-13:3, and Galatians 1:11-2:10.

Paul's own description of his life (2 Corinthians 11:24-28) confirms how dramatic his experiences actually were.

Five times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes with a whip. Three times the Romans beat me with a big stick, and once my enemies stoned me. I have been shipwrecked three times, and I even had to spend a night and a day in the sea.

During my many travels, I have been in danger from rivers, robbers, my own people, and foreigners. My life has been in danger in cities, in deserts, at sea, and with people who only pretended to be the Lord's followers.

I have worked and struggled and spent many sleepless nights. I have gone hungry and thirsty and often had nothing to eat. I have been cold from not having enough clothes to keep me warm. Besides everything else, each day I am burdened down, worrying about all the churches.

(2 Corinthians 11:24-28 (CEV))

Paul played a prominent and crucial role in the first generation of the Christian Church. Although he had not been personally associated with Jesus, Paul grasped the essence of Christ's message and its implications for all people everywhere. He developed both a theology and a mission strategy which became the blueprint for the rapid expansion of the Christian community in the first Century. He was a leader in welcoming non-Jewish (gentile) believers into the Christian Church. He was also the author of about one quarter of the material that became the New Testament.

We know relatively few details about Paul's life prior to his appearance in the New Testament record though there are a few details in his legal defense later in Acts . His Jewish name was Saul. He was a native of the city of Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia and he acquired Roman citizenship at birth. Within Judaism Paul was a student of the Law and belonged to the party known as the Pharisees. He seemed an unlikely candidate to become a Christian.

The dates assigned to various events in Paul's life are based on the assumption that Christ's death and resurrection occurred in 33 AD.

Paul, at that point called Saul, first appears in the biblical record in connection with the stoning of Stephen, who is often described as the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:). Stephen was accused of heresy and stoned to death by his accusers. While Saul was not a participant in the stoning he did witness it and approved (Acts 8:1). This took place in 35 AD.

The stoning of Stephen marked a turning point in the relationship between the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and the followers of Jesus Christ. In the ensuing persecution many of the followers of Jesus were forced to flee from Jerusalem. Two consequences followed these events. The followers of Jesus who fled from Jerusalem for safety took their faith with them when they were scattered through Judea and Samaria. It is also recorded that this was a turning point in Saul's life and he became more enthusiastic in his opposition to Christianity. He began systematically to seek out Christian believers for punishment and persecution (Acts 8:3 and 9:1,2).

Still in 35 AD, Saul planned a trip to Damascus to seek out more followers of Jesus Christ with the intention of bringing them back to Jerusalem for punishment. However, on route to Damascus Saul had a dramatic spiritual encounter which led him to become a believer in Jesus Christ (Acts 9:9-19). The change in his conduct was dramatic. Within days he went from being an enthusiastic persecutor of the followers of Jesus Christ to becoming one of them. As one might expect, the Jews in Damascus were stunned by this about face and took steps to silence him (Acts 9:19-25). With his life in peril Saul fled from Damascus.

His movements in the next few years (35 to 43 AD) are difficult to recount in any detail. By his own testimony he spent some time in Arabia before returning to Damascus. It was not until three years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18) that he made a brief visit to Jerusalem. As indicated in Acts 9:26, 27, his arrival in Jerusalem was understandably greeted with caution and considerable skepticism was expressed as to whether or not he could be trusted. A man named Barnabas, who was aware of Saul's experiences in Damascus, vouched for the genuineness of his conversion to Christianity and introduced him to the Apostles. As in Damascus, he quickly attracted the opposition of the Jews who regarded him as a traitor, and some Christians in Jerusalem rescued him and took him to Caesarea and from there he returned to his native city of Tarsus (Acts 9:28-31). As to the remainder of this period in his life we know only that he went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia to preach about Jesus (Galatians 1:21-24). During this time one has the impression that he mostly travelled alone without much contact with or support from the wider Christian community.

In these early years of Christianity there was an ongoing discussion about whether gentiles should be sought as converts and if so what obligations of the Jewish law ought to be imposed on them. In about 43 AD the Christian community in Antioch began to grow as the result of the conversion to Christianity of a number of Gentiles (Acts 11:19-21). When news of these developments in Antioch reached Jerusalem Barnabas was sent to Antioch to investigate what was happening. Barnabas approved of these developments in Antioch and out of concern for the care of these new gentile believers decided to go on to Tarsus to recruit Saul to assist with their spiritual care. Barnabas brought Saul back to Antioch and they worked together in the church in Antioch for a year. Incidentally, it was the followers of Jesus in Antioch who were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). The growing respect with which Saul is being regarded is evidenced in his being selected to accompany Barnabas on a brief trip to Jerusalem to deliver a famine relief offering collected by the church in Antioch (Acts 11:27-30). All of these events had the effect of bringing Saul more into the mainstream of the emerging Christian Church. Consequently, when the church in Antioch proposed to sponsor some missionaries to evangelize gentiles the candidates they selected were Barnabas and Saul.

This map may be helpful in identifying many of the places referred to in the accounts of the early years of Paul's life in the Christian Church.

