

Who was Paul?

Introduction

Over the coming months I'm hoping to share with you some thoughts from Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. This is one of the thirteen Epistles in the New Testament that are attributed to Paul and given that there are 27 books in the New Testament that means that Paul was responsible for almost 50% of the contents.

However, before we begin our look at this glorious Epistle, I want us to consider just who Paul was; after all, this was the man who wrote so much of the New Testament and did so much to spread the good news of salvation in and through Jesus Christ; and yet I wonder if we have ever thought about him and his background.

Background

I don't want to bore you with unnecessary detail by making this more of a lecture than a sermon, but I always find it useful to have an understanding of the background to the various letters that appear in the New Testament. The Epistles by Paul are all similar in structure and layout and are similar in many ways to those Epistles that weren't written by Paul. The various Epistles in the New Testament all follow what was a standard pattern for letter writing at the time. The opening verses include details of who wrote the letter and to whom it was written followed by greetings in one form or another. This tended to be a short section which was then followed by the main body of the letter. The closing verses normally included final personal greetings from the writer and others together with messages to pass on to people known to the writer and the recipient. Generally speaking these closing comments occupy only a handful of verses although in the case of the Epistle to the Romans they occupy a whole chapter!

I'm planning on giving an overview of Ephesians itself in the next sermon. For now I want us to consider just who Paul, or Saul, was.

Saul to Paul

I want you to imagine for a few minutes that you are an HR Consultant tasked with employing someone to be a missionary, church planter, letter writer and evangelist. The employer is a dynamic young organisation with a unique selling point. I should point out that someone has already been identified and you have been asked to check their CV and proffer an opinion. The preferred candidate is a young man by the name of Saul and is a Jewish zealot. What follows is what we know about him.

We first meet the candidate in **Acts 7:58b** where he is introduced as Saul. At this point he is "*minding the coats*" of those fellow zealots who are stoning to death Stephen, a well known follower of Jesus. A few verses later in **8:1a** we read "*And Saul was there, giving approval to his death*". Stephen was a committed follower of Christ who gladly preached the good news of Jesus even as he was being hit by the stones that killed him. The young man that we are considering for this important role was there; supporting and encouraging the stone throwers as they killed a follower of Christ simply for following his faith.

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You see, Saul was a persecutor of followers of Jesus. He was no ordinary thug but was a well qualified Pharisee and as we learn later in [Philippians 3:4a-6](#), *"If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."* Saul was proud of his background and of being a renowned scholar of the Jewish writings and traditions. As a devout Jew Saul would have believed that the Messiah would arrive like a great warrior king with social, political and military skills that were just what the Jews were looking for and expecting. In this role the Jews expected Him to drive out the occupying Romans and make Israel and the Jewish people great again. Unfortunately as such a zealous Jew Saul was not prepared to accept that the Messiah could possibly be the son of a carpenter from Nazareth of all places; hence he no doubt thought that Jesus was just another false Messiah, one of many who had popped up in the past.

We next come across Saul in [Acts 8:3](#) where we learn more about his work, *"... Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."* That was his role; to go around taking followers of Christ and then throwing them into prison before destroying their fellowships.

We hear no more of Saul until [Acts 9:1-2](#) where we learn that he *"... was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."* The Way was an early name for the group of believers who followed Jesus. There are a number of possible sources for this name the first of which appears in [Matthew 7:14](#) where the NIV uses the word "road" whilst the KJV, NASB, ESV and NLT all refer to it as the "way". Jesus' statement in [John 14:6](#) where the Lord said, *"I am the way the truth and the life"* could also be a source of the name. Thirdly, the prophet Isaiah may have provided the source in [Isaiah 40:3](#) where he quotes God's words, *"A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."*

So determined was Saul to close down this group altogether that he obtained these letters of authorisation to allow him to travel to Damascus to search out any members of the Way and imprison them.

Later in his ministry after Paul was arrested in Jerusalem he asked his jailers if he could speak to the crowd and in [Acts 22:4-5](#) we can read Paul's admission as to what he had done in the past; *"I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."* Later when Paul appeared before King Agrippa to plead his case before being sent to Rome he made this statement: *"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to*

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persecute them." (Acts 26:9-11). This admission is slightly different to that in Acts 22 but is still a bit of an eye opener. Paul admits what he did and his account gives us more detail than Luke's earlier narrative in Acts 9. I wonder if we could be so honest about our past sins and how serious they were. We all need to remember that we are sinners and can only be in God's presence if and when we come to faith in Jesus Christ. I should add that I don't think Paul was bragging about his past in these statements but simply admitting what he had been guilty of before coming to faith in Jesus.

My recommendation as an HR Consultant would be that given all that background, the only conclusion to reach is that this candidate is totally unsuitable for the role that he would be required to fill. In fact in our opinion he is totally the opposite of what is required given that he has been persecuting the very organisation that wants to employ him; not a suitable candidate at all! Given all that you now know about this person would you employ him to fill a role that would involve travelling thousands of miles, spreading the message of the very organisation he has been persecuting; planting new churches to cater for all the new followers and then writing numerous long letters to those very churches, frequently whilst in prison?

What we can't always account for, and tend to forget, is God's plan and the way that He sees things. The prophet Isaiah quotes God's words in Isaiah 55:8-9 where we read, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*" declares the LORD. *'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'* We might look at Saul and think that is no way he would ever serve God in the way that God required. How wrong can we be? We should always remember that God is in control and He has His ways which are totally different to ours. As we move on in the story events take over in a way that I doubt ever crossed even Saul's mind!

As he made his way to Damascus we can deduce from Acts 9:7 that Saul was not travelling alone as he had a number of supporters with him. As I think about this group I have a vision of the opening scene of *West Side Story* where the Jets come together; they start slowly and build up ready and willing to take on the Sharks with both gangs intent on defending 'their' territory! That sounds similar to Saul and his zealous band of followers as they gathered together to walk to Damascus although I doubt in the same balletic way as the Jets and the Sharks. However, things didn't quite go according to plan since they hadn't quite reached their destination when they had a strange encounter. We are told in Acts 9:3-4 that, "*As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'*" What followed was one of the most amazing episodes in the history of the Christian church.

Luke continues his fascinating narrative on Saul's journey to Damascus by telling us that a truly startled Saul asked, "*Who are you, Lord?'* Saul asked. *'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,'* he replied. *'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'* The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could

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see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.” (Acts 9:5-9)

Saul had been a renowned persecutor of the Way; that group who followed Jesus Christ; and he was ruthless in his efforts to totally eradicate any trace of this fledgling organisation. What he hadn't expected was the intervention of the very Person who he had been persecuting. Now whilst the words “*but God*” don't appear in this passage it seems to me that they most certainly apply since God had other plans for Saul hence this encounter with the risen Jesus Christ where Saul was reduced to a blind, trembling wreck, subdued and now in the hands of Someone he never expected to meet.

God of course had everything planned and spoke to Ananias a disciple of Jesus who lived in Damascus. God asked him to find Saul and place his hands on him to heal Saul's blindness. Perhaps not surprisingly Ananias balked at this idea; he had heard of Saul and his reputation and so was wary of meeting him even if Saul was temporarily blinded! God reassured Ananias that all would be well and told him, “*Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*” (Acts 9:15-16) When we are faced with a seemingly impossible task, God is always there to help and support us; He will never ask to do anything that is beyond our capability or that could harm us; He is the ultimate expression of a loving Father. We may also remember from [Matthew 28:20b](#) that Jesus promised that “*surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*”. Ananias trusted God and so stepped out in faith by doing what God asked and as a result Saul made a good recovery. I'm sure we can all learn from Ananias' response and trust God to protect and strengthen us at all times but especially in our times of great need.

The story continues of course with Saul spending time with the disciples and learning more of Jesus and His salvation plan for the world. At the end of [Acts 9:9](#) we are told that “*Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.*” In the next verse we then read that Saul “*At once [he] began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*” ([Acts 9:20](#)). That apparent swift change between conversion and preaching is slightly misleading since we know that Saul spent approximately 3 years studying and conversing with Christ Himself as God built him up for the task that lay ahead. In [Acts 9:23](#) we see mention of “*many days*” between Saul's conversion and time spent in Damascus and his arrival in Jerusalem that is mentioned in [Acts 9:26](#). Paul expands on those “*many days*” in [Galatians 1:17-18](#) where we read, “*nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem*”. Those three years in Arabia were spent learning more about Jesus and undoubtedly included a great deal of time spent with the Lord Himself. Anyone who wishes to serve the Lord in full or part time ministry needs some form of training; we cannot work in our own strength and need God's help in order to grow in faith and knowledge so that we can serve Him in the way that we should.

What Happened Next

A great deal happened to Saul over the following months including meeting Barnabas and both of them being set apart by the church to do the work of missionaries and it is in this

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period that Saul became known as Paul. We have no explanation for this other than the statement in [Acts 13:9a](#) where we read, “*Then Saul, who was also called Paul ...*”

There are many, many important points that arise from this story but I want to highlight two in particular. Firstly, I think it's safe to say that as an HR Consultant most of us would have rejected Saul for this vital role in the spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ. There was nothing in his background to suggest that he was the right man for the job. And yet: God chose him; God knew that Saul was the person he wanted to fulfil His plan for the spreading of the gospel message amongst the Gentiles. God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and said, “*For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*” ([Jeremiah 29:11-13](#)). God had a plan for Saul, a plan of which Saul was totally ignorant until that dramatic encounter on the Damascus Road. God has a plan for each of us, a plan that He will share with us in His time and when we draw nearer to Him. I know from personal experience that that prophecy in [Jeremiah 29](#) is very true and we can all be reassured that God will never let us down. During my first year at College I knew that He had a plan for me, it was just a case of asking Him to share it with me! Saul thought that he was following God's plan so you can imagine his surprise when he discovered that God's plan was the complete opposite to what he had been doing. Saul learned that he needed to follow God's plan and not his own. We can all learn from that by patiently waiting for God to share His plan with us. We can be assured that whatever plan He has in mind for us, He will never let us down.

The complete turnaround in Saul's life is a truly perfect example of just how big a change God can bring about in someone when they accept Christ as Lord and Saviour. Over hundreds of years there are many who can testify to what the power of Christ has done in and to their lives. Today we regularly hear of criminals coming to faith in Christ and turning their backs on crime. There are drug addicts who have stopped using drugs, got clean and then gone on to live long and faithful lives. In fact in the BCM December 2021 Update we can read about Matt Buttery who now works at BCM. Matt had apparently started taking drugs at the age of 12 and had been in various scrapes whilst trying to fund his habit. One day when he was in a Christian rehabilitation centre God spoke to him directly and he stopped taking drugs immediately; note that, immediately! That was many years ago and he is still off drugs, happily married with a loving family and enjoying life as never before. Anyone who places their faith in Jesus can be assured that He will bring about a major change in their lives and will remain with them to help and strengthen them through those hard times that we all experience.

After his dramatic conversion Saul, or Paul as we now know him, went on to fulfil the plan that God had for him. He visited many countries that are on or near the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas; planted churches in many of the places that he visited; was persecuted himself by being flogged, stoned, beaten, shipwrecked and thrown into prison on many occasions. It's amazing to think that that was what he had planned for those who were now his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Conclusion

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That's the background to Saul now known as Paul and how he came to be called to serve Jesus Christ in the way that he did. When you read the various passages in Acts concerning Saul's early activities and his eventual conversion and calling, it's amazing to think that this is the man who went on to write 13 books of the New Testament, travel over 10000 miles on his missionary journeys and was persecuted on numerous occasions. If we were that HR Consultant that I mentioned at the beginning, I doubt that any of us would ever have considered Saul as being the right person for the role that Paul eventually fulfilled. And yet, God chose him! As I thought about this I was reminded of the time that Samuel was sent by God to find a successor to Saul (not this one!). Samuel looked at each of Jesse's sons and found Eliab who he thought was the ideal candidate. Samuel thought he was the just the right person until: *"the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'"* (1 Samuel 16:7).

God had chosen Saul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles since before time began and yet to ordinary people he was the least likely person ever to take the gospel to anyone let alone the Gentiles. But as God had told Samuel, He looks at the heart and not any outward appearance.

We can learn from that by remembering that old adage *"never judge a book by its cover"*! God chooses whomsoever He wants to choose and because He looks at more than their outer appearance and earlier performances, He is never wrong. Saul was the right man for the job as later events proved only too well.