

Pharisee Saul Changes His Mind

Meet Saul. Saul wasn't just a Pharisee who didn't like Jesus very much. He was a determined enemy of all those who followed Jesus. He arrested and sent to torture and death, people who'd done nothing worse than believe in Jesus. He was in the crowd watching the death of Stephen, probably encouraging those who were throwing stones, and maybe even throwing a few stones himself.

At the beginning of Chapter 9 of Acts, Saul was

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. (Acts 9:1-2)

Later in his life, Saul writes to his young friend Timothy that he was the foremost of sinners. We can wonder what he had done that was so bad, but it could be his attacks on followers of Jesus. It would take a something big to get the Pharisee Saul's attention, much less move him out of the course he's been following.

Where did Saul come from?

Saul had come to Jerusalem from Tarsus, the provincial capital of Cilicia. We hear about his origins in Acts 21 when he says,

I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. (Acts 21:39)

Paul's family had apparently lived in Tarsus for several generations, because his father had achieved Roman citizenship there. It took either loyal service or a serious bribe to become a Roman citizen. We hear later in Acts 22 that when a tribune asked Saul

"Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I am," he answered. Then the commander said, "I had to pay a big price for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. (Acts 22:27-28)

As a place to grow up, Tarsus had mixed reviews. Locals were very proud of their city as provincial capital. It had strong educational institutions, and it received favor from Emperor Augustus.

More cosmopolitan visitors saw the city as, well, provincial. Strabo wrote a travelogue and talked about the high value placed on education in Tarsus:

The people at Tarsus have devoted themselves so eagerly, not only to philosophy, but also to the whole round of education in general that they have surpassed Athens ... (Strabo, Geography 14.5.13)

However, this travelogue gave the Chamber of Commerce view. Strabo also said,

the men who are fond of learning are all natives, and foreigners are not inclined to sojourn there; neither do those natives stay there, but they complete their education abroad; and when they have completed it they are pleased to live abroad, and but few go back home. (Strabo, Geography 14.5.13)

We get a vignette of life in Tarsus at the time Saul was growing up in the biography of the philosopher Apollonius. In his early life Apollonius was sent to Tarsus for his education, but he didn't find Tarsus a congenial place for study.

When he was fourteen years old, his father took him to Tarsus. ... For his part he was attached to his tutor, but he found the nature of the city unpleasant and not conducive to studying philosophy: for more than anything else it is a place where there are mocking and immoral men who seize upon luxury, and devote themselves more to fine linen cloths than the Athenians do to wisdom. With his father's permission, he transferred his teacher to Aegae nearby. (Philostratus, Life of Apollonius 1.7)

When young Saul moved away to continue his education, he was following the typical pattern in his neighborhood.

Where did Saul get his education?

We can understand that a young Jew who cared deeply about the law of Moses preferred to continue his education in the homeland. Scholar Martin Hengel's view of Paul's early education seems fairly accurate:

Paul seems to have gone to a good Greek elementary school, which was a Jewish school – because the literature from Homer to Euripedes used in regular teaching was quite alien to him. The literature that he knows – as is also suggested by his vocabulary – is that of the Septuagint and related religious writings. This distinguishes him from the other Jewish authors who wrote Greek, since their 'vocabulary' is literary. ... He could have spent at least part of his schooldays in Tarsus. He also learned the Jewish Bible primarily the Septuagint. (Hengel, The Pre-Christian Paul p38)

We don't know, although scholars argue about it, exactly how much of Saul's education happened in Tarsus and how much in Jerusalem. Saul was fluent in Hebrew as well as Greek. We hear when he addresses people near the end of the book of Acts,

Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: (Acts 21:40)

In spite of being from a family in the Diaspora, Saul considered himself a member of the people of Israel. He described himself as

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; (Philippians 3:5)

When he came to Jerusalem to continue his education, Saul would have been welcomed by relatives living in the city. We hear in Acts 23 that his sister's son was a young man living in Jerusalem at the time when he was in prison there.

Saul was clearly a gifted and enthusiastic student. He says,

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. (Galatians 1:14)

This sounds strangely similar to the experience of Josephus, who was growing up at the same time, a gifted child in that culture. Josephus says,

when I was a child, and about fourteen years of age, I was commended by all for the love I had to learning; on which account the high priests and principal men of the city came then frequently to me together, in order to know my opinion about the accurate understanding of points of the law; (Josephus, Life 2.9)

What did it mean to be a Pharisee?

Saul identified himself as a Pharisee, and from Josephus we hear that Pharisees were expert interpreters of the law and keepers of the oral traditions of the elders. Josephus says he began at age nineteen “to conduct himself according to the rules of the sect of Pharisees.” He described them in this way:

Now, for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason; and what that prescribes to them as good for them, they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason's dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced;

From his point of view, Pharisees were careful, respectful, and rational. They acknowledged God's power, but allowed that individuals have free will to act for good or for evil.

when they determine that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit; since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament, whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of men can act virtuously or viciously. (Josephus Antiquities 18.1.3.12-13)

Humans have free will and make the choice, in each circumstance of their life, whether to obey the law or choose a different course.

Study, for the Pharisees as for the rabbis, meant learning the Torah and the way things had been done so far, and then continuing to add to the body of wisdom in their own time. Later in Acts, when Saul describes himself, he says,

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. (Acts 22:3)

By positioning himself as a student of Gamaliel the Elder, Saul put himself squarely in the middle of Pharisaic life as it was before the Romans destroyed the temple.

The great founders of the two schools of Pharisees, Hillel and Shammai, were a generation older than Saul. Their schools would have been well established in his time, with numbers of students in each camp.

The practice of interpreting the law by using examples and disputing applications was well established. Examples of disputes using examples are found in the earliest levels of the Mishnah, and they also appear in the encounters in the New Testament between Jesus and the Pharisees.

The primary focus of the Pharisees was living out the provisions of the law, both the written law found in the Torah and the oral law which was passed down from generation to generation. Their interest was practical—how does a person live out a provision of the law in each specific set of circumstances. In order to distinguish gray areas, examples were created to think through the possibilities.

The resulting records in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the two Talmuds are largely made up of situations where authorities discuss (and usually disagree about) the way the law applies. These documents end up sounding a lot like case law, telling what was decided in each case and explaining the reasoning behind the decisions.

As a student Pharisee, Saul would have found himself in the middle of Torah study, learning the oral traditions, and participating in arguments over application of law.

Why didn't the Pharisees like Jesus?

What was it about Jesus that upset the Pharisees so much? Disputes over application of law were part of their own normal practice. Testing with questions, like the ones about paying taxes or what was the greatest commandment, were typical of the back-and-forth dialog used to get clarity.

Most of the reported differences in these conversations were well within the wide diversity of Judaism at the time. Like the people of a small town who argue among themselves but provide a united front for an outsider, their differences and their unity were both sincere. Jesus and his followers were initially accepted as participants in the ongoing conversations.

For example, in the conversations about healing on the Sabbath, both Jesus and the Pharisees were thinking about things of interest at the time. Both separately came to the conclusion that healing was acceptable on the Sabbath.

By engaging in this kind of conversation, Jesus wasn't rejecting the law but working to establish its boundaries and its priorities. He used the kind of discussion that was typical among the Pharisees, and by doing so he showed that he was an active participant in his Jewish tradition. Otherwise, Jesus' attacks on the Pharisees usually weren't about their teaching itself, but their own practices.

The area where Jesus touched dangerous ground was blasphemy. The teachings of Jesus that offended the Pharisees had to do with himself and his own role. For example, the issue came up during one healing incident, when Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins. Mark says

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:6-7)

A similar conversation happened when Jesus was at dinner at the home of the Pharisee Simon, when Jesus told a woman that her sins are forgiven (Luke 7:36-50).

What turned Saul around?

The story of Saul's conversion is told three times in the book of Acts, once in the narrative when it happens, and twice as he tells it after his arrest as an explanation of why he's doing what he's doing. The incident itself is very, very simple.

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?"

"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 traveling 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 see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. (Acts 9:3-8)

Saul hears a voice that asks him a question. Saul responds with a question, "Who are you?" Saul knows enough to add "Lord" to his question, because the voice that's speaking to

him clearly has power and authority. Saul is a busy and devoted Pharisee, passionate about his commitment to the Torah and an enemy of the enemies of God. He's never been knocked to the ground before by a light from heaven.

Notice that the first question for Saul is not "How can this happen?" or "What's going on?" Saul wants to know, not "how?" or "what?" or "why?", but "who?" Who is it that has this power? Who is it that could speak to him in such a way? What person of such strength, would single him out, and not go to one of his superiors? Who's behind this voice and this show of raw power?

Saul was knocked to the ground. The voice of Jesus himself spoke to Saul. Jesus didn't waste words with a list of what Saul's done wrong. He simply said, "I am the one you are persecuting." Saul's no fool. He's been persecuting an imposter, a pretender who claimed to be the Son of God, but wasn't.

With this voice from heaven, all that Saul's been trying to do has become irrelevant. Jesus is no false prophet, but the genuine article. He's no imposter, but the true Son of God. When Saul realized how wrong he's been, his life was changed in an instant. He'd been the enemy of a blasphemer, or so he thought. Now that he realized that the one he'd made his enemy was on God's side, he needed to change sides. Jesus gave him three days in the dark to figure out what to do next.

What difference did it make?

When Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, accepting the call of Jesus was not an alternative to his faith. On the contrary, his experience of Jesus only made sense in the context of his scriptural background. Scripture provided the expectation and meaning of the arrival of the Messiah. Saul's acceptance of Jesus as Messiah was a result of his early faith, rather than a rejection of it. He says later,

*Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.
(Romans 3:31)*

The word translated as "uphold" implies putting something in place, acknowledging the validity of something, or even establishing or authorizing something. Far from leaving the law behind, Saul saw this faith in Christ as solidifying, strengthening, and reinforcing the law that was already in place.

Jesus demonstrated his reality and his power to Saul, by stopping him in his tracks. Saul spent three very quiet days, unable to see anything, thinking over what had happened. He'd been in control, a giver of orders, and now he was blind and helpless, an easy target for those he came to destroy.

Saul was a religious man, devoted to God and trying to serve God. When Saul understood that he'd been wrong, that Jesus was truly from God, his heart was changed. But the change of heart, didn't change who he'd been or what he'd been doing.

Saul had been an ambitious and self-righteous young Pharisee, known for arresting and executing followers of Jesus. Saul was the Gestapo of his time, the knock on the door that led members of the early church to prison and death. He was good at his job, and enthusiastic. He was the enemy of the followers of Jesus, and there was blood on his hands. He had committed real crimes against the disciples of Jesus.

Saul learned where his loyalty belonged, and it was in the opposite direction from his previous life. He repented, turned himself completely around. Saul suddenly believed Jesus and believed in Jesus. It was done and over for a lifetime. Saul began his new life as Paul by following the instructions Jesus gave, going into the city to wait for his next orders.

Who's going to believe in the change?

Paul believes Jesus, but who's going to believe Paul? How would you feel if you were Ananias, sent to see him by the Lord? Going to see this man was a recipe for a vacation in prison or worse.

How would you like to have been Ananias? Ananias is minding his own business when the Lord sends him instructions in a vision. The Lord calls, and Ananias responds willingly, "Here I am, Lord." Unfortunately, after he hears what the Lord has in mind, Ananias isn't particularly pleased. God sends Ananias to go see Paul.

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." (Acts 9:13-14)

This Paul doesn't sound like a good new recruit for the movement. In fact, he doesn't even sound like a safe person to go visit for a social conversation. So how would you have felt? How many things can you think of that you'd rather do, than go visit a person who has been out to kill you? This makes cutting the grass or even cleaning the toilet look like fun by comparison. But God doesn't give Ananias a choice. "I need him, so it's up to you to go get him."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "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)

Paul isn't going to have it easy, either, and maybe Ananias can find some satisfaction in that. But go he must, no matter how much he doesn't want to, no matter how afraid he is for himself, and no matter how much he just plain doesn't like Paul. Paul is called and forgiven, and it's up to Ananias to go and bring him into the family.

Incidentally, this is where we personally can run into our own challenge. Sometimes we're called to bring the message of forgiveness and welcome to a person we personally don't like. We may have very good reasons for the way we feel. After all, forgiveness is for having done wrong, and sometimes the wrong has been done is to us, or caused hurt to someone we love. Sometimes there are folks who we hope will get what they deserve, because what they've done is truly nasty.

Regardless of how we feel, we're called to offer healing from sin in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ. This wasn't easy for Ananias, and it isn't easy for us. It takes courage, and it takes a leap of faith, faith that God alone knows what's best.

If God wants to call a person to repentance through our voice, we need to have the courage to do the speaking. If God chooses to use us to make a complete life turn-around possible, we need to be there, regardless of how we feel about the turn-around-ee. The bigger the mess that's left behind, the greater the glory, and some of the rejoicing in heaven might spill over onto us in the process.

Ananias does as he's instructed, and he leads Paul into the life that's to be his destiny.

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. (Acts 9:17-19)

Paul began his ministry right there in Damascus, and it was successful:

At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. (Acts 9:20-22)

Heading off in a new direction

Of course this success brought Paul to the attention of those who were once his allies and friends.

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. (Acts 9:23-25)

This escape was only the first of many adventures and misadventures in Paul's career as an evangelist.

Ultimately Paul came to Jerusalem, which was the center of the early church in those first days before the destruction of the Temple. Unfortunately his old reputation was well established and remembered.

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. (Acts 9:26)

Fortunately there was Barnabas to give him a reference.

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. (Acts 9:27-28)

In true Pauline fashion, his enthusiasm drew out strong opposition.

He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. (Acts 9:29-30)

At the end of this part of his story, Paul is sent back to Tarsus a completely different person from the talented young student who had set out years earlier. He was on his way to being the evangelist who carried the Gospel all across the Roman world.

Paul never was a systematic theologian, reasoning from an ordered set of principles. Rabbinic thinking, two centuries later, had become systematic, but in Paul's time Pharisees argued directly about applications of Scripture. Paul used a Pharisee's reasoning process to work through real world situations. He worked from relevant parts of Scripture, chosen and prioritized in response to each situation. As a Pharisee would, Paul used Scripture as his authority, adapting

and applying it as needed, to the different issues that came up in the churches. We all have the opportunity to learn from his thought and his writings.

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