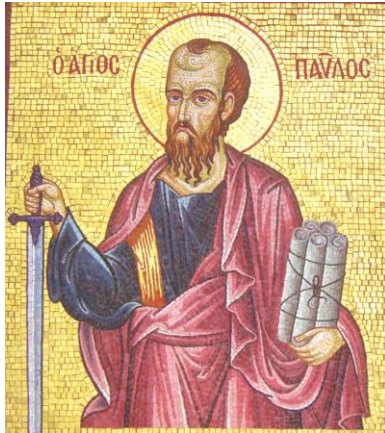


What Kind of Person Was Saint Paul?

What was Paul really like? What was his character? What kind of personality? How did he react to weakness, or opposition, or indifference? Did he lose his temper? Was he a good listener? It's important to me, as I listen to what Paul had to say, to know what kind of person is doing the talking.

For me to try to understand Paul, I need to use whatever materials we have to get an idea of the kind of person he was. These are some of the characteristics that show through his letters.

Highly focused and goal oriented



Paul's life and daily activities all come from his role as an apostle. He doesn't spend some part of his day on his ministry and then go home to relax for the rest of the evening. Even his profession as a tent maker is totally in service to his ministry.

Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. (1 Thessalonians 2:9)

As Soren Kierkegaard explained it, apostleship is an all-consuming vocation.

an apostle has really only to be faithful in his service, and to carry out his task. Therein lies the essence of the apostle's life of self-sacrifice, even if he were never persecuted, in the fact that he

is "poor, yet making many rich," that he never dares take the time or quiet or carefreeness in order to grow rich. ... even though at first he might have wished for a long life, his life to the very end will remain unchanged, for there will always be new people to whom to proclaim the [gospel]. ... a man is called by a revelation to go out into the world, to proclaim the word, to act and to suffer, to a life of uninterrupted activity as the Lord's messenger. [Kierkegaard quoted in Johan Christiaan Beker, Paul the Apostle: the Triumph of God in Life and Thought, p 11-12]

Paul sees himself as completely defined by his role as an apostle, as we hear in the beginning of his letter to the Romans:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God (Romans 1:1)

With a high sense of urgency

Paul's missionary activities were in constant motion. He worked when he could in a community and then moved on when he found he couldn't be effective. He had a strong sense of those people he wanted to visit to share the gospel with or encourage in it.

God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware,

brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. (Romans 1:9–13)

His urgency seems to come from two sources, awareness of all those he wanted to visit and a sense that the time available for his work was short.

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. ... For this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29, 31)

With a consciousness of the size of the population he still wanted to reach and the shortness of the time available, Paul was compelled to work at full intensity.

Determined to do whatever it takes

Both before his conversion in his life as a Pharisee and after his conversion as an apostle of Jesus, Paul believed that his work in the service of God was so important that he needed to make any efforts necessary to do the job. His willingness to suffer and accept rough treatment was the result of his conviction that the work was for God alone.

We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. (1 Thessalonians 2:2–4)

He was willing to do whatever it took to win those around him to faith in Jesus.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22–23)

Paul's service to the gospel drove not only his activities but also every aspect of his behavior, style, and expression.

Energetic and hard working

Paul was a high-energy person, and he was constantly active. In his travels on land, he walked. There were good Roman roads to walk on, and the Roman government provided relative safety for travelers. A day's travel on land in those days was twenty-three miles. Although there were places of rest along the roads in villages planted by the road builders, Paul's travels took great physical strength and stamina.

Not sensitive to personal needs

Paul was strong enough and willing to be uncomfortable in service to his purpose.

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:24–27)

The ordinary needs of daily life—food, clothing, and shelter—were satisfied in a minimal way with whatever was available for survival.

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. (1 Corinthians 4:11–13)

A robust conscience

Paul had a basic understanding of himself as a sinner with all other human beings, and he accepted responsibility for his sins. As he said,

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)

He identified in himself the struggle between his desire for righteousness and his physical desires for sin.

For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:19–24)

His conclusion was that he had been rescued through Jesus from defeat by bodily sin. His description of the tendency to sin is typical of the tendencies (yetzer) to good and evil in the Jewish tradition. He seems not to use the introspective examinations of motives that are more common in later western thought.

Paul’s thought is not dominated by an overactive conscience. He accepts his sin and forgiveness in a practical way and moves on. Krister Stendahl warned against the danger of interpreting Paul’s view of sin through the western struggles with conscience derived from Augustine. For more detail, see Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West” in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays*, pages 78-96.

Skilled

Paul had many basic skills that he needed for his work as an apostle, beyond his direct preaching of the gospel. He traveled from town to town, and he was a competent traveler. He was able to organize his travels and use ships when possible. He could get from place to place on land by his own power, find food and lodging, and negotiate with strangers along the way.

Paul knew that it was wise to keep company with one or a small group of fellow travelers. This served as a precaution for safety in dangerous places and a source of help in possible emergencies. He was able to approach people of different cultures and learn enough of their customs to make himself acceptable with them.

Paul was able to engage in basic business and make his own living when necessary. He may even have used his trade to enable him to make connections with those he wanted to reach. E. P Sanders describes a possible scenario:

Whenever he entered a new city, he probably took a room in which to ply his trade, and he talked with whoever came in or walked past. Cutting and sewing leather (of which

tents are usually made) was a fairly quiet occupation, and it would not have interfered with discussion. We cannot know for sure how Paul reached interested hearers, and he may have employed diverse means. He was probably most effective, however, one-to-one, or in small groups. (E. P. Sanders, Paul, page 20)

We have also seen, as happened in Athens, that Paul was comfortable simply entering into on-going conversation and debate in the marketplace.

Paul was also an organizer for the early church communities. He recruited people into roles based on their assets and gifts, and he put together house church organizations that functioned well and flourished long after his departure. He was capable enough financially that the churches entrusted money raised from charitable contributions to him for delivery.

Flexible

Paul was willing to use whatever assets he found to further his work. We can see this particularly in the way he used his Roman citizenship. In Philippi, Paul used his citizenship to get out of prison and even to get an apology from the ones who had beaten him and put him there. In Corinth, he accepted the protection of the Proconsul Gallio.

When a Roman tribune responded to the disturbance around Paul in Jerusalem, Paul used his citizenship to be released and get an appointment before the council. Later in Caesarea in his hearing before Festus, Paul used his privilege as a citizen to appeal directly to the emperor.

His encounter with Lydia outside of Philippi showed his openness to the opportunities he found.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. (Acts 16:13-15)

An opportunity opened in casual conversation led to a lasting friendship and on-going support. Paul was always flexible and open to the possibilities in his encounters.

Confident

Paul was extraordinarily confident in three things:

1. the importance of the work he was called to do,
2. the benefit of the gospel to all those he approached, and
3. the authorization that he had from God for his message.

This confidence came from two sources—from the scriptures in which he believed completely and from his personal encounter with Jesus in the road to Damascus.

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11-12)

For Paul, this is the strength of the foundation on which he stood and from which he preached. He understood the way the gospel can appear to outsiders, and he completely rejected any possible negatives. He said,

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)

He had absolute confidence in the reality of the power of God in the message that has been entrusted to him

we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (1 Corinthians 1:23–25)

This confidence took him wherever he feels called to go, led him to interrupt people going about their business, and drove him to speak to any and all audiences he can muster.

Argumentative

Paul was educated as a Pharisee, and this means that his formation was full of argument, point and counter point. Since Pharisees cared deeply about living out the law, one must consider the specific details carefully in order to understand the application of the law.

One must look carefully at the ways the law touches each situation. This involves considering which aspects of the law are relevant and which considerations are more important than others. Paul developed his skills in advocating, objecting, and answering objections during his study of the law, and those skills were still available in his work as an evangelist.

Early in Paul's missionary travels, conflict was a reality in the response to the gospel.

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, ... The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. (Acts 14:1-4)

Paul and his companions continued their proclamation, engaging in argument with their opposition.. They only withdrew from the conflict when faced with physical violence. In Athens, he joined in the public debate that was popular in the city.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. ... (Acts 17:16-18)

Paul's willingness to take on a good argument in this way was consistent with the practices he had learned in his early life.

Passionate

Paul did not hesitate to express himself in strong language when he felt strongly about something. His letter to the Galatians was in response to a message he found distressing. After the usual formal greetings of the letter, Paul dove right in.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel (Galatians 1:6)

Paul was shocked, and he was not afraid to say so. He did not think the Galatians were behaving well, and his reaction was not pedantic but personal. He said,

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? (Galatians 3:1–4)

Paul was truly upset, and he showed it. The Galatians were making some very big mistakes, from Paul's point of view. They'll know when they receive the letter how important Paul believed those issues to be.

Paul cared deeply about the people of his churches, and he took their progress and their failings personally. As his passion subsided, Paul's tone changed, even though the convictions that led to his outrage didn't change. He said,

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! (Galatians 4:19–20)

In his letter to the Thessalonians, a letter of reinforcement and encouragement, Paul says

we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8)

Paul's feelings—anger, outrage, disappointment, frustration, and affection—are all directly reflected in his language through the text of his letters.

All together

Paul was physically strong and energetic, with all the skills and attention he needed for his travels through the Roman Empire. He was willing to endure pain and hardship in order to bring his message to all who could accept it. He was hard working and gave little attention to physical comfort or his own personal needs.

He was highly focused and goal oriented, with a sense of urgency that fueled his determination to do whatever it took to win people to Jesus. He was flexible and willing to use any way that he found to communicate with people in their own cultural contexts.

His education as a Pharisee provided the intellectual tools and the kind of assertive advocacy that enabled him to contest with all comers. His passion for Jesus and the need to bring salvation to all led him to devote everything that he had to reaching as many people as he could.

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