

CHURCH HISTORY

The Background, Conversion and Early Work of the Apostle Paul: 3 B.C. to A.D. 46

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Early Church History, part 5

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Church History involves a study of famous men. The most dedicated and zealous Christian in the last two thousand years was the apostle Paul.
- B. Someone has said that if the conversion of the apostle Paul could be adequately and logically explained, then the Christian Faith would fade out of existence.
- C. When the early church was beginning to bog down because of Jewish racial barriers and legalistic tendencies, God saw fit to convert Paul and make him the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul came at a critical time. The early church was in danger of becoming a legalistic sect. It was Paul who delivered Christianity from the Judaizers. After Paul's death, his emphasis began to lose ground, and the church moved away from the teachings of justification by faith and freedom from the Mosaic Law.
- D. As no other in the early church, Paul realized the universal character of Christianity and dedicated himself to the propagation of it to the Gentile world (Rom. 11:13; 15; 16).

II. BACKGROUND

- A. *Birth:* Paul was probably born between 3 B.C. and A.D. 3 in the city of Tarsus, the leading city of Cilicia (Acts 9:11), which was a very important city (Acts 21:39). His birth name was Saul. Mark Anthony gave Tarsus the right to be a free city and not taxable by Roman Law. Many famous people visited this thriving metropolis such as Cicero, Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony and Cleopatra. It was primarily a Greek city ruled by Romans. Its people were very educationally minded. However, Saul never attended any of the Gentile schools that were there. Still, he must have become acquainted with their philosophies and ways of thinking.

- B. *Citizenship*: Saul's father was a Hebrew Pharisee and not a Hellenist (Phil. 3:5). His father enjoyed Roman citizenship, and so did Saul. The apostle Paul often used his citizenship in carrying out his mission for Christ (Acts 16:37; 25:11).
- C. *Education*: As a Jew, Saul was raised in a strict Jewish home with a rabbinic influence. He began studying the Mosaic Law at age five (Acts 22:3; 26:5). Apparently Saul's father went to Jerusalem when Saul was about 15 years old, and he was raised there (Acts 26:4). Paul trained for at least 18 years in the best Jewish seminaries, sitting at the feet of Gamaliel, the finest instructor in the Law in all Judaism (Acts 5:33-42; 22:3). Saul was one of the most promising religious leaders in the Jewish nation (Gal. 1:14). After training at Jerusalem, he probably returned to Tarsus. Saul was steeped in the Law and Jewish tradition, and he was a Hebrew through and through (Phil. 3:4-6).
- D. *Linguist*: Saul spoke Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and probably Latin. Saul was one of the outstanding intellectuals of his day, and it was this man that God used to take the gospel to the Gentiles and preserve the early Church from heresy.
- E. *Beliefs*: He was a conservative, orthodox Jew who was bogged down with a works system of salvation and a legalistic spirit. However, he did have a high regard for the Old Testament, especially the law, as the inspired Word of God.

III. CONVERSION (ca. A.D. 32)

- A. *Saul, the Christian Hater*: Saul was convinced that Judaism was right and that Christianity was a Jewish cult that needed to be stomped out before it became a major threat to his religion (Acts 8:3). He persecuted and was indirectly responsible for the murders of Christians (1 Tim. 1:13-15). There was no reason why Saul should ever have wanted to become a Christian, but God had different plans for him.
- B. *Paul, the Christ Lover*: On his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Saul met the risen and glorified Christ in a supernatural way and was saved (Acts 9:1-9; cf. 22:5-16). The world's greatest Jewish evangelist had been saved, and God was about to make him the world's greatest Christian evangelist. The one who hated Christ had come to love him, and no price was too great a sacrifice for him to make for Christ (Phil. 3:7-8). It is not hard to understand that Paul's whole conversion depended entirely upon an act of God's electing love.

IV. ARABIA AND PREACHING IN DAMASCUS (ca. A.D. 32-35)

- A. We know that Paul (Paul is his Roman name and Saul is his Hebrew name), after his conversion, went into Damascus and preached, but primarily to the Jews (Acts 9:19-25; cf. Gal. 1:17).
- B. Apparently this was a training period for the Apostle.

V. FIRST VISIT TO JERUSALEM (ca. A.D. 35; cf. Acts 9:26-29)

VI. TARSUS AND THE REGIONS OF SYRIA AND CILICIA (ca. A.D. 35-44; cf. Acts 9:30)

This is a great silent period in Paul's life. He apparently did not stop ministering, but this was the "back side of the desert" for him while God was training him for a great task. If Paul was going to reach the Gentiles effectively, many of the things he had learned as a Jew would have to be unlearned. This takes time!

VII. ANTIOCH (ca. A.D. 45)

- A. Barnabas is used effectively at Antioch, but apparently the work grows too big for him to handle alone. Therefore, he sends for Paul (Acts 11:19-25). At this point, Barnabas is the leader and Paul is the helper.
- B. This work at Antioch was apparently another step in God's training of Paul, for he was working with Gentiles under the discerning eye of Barnabas. Paul, at this point, was learning to take orders instead of to give them.
- C. It is interesting to note that the time from Paul's conversion to his service in this major ministry with Barnabas was approximately 12 to 13 years. God was preparing his servant for the great ministry to which he had originally called him.

VIII. PAUL AND BARNABAS VISIT JERUSALEM WITH A GIFT TO THE CHRISTIAN JEWS (ca. A.D. 46; cf. Acts 11:27-30; 12:25)