

Background of the Apostle Paul

Introduction

1. In Acts 9:1-6, we read about the salvation testimony of the Apostle Paul.
2. Paul was on his way to Damascus to find and arrest Christians. On the road to Damascus, Paul has a face to face meeting with the risen and glorified Redeemer. This is reiterated in verses 17 and 27.
 - He guarded the garments of those stoning and murdering Stephen in Acts 7:58.
 - His desire was to threaten, slaughter, and jail Christians. Acts 9:1-2
3. Yet Paul was not a non-religious, atheistic, God-hating man. He was not some wild, wide-eyed nut with a shaved head running around like some Nazi or Communist, filled with hatred toward mankind. Paul was surprisingly a different man.
4. Paul was a deeply religious, well-educated man of excellent upbringing.
5. In this lesson, we will study the background of the apostle Paul, so that we might obtain a greater appreciation of his unique ministry.

First, let's look at Paul's race.

1. Paul was a full-blooded Jew, *"an Hebrew of the Hebrews."* Philippians 3:5
 - This means that Paul's parents and ancestry on both sides were Jewish.
 - Paul could even easily trace his ancestry to the tribe of Benjamin.
 - Being of royal Jewish parents, he was circumcised the eighth day in accordance with God's instructions to Abraham (Genesis 17:12) and reaffirmed in Israel's law (Leviticus 12:3).
2. At his circumcision, he probably received a double name, that of Saul for his family, and that of Paul for the world of trade and municipal life.
3. Paul was of noble stock, yet he was an evil man with ungodly behavior. What can we learn from this?
4. This teaches us that:
 - It is not our human heritage that begets good behavior. It is our heavenly heritage obtained through the new birth that produces genuine godly behavior in a person.

- Royal blood, statesmen's blood, Jewish blood, or any other highly respected blood of man does not make one godly. Only the blood of Christ can do that.
- The Jews in Christ's day thought they were special because they were from Abraham's bloodline, but Jesus said, *"Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do."*

Second, let's look at Paul's region.

1. Though a pure-blooded Jew, the place Paul called home was not a city in Israel as would be expected. Rather, it was Tarsus, a city located in the Roman province of Cilicia. Acts 21:39
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 - Paul was born in Tarsus. Acts 22:3
 - Paul was a citizen of Tarsus. Acts 21:39
 - Paul resided in Tarsus. Acts 11:25
2. Paul said in Acts 21:39 that Tarsus was *"no mean city."* This simply means that Tarsus wasn't your average, common, ordinary city.
 - Tarsus was a very important and significant seaport town that was a focus of trade.
 - Tarsus was a center for intellectual and religious activity.
 - Tarsus was a city in good favor with the rulers in Rome and was a "free-city." This means it had the privilege of self-government. This resulted in Roman citizenship for those in Tarsus.
 - This is why Paul could claim Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25-28). He was "free-born." This means he was born of parents who were already citizens of Rome, gaining Roman citizenship by virtue of their Tarsus residence.
3. But for all of Tarsus' greatness, its lasting fame and recognition comes from the fact that the apostle Paul is associated with this city.
4. Paul was a citizen of a progressive, important city, yet he held no citizenship in heaven. Through Christ, later in life he could proclaim that his conversion (citizenship) was in heaven (Philippians 3:20). He was a citizen of two worlds. How about you?

Third, let's look at Paul's raising.

1. The twelve apostles were unlearned, uneducated men (Acts 4:13), unlike Paul who was very well-educated.
2. Because Paul was raised in Tarsus, he had opportunities of early education that were among the best in the Roman Empire. This explains why Paul, in his writings, frequently indicated a familiarity with classical literature.
3. When Paul was older, he was sent to Jerusalem where he was taught by Gamaliel. Acts 22:3
 - This, in the Jews' eyes, would be education supreme.
 - Gamaliel was held in great respect. Acts 5:34
4. So Paul received an extensive education:
 - His secular education was obtained in Tarsus, one of the world's best learning centers in its day.
 - His religious education was obtained in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, the best religious educator obtainable in those days (as far as the Jews were concerned.) Acts 22:3
 - He was also taught the practical trade of tent-making. Acts 18:3
5. But education failed miserably to give Paul the right answers to the most important questions in life. Instead of pointing him to Christ, it drove him away from Christ. Instead of honoring Christ, it taught him to hate Christ.
6. Notice Paul's assessment of all this in Philippians 3:7-8. Education is not the answer to the problems in life, but rather Jesus Christ is the answer!

Fourth, let's look at Paul's religion.

1. Paul's early life was not characterized by disinterest and hardness against religion. He was no atheist, nor even just a casual religious person. He was completely consumed in the religion of Judaism. Galatians 1:14
2. Notice also Philippians 3:4-6.
 - Paul was a Pharisee, as was his father. Acts 23:6
 - Paul was a morally pure man.
 - Paul was zealous in his religion.

3. Being from Tarsus, Paul would be a member of the Cilicians' synagogue in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). This would have brought him into contact with Stephen, when Paul guarded the garments of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58).
 - Nobody could have ever imagined that the man guarding the garments of the stoners would become a greater advocate of the gospel of Christ than the man being stoned.
 - This is the power of the gospel! Romans 1:6
4. Paul is an example of the fact that Christless religion is not the answer to man's needs. There is much religion in the world, but very little of it exalts Christ.
5. A person can be very religious, yet be as lost as the most non-religious person in the world if his religion leaves out Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer of mankind.
6. The question is not, "Are you religious?" Paul's religion didn't impress Jesus Christ. The question is, "What have you done with Christ? Is He your personal Savior?"