

PAUL: HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 3

Paul's Background and Childhood

Children fascinate me. I have five children that span 15 years in age. There is something unique about each child in how God fashioned them. I can also see in my children the effects of the environment in which they have lived. Psychologists and child development specialists speak of and study about issues of “nature” and “nurture.” How much of a person’s traits are results of their nature and how much comes from nurture or environment?

While the psychoanalysis of nature and nurture may seem modern, the Psalmist understood the concepts thousands of years ago. In Psalm 139:13-14, we read, “you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” This speaks of nature, what scientists today would refer to as the wonderful combining of genetic maps from a mother and father’s DNA that will have God’s spark of life and grow into a child. The same Psalm also speaks of God and nurture, exclaiming in verse 5, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” We have a God who not only made us, who not only selected our DNA, but also who has taken us and worked through the world to produce in us vessels for his service. As Paul would later write, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

God knows whom we are and has made us for his purposes. It is amazing but true. Needless to say, it is no less true of the apostle Paul! While we do not have Paul in front of us to probe his nature and nurture, we do have some passages of Scripture that give us insight into his childhood, his family and background. By studying these passages and putting them into their historical context, we can better position ourselves to see Paul the man, with his strengths and struggles. We can get inspiration from the way God worked through brother Paul and take that to heart knowing that God is equally at work in our loved ones and us.

These next few weeks, our goal is to concentrate on the early background and childhood information about Paul.

THE RELEVANT SCRIPTURES

As we look for the scriptures that directly bear on the issues of Paul’s background and childhood, we have a select few for consideration. In addition to these scriptures, we have a great wealth of other scriptures that give indirect information about Paul from which we perceive relevant facts of Paul’s early life.

One of the major scriptures that gives us insight comes from the account in Acts 21 when Paul is arrested in the Temple in Jerusalem and the Romans begin to escort Paul to the barracks. In verse 37, Paul says to the Roman tribune, “May I say something to you?” The tribune is startled to hear Paul speak to him in Greek and thinking Paul was an Egyptian, asks Paul, “Do you know Greek?” Paul response shows he not only knows Greek, but much, much more. Paul says that he is not the Egyptian in question, but rather he is “ a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.”

Paul then gets permission from the tribune to address the Jewish masses that were assaulting Paul before the tribune interrupted the assault by arresting Paul. Paul shifts from Greek to Aramaic as he addresses the Jews. Paul begins telling them, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel...” (Acts 22:3). Paul then recounts his conversion experience, adding that God had sent Paul to share the news of Jesus as Messiah to the Gentiles. At this point, the crowd goes mad with anger and the tribune orders his men to examine Paul under torture (flogging with whips).

Paul stops the torture before it begins claiming the torture illegal since Paul was a Roman citizen. The Tribune finds out Paul is claiming citizenship and comes to ask Paul about it. In Acts 22:27-28 we read, “So the tribune came and said to him, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ And he [Paul] said, ‘Yes.’ The tribune answered, ‘I bought this citizenship for a large sum.’ Paul said, ‘But I am a citizen by birth.’” Luke then tells us of the tribune’s fear over having earlier bound Paul even though Paul was a Roman citizen (We also read in Acts 16:37-38 of Paul’s Roman citizenship.)

As the saga continues, the tribune has Paul set before the Chief Priest and ruling council of the Jews the next day. During Paul’s discussions with the council, we read Paul explaining, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6), giving us a bit of insight into Paul’s parents. A bit later, the council plots to ambush Paul and the attempt is thwarted because “the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush” (Acts 23:16).

Some time later, Paul is appealing through the Roman judicial system and makes an appearance before King Agrippa in Caesarea. Paul begins his defense telling Agrippa, “My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews” (Acts 26:4). It is during this speech to Agrippa that Paul confesses, “I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them” (Acts 26:10).

Paul himself gives us some insight into his upbringing in his letter to the church at Philippi. In Phil. 3:5-6, Paul writes that he was, “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

IMPLICATIONS

From these passages, we learn a great deal about Paul’s early life. We learn that:

- Paul was born a Roman citizen (which tells us Paul’s father was also a Roman citizen);
- Paul was born in Tarsus of Cilicia (Paul was a citizen of Tarsus as well as a Roman citizen);
- Paul’s Father was a devout Jew (Pharisee);
- Paul was not an only child, having at least one sister (and through her a nephew);
- Paul spoke Greek fluently as well as Hebrew/Aramaic and at least a good measure of Latin;
- Paul moved to Jerusalem at some point and continued his studies under Rabbi Gamaliel;
- Paul’s family kept their heritage and could trace their lineage to the tribe of Benjamin throughout the centuries, even through the captivities and dispersion; and,
- Paul cast his vote against saints of the church; likely indicating Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin.

We can take these facts and consider them in light of other historical knowledge we have and learn a great deal more about them.

THE HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Tarsus Let us start with Tarsus, “no obscure city.” Tarsus was an ancient city, already several thousand years old at the time Paul was born. It was located near what is now the southeast coast of Turkey. The town was inland ten miles from the coast on the Cydnus River, and the river formed a lake, which served as a naval station. Although historically, Jewish people in Israel were not typically seafarers, Paul was from an area where the sea was seen as a natural resource for transportation and commerce.

Tarsus had a storied past. It had seen the Assyrian King Shalmaneser in the 800’s B.C. as well as King Sennacherib in the 600’s B.C. Alexander the Great had

saved the city from burning in 333 B.C. Julius Caesar spent time in Tarsus, and it was Tarsus where Cleopatra, dressed as Aphrodite, sailed in to meet Marc Antony in 41 B.C.

Tarsus was a city of culture. Strabo (64/63 B.C. – 24 A.D.), a Roman writer of geography during the early years of Paul’s life recorded that, “The people of 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, Alexandria, or any other place that can be named where there have been schools and lectures of philosophers.”¹

Bruce calls Tarsus a “university city,”² noting that Tarsus produced scholars that went out into the civilized world taking their Tarsian heritage with them.³ As a cultural and educated city, Tarsus was an early influence on Paul that leaves us with no surprise at Paul’s ability to converse with the educated philosophers of Athens. No doubt even the most important Greek philosophers in Athens must have respected Paul’s educational roots in Tarsus. Paul’s “resume” would make him at least worthy of their listening. Paul could quote Greek poets from memory and understood the implications of the latest Greek philosophies.⁴

Paul came by this knowledge as well as Paul’s great dexterity with the Greek language quite honestly! As Strabo noted, “the city of Tarsus has all kinds of schools of rhetoric; and in general it not only has a flourishing population but also is most powerful.”⁵ Tarsus was the perfect place for one who was to grow up and take the gospel to a Greek world.⁶

¹ Strabo, *Geography*, 14.5.13 (Loeb Classical Library, H.L. Jones transl.).

² F. F. Bruce, *Paul – Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 35.

³ Strabo is Bruce’s source as well. Strabo wrote that in Tarsus “the men who are fond of learning are all natives, and foreigners are not inclined to sojourn there; neither do these natives stay there, but they complete their education abroad, and but few go back home.” *Geography* at 14.5.13.

⁴ See Acts 17:16-34 and Biblical Literacy lessons 32 and 33 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

⁵ *Geography* at 14.5.13.

⁶ Some scholars argue that Paul moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem in infancy, or at such an early age, such that any Tarsian influence on Paul is unlikely. See e.g., W. C. van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem, The City of Paul’s Youth*, (Epworth Press 1962). We find these arguments unpersuasive in light of the exegesis other scholars offer of the Acts

Knowing Tarsus as a philosophy and rhetoric center with a strong influence on Paul (Paul also spent time there after his conversion – Acts 11:25-26) puts emphasis behind passages like 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 where Paul writes, “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech [*rhetoric*] or wisdom [*philosophy*]. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” -- especially powerful words from a Tarsian, a famous seat for rhetoric and philosophy.

Metaphors The Australian scholar David Williams put together a book from lectures he gave on Paul’s metaphors. Ranging from such diverse subjects as city life, the marketplace, courts, business, warfare and the army, Williams opens Paul’s metaphors as windows into Paul as a person, and in the process, by teaching the metaphors’ historical context, Williams spreads greater light on Paul’s points behind the metaphors.⁷

If we consider Paul as one who had one foot in the Greek world and one in the Jewish world, we can see in many of these metaphors the “Greek” aspect of Paul’s life (we will consider the Jewish aspect in later lessons). For example, in Galatians 3:24-25 we read Paul writing that, “the law was our *guardian* until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a *guardian*.” Now, the word the ESV translators have translated as “guardian” is the Greek *paidagogos* (παιδαγωγος) or pedagogue. No one uses it in the Bible except Paul. He uses it here in Galatians and also uses it in 1 Corinthians 4:15 (“For though you have countless *guides* in Christ, you do not have many fathers”).

passages noted above as well as the clear non-Jerusalem influences shown in Paul’s life.

⁷ See also H. Weinel, *St. Paul, The Man and His Work* (Williams and Norgate 1906) at 18-19 where he lists many of Paul’s metaphors that, “come to him so naturally that it is extremely probable he was acquainted with these things before he started on his missionary journeys, that these pictures from the life of a Hellenistic city impressed themselves on his soul while he was still a child, and therefore that Tarsus was not only his birthplace but also his home.” Weinel cites Paul’s usage of images from the soldier’s life, the legal world, the theater, the racecourse, the wealthy houses and commerce of a city, the letters of the literate, *etc.*

What was a pedagogue? A pedagogue accompanied a child to school through the primary and secondary years. This was an important chore requiring care. Children on the street alone were frequently victims of molestation and abuse. The pedagogue also taught the child basic manners and the decency of good behavior. The pedagogue could and would discipline the child. Once the child reached adulthood, the pedagogue's role was over.

Understanding this aspect of Paul's culture brings to light not only the passage of the law's role in Galatians, but also the difficulty of the translators' chore to find an English equivalent word for the Greek word Paul used!⁸ Paul was writing that the law was given to take care of us until we reached adulthood in Christ. The law taught us manners and good behavior, brought necessary discipline, protected us and guided us on our way. We do not leave behind the lessons of the law/pedagogue when we reach adulthood. We live with decency and good deportment because we had a wonderful pedagogue. But, we also never confuse our Christian life as one under the authority of the law/pedagogue. We walk by faith under the authority of the Spirit of God!

Citizenship Paul was a citizen of Tarsus as well as a Roman citizen. These two citizenships came about through different manners. The cost for Tarsus citizenship was fixed at 500 drachmae according to Dio Chrysostom, a first century Greek writer/orator from nearby Bithynia (now Northwestern Turkey).⁹ This was no small amount, and scholars generally consider that Paul must have come from a family of some wealth.¹⁰

As for Paul's Roman citizenship, Paul explained he was born a citizen. This means Paul's father was a Roman citizen, for when Roman citizens had children, those children were automatically Roman citizens. Citizenship could pass by birth. There were several other ways to get citizenship, including purchase, reward by the emperor, or certain completions of military service.¹¹

⁸ In other words, study the Bible and used multiple translations as well as good commentaries!

⁹ Dio Chrysostom Oration 34.23 (Loeb Classical Library No. 358).

¹⁰ See Bruce at 36.

¹¹ John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching* (Baker Book House 2003) at 24.

Roman citizenship offered many privileges in Paul's day.¹² Roman citizens were entitled to fair public trials (non-citizens were not!), were immune from certain types of punishment (including crucifixion), and were entitled to appeal any punishment or conviction straight to Caesar.

Paul's Roman citizenship served him well in his ministry. We know of three times that Paul invoked his rights as a Roman citizen. In Acts 16, we read of Paul imprisoned with Silas in Philippi, after receiving beatings at the hands of the local magistrates.¹³ Around midnight, while Paul and Silas were praying and singing, an earthquake shook open the jail, offering Paul and the others freedom. The jailer, who no doubt should not have been sleeping without a watch over the prisoners, awoke to the discovery of open doors. Fearing the prisoners had fled, and knowing his own life would be forfeit, the jailer started to kill himself. Paul shouted for the jailer to stop, telling him no one had fled. This led to the jailer's conversion along with that of his household.

The next day, the magistrates ordered Paul's release, but Paul refused to leave the cell! Paul said, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out" (Acts 16:37). The magistrates were fearful over their deeds and came to Paul with apologies, giving Paul a personal escort out of town.

A second time we know of Paul invoking his Roman citizenship came in Jerusalem. Luke writes in Acts 22:25-29 the interchange between Paul and the Tribune noted earlier. After Paul is ordered to be taken into custody for torturing and questioning, Luke records, "But when they had stretched him [Paul] out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" Needless to say, the flogging went no further!

About two years later, we have Luke's account of Paul before Festus and Agrippa noted earlier. Festus had intended to send Paul back to Jerusalem where some of the Jews were waiting to kill him. Instead of returning, Paul declares, "I appeal to Caesar!" With that automatic right of appeal, Paul is shipped off to Rome, taking the gospel with him. As a side note, we should notice that Paul had earlier written the church at Rome and told them he had longed for years to visit Rome (Rom.

¹² For a full discussion of these privileges and duties see J. A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome, 90 B.C.-A.D. 212* (Cornell Univ. Press 1967) pgs 72-74, 250ff.

¹³ Paul could have invoked his citizenship and prevented the beatings, but for reasons we do not know, Paul chose not to.

15:33). Using his Roman citizenship privileges, Paul finally got to make that ministry trip. Acts closes with Paul in Rome for several years preaching the gospel.

Next week, we continue with a careful look at more of Paul's upbringing, including his likely age, his economic status, his family relations, and his early education.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. After decades in church and Sunday school, sometimes people get caught in Scripture ruts. By that, we mean there are phases in life where some feel they have gleaned most of scripture's high points. Although we would be loath to say it, even to ourselves, it is as if Scripture has little left to teach us, that there is little more to add or know beyond what we have learned. Abandon the rut! There is so much to learn and wonderful nuggets to pick up along the way. Consider Paul. Little verses like his description of his upbringing bring to light opportunities to use history and bring freshness to Paul the man as well as his message.
2. Consider Paul's metaphors. Take time to go through his writings and make lists. Then, find good resources to learn of Paul's times. Read books of Roman life. Read good books on Paul, like those referenced in these papers. Find a chance to go through and list Paul's metaphors on warfare and the soldier. Take the listing of the armor of Christ in Ephesians 6:11-18 and compare it to historical writings of Romans soldiers and their armaments. Dig deep into Paul and find extra nourishment and enrichment.
3. Remember as we sort through the life of Paul and see that he was made to fit God's mission for his life like a perfectly fitting glove on a hand, that the same God has made you and me! The same God has fashioned us in nature and seen our nurture in ways that will fit his purposes for us perfectly. We are each unique. God has unique opportunities of service for each of us. Let us seek them, embrace them, and praise God for them.