

PAUL

Untimely Born

PAUL *Untimely Born*

Many of us have a hard time understanding the writings of Paul. Even in his day he was often misunderstood. This class is an attempt to learn more about his story so that we can know what made him tick and better understand his writings.

Structure of this Book:

This book is split into five sections. Each section has four parts. The sections correspond to the five weeks of the class. The parts correspond to an individual video/lesson. Watch the video at pastorchristhomas.com/paul then reflect on the questions. Do each week in one sitting or split it up through the week.

Sources

This study owes itself to two more academic works. Feel free to go directly to the source and check these books out since this study is merely a primer on the material.

“Paul: A Biography” by N.T. Wright

“The Calling” by Adam Hamilton



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5-10 Birth of Saul

16-22 Saul begins study in Jerusalem

32 Saul persecutes the followers of Jesus



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PAUL *Section 1*

Part 1

Tarsus was a major metropolitan city in the Roman empire. It had a rich history going back hundreds of years. The city sat on important trade routes and had culture and education that rivaled Athens. Tarsus also had a sizable Jewish population. To know Paul we should get to know Tarsus.

Acts 9:11 *“The Lord said to him, ‘Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying.’”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) What city did you grow up in and how has that impacted who you are today?
- 2) Have you experienced cross cultural relationships? Has God used these experiences to help you better love others in his name as a Christian?
- 3) Was there anything you heard about Tarsus that helped you understand Paul better?

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Section 1 Part 2

Saul was likely raised by observant Jewish parents who were in the sect of Pharisees. This meant they would have stringently followed the Law of God found in the Torah (Hebrew Scriptures). Religion was different in Saul's day. Spirituality was seen as a public and community issue and not private.

Philippians 3:5 *“circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Do you see the Christian scriptures as Jewish or something new entirely?
- 2) What would be different about your faith if spirituality was something that permeated all of society?
- 3) Have you ever lived in the midst of tension? What did it do to your life experience?

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Section 1 Part 3

When we hear the word “zeal” it means something different than Saul’s day. For a first century Pharisee the word zeal brought to mind various stories of God’s people rising up in radical ways to keep his commands and make his people pure. Often this involved violence.

Philippians 3:6 *“as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) When you hear the word “zeal” what do you think of?
- 2) Does zeal, as Saul understood it, still have a role with the Christian faith today?
- 3) How does understanding the history of zeal in Saul’s Jewish experience help you understand his

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Section 1 Part 4

One of the first things we learn about Saul is that he was a persecutor of the Church. Saul's identity as a Jew and a Pharisee would have led him to oppose any threat he saw against the God of Israel. This new movement threatening the Jewish people came from within but was still dangerous in Saul's mind.

Acts 8:1b-3 *“That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever been persecuted for your faith?
- 2) Were Saul's actions righteous or not?
- 3) How do you imagine the first followers of Jesus felt when they heard the name of Saul? Knowing his story as we do, is there anything we should learn from this about how to feel for our enemies?



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Section 2 Part 1

Saul sets out for Damascus to stop a newly formed meeting of the followers of Jesus. On the road God intervenes. The experience Saul has will shape the rest of his life and ministry. Saul's experience was not one of "conversion" how we see it today but rather a mystical experience refocusing his faith.

Acts 9:3 *"Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him."*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Do you remember a time where you had a "revelation" from God and it changed your relationship with God?
- 2) What ways can you recognize God's work in your life before you knew God was working? How did that work prepare you to serve God today?
- 3) What would you have thought if you were one of Saul's traveling companions on the road to Damascus? Do you think the experience changed them as well?

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Section 2 Part 2

Saul sat for three days, blind, in a house in Damascus. As he sat, he no doubt prayed and reflected on his experience on the road. He would have been trying to grapple with the scriptures he had studied his whole life in light of this new vision. God then sends Ananias to heal him.

Acts 9:9-10 *“For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, Lord.’”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever practiced fasting for any period of time as a spiritual discipline? If yes, what did the experience do for you? If no, what reason might you consider trying it?
- 2) Have you ever experienced anything that completely challenge your fundamental beliefs? How did that experience form you today?
- 3) Could you follow God’s command if you were Ananias?

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Section 2 Part 3

We don't know exactly what Paul did after he left Damascus but we have some guesses. Many think he went down to the Sinai Peninsula to reflect and pray at Mount Sinai. He returned to Damascus then Jerusalem where his reception was not as welcome. He stayed a short time and then left for Tarsus.

Galatians 1:16b-17 *"I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus."*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Do you have a physical space to get away from the distractions in life and seek God? If you don't can you set one up inside your home?
- 2) Have you ever not been welcome somewhere? What did it feel like? How do you think this impacted Saul when he was not very welcome in Jerusalem?
- 3) Have you ever felt sure about something only to have it not work the way you planned? How did you deal with it?

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Section 2 Part 4

Based on our guesses about the dates in Paul's story, he could have spent up to ten years in Tarsus after he left Jerusalem. We have absolutely no record of what he did in that time. Scholars have guessed but many think he returned to his trade of making tents and continued to study the scriptures.

Acts 9:30 *“When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Does it bother you that we have a hole in the story of Saul's life with no details? Why or why not?
- 2) When you think about what Saul may have done in that time, how does it change your perspective on Saul?
- 3) Have there been times in your life that you have felt like you have been in a holding pattern? What struggles came with that? How did that period end and can you see God's hand in it all now?



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- 48/49 Jerusalem Council
- 48 Paul writes Galatians
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- 46 Barnabas seeks Saul in Tarsus, ministry in Antioch

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Section 3 Part 1

Barnabas is sent to a new community in Syrian Antioch. The exciting thing about this fledgling group is that it is the first with Jews and Gentiles meeting together we are aware of. When Barnabas sees their needs he realizes he needs help and immediately thinks of Saul sitting in Tarsus.

Acts 11:25-26 *“Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.””*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Do you have a Barnabas in your life who encourages you and reminds you of your calling? Who are you a Barnabas to?
- 2) The Spirit was doing a new thing in bringing Jews and Gentiles together in Antioch, what new things do you see the Spirit doing in our age?
- 3) Have you ever felt like you were doing exactly what you were created for? What were you doing? Are you still doing that?

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Section 3 Part 2

We are used to the idea of “missions” as Christians but in Paul’s day it didn’t exist. Paul and Barnabas were creating a whole new thing as they went out into the Gentile world to bring the good news of the Messiah Jesus. They didn’t know how it would go or what would happen but struck out in faith.

Acts 13:2-3 *“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever sensed a call to serve God? What was that call? Did you obey? How did it go?
- 2) Have you ever done something new? What was it like to be on the cutting edge? How did you deal with the uncertainty of lay ahead?
- 3) What are some of the physical challenges of traveling to a foreign land? How do you think this impacted Paul and Barnabas on their journey?

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Section 3 Part 3

After Paul and Barnabas return they get wind of Jewish believers following their footsteps and preaching a different message than the gospel. This was a sensitive situation as the Jewish community recognized the danger of Gentiles entering their unique relationship with Rome jeopardizing it.

Galatians 2:11-12 *“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) How do you handle conflict in your life? Do you face it head on or avoid it? Which is the more Biblical option?
- 2) How do you think Paul could have dealt with this situation better?
- 3) Is there a place for confronting those you see doing wrong in the Church? How do you think it should be done?

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Section 3 Part 4

Paul and Barnabas are elected as representatives to go to Jerusalem for the community in Antioch to ask about the issue of circumcision. Paul must have received advice to hang back because he does not take the lead on arguments and focuses on sharing stories about what the Spirit was doing.

Acts 15:12 *“The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) What does this early account of conflict in the Church teach us about how we are to govern ourselves?
- 2) Have you ever experienced a time where arguing reasons was less effective than stories? Why would stories be a compelling argument?
- 3) Are there any things you consider “imperatives” for Christianity which might not be as important as you have made them? What are some things that are true imperatives?



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- 56-57 Paul in Corinth then Jerusalem
- 53-56 Paul in Ephesus
- 52/53 Third Missionary Journey, Ephesus
- 50/51 Paul writes 1 and 2 Thessalonians
- 49 Second Missionary Journey w/ Silas
- 48/49 Jerusalem Council
- 48 Paul writes Galatians
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PAUL *Section 4* *Part 1*

Paul and Barnabas, both excited about the validation of the ministry to the Gentiles, feel the call to head back out. They are not immune to conflict though, as they have their own falling out over whether to bring John Mark with them. They go their separate ways and Paul heads out.

Acts 15:40-41 *“But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever had a falling out with a dear friend? What is your perspective on it after some time?
- 2) Did Paul have legitimate reasons to be worried about John Mark? How do you imagine their argument going?
- 3) How important is trust to you in relationships? Have you had your trust betrayed by someone? Have you betrayed someone else's trust? How can you recover from either of those circumstances?

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Section 4 Part 2

Paul heads to Macedonia and then south to Athens and Corinth. Acts 17 is often used as a prime example of great evangelism but Paul was really on trial before the authorities. If he couldn't convince them that his teaching was legitimate, he could have been in physical harm. He stays in Corinth for a significant amount of time and invests a lot in the believers there.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2 *“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever had to defend yourself in a court of law or before authorities? What did it feel like?
- 2) What have you invested most in during your life? What have been the results?
- 3) Paul spends a lot of time with the Corinthians but they have their struggles, how does Paul's correspondence with them help us with our own failures?

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Section 4 Part 3

When God called Paul to be his apostle to the Gentiles, he promised it would include suffering. Here in Ephesus we see Paul have unprecedented success and that success only adds to his physical suffering. Paul continues his ministry despite his own suffering.

Acts 19:29 *“The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s travel companions.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Sometimes overwhelming success can be harder than failure, have you ever succeeded and wished you hadn't? If yes, what made you regret the success?
- 2) Paul's ministry had such an impact the economy was changing in Ephesus, what would impact look like in our culture that mirrored this?
- 3) If God called you to something but told you it would include much suffering, would you follow the call? Why or why not?

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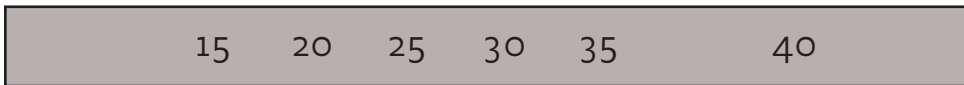
Section 4 Part 4

Many believe Paul wrote his prison epistles while in Rome, but N.T. Wright believes he spent time in prison in Ephesus and wrote these letters here. Either way, Paul experienced great suffering but while writing these letters, seems to be extremely tired and burnt out.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever dealt with depression or extreme sadness? What were the events that led to it? How did you come out on the other side?
- 2) In moments of sadness, how have you learned to maintain hope in the face of it? Have you shared this wisdom with those coming after you?
- 3) How do you understand suffering in light of your faith in Jesus?



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52/53 Third Missionary Journey, Ephesus

53-56 Paul in Ephesus

56-57 Paul in Corinth then Jerusalem

57-59 Arrest and trials

59 (Fall) Travel to Rome/Shipwreck

60 Arrival in Rome

62-64 Possible 4th mission (to Spain)

60-62 House arrest in Rome

64 or later- Paul's death

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PAUL *Section 5* *Part 1*

Paul has pressures coming from every side. One way he dealt with the pressure back in Jerusalem about his ministry to the Gentiles was to organize an offering for the Jerusalem Church from the Gentile Churches. After much hard work making it happen, Paul sets sail to Jerusalem to deliver the offering.

Romans 15:25-26 *“At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever done something for multiple reasons? Paul collects an offering both because it was the right thing to do and because it could bring healing between the divide of Jew and Gentile. What do you think about his effort?
- 2) What divisions exist today that you wish you could heal? What might God call you to do to be a part of that healing?

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Section 5 Part 2

Paul is arrested under false accusations while in Jerusalem. He stands trial before multiple authorities. Finally Paul uses his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. The entire experience allowed Paul to be a witness to the Gospel in the most unlikely of places.

Acts 26:28-29 *“Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?’ Paul replied, ‘Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains.’”*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Has God ever placed you in a position to be a witness to the gospel with someone you would never have had the opportunity on your own? Did you follow God’s lead and share your faith?
- 2) What would it be like going from court to court and sharing your story knowing the judge had your life in their hands each time? How would you handle that situation?

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Section 5 Part 3

Paul appeals to Caesar knowing it was risky but also knowing he would get a free trip to Rome. Paul always had a goal to make it to Rome to proclaim the gospel and strengthen the believers there. His trip to Rome is eventful with a shipwreck delaying them but he makes it and spends two years there.

Acts 26:32 “ Agrippa said to Festus, ‘This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.’”

Reflection Questions:

- 1) Have you ever been delayed for some reason while traveling? What was that experience like?
- 2) As Paul made his way to Rome he knew he could end up executed, have you ever faced an uncertain situation where there was a good chance you wouldn't get out of it alive? What was that like? How does that help you understand Paul more?
- 3) Has God ever used a terrible situation in your life to bring about good in the long run?

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Section 5 Part 4

Paul's story stops in Rome in the records we have. Some think he dies there, some think he goes on for a few more years doing missions in Spain, and some think he lived a long life continuing his work around the Mediterranean. Regardless of what happens, his life stands as a sharp example to us of obedience to God's call.

Acts 28:30-31 *"He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."*

Reflection Questions:

- 1) What has this study of Paul's life inspired in you for your faith journey?
- 2) Is your opinion of Paul changed now that you have studied his story? How has it changed?
- 3) Have you read any of Paul's letters with this new perspective on Paul's life and ministry? If not, what is stopping you? No seriously, go start reading him.

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Appendix A *Chronology of* *Paul's Writings*

48 - GALATIANS

50/51- 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

53? - 1 CORINTHIANS

55? - PHILIPPIANS

55/56- PHILEMON, COLOSSIANS, EPHESIANS

56 - 2 CORINTHIANS

57 - ROMANS

62/63- 1 & 2 TIMOTHY, TITUS?

