

Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a fourteen-part series

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Galatians 1:11–2:10 (NRSV)

Paul's account of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and the aftermath

¹¹ For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹² for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷ 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.

Arabia?

In Galatians 1:17, Paul says that after encountering Jesus he quickly went to “Arabia.” But where did he mean? NT Wright suggests that he headed for Mt. Sinai, the place of beginnings. This is from Wright’s excellent book, *Paul: a biography*.

The word “Arabia” in the first century covered a wide range of territory. It could refer to the ancient Nabataean kingdom, which stretched from a little to the east of Syria—close to Damascus, in fact—southward through what is now Jordan and beyond to include the Sinai Peninsula. But one of the only other references to it in the New Testament—indeed, in the same letter, Paul’s letter to the Galatians—gives us a far more specific location: Mt. Sinai, in the peninsula to the south of the Holy Land and to the east of Egypt. Mt. Sinai was where God had come down in fire and had given Moses the Torah; it was the place of revelation, the place of law, the place where the covenant between God and Israel, established earlier with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was solemnly ratified. Sinai, the great mountain in Arabia, was, in that sense, the place of beginnings. It was the place to which subsequent generations looked back as the starting point of the long and checkered relationship, the often shaky marriage, between this strange, rescuing, demanding God and his willful, stiff-necked people. Sinai was where Elijah had gone when it all went horribly wrong. Sinai was where Saul of Tarsus went—for the same reason.

¹⁸ Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; ¹⁹ but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. ²⁰ In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²² and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³ they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ² I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. ³ But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴ But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us— ⁵ we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. ⁶ And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no

difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. ⁷ On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised ⁸ (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), ⁹ and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰ They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

Paul's 1st journey and his typical sermon

Acts 13:1–3 (NRSV)

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Acts 13:13–41 (NRSV)

¹³ Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem; ¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it.” ¹⁶ So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak:

“You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen. ¹⁷ The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. ¹⁸ For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ After he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance ²⁰ for about four hundred fifty years. After that he gave them judges until the time of the prophet Samuel. ²¹ Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. ²² When he had removed him, he made David their king. In his testimony about him he said, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.’

²³ Of this man’s posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised; ²⁴ before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.

²⁵ And as John was finishing his work, he said, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.’

²⁶ “My brothers, you descendants of Abraham’s family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. ²⁷ Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him. ²⁸ Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. ²⁹ When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead; ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they are now his witnesses to the people.

³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors ³³ he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm,

‘You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.’

³⁴ As to his raising him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way,

‘I will give you the holy promises made to David.’

³⁵ Therefore he has also said in another psalm,

‘You will not let your Holy One experience corruption.’

³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died, was laid beside his ancestors, and experienced corruption; ³⁷ but he whom God raised up experienced no corruption. ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through

this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; ³⁹ by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, that what the prophets said does not happen to you:

⁴¹ 'Look, you scoffers!

Be amazed and perish,
for in your days I am doing a work,
a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you.' "

From Saul to Paul. From Persecutor to Apostle.

And so we begin a long journey with the apostle Paul: his writings, the man, his mission. Like the Blues Brothers (I know, but I can't help myself!), Paul was on a mission from God – to take the Good News about Jesus to the Gentile world. It didn't start that way for him.

Paul was born Saul in Tarsus on the southern coast of modern-day Turkey. It seems pretty clear that he grew up breathing the air of revolution and zealotry, for the Jews had labored under foreign oppressors for the best part of 500 years. Surely, the zealots thought, it was time for God to bring that to an end. Here is a bit from NT Wright on this:

That was the air breathed by the young Saul, growing up in the early years of the Common Era. The best guess has him a little younger than Jesus of Nazareth; a birth date in the first decade of what we now call the first century is as good as we can get. As for his family, we find later that he has a sister and a nephew living in Jerusalem; there may well have been more relatives there, although Tarsus was probably still the family home. Anyway, it was to Jerusalem that he went, most likely in his teens, his head full of Torah and his heart full of zeal. Shema Yisrael, Adhonai Elohenu, Adhonai Echad. One God, whose never-to-be-spoken Name was replaced in the great prayer by Adhonai, which went into the ubiquitous Greek as Kyrios. One God, One Torah; One Lord, One People, called to utter loyalty. And with that loyalty went the one hope, the Passover hope—freedom, especially freedom from the rule of foreigners. A whole new world, with Israel rescued from danger once and for all. A new creation. A new Eden.¹

We don't know much about Saul's upbringing, though we learn a bit about his family in the New Testament. We know his father was a Roman citizen. And we know from his life and writings that Paul was an intellectual giant and it is not surprising that he became a Pharisee and made his way to Jerusalem as a young man to study under one of the great rabbis of the day Gamaliel, who was, as NT Wright puts it a live and let live sort of Jew. That was not Saul!

The first time we encounter him, he is holding the cloaks for those who were stoning Stephen and saw Jesus as a blasphemous and affront to the temple and to the God of Israel. Saul sought to stamp it out with great zeal, which he admits himself in his letter to the Galatians. He was like a beast tearing through the community of believers in those first years after Jesus' death and resurrection . . . until he was met by Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). Saul becomes Paul – apostle to the Gentiles.

When telling some of his own story in Galatians, Paul does not dwell on the encounter but on its aftermath and his certainty that indeed he had been called by God. He had been changed by God. He had been transformed. So much so that he tended to keep to himself in the immediate years after his encounter with Jesus, heading into Syria and Arabia. And three years later heading back to Jerusalem, but only for a couple of weeks

¹ Wright, N. T. Paul (pp. 34-35). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

to spend time with some of the apostles. After this, Paul's story goes dark for a decade, until about AD 46 when Barnabas brings Paul to Antioch of Syria.²

One of the things you need to understand about Paul is that he very much believed that his gospel had been given to him by God and was not simply something taught to him by others. It was the direct revelation from God about the implications and the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.

In the late 40's (AD 47-48) Paul began a series of missionary journeys that would carry him around the eastern end of the Mediterranean for the next fifteen years. During these journeys, Paul would found and later pastor numerous Christian communities. The blessing for the Church is that some of his letters to these communities have been preserved. Indeed, they were copied and shared among the Christian communities in the 1st century, quickly being taken as sacred Scripture alongside the Hebrew Scriptures such as Genesis and Isaiah and the book of Psalms. The Christians saw in Paul's writings the apostolic truth of the Good News.

The first journey

In the late 40's AD, Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, embarked on his first missionary journey. It took them from the south central coast of Asia Minor northward into the interior as told in Acts 13-14. Paul and Barnabas founded churches in places such as Derbe and Lystra. It was a difficult ministry, as Paul met stiff opposition. In Lystra, for example, Paul was stoned so badly that his attackers assumed him to be dead.



Paul in his own words

There is a lot of Scripture at the beginning of this study. I hope you will take the time to read it. In Acts 13, we get one of Paul's sermons on the first journey. It is a connect-the-dots message that leans heavily into the truth of Jesus, the resurrected Messiah. And, of course, the Galatians passage is taken from what is probably the oldest of Paul's that have been preserved for us. In the coming weeks, we will do more of this – hearing Paul in his own words.

² Antioch was one of the largest cities in the Roman empire at that time. It is not to be confused with the vastly smaller Antioch visited by Paul on his first missionary journey.

The Conversion of Saul

In his excellent commentary, *The Message of Acts*, John Stott argues that Saul's conversion into the apostle called Paul was neither sudden nor compulsory. Stott rightly emphasizes that God prepared this zealous Pharisee for his encounter with Jesus. Could Saul really have glimpsed nothing of the truth of Christ? Could he have been unshaken by the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen? Rare is the person whose faith in Christ comes completely out of nowhere. God prepares us for the revelation of the Good News. Stott sums it up this way:

The cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads. Then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves.

C. S. Lewis, whose sense of God's pursuit of him has already been mentioned, also expressed his sense of freedom in responding to God:

I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, 'I am what I do.'¹

1. from Lewis' book on his own conversion, *Surprised by Joy*

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Isaiah*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week we will host the first learning event in the new **Second Act Ministry**. Paul Markowitz and Christy Byerly from Senior Living Specialists will talk to us about the challenges of caring for aging seniors.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.