

For Such *a* Time As This: The Apostle Paul



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 9:1–9, 22:3–5, 25–29, Rom. 7:19–25, 11:1, Phil. 3:5, 2 Pet. 1:3–8.*

Memory Text: “Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God” (*Romans 15:17, NIV*).

Key Thought: The apostle Paul had a powerful impact on the then-known world, spreading Christianity far beyond the geographical confines of Israel and the Jewish people. His life and ministry is a model for our mission today.

The idea that the good news was also good news for the Gentiles was a shocker to people who, despite the teachings of their own prophets, had grown up with a different understanding. God's salvation was for the entire world, not just for Jewish people. Talk about a paradigm shift!

The apostle Paul was a key leader in acting on this revelation. His background, personality, and calling from God made him the right person at the right time to guide the church into this new era of mission to all people.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church went through a similar process during the late nineteenth century, when it began its mission work outside North America. This was a radical step that laid the foundation for today's international Adventist mission work in more than two hundred countries.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 5.*

Paul's Background

The apostle Paul is arguably the most influential person in the New Testament, apart from Jesus Himself. He took the good news about Jesus to much of the then-known world.

Paul was born in Tarsus, then the capital of Cilicia, a Roman province, in what is present-day Turkey. This area was noted for its goats'-hair cloth that was widely used for tent making, which was Paul's trade (*Acts 18:3*).

Read Acts 22:3–5, 25–29, Romans 11:1, and Philippians 3:5. What do these texts tell us about Paul that could help us understand why he could be so effective a witness at this time in history?

Roman citizenship by birth was highly prized. In Paul's day, a person could purchase Roman citizenship for 500 drachmas, close to two years' wages for the average worker. Roman citizenship came with certain privileges—safety from scourging and no death penalty without a trial (*see Acts 22:23–29*); the right to vote, make contracts, and have a legal marriage; and exemption from paying taxes.

And yet, he was also a Jew, one with a rich spiritual heritage. In later years, Paul often referred to his heritage and said, “I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today” (*Acts 22:3, NIV*).

Paul came from the tribe of Benjamin, was reared as a Pharisee, and studied under the great Gamaliel (*vs. 3*), one of the leading Jewish teachers of the time. We learn from Paul's letter to the Galatians that he was “extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (*Gal. 1:14, NIV*). This zeal translated into full-scale persecution of those who became followers of Jesus.

Zealous Jew, Roman citizen, Paul was soon to become the greatest apostle the world has ever seen.

What aspects of your own life (nationality, education, upbringing, etc.) can be of special use in witnessing? How can you take advantage of your background to better witness for the Lord?

Paul: His Conversion and Calling

The apostle Paul was not always the apostle Paul but Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the early church. He then had an experience that set him on the course that would change not only his own life but history itself.

Read Acts 9:1–9, Paul’s conversion experience. What happened to him that changed him so greatly? How hard must it have been for him to accept that he had been so terribly wrong about Jesus?

Paul did not need any deep theological explanation before surrendering Himself to Jesus. Right then and there Paul gave himself to the Lord, declaring, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (*vs. 6*). The fiery opponent of Jesus was now His humbled and broken servant.

After his conversion, Paul met with Peter, James, and John—the “pillars” among the apostles—and they agreed that Paul’s special calling was to go as an apostle to the Gentiles (*Gal. 2:7–9*).

Read Acts 13:47 and Isaiah 49:5, 6. What title and purpose do Paul and Barnabas apply to themselves that was also applied to Jesus? *Luke 2:30–32*.

Though Paul saw himself as a special envoy or instrument to reach the Gentiles, he also shared the good news with Jewish people. In the same way, other apostles such as Peter preached mainly to Jews, but God also used them to witness to Gentiles. In fact, Peter was the first apostle to reach out to Gentiles (*see Acts 10*).

Most likely, few of us have had the kind of dramatic conversion experience that Paul did. Yet, we all, at some point, need conversion. What has your own conversion experience been? Most important, what have you learned from that experience that could help you lead others toward having their own, as well?

Paul: A Man of Like Passions

It is so easy to envision Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles and, with the exception of Jesus Himself, the greatest force in all Christianity, as some kind of superhuman being, a flawless saint and herald of the faith.

Yet, that is not the picture presented in the New Testament. Scripture puts us all under sin, paints us all as sinners in need of divine grace. The apostle Paul is no exception either.

At times Paul seems impulsive, almost aggressive. He often stood up for his rights. When he and Silas were in jail, he appealed to his rights as a Roman citizen (*Acts 16:35–40*). Later, when in the court of Agrippa, he appealed to Caesar—which was one of his rights as a Roman citizen (*Acts 25:11, 12*). Had he waited and not demanded his rights, he later might have been freed (*Acts 26:32*).

What can we learn about Paul from the following texts? *Acts 15:37–39, Rom. 7:19–25, 1 Cor. 9:27, 2 Cor. 12:7.*

It is a comfort to know that such a giant of faith as the apostle Paul was not perfect. He sometimes made mistakes. He needed the daily grace and forgiveness of Jesus in his life, just as we do. Indeed, from all that we can tell by his writing, Paul was very aware of his own sinfulness. No doubt it was from, partially at least, this awareness of his own weaknesses and faults that made him such a powerful teacher of God's saving grace.

Read Romans 7:24. What does this tell us about Paul's self-understanding? What hope and comfort can you draw from yourself by these words?

Though Paul was not perfect, God used him anyway. Why is it important that while being aware of our faults and claiming God's promises for victory we not allow them to discourage us from working for the Lord?

Life and Salvation Through Christ

Several major themes dominated and motivated the apostle Paul's life and mission. At the top of the list was the story of Jesus crucified. This event was the basis of everything he taught and did. He wrote to the Corinthians, "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (*1 Cor. 2:2*), and to the Galatians, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Gal. 6:14*). These verses show that for Paul the cross of Christ (which of necessity includes Christ's resurrection, as well) was the central theme of his whole theology.

Throughout his writings, Paul describes in many different ways the enormity of what Jesus did through the Cross to save humanity.

Read the following texts in which Paul describes salvation. What do these verses tell us about what Christ has done for us?

Rom. 5:10

Rom. 6:18

Rom. 7:2-4

Rom. 8:15-17

Gal. 2:16

Eph. 1:7

1 Tim. 2:6

1 Pet. 1:18, 19

Paul uses a number of different images and word pictures to describe what Christ has done for us. Most likely that is because no single image alone can do justice to the grandness of what was accomplished for us at the Cross.

How central is the Cross to your own theology? How focused are you on it? Why is it important to keep the Cross at the center of all our witnessing?

Themes of Hope

In yesterday's lesson, we saw how Christ's death on the cross was the key theme in Paul's life and teachings. Today we will touch briefly on some other major Pauline themes.

Living a godly life (sanctification). Paul makes it very clear throughout his writings that salvation is free, a gift we cannot earn or deserve (*Rom. 5:15, 6:23, Eph. 2:8*). But salvation does not free us to behave as we did before we met Jesus. In response to His grace, we must live as Jesus asks us to live.

Paul writes to Timothy: "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness" (*1 Tim. 6:11, NIV*). We do not do what is right in order that Jesus will save us; we do what is right because we have been saved. In fact, says Paul, we were "created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (*Eph. 2:10, NIV*).

We do not obey God so that He will love us, accept us, or give us a ticket to heaven. When we accept Jesus' gift of salvation, we are accepted totally and unconditionally. We obey God because His powerful love leads us to good works. We obey Him because His love compels us (*see 2 Cor. 5:14*).

Read 2 Peter 1:3–8. What reasons does Peter give for living a godly life? What other reasons can you add?

Paul wrote that he did not want us to "be ignorant" about what happens when people die (*1 Thess. 4:13*). Why is it important to understand the truth about life after death?

Paul's key themes are all linked. Through Jesus' self-sacrifice and resurrection, He conquered death. He will return to bring His gift of everlasting life to His faithful children (*see vs. 13–18*) at their resurrection. These followers of Jesus have demonstrated their love for Him in the way they have lived their lives (*see Eph. 4:20–32*).

What is the one hope of Christianity that means the most to you? That is, of all the promises we have, which one offers you the greatest hope, and why? Write out your response and bring it to class on Sabbath.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “From Persecutor to Disciple,” pp. 112–122, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The belief of a falsehood did not make Paul a kind, tender, compassionate man. He was a religious zealot, exceedingly mad against the truth concerning Jesus. He went through the country, haling men and women, and committing them to prison.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 214.

“The apostle Paul had all the privileges of a Roman citizen. He was not behind in the Hebrew education; for he had learned at the feet of Gamaliel; but all this did not enable him to reach the highest standard. With all this scientific and literary education, he was, until Christ was revealed to him, in as complete darkness as are many at this time. Paul became fully conscious that to know Jesus Christ by an experimental knowledge was for his present and eternal good. He saw the necessity of reaching a high standard.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 18, 1899.

“There is one great central truth to be kept ever before the mind in the searching of the Scriptures—Christ and Him crucified. Every other truth is invested with influence and power corresponding to its relation to this theme. It is only in the light of the cross that we can discern the exalted character of the law of God. The soul palsied by sin can be endowed with life only through the work wrought out upon the cross by the Author of our salvation.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1084.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What beliefs are most important to you? How do they affect the way you live? How do you respond to those who hold other beliefs, maybe even contrary beliefs to your own, just as strongly?
- ❷ How central is the Cross in your own local church? What could you do, as either an individual or a class, to help ensure that as with Paul, Christ and Him crucified are central to your church and its outreach to the local community?
- ❸ In class, share your responses to Thursday’s final question.

Summary: Paul provides a wonderful example of the fact that there is no limit to what God can do through us—human and weak though we may be. Paul’s unique background and gifts enabled him to take the good news about Jesus to an entirely new mission field.

The Hidden Money

by CHARLOTTE ISHKANIAN

Stefka Mancheva lives in Bulgaria. Life for Stefka was never easy, but shortly after Communism fell in Bulgaria, her husband died. Inflation wracked the nation and ate up her meager pension until she could barely afford to buy food for herself and her son. She prayed that God would remember the widowed and the orphaned, that He would somehow meet their needs.

One cold day she needed her scissors. She looked in the drawer, but they weren't there. She emptied her purse of its contents, but couldn't find the scissors. However, she noticed that the lining of the purse had been cut, and it felt as if something had slipped between the lining and the outer shell. She reached into the hole in the lining and pulled out some paper. It seemed to be money, but it wasn't from Bulgaria.

She examined the money and realized that it was Italian lira—100,000 Italian lira. It wasn't hers, for she had never been to Italy. But where could it have come from? *God must have sent it in answer to my prayers*, she thought. *But why is it foreign money?*

Stefka thanked God for the lira and placed it in a safe place. Then she went to the bank and asked the manager how much 100,000 Italian lira were worth. She waited, stiff with apprehension, as the bank manager punched some numbers into his calculator. Then he told her that 100,000 lira were worth about four months' wages at the present rate of exchange. "But," he added, "with inflation, the value should grow."

Stefka thanked him and walked home, praising God. She had bought the purse in which she found the money four years earlier. The money had been there all that time. That meant that God had seen her need years before she even asked Him for help. And God had provided for her by sending foreign currency that wouldn't be eaten up by inflation. *How good You are, God!* she praised Him in her heart. *Before I even called on You, You answered my prayer.*

Stefka saved the money, exchanging only what she needed to buy food and clothes for herself and her son. As inflation continued to climb, the lira became worth more and more. Eventually they were worth the equivalent of more than a year's pension.

"I praise God for His faithfulness to me, a poor widow," Stefka said.

God provides all our needs according to His riches. As He has blessed us, let's give abundantly to mission so that others can know the God who loves them and will never leave them.

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