

“From Adversary to Advocate” (Various Scriptures)

Grace and peace to you,¹ my name is the apostle Paul. Your pastor asked me to step in and preach for him. I hope you don't mind. He really felt that this Easter you need to hear my story. I'll let you be the judge of that.

Before I share my story with you, permit me to ask you a few questions: Have you ever wrestled with the claims of Jesus Christ? Have you ever rejected some of the teachings in the Bible? Have you ever felt that God could never love you or accept you because of things that you have done? When you have been given an opportunity to serve God, have you ever wondered if your past will haunt you? Have you ever struggled forgiving yourself for sins you've committed in your past?

If you can identify with any of these questions, you may be able to relate to my life. I have personally struggled through all of these concerns. I hope that my story will help you in some of your own soul-searching.

1. Paul's History. I was known for many years as Saul² of Tarsus. I was born to Jewish parents in the city of Tarsus,³ located in what is today southern Turkey.⁴ I was a faithful Jew. I was a member of the proud tribe of Benjamin, one of the two tribes that had remained faithful to King David.⁵ I was named after Saul—the first king of Israel, who came from the tribe of Benjamin.⁶ Growing up, my father taught me the trade of tent making. We made tents out of the heavy hair of goats, which were grazed by the thousands in the neighboring mountains. However, being a devout Jew, my father had greater ambitions for his son. Though tent-making would be my trade, my father sensed a divine calling upon me. So when I turned 13 he sent me to Jerusalem to enter the school of the rabbi's. At this school I was able to study under Gamaliel, who was one of Israel's greatest teachers.⁷ Under Gamaliel's superior tutelage I became an expert in the Old Testament. Later, I became a Pharisee.⁸ The Pharisees were the strictest sect of the Jews. We studied the Old Testament inside and out. We loved our Jewish roots. In fact, I referred to myself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews.”⁹ I was passionate about my heritage, my people, and my God.

Not only was I a devoted Jew, I was also a Greek by culture. My hometown of Tarsus was one of the three main centers of Greek culture. The other two were Athens, Greece and Alexandria, Egypt. I received an excellent Greek education.¹⁰ Consequently, I was familiar with many of the sayings of classical and contemporary Greek writers. I understood Greek philosophy and logic, and was able to debate the most able Greek minds of my day. This gave me a breadth of culture and understanding that surpassed even that of my teacher, Gamaliel. Furthermore, although I was a Jew, I was born a Roman citizen.¹¹ In my day being a Roman citizen was a high honor with many privileges. I used these to my advantage later in my life.

[Now that you know a bit of my personal history, let me tell you about my spiritual background.]

2. Paul's Beliefs. As a Jew, I believed in the one true God, Yahweh. As a Roman citizen, influenced by Greek culture, I relied upon my own intellect. I was staunch in my beliefs. I would not back down from anyone. In fact, I was beginning to develop quite a reputation among the Pharisees. I was the top up-and-comer. When I was in my thirties I heard news about a new religion. This new sect was declaring the crucified Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah. This was ludicrous to me! I was convinced that Jesus could not be the Messiah. To die on a cross as Jesus did was to be cursed.¹² A crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms! Therefore, I became enraged with a religious fury and determination to destroy anyone who would dare to utter the name of Jesus with any hint of worshipful tone. I was convinced that this new sect was heretical, and if allowed to spread would divide and weaken Judaism.

As a result, I went from house to house dragging off men and women who professed faith in Christ and putting them in prison.¹³ These new Christians were terrified of me. On many occasions I beat them, imprisoned them, and threatened to kill every last one of them.¹⁴ I vigorously tried to force them to turn back to Judaism by blaspheming Christ. I even traveled to foreign cities in order to persecute Christians.¹⁵ I then voted for the death penalty for these believers in Christ.¹⁶

I remember one defining moment in my life. There was a commotion as a crowd of angry people were dragging a man out of the city, with stones in their hands. This man, Stephen, had dared to stand before the high priest and declare that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. I was happy to be included in this mob of people who would stone the life out of this blasphemer. Those with rocks took off their cloaks and laid them at my feet so I could watch over them as the men began hurling their stones at Stephen.¹⁷ I consented to this murder.

Yet, I must confess to you that Stephen's stoning stirred some things within me. I heard Stephen proving with the Old Testament Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah. I witnessed Stephen's face emitting a supernatural glow. I heard Stephen, with his dying breath, praying tenderly for those who were stoning him. I asked myself, "Could this man really be an enemy of God?" Nevertheless, I chose to ignore the promptings of God's Spirit. I set off on an even more furious mission to seek out and destroy Christians wherever I could find them.

[So what happened next? How did my life turn out? Keep listening.]

3. Paul's Conversion.¹⁸ Some time after the stoning of Stephen, I set off to Damascus. I chose to travel to Damascus because I was concerned that Christians¹⁹ in that great trading center would tell travelers in incoming and outgoing caravans about Jesus. I was worried that they would spread the influence of this new belief to other lands, far and wide. My intent was to arrest the Christians there and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried, tortured, and killed.

Damascus was about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. It was an exhausting journey of about seven days. On my way to Damascus I had plenty of time to think. Day after day, with the hot sun beating down on me, I thought about my life of persecuting Christians. At one point I had to travel through Galilee, the home area of Jesus. As I did so I sneered. I just could not understand how people could believe in Jesus. If Jesus were alive, He would be the same age as I am. Moreover, He was from Nazareth and He was a carpenter. Why would anyone want to follow a man like this? It just didn't make any sense. I could not believe that this Jesus could be the resurrected Son of God.

Suddenly at midday, as my company and I were riding forward beneath the blaze of the Syrian sun, an even brighter light surrounded us.²⁰ A shock vibrated through the atmosphere, and in a moment we found ourselves lying on the ground.²¹ While we were all on our faces a voice sounded in my ears, "Saul, Saul,²² why are you persecuting me?"²³ I looked up and asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!"

At that moment I realized how tragically wrong I was. What was a badge of honor became a lifelong shameful blot on my character.²⁴ I was wrong! Stephen was right!²⁵ Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus Christ did die on the cross and rise from the dead. This encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ changed my life. This was reflected in my name. Jesus lovingly changed my name to Paul, which means "little."²⁶ God took a man who was big in his own eyes and the eyes of the world and He made him small. Paul is also derived from the Latin word for "cease" or "desist." My new name would forever testify to the day Jesus Christ pursued and arrested, with love and forgiveness, the one who, out of hatred, pursued and arrested the people for whom He had died.

I could share many amazing elements of this divine encounter with the risen Christ. I could talk about it all day and night. But one of the things that meant the most to me was that Jesus' words to me were not harsh. Jesus did not reprimand me for my murderous actions. He did not demand from me an eye for an eye. Instead, He spoke with power wrapped in tenderness. The Lord Jesus Christ showed me grace, mercy, and compassion when He should have poured out the full cup of His wrath! If Jesus Christ was willing to do that for me of all people, I know He is willing to show you grace as well.

While I was still on my face before Jesus, He told me to stand up and go in to Damascus and I would be told what to do. I rose up and immediately realized that I couldn't see. I was blind! How ironic! I had gone several years blind to the gospel and the teachings of Jesus. I had been blind spiritually, but when my eyes were opened spiritually I became blinded physically. Apparently, God chose to take my physical sight away from me so that I would be humbled before Him. God had to break me and reduce me to a person that He could work with.

Thus, I had to rely on my companions to lead me by the hand all the way to Damascus. God then sent one of His disciples, Ananias, to teach me the truth and to fill me with His Holy Spirit. The moment Ananias laid hands on me, something like scales fell from my eyes and I could see again. I then got up and was baptized into Christ.

[What is the appropriate response after salvation and baptism? What follows next?]

4. Paul's Ministry. After believing in the Lord Jesus and being baptized, I prepared to serve Him with my life. My encounter with Christ was not only a conversion, but it was also a call to a very specific ministry. I was told at the time of my conversion that God had chosen me to bear witness to the Gentiles, kings, and Jews.²⁷ Therefore, I began my preparation immediately. I spent three years in Arabia before my first visit to Jerusalem.²⁸ I used this time to restudy the Old Testament Scriptures. During these three years the Holy Spirit helped me understand how the Old Testament pointed ahead to Jesus Christ.²⁹ Eventually I became a relentless church planter, evangelist, and theologian. Obviously, all by God's grace! He is the One who transformed me and reversed my passions.

[What can my transformation be attributed to? How can a man so opposed to Jesus Christ become His herald and servant? The answer in one word is: resurrection. The resurrection of Christ convinced me that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did indeed die on the cross for the sins of the world. This has forever changed my life.]

5. Paul's Confidence. During my ministry, God was extremely gracious to allow me to pen 13 New Testament letters. One of my favorite passages, that the Holy Spirit led me to compose, is 1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter I argue that apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ life is futile. If the bodily resurrection is only an empty dream, all our preaching has a hollow ring to it, our faith is worthless, the dead have perished, we are still under the condemnation of our sins, and we are of all men most to be pitied.³⁰ On the other hand, if Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, there is no more important truth to proclaim, because *the resurrection changes everything*. The resurrection resurrected me from one who was a hater of Christ to a lover of Christ. The resurrection resurrected me from a prideful persecutor of Christ to a humble proponent of Christ. The resurrection resurrected me to a new life, a new hope, and a new ministry. *The resurrection changes everything*.

What Jesus Christ has done for me He can do for you as well. Today, He simply calls you to believe that He died and rose again. Will you acknowledge that the Lord Jesus died for your sin? Will you believe that His work on the cross is enough to pay your debt? Will you entrust yourself to His person and work? If so, you will discover that *the resurrection changes everything*.

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Scripture Reference

Acts 9:1-30

Acts 22:1-21

Galatians 1:11-24

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

1 Corinthians 15:20-34

1 Corinthians 15:35-49

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Study Questions

1. Before I became a Christian, how did I feel about Jesus Christ? How did I view Christians? What preconceived notions did I hold that I now believe are inaccurate? In what specific ways did my religious background or worldview keep me from trusting in Christ?
2. How did I become a Christian? What experiences brought me to the realization that Jesus is the Christ? Was my conversion experience gradual or instantaneous? What events did God use to get my attention? Could I share my conversion experience with someone in two minutes or less?
3. In what ways has my life changed since I first believed in Christ? How did God begin to bring about this change? Who did God use in my life? Have I made it a practice to express my gratitude to God and others for my salvation? Am I also committed to saying “thank you” to fellow believers who shared Christ with me?
4. What does the resurrection of Christ mean to me? How has God used this miraculous event to transform me personally? Who will help me to recognize the power of the resurrection in my daily life this year?

Notes

¹ Paul uses “grace” (*charis*) and “peace” (*eirene*) as his greeting in each of his 13 letters: Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; Phlm 3; cf. 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 1:2; 2 John 1:3; Rev 1:4.

² In the Hebrew language the name Saul means “asked for.”

³ Tarsus is mentioned by name only 5 times in the Bible, all of these times in relation to this man, Saul. Tarsus, being a Roman colony and a seat of knowledge was a very multi-cultural city. Young Saul would be schooled in Greek, the common language of the day, and Latin as well; he was a Roman citizen. He would also be taught from the great thinkers of the era such as Plato, Aristotle, and Homer.

⁴ Tarsus was situated adjacent to the Cydnus River, about ten miles north of The Mediterranean Sea.

⁵ See Phil 3:4-5.

⁶ This is likely, although there is some conjecture.

⁷ See Acts 22:3.

⁸ Apparently Paul followed in the footsteps of his father (Acts 23:6).

⁹ See Phil 3:5.

¹⁰ Cf. Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12.

¹¹ See Acts 22:28. Because of this, he could appeal to Caesar as a citizen of Rome while imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:37-39).

¹² See Deut 21:23.

¹³ See Acts 8:3. Saul did not agree with his teacher, Gamaliel, on how Christians should be dealt with (Acts 5:34-40). Rather, he sought the arrest, trial, conviction, and punishment of those in Jerusalem.

¹⁴ See Acts 22:19; 26:11.

¹⁵ See Acts 26:10-11; Gal 1:13.

¹⁶ See Acts 26:10.

¹⁷ See Acts 7:58-83.

¹⁸ Barclay writes, “In this passage we have the most famous conversion story in all history.” William, Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*: Daily Study Bible series, 2nd ed. and reprint (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1962), 71. Many other

¹⁹ Christians were most commonly called followers of “the Way” (cf. Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; cf. also 16:17; 18:25-26). This description appears only in Acts. It was evidently a term used by the early followers of Jesus to denote their movement as the way of life or the way of salvation. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Revised Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 181.

²⁰ The account of Saul’s conversion appears three times in Acts (see also 22:3-21; 26:12-18).

²¹ Saul and his traveling companions see the light, but Saul sees more: the risen Lord Jesus in all his resplendent glory (Acts 9:17, 27; 22:14; 26:16; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8).

²² The double vocative, “Saul, Saul,” is reminiscent of the way God’s voice was heard often in the OT (see Gen 22:11; 46:2; Exod 3:4; 1 Sam 3:4).

²³ In Acts 26:18, Luke adds: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Goads were sharp sticks, used to prod oxen. This proverb appears often in classical writings. It was often used by the Greeks to express the futility of striving against fate or against the gods, and its meaning to Paul on the Damascus road was that it was now futile for him to try any longer to work against Christ, as it would be for an ox to kick against the plowman’s goad.

²⁴ See 1 Cor 15:9; 1 Tim 1:13, 15.

²⁵ See Stephen’s words: “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56).

²⁶ Saul later became known as Paul (see Acts 13:9).

²⁷ See Acts 9:15.

²⁸ See Gal 1:16-19.

²⁹ After his three years in Arabia Paul returned to Tarsus. For the next 8-10 years very little is known about him.

³⁰ See 1 Cor 15:14, 16, 18-19.