

# WEEK 4: The Apostle Paul

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This week I thought I would mix it up a bit and shift to a character study, and no one better to focus on than the Apostle Paul. Next to Jesus, Paul is probably the most important figure in the New Testament and has done more to shape the concepts of Christianity than any other writer. Almost half of the books in the New Testament are attributed to him and 17 of the 28 chapters in the Acts of the Apostles are about Paul (Peter is a distant second with 7), Despite all of that, Paul always meets with a mixed reaction when he is brought up in Bible study conversation. I doubt seriously if anyone would vote him their most favorite Bible character or that he would even make top five!

This is probably due to reasons associated with some text attributed to him that we strongly disagree with, or how arrogant at times he comes across, or that he does not seem to get along with others. While some of this is easy and natural to conclude from the text, other parts are more of a misconception about Paul and his ministry.

Over the next several days, we will explore several stories about Paul and texts written by him to see what insight it might give us into the apostle, as well as the inspiration behind some of the most powerful scriptural text in the entire bible. Listed below are the texts if you want to get ahead!

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## **Monday**

Acts 9:1-9, 17-19

## **Tuesday**

Acts 9:26-30  
Acts 11:19-26

## **Wednesday**

Colossians 3:18  
Ephesians 5:22-24  
I Timothy 2:11-15  
Colossians 3:22-23  
Ephesians 6:5-8

## **Thursday**

Philippians 2:9-11

## **Friday**

Galatians 1:1-6,  
2:14b-16

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# Monday

*Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. . . . So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. (Acts 9:1-9; 17-19)*

This passage is perhaps the most familiar associated with the Apostle Paul, or Saul as he is known here. It is so memorable that we often refer ourselves to any transformative moment, especially spiritual, as our "Damascus Road" experience. If your Bible is like mine, the first section of Acts Chapter 9 is called the "Conversion of Saul." It is such a powerful story that many view it as the moment when Saul's name is changed to Paul. However, his name is not changed till some years later, and it is only mentioned in passing by the author of Acts (13:9). Prior to that he was still known as Saul.

It is somewhat ironic that we make that mistake because calling this a conversion story is also a bit of a mistake. Conversion has both a secular and religious meaning, and the key point is it requires dramatic change. From a religious perspective, the definition alludes to changing one's faith or beliefs. In our 20th century eyes we see that Paul (Saul) had a "conversion" from Judaism to Christianity. The only problem is that Christianity was not yet a religion. In fact, the term "Christian" does not get introduced in the New Testament till later in the book of Acts. The followers of Jesus were still very much Jewish, so Paul was moving from one form of Jewish tradition to another. But then, so did everyone else who acknowledged Jesus as the messiah and the Son of God.

I like to think of this story more as the moment when Paul's eyes were opened to the truth. In fact, in the second part of today's scripture passage, we see that when his eyes were touched by a disciple named Ananias, scales physically dropped from his eyes and he was able to see. I think Paul not only physically regained his sight, he did so spiritually as well. I am reminded of a story my wife tells about when she was a little girl and got her first pair of glasses. She was three and prior to getting glasses she was very timid and reserved, never leaving her mother's side. When she finally put on her glasses, her mom recounts that she just stood there in amazement and said, "the tree isn't fuzzy." She had never left her mother's side because the entire world to her was unnavigable – it was fuzzy. Paul could now see the truth about Jesus, but we will find out tomorrow that just because you can see in front of you does not mean that the path will be easy.

Peace (Shalom)

# Tuesday

*When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. (Acts 9:26-30)*

*But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. 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 associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'. (Acts 11:19-26)*

Almost immediately after Saul had recovered his sight, he began sharing his story with those in Damascus. The book of Acts tells us that he confounded and angered many of the Jews by "proving" that Jesus was the Messiah (9:22). He angered them so much that he had to leave Damascus and head back to Jerusalem. This is where we pick up today's first text.

Before we go too much further, we must back up and explain a few things about Saul. Saul was not born in the region of Israel but his parents were Jewish, and there is also evidence that his father must have been of some stature because he was also a Roman citizen. That made Saul a Roman citizen as well, something that will be important later in the story. Saul grew up studying the Torah like any other Jewish boy and he excelled. At some point, he went to Jerusalem where he studied under one of the premier scribes in the temple (Gamaliel) and soon became part of the religious group known as the Pharisees. Not only was Saul a Pharisee, he was rather zealous in his hatred of the followers of Jesus. We don't know this, but if Saul had been present for Jesus' trial in the Temple, he probably would have been one of those who spat on Jesus and called him names. After Jesus' resurrection Saul gained a reputation as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus and, in fact, was on his way to Damascus to follow up on a lead about some of those "believers of the Way" when the Lord spoke to him in a vision.

Why all the background? For a couple of reasons. First, Saul was very well educated in the Jewish law. He probably would have had most of the Torah memorized and could speak eloquently of the prophets and sacred writings. Secondly, by his actions it would be safe to assume that he was rather proud, maybe even arrogant because of his stature, and he was also probably very aggressive. You don't get to be part of

the Pharisee “hit squad” by being a passive reader and thinker! So now you have all that knowledge and aggression turned 180 degrees fueled by a divine message from the Lord himself! I can only imagine how much of a condescending intellectual Saul must have been in his early sermons and teachings. You can understand how folks might get a bit angry with him and why the disciples, huddled together in Jerusalem, might not (1) trust him and (2) accept him into the group. They end up sending Paul away, partially because he is stirring up so much trouble and also to see how committed he is to this new cause. His new (and only) friend, Barnabas, takes Paul back to his hometown of Tarsus. Our second passage refers to Barnabas’ retrieval of Saul and the start of his public ministry.

There is a fair amount of debate as to how long Saul was in Tarsus and what he did there. Most scholars say it was from 6 to 8 years and while he might have spent some of that time witnessing about Jesus there is no record that he did anything that would have caused him to arouse any attention from local Jewish communities. I like to think that Saul spent this time in study. I have this mental image of Saul reading back through the sacred Jewish text with a new appreciation, formulating his own thoughts and writings as to how Jesus truly came to fulfill the law and the words spoken by the prophets. I am sure he also spent a lot of time in local synagogues continuing to reason and debate the Torah and the Mishnah as well as time in silent prayer and reflection.

What we must take from this episode of Saul’s (Paul’s) life is that clear vision and a call might not always materialize in the timeframe that we would like. Imagine having felt like you were called to do something as a junior in high school, maybe at a youth conference or mission trip, only to realize that you were not able to act on that call till you had been a couple years out of college. It is easy to get frustrated and want to force out your own schedule on things. Be patient and listen to the still small voice of God.

Peace (Shalom)

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## Wednesday

*Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord... (Colossians 3:18)*

*Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. (Ephesians 5:22-24)*

*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2:11-15)*

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, (Colossians 3:22-23)*

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 Render service with enthusiasm ... (Ephesians 6:5-8)*

Today's texts are a major part of why so many Christians are divided on the subject of Paul. Even if you try to explain these scriptures as being a product of their times, it is still hard to excuse Paul and certainly this contributes to him not being on your top 10 of Biblical characters. In three separate passages from what are known to be part of the Pauline epistles are these statements about woman and those who are enslaved: women were placed on earth to have children, and slaves should enjoy their time in bondage. No wonder Paul gets the reputation he does!

But there is a catch. There are several inconsistencies when you look at the full body of Paul's work in the New Testament. Case in point, the book of Philemon. Philemon, like so many of Paul's other writings, is a letter. In this case the letter is to an individual whereas all of Paul's other letters are written to congregations of churches in a particular city or region. Philemon is a short book, only one chapter and stuck between Titus and Hebrews – very easy to miss if you are scanning through the New Testament. I dare say, many of you have probably not read Philemon, but here is why it is a very important text: The letter to Philemon was written by Paul as a plea that Philemon free his slave named Onisemus. Paul begs Philemon to treat Onisemus as not a slave but as a brother in Christ and poses the question: How can a Christian oppress another Christian?

In addition to questions about slavery there are also questions, many more in fact, regarding Paul's view on the role of women in society. Reading these selected passages it would be easy to pass Paul off as a misogynist. The problem is that this is not the view of Paul that is portrayed in his body of work. Paul mentions 27 people by name in his epistles, 10 of them are women. Eleven of those people have special mention, six were men and five women. Paul is the first to make mention of a female apostle (Junia) and refers often to the husband and wife team of Priscilla and Aquila – Priscilla's name always coming first. Six times in his writings Paul refers to hard work in the name of the Lord. Two of those are in reference to himself (he is still the same egotistical Paul) but the other four times are in reference to women.

So why is there so much inconsistency? Was Paul just being nice in all these other references but in the three cited his true self came out? Over the past several decades, scholars now generally believe that many of the epistles attributed to Paul were not actually written by him. That not only are there these inconsistencies, but there are also big differences in writing style and use of specific words and phrases. Of the 13 epistles that are generally attributed to Paul, only 7 are believed to be truly from the hand of Paul. All the others, including Ephesians, Colossians and 1 & 2 Timothy (our scripture references today) are considered pseudo- or post-Pauline, meaning someone else wrote them but signed them as if they were

from Paul. Let me end with something that comes from what is considered one of the definitive writings of Paul, the letter to the churches in Galatia.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:28)

Peace (Shalom)

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## Thursday

*Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)*

Today’s passage may sound familiar to some of you, or at least pieces of it might. It addresses one of the central themes of Paul’s epistles: the idea that Jesus is Lord. In Paul’s letter he refers to Jesus as “Lord” more times than messiah (Christ), Son of God, and Son of Man. That might not seem like such a big deal when we are reading the Bible, but at the time this was a radical idea.

Before we get too far into this concept, we need to set a little bit of background. Scholars believe that Paul’s first letter was written to the church at Thessalonica in about 50 CE (known as the book of 1 Thessalonians). In fact, Paul is believed to have written all 7 of his epistles between 50 and 58 CE, the last probably being the book of Romans. Why is that important?

When we look at the New Testament, it is structured to match the timeline of the story, starting with the birth of Jesus through his ministry, death and resurrection. These stories are recorded in the gospels. Then it shifts to the history of the early church and the letters that were written to churches and people during that time period. Because we read it that way and the format of the Bible is structured that way, we lose sight of when these books were written. The gospel of Mark has been long established as the first gospel and is dated to approximately 70 CE and the last gospel, John, after 100 CE. What that means

is that Paul wrote his letters 10 to 20 years before the first gospel. Let that sink in for a moment, Paul would probably have had access to some of the sayings of Jesus; however, he did not have any of the gospel writings as source material.

So, in reading Paul, we must set what we know from the gospels aside. This is very important when you get to his use of the word "Lord." The Greek word that Paul used (kurios) had several meanings. It was used as a show of respect as slaves referred to their masters as Lord, and teachers might be referred to as Lord to also show respect. More importantly, this Greek word was the word used for the name of God in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, a book called the Septuagint. Jews could not say or write the name of God so the term Adonai was used, which is translated as Lord in English. By calling Jesus "Lord," Paul was saying that Jesus was God. Finally, the term "kurios" was used as a title for Caesar and inferred that Caesar was both a human as well as divine ruler.

Paul is really the first to put it out there that Jesus was the true "kurios" or Lord. By doing so he makes, political (against Caesar), spiritual (as in Adonai), socio-economical (Master) and cultural (Teacher) statements in relationship to who Jesus truly was. He was the teacher to all, the master of all, one with God and more important than any earthly ruler. This would not have only been a radical and revolutionary idea, it was a total novel and fresh concept. Long before any document referred to Jesus as the Son of God or that he was the Messiah, Paul made this amazing statement that oftentimes we use rather lightly and in passing – that Jesus is Lord!

Peace (Shalom)

# Friday

*Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— and all the members of God's family who are with me. To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel (Galatians 1:1-6)*

*'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?' We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. (Galatians 2:14b-16)*

Over the course of his ministry Paul made three separate missionary trips and spent over 10 years traveling and living with different communities throughout Asia Minor and Europe. In each of those communities he helped establish a gathering of believers that came to be known as Christians. Paul would keep in touch with those communities and those churches, as we have seen, by writing letters. Some of the letters were pep talks offering words of encouragement and hope to the people. Such was the case in the letter to the church at Philippi (Philippians) that we looked at yesterday. There were, however, some letters that took a different tone and addressed issues that were dividing the members of the church, and Paul knew he had to act fast. Today's text and theme comes from one such letter, the letter to the churches in Galatia (Galatians).

As you can see in the first passage, Paul doesn't waste time in getting to the crux of the issue. He basically says, "Hey its me Paul – the one JESUS spoke to personally - hope you all there in Galatia are doing ok – I have been praying for you. That being said – WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?!"

Evidently after Paul had left, some Jewish Christians began telling all the Gentiles in the community that in order to stay in the church they had to be circumcised. Their logic was: Jesus was a Jew; this is therefore a Jewish movement, and all Jews are required by the Abrahamic covenant to be circumcised. This led Paul to a response that is one of the major themes of his writings and a prime tenant of the reformed tradition and the Presbyterian church: saved (justified) by grace through faith.

Like the concept of "Jesus is Lord," this one is just as radical. To be justified was a legal term in ancient times and it meant to be found "in the right" – guilty of no doing no wrong. What Paul is saying is that this justification is a gift given freely by God through Jesus and there is nothing we can do to earn it, nor is it a reward for achievement. Not only that, but this gift is given to sinners so there is no need to fulfil the sign of the covenant when Jesus did it for everyone. This is still a radical concept today!

Peace (Shalom)