



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

"Ancestry.paul"

If the church is a building constructed on the foundation of Jesus Christ, Paul the apostle is its primary architect.

He made three long missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire, planting churches where there were none, preaching the Gospel, and giving strength and encouragement to early Christians. Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament Paul is the author of thirteen of them.

He didn't just impact the church. One writer stated, "it may be impossible to overstate Paul's impact on western civilization."

His life was so filled with action and his words so flowing with doctrine that we rarely take time to look at the man himself. What I want to do in this series is take a look at the man in what might be termed "A Harmony of the Life of Saint Paul." I'm indebted to Frank Goodwin who compiled just such a harmony and published it with that title.

What we will do is blend the accounts of Paul in the Book of Acts with certain historical and autobiographical portions in his letters.

We will read the verses pertinent to a time or event in Paul's life and then put them into perspective.

We want also to see ourselves in this - or I should say, to see how God works to make a man or woman of God. Although we might think we pale in comparison to Paul and his accomplishments, God's ways are the same today and His work in and upon and through us is just as powerful, just as wonderful.

A good place to begin is with Paul's ancestry. Listen as I reference then read the pertinent verses.

Acts 21:39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city..."

Acts 22:3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.

Acts 23:34 And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And... he understood that he was from Cilicia,

Second Corinthians 11:22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.

Romans 11:1 I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

Philippians 3:4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so:

Philippians 3:5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;

There's a lot we could focus on but two things rise to the top: Paul was a Jew, a "Hebrew of the Hebrews," who was also quite proud of both his Roman citizenship and his being a resident of Tarsus.

Among Jews his name was Saul. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, the brother of Joseph, specially loved by Jacob since Rachel died after giving birth to him. His name, Saul, came from the most famous Benjamite, Israel's first king.

It's believed he was born somewhere between 5BC and 4AD. He was a contemporary of Jesus.

At least seven of Paul's relatives are mentioned in the New Testament. At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul greets as "relatives" Andronicus and Junia, Jason, Sosipater, and Lucius. In addition Acts mentions Paul's sister and his nephew, who helped Paul when he was in prison (Acts 23:16–22).

Paul was what scholars call a dispersion Jew. *Diaspora* is the English term used to describe the scattering of the Jews from the Promised Land. The diaspora began with the 6th century BC conquest of the ancient Kingdom of Judah, the destruction of the First Temple, and the expulsion of the population. We're reading about it in our Sunday morning studies in Jeremiah.

The Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar allowed them to remain in a unified community in Babylon. Another group of Jews fled to Egypt, where they settled in the Nile delta.

From 597BC onwards, there were three distinct groups of Hebrews: a group in Babylon and other parts of the Middle East, a group in Judea, and another group in Egypt.

Cyrus the Persian allowed the Jews to return to their homeland in 538BC but most chose to remain in Babylon. In a world Jewish population estimated at from three to eight million, about two thirds of the Jews lived outside of the Holy Land.

To his Israelite heritage Paul added the further detail that he was "a Hebrew [born] of Hebrews." It was a specialized term. All Hebrews were Jews but not all Jews were Hebrews. Some were Hellenists.

The conquests of Alexander the Great in the late 4th century BC spread Greek culture and colonization. This process of cultural change was called Hellenization. The aim was to establish a single culture among diverse peoples. To be a Hellenist meant you spoke Greek and adopted the ways of Greek culture.

Some Jews embraced Hellenism; others, the more orthodox, did not.

- The Hebrews attended synagogues where the Scriptures were read and the prayers were offered in Hebrew and they used Aramaic, not Greek, as their daily language.
- The Hellenists spoke Greek and their synagogue services were held in Greek.

A Jew born in a city like Tarsus would be assumed to be a Hellenist but Paul was not. Paul was raised in a strict home observant of the Jewish way of life that maintained a cultural connection with Jerusalem.

This "Hebrew of Hebrews" was also quite the Roman citizen. Paul is not the Roman (or Greek) equivalent of Saul. Neither did he change his name from Paul to Saul after his dramatic conversion. It was his given Roman name. It is likely he had both of these names from birth. It was the practice to have a Roman name, to celebrate Roman heritage, and another name to celebrate your ethnic heritage.

He would have received the name Saul on the eighth day after his birth, at his circumcision.

Tarsus was the capital city of the province of Cilicia. It was located in what is modern-day Turkey on the Mediterranean Sea. It was awarded, by the Roman senate, the privileged standing of *libera civitas*. These Latin words (Latin was the language of the Romans) mean "free city." Such a standing gave the city the right to govern itself.

About 500,000 people lived there. It was a port city with a natural and well-protected harbor.

The prosperity of Tarsus was based on the flax which they grew. Reference is also made in history texts to a local material called *cilicium*, woven from goat's hair, from which were made coverings designed to be weatherproof. According to one source, "the black tents of Tarsus were used by caravans, nomads, and armies all over Asia Minor and Syria."

Paul's trade, that of tentmaker, meant he was engaged in the manufacture of goods made from *cilicium*.

Tarsus was also a university town boasting of great wisdom. Teachers from all over the Roman Empire came to Tarsus as guest lecturers.

Paul was a “citizen” of Tarsus (Acts 21:39). Citizenship was rare in the Roman Empire. Roman citizenship was originally confined to freeborn natives of the city of Rome. Later it was conferred upon others who were not born there. Eventually it could be purchased but at great cost. It was especially rare for Jews to hold Roman citizenship.

The citizens of a city were responsible for its government. Those named citizens were the ones who would assemble to conduct the affairs of the city and make the decisions that affected its corporate life.

Being a Roman citizen had its privileges.

- A Roman citizen could not be condemned or punished without a fair hearing, a right ordinary people did not possess.
- He could not be scourged, which is the reason Paul escaped the beating in Acts 22:25–29.
- A Roman citizen could also appeal his case to the emperor if he felt he was not being treated fairly.

How could you prove you were a citizen? It's an important question because it was a capital offense to claim to be a citizen if you were not one.

There was something called a *diptych*, described as a pair of folding wax tablets that contained a certified copy of birth registration. It was analogous to our passport. How he didn't lose it in, say, a shipwreck is beyond me, but at any rate he could prove he was a citizen.

Just how did Paul's family acquire Roman citizenship? Presumably Paul's father or some other earlier relative had rendered some outstanding service to the Roman Empire. At any rate, there were but a few Roman citizens in Tarsus and they would have been seen as an elite group.

That's a little bit of where Paul came from - his back story.

You and I came from somewhere. We, too, have a back story, and it contributes to who we are in the Lord.

God can and does use anyone. He's on record as saying He uses very few "wise, mighty, or noble" according to the standards of the world. No, He prefers [the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence \(First Corinthians 1:27-29\).](#)

The world would have you believe that a background like I just described is a problem. Descriptors like "foolish," "weak," "base," and "despised" are thought to be demeaning. If you came from a broken home, or if you were in some way abused, or if you lost a loved one at an early age, you're taught that it defines you - even after you come to the Lord.

I'm not saying those things won't affect you; they absolutely do. But the Lord wants to transform you. He is working to conform you into the image of His son, Jesus Christ.

The direction to look, then, is upward, to the Lord, in order to move forward, with the Lord. Don't spend lots of time looking backward.

Take a look at Jesus. He was born under socially questionable circumstances, thought to be illegitimate. It would seem that His earthly father, Joseph, died while Jesus was in His teens. His family were poor, very poor, and living in a village that was often slandered by others.

The wise and the mighty and the noble in our world today would recommend Jesus for therapy!

Let God have your past; let Him heal your past. It may not happen immediately but don't ever think it won't or can't happen without some extra help from the world. The help you need is in the Word - both the written Word and in the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Something else we might glean from Paul's ancestry. Surrounded by Greek culture, his family leading citizens of Tarsus and citizens of Rome, influenced by a university intellectualism and the diversity of peoples coming to and from the port, Paul nevertheless was raised to be a strictly observant Jew - a Hebrew not a Hellenist. We'll see next week that his upbringing was even more restricted in that he was raised to be a Pharisee - the strictest sect of Judaism - spending time as a child in Jerusalem under the teaching of Rabbi Gamaliel.

He was on the fast-track to Jewish stardom. At the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian era, he was already well-known.

I'm sure his family was proud of him - **right up until the time he received Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior!**

I mean, look at all they did to insure he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews." Then in a moment of time he essentially rejected his entire way of living - trying to achieve righteousness by the law - for the power of grace.

It would seem reasonable to assume his family rejected him. He certainly isn't portrayed as being the son and heir of a wealthy Tarsian family as we see him traveling around working with his hands to support himself as a missionary.

Maybe your background wasn't so bad. Maybe you are one of the few who were "wise," "mighty" or "noble." **It can be a hindrance if you are unwilling to give it up to follow Jesus.**

God knows where you came from. He also knows where you're going! Thus could Paul utter the famous words,

Philippians 3:12-14

... but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.