

# The Gospel and God's Righteousness

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(2)

[Romans 1:1-17](#)

## Paul's Credentials: Enslavement to Christ

### The Author

It is impossible to clearly understand the book of Romans without knowing something about its amazing author. Paul was originally named Saul, after the first king of Israel, and, like his namesake, was of the tribe of Benjamin ([Phil. 3:5 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Philippians 3:5 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>5</sup>“Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee.”

He was born in Tarsus ([Acts 9:11 \(NASB\)](#)), a prosperous city just off the northeastern Mediterranean coast in the province of Cilicia, located in what is modern Turkey.

[Acts 9:11 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>11</sup>“And the Lord *said* to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.”

Tarsus was a center of Greek learning and culture, the home of one of the three most outstanding universities in the Roman Empire. Saul may have received training there as well as in Jerusalem under the rabbi Gamaliel ([Acts 22:3 \(NASB\)](#)), who was the grandson of Hillel, perhaps the most famous rabbi of all time.

[Acts 22:3 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>3</sup>“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.”

Because he was said to personify the law, Gamaliel was often referred to as “**the beauty of the law.**” Saul was therefore learned both in Greek literature and philosophy and in rabbinical law.

Following the Mosaic law, Saul was circumcised on the eighth day ([Philippians 3:5 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Philippians 3:5 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>5</sup>“Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee.”

He probably was sent to Jerusalem soon after his thirteenth birthday, the age when Jewish boys became recognized as men. Under Gamaliel, Saul would have memorized and learned to interpret Scripture according to rabbinical tradition, notably that of the Talmud. It was

probably during his stay in Jerusalem that he became a Pharisee. Because his father was a Roman citizen, Saul was born into that citizenship ([Acts 22:28 \(NASB\)](#)), a prized and highly beneficial asset.

[Acts 22:28 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>28</sup>“The commander answered, "I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money." And Paul said, "But I was actually born a citizen.”

He therefore had the highest possible credentials both of Greco-Roman and Jewish society. In keeping with Jewish custom, Saul also learned the trade of his father, which was tent-making ([Acts 18:3 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 18:3 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>3</sup>“And because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.”

In light of the fact that this apostle never encountered Jesus during His earthly ministry; it is likely that he returned to Tarsus after his education in Jerusalem. Because of his outstanding training, he was doubtlessly a leader in one of the leading synagogues of Tarsus, supporting himself by tent-making. By his own account, he was a zealous legalist, a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” totally committed to the law in every detail ([Phil. 3:5-6 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Philippians 3:5-6 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>5</sup>“Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee;  
<sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.”

It was probably while he was back in Tarsus that he began hearing about the new “sect” that was filling Jerusalem, not only with its teaching but also with its converts. Like most of the Jewish leaders in Palestine, Saul was deeply offended by Jesus’ claim to messiahship and dedicated himself to stamping out the presumed heresy. He was still a young man when he came back to Jerusalem, but due to his zeal and natural ability he soon became a leader in persecuting the church. Instead of its softening his heart to the gospel, the stoning of Stephen at first hardened Saul's heart still further, and he “began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison” ([Acts 8:3 \(NASB\)](#)).

Luke reports that Saul was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” ([Acts 9:1 \(NASB\)](#)). He became like a war horse with the smell of battle in his nostrils, snorting out unrelenting fury against everyone and everything Christian. Toward the Christians, he became like the wicked Haman—“the enemy of the Jews” who determined to exterminate every Jew in the vast Persian empire of King Ahasuerus ([Esther 3:8-10 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Esther 3:8-10 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>8</sup>“Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of all other people and they

do not observe the king's laws, so it is not in the king's interest to let them remain.

<sup>9</sup> "If it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who carry on the *king's* business, to put into the king's treasuries."

<sup>10</sup> Then the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews."

Not content with persecuting believers in Jerusalem and Judea, Saul "went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" ([Acts 9:1-2 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 9:1-2 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,

<sup>2</sup> and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Saul was consumed by a passion to imprison and execute Christians, and before going to Damascus, he had hounded Christians in many other "foreign cities" outside Israel (see [Acts 26:11 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 26:11 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> "And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."

At that time, Damascus was a city of perhaps 150,000 people, including many thousands of Jews. It is therefore possible that the "synagogues at Damascus" to which Saul referred could have numbered a dozen or more. Damascus was the capital of Syria and was 160 miles northeast of Jerusalem, requiring at least six days of travel time from one city to the other. But on his way there, just as "he was approaching Damascus,... suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" ([Acts 9:3-4 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 9:3-4 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> "As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;

<sup>4</sup> and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

In his defense before King Agrippa many years later; Paul reported that Jesus then added, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" ([Acts 26:14 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 26:14 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> "And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"

A goad was a long, pointed stick used to herd stubborn livestock such as oxen. To keep the animal moving, he was poked in the flank or just above the heel. In Greek culture the phrase **“hard to kick against the goad”** was a common expression used to indicate opposition to deity, an expression Saul had doubtlessly heard many times while in Tarsus. With that phrase, Jesus was pointing out to Saul that his persecution of Christians was tantamount to opposing God, the very opposite of what he thought he was doing. In abject fear Saul replied to the heavenly voice, **“Who art Thou, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting”** ([Acts 9:5 \(NASB\)](#)). At that moment Saul must have been terrified and shattered—terrified that he was in the very presence of God and shattered by the discovery that he had been assailing God rather than serving Him. He was devastated to realize that the blood he had been shedding was the blood of God’s people.

The Jesus whom his fellow Israelites had ridiculed, beaten, and put to death; the Jesus upon whom Stephen had called as Saul stood by consenting to his death; the Jesus whose followers Saul himself had been imprisoning and executing—That Jesus was indeed God, just as He had claimed! Now Paul stood exposed and helpless before Him, blinded by the dazzling brightness of His revealed majesty.

For several years Saul had been totally engrossed in the annihilation of the church, and had he fulfilled his plan, the church would have died in infancy, drowned in its own blood. If the Lord had not immediately added, **“But rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do”** ([Acts 9:6 \(NASB\)](#)), Saul could very well have expired simply from fear over the enormity of his sin. **Many years later he looked back on that experience and declared,**

**1 Timothy 1:12-15 (NASB)**

<sup>12</sup>**“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service,**

<sup>13</sup>**even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief;**

<sup>14</sup>**and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are *found* in Christ Jesus.**

<sup>15</sup>**It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”**

On that road near Damascus, Saul was marvelously and eternally transformed. Although temporarily blinded and all but speechless, during that experience he submitted his life to Christ. It is likely that Saul was so vehemently bent on destroying Jesus’ followers that no Christian would have been able to present the gospel to him successfully. Only God, by miraculous intervention, could get his attention. He had to be utterly shattered before he would listen to God’s truth. He was so feared by the church that even the apostles would not talk to him when he first asked to visit them. They found it impossible to believe that Saul of Tarsus could be a disciple of Christ ([Acts 9:26 \(NASB\)](#)).

**Acts 9:26 (NASB)**

<sup>26</sup>**“When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the**

**disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.”**

Consistent with his natural zealousness, as soon as Saul regained his sight, was baptized, and had some nourishment after three days without food or drink (see [Acts 9:9 \(NASB\)](#),

[Acts 9:9 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>9</sup>“**And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.**”

—the very synagogues to which he had been given letters from the high priest permitting him to arrest any Christians he found among them!

[Acts 9:20 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>20</sup>“**And immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."**

It is hardly surprising that “those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, 'Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’” ([Acts 9:21 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 9:21 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>21</sup>“**All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and *who* had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’”**

By remarkable divine illumination, Saul was immediately able after his conversion not simply to testify to what had happened to him but to defend the gospel so powerfully that he confounded every unbelieving Jew who argued with him, “**proving that this Jesus is the Christ**” ([Acts 9:22 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 9:22 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>22</sup>“**But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.**”

He was so successful in proclaiming the gospel that soon his former accomplices, along with other unbelieving Jews in Damascus, planned to kill him. In their determination to exterminate this traitor to their cause, they enlisted the political and military support of “**the ethnarch under Aretas the king**” ([2 Corinthians 11:32 \(NASB\)](#)).

[2 Corinthians 11:32 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>32</sup>“**In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me.**”

As Paul himself explains in his letter to the Galatians, it was at this point that he went to Arabia, spending three years there (see [Galatians 1:17-18 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Galatians 1:17-18 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>17</sup>“**Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.**

**<sup>18</sup> Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.”**

It was probably there that the apostle learned much and received direct revelation from the Lord. As he had testified earlier in Galatians, the gospel he preached was **“not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ”** ([Galatians 1:11-12 \(NASB\)](#)).

After that **“divine seminary”** training in Nabatean Arabia, Saul went back to Damascus for a brief time ([Galatians 1:17 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Galatians 1:17 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>17</sup>“Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.”**

It is possible that it was on this second visit that the ethnarch under King Aretas became involved, perhaps because Saul had raised the royal ire by preaching the gospel while in Arabia, which was under the monarch's control. If so, Saul escaped from Damascus a second time, this time by being lowered through the wall in a basket (see [2 Corinthians 11:33 \(NASB\)](#)).

[2 Corinthians 11:33 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>33</sup>“And I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.”**

Only after that three-year period did Saul go to Jerusalem and meet the other apostles. Through the trusting and gracious intercession of Barnabas ([Acts 9:27 \(NASB\)](#)), the apostles finally acknowledged Saul as a true believer and accepted him into fellowship.

[Acts 9:27 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>27</sup>“But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.”**

The exact chronology of this period in Saul's life cannot be determined, but he spent fifteen days in Jerusalem with Peter ([Galatians 1:18 \(NASB\)](#)), at which time he may or may not have communicated with the other apostles.

[Galatians 1:18 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>18</sup>“Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.”**

He soon began preaching and teaching there and was so forceful in **“arguing with the Hellenistic Jews”** that **“they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus,”** his home town ([Acts 9:29-30 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 9:29-30 \(NASB\)](#)

**<sup>29</sup>“And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death.”**

**30 But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.”**

He probably founded churches in Tarsus and in other places in Cilicia, and we know that the Lord later used him to strengthen the churches of that area ([Acts 15:41 \(NASB\)](#)).

[Acts 15:41 \(NASB\)](#)

**41 “And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”**

After Barnabas was sent by the Jerusalem church to organize the church at Antioch of Syria, he ministered there for a period of time and then decided to enlist the help of Saul. After searching out Saul in Tarsus, Barnabas **“brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers.”** It was during this time in Antioch, under the joint ministry of Saul and Barnabas, that **“the disciples were first called Christians”** ([Acts 11:22-26 \(NASB\)](#)).

When the world-wide famine predicted by Agabus occurred, the church at Antioch received contributions from its members for relief of believers in Judea, who were in special need. The offering was sent **“in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders”** at Jerusalem ([Acts 11:28-30 \(NASB\)](#)).

As the church in Antioch grew, other prophets and teachers were raised up, and eventually the Holy Spirit instructed those leaders: **“Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted, prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away”** ([Acts 13:1-3 \(NASB\)](#)). It was at that time that Paul, still called Saul, began his unique ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles.