Life Of Paul Essay, Research Paper

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The life of the Apostle Paul is a very long and complex story. Through much research and thought of an approach, I have found the best way to give an account is to actually recount the life that he led. In this paper I will attempt to give a testimony of how I perceived the life of Paul. In my view, his life consists of four parts: his life before the conversion, the actual conversion, his life through the three renowned missionary journeys, and the testimony he gives throughout. The letters he wrote through this time and the miscellaneous autobiographical information supplied in the scriptures also takes on a large amount of the concentration.

The first area I would like to observe in the life of Paul is his actual life before the conversion. This Jewish Pharisee is first seen or heard of with his Hebrew name Saul (Acts 7:58; 13:9). According to The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, Paul was born in Tarsus in Cilicia. This place of origin is located in Asia Minor or modern southern Turkey. As far as we know, he was born around ten years after Christ. This assumption is gathered since he is referred to as a ‘young man’ at the time of Stephen’s stoning (Act 7:58). We know that Paul’s father was definitely Jewish, but he obviously had been bought or given Roman citizenship. This is shown by Paul making use of the fact that he was born a Roman citizen to give him the right to be tried in Rome by Caesar (Acts 22:25). He was brought up in a devout Jewish family from the tribe of Benjamin. He then received careful instruction in the Jewish law and joined the Pharisees. To add to Paul’s broad upbringing, he called himself a ‘Hebrew of the Hebrew’. He was brought up in accordance with the Law, he was circumcised on the eighth day, and had become zealous to follow every aspect of the Mosaic commands (Phil. 3:5-6). Paul traveled at some stage of his life, probably sometime while he was a teenager, to Jerusalem where he studied under the famous teacher named Gamaliel. We find evidence of this while he spoke to the Jewish leaders of that time: ‘Under Gamaliel 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). Even renowned Jewish teachers were expected to have a certain trade, and so it comes as no surprise that this extensively educated religious leader had also been taught a craft by his father. This trade was being a tent-maker (Acts 18:3). At time to time he mentioned of how he worked to support himself (I Corinthians 4:12; 2 Thess. 3:8 etc.). This gives us evidence in these and other passages that Paul purposely worked so he wouldn’t impose a burden on any that he wished to proclaim the absolutely ‘free’ gospel (1 Cor. 9:16-19). To avoid being classified as another travelling teacher or philosopher who often expected people to support them with food and finances, I believe Paul deliberately worked (1 Thess. 2:3-6).

Being educated as he was and with such a universally acceptable trade, it is likely that Paul had traveled widely even before he became a Christian. He would, of course, have been fluent in Greek and Hebrew or Aramaic (possibly both). He is first encountered in Acts, watching people’s clothing as the crowds stoned Stephen to death for his faith, commitment to Christ, and his desire to promote the gospel. ‘Saul was there giving his approval to his death’ (Acts 7:58-8:1).

Not all of Paul’s life was spent as a great missionary of God. The prior years to his missionary days were spent educating himself, practicing his trade, or persecuting Christians. The latter times before Paul’s conversion were mostly spent persecuting the Christians. From the day of Stephen’s death a great persecution broke out against the followers of Jesus. Saul, as he was known then, had such zealous activity as a Jew that it led him to join the persecutions. He volunteered his services to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. So violent was his persecution that we read: ‘Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison’ (Acts 8:3; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6). In Acts 9:1 it tells of how Saul, ‘breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples’, went to the high priest for letters he could take with him to the synagogues in Damascus in order to pursue the persecution there as well.

This is where we come to the turning point in Paul’s life. It was while he was on his way to Damascus that Acts 9 tells us a bright light from heaven flashed around him, throwing him to the ground and blinding him. While he was still laying on the ground, a voice spoke to him saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ Paul then asked in returned confusion, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ only to receive the frightening words: ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’ (Acts 9:4-5). Saul was therefore instructed to go to Damascus and wait for further instructions. He waited there for three days without eating and drinking. After these three days of complete and total darkness for Saul, he was told to go the house of the Christian Ananias. I think this time was probably a time of fasting and repentance for Saul for we are told when Ananias came to Saul, he found him praying (Acts 9:11). Ananias laid hands on Paul, his sight was restored, he received the Holy Spirit and he was baptized. He then spent several days with the disciples in Damascus, no doubt learning as much as he could about Jesus. Nevertheless, there wasn’t much time for learning since he ‘at once began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God’ (Acts 9:20). Although new and inexperienced with the idea of preaching about Jesus Christ, his extraordinary theological understanding coupled with the complete change in his perspective on Christ, enabled him to ‘baffle the Jews’ in Damascus ‘by proving that Jesus is the Christ’ (Acts 9:22).

After some amount of time, the Jews became enraged with the instant change of Paul insisted on a plot to assassinate him. He escaped by night and, eventually, came back to Jerusalem. It was hard to meet with the disciples though for they had become afraid of Paul. This is where Barnabas came into the picture. Barnabas took Paul in and brought him to the apostles who gave him their approval. Paul then continued to preach until his life was threatened once again. The disciples then took him to Caesarea where he boarded a boat for Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30; Gal. 1:18-24). This is the end of the conversion experience for Paul. Paul himself recounted this conversion experience on two other occasions. In the first instance in Acts 22 it was following his arrest in Jerusalem when he asked to be allowed to speak to the crowds. The second instance is recorded in Acts 26 when Paul was speaking in his own defense before King Agrippa.

This is where we first encounter the concept of Paul being called to the Gentiles. Paul made mention of this special calling of God to a ministry among the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:8;1 Tim. 2:7). Although Peter was called to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles, the Bible tells clearly that they both preached whenever, wherever, and to whoever would listen. Paul in fact usually went first to the synagogue in each town he visited.

This is when we move into the famous missionary journeys. The first missionary journey was probably made sometime between AD 47 and AD 48. Paul and Barnabas went to Barnabas’ home country of Cyprus. Right across the island they preached. When they reached the town of Pathos, Paul was given the opportunity to preach the gospel to the proconsul of Sergius Paulus. When a certain Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus questioned and rejected Paul, he made him blind. Then the proconsul believed, ‘for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord’ (Acts 13:12). This conversion might have been the final confirmation for Paul and his Gentile ministry. From this point onwards Saul was called by his Latin name Paul (Acts 13:9). From Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas set sail for Perga in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It was when they arrived there that John Mark who had been traveling with them, left the group and returned to Jerusalem. They then traveled north to Pisidian Antioch. This is where the confrontation with the Jews about preaching to the Gentiles arose. The Jews grew jealous and began to blaspheme, so Paul told them that they were to be told about the Gospel first, but since they rejected it when they were then he would now tell the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas were shortly run out of the city by the Jews.

The next stop was east Iconium. Then they went south to Lystra. This was one of the first widely known healing for Paul. In Lystra Paul healed a crippled man who had no use of his since birth. The people there began to worship Paul and Barnabas saying the gods are here with us. They named Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes”. Paul and Barnabas got word of this though and tore their clothes. They spoke to the crowds and revealed where the healing was from and said we are mere mortals (Acts 14:15). The Jews from Antioch then arrived and stoned Paul and drug him out of the city ’supposing that he was dead’ (Acts 14:19).

They then went on the Derbe before retracing their steps and sailing back to Antioch from Attalia. Back in Antioch some teachers arrived from Judea arguing the point of true salvation was dependent upon circumcision. The church of Antioch then decided to send the two back to Jerusalem for the famous Jerusalem Council with the other apostles.

This meeting was attended by the Christian apostles and the leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35). The apostles then debates and dug into the subject of circumcision in which Paul had a large part of course. He insisted that God had made no partiality between anyone so who were they to start. Paul’s stand for the universal significance of the gospel message had been vindicated.

After this they decided to embark on the second missionary journey. This journey lasted from around AD 49 to AD 52 (Acts 15:36-18:22). This journey covered from Asia Minor into southeastern Europe as well. This began with the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas concerning John Mark. So the two separated. Paul took Silas north with him to Antioch in Syria, on to Tarsus and back through the recently founded churches in Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. Barnabas and John Mark went on their way to Cyprus to continue work there.

While is Lystra, Paul was introduced to a man who became one of his closest friends, Timothy. Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father. So Paul, being concerned about the Jewish witness of Timothy, urged him to be circumcised. It was one thing for a Jew to be circumcised in order better to reach his own people with the gospel, but altogether another to enforce circumcision on Gentiles based on some false understanding that they needed to be ‘Jews’ in order to be proper Christians! The next part of the journey was into new territory. They made an overland trip to Troas (Acts 16:7). This is where Paul had a vision of a man calling him to come and minister in Macedonia. So they moved on and crossed into the Greek province of Macedonia where they preached in Neapolis, Phillipi, Thessalonica and Berea. The time spent in Phillipi was where they met Lydia of Thyatira. She believed along with her household, down by the river, and Paul and Silas stayed in her home. The next day Paul cast a spirit out the young slave-girl and made the girls owners furious. Paul and Silas were thrown in jail. That night while singing hymns, an earthquake shook the gates loose and released them. The guard was about to kill himself for letting them get away when Paul said ‘here we are’ and went back in. Paul told the guard how to be saved and he and his household were. The next day they were released because of their Roman citizenship.

From there they set sail south and preached in Athens and then to Corinth, where he stayed for 18 months, before crossing back to Ephesus in Asia Minor and on to Caesarea, Jerusalem and back to Antioch.

This journey’s highlights were numerous. The churches founded during the first journey were settling down well and more and more were added to their number (Acts 16-19). In Athens, Paul had seen at least a few conversions while debating with the greatest philosophers of the age. Back in Corinth, Paul gained a close friendship with Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18: 1-3). They accompanied him from Corinth over to Ephesus where they helped Apollos understand more of the truth of the gospel. Paul meanwhile stopped just briefly in Ephesus before returning to Caesarea and Jerusalem where he greeted the church and then returned once more going to Antioch.

Paul stayed a while in Antioch before leaving for his third missionary journey. This trip took place at some time around AD 53 through AD 57 (Acts 18:23-21:16). On this trip Paul once again traveled north and west overland revisiting the churches in Galatia and Phrygia (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia). He finally arrived in Ephesus and encountered some disciples. They had simply received the Baptism of John the Baptist, so Paul informed them of Jesus Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit, they were immediately baptized ‘into the name of the Lord Jesus’ and the spirit came upon them (Acts 19:1-7). In Acts 19:20 we find an accurate summarization of this ministry period. “In this way he word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.’

This was the period when the great riot occurred in Ephesus or the temple to Artemis (1 Cor. 15:32; Rom. 16:3-4; 2 Cor. 1:8-11). Paul then sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead to Macedonia. Paul soon after sailed over to Macedonia retracing his earlier ministry through Phillipi, Thessalonica and Berea. From there he set sail stopping a various ports on the way south including Miletus where he met the elders of the Ephesian church. The last significant port on the journey was at Tyre. There the prophet Agabus warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem because his life would be in danger. The prophecy was to be fulfilled though.

Paul went back to Jerusalem and just like the prophecy said he was arrested because of the antagonism of the Jews. This time was very hectic for Paul. He shuffled between meeting and testifying in front of the Saducees and the Pharisees, being taken to Caesarea to present the letter to the governor and give a defense before Felix, and then on to Rome when he would be tried before Caesar. After the trial, Paul was placed on house arrest in Rome where it is believed he wrote most of the epistles. He lived there preaching until his release. Then he traveled to Spain for a short time. He was then rearrested and taken back to Rome. Tradition has it that Paul died in Rome a martyr at the hands of Nero around AD 67.

Lastly, the writings of Paul carry on his great missionary life and journeys. The order of these writings and the origin are some mysteries. The early and major epistles include Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. The prison epistles include Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Then there are the pastoral epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Below is an outline of the order and dates I believe to be closest to the mark:

Galations – 48 AD (Written before Jerusalem Council because there is no mention of it in the book.)

1 & 2 Thessalonians – 51 AD

1 & 2 Corithians – 56 AD

Romans -57 AD

Collosians – 60 AD

Philippians -60-62 AD (Rome imprisonment most accurate origin because of freedom to preach and spread the word.

Philemon – 60-62 AD

Paul’s life is a very complex and interesting subject. I have merely tried to cover a basic overview. This attempt is by no means a complete biography of Paul’s life. This is simply a summary of the accomplishments and landmarks his mission left behind for all of us.

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