

## **The Significance of the Apostle Paul**

We must never underestimate the unparalleled significance of the Apostle Paul.

It is not an exaggeration to say that except for our Lord Jesus Christ, he was surely the most significant and influential man that ever lived.

Monod describes him as;

*'Apart from our Saviour... the greatest benefactor of the human race'.*

Professor F. F. Bruce describes him as;

*'Paul is one of the most significant figures in the history of civilisation'.*

Another describes him as;

*'One of the most profoundly significant men that ever lived.'*

Another as;

*'One of the outstanding makers of the history of mankind.'*

James Denney describes him;

*'He is the most important figure in Christian history. He did more than any of the apostles to win the Christian religion its place in the life of the world, and he has done more than any of them in always winning back that place again when it seemed in danger of being lost. Evangelical revival in personalities so powerful as Luther, Wesley and Chalmers has always been kindled afresh at the flame which burns inextinguishable in his testimony to Christ.'*

Karl Barth speaks of him as one who;

*'Veritably speaks to all men of every age.'*

Anthony C. Dean, Canon of Windsor in his *St Paul His Life and Letters*, comments;

*'The influence of Paul the Apostle upon the history of mankind probably exceeded that at any other individual in any age. At the time of his conversion, Christianity was a nameless creed, accepted only by a small and inconspicuous group within the Jewish church. By the time of his martyrdom, some 30 years later, it had become a world religion, embodied in an independent organisation. In this form it was destined to change the whole outlook on life of its adherents, to revolutionise their moral code, to influence every social institution and to reshape every political system. The consequences of this transformation have endured for 2000 years.'*

Gerhardus Voss says of Paul's writings reveal;

*'The genius of the greatest constructive mind ever at work on the data of Christianity.'*

The Pauline Eschatology page 149. Quoted by R. L. Reymond p 17

James D. G. Dunn, referring to claims that Paul is the greatest theologian of all times affirms;

*'Paul's status within the New Testament Canon in itself gives Paul's theological writings the pre-eminence which overshadows all the Christian theologians who followed.'*

The Theology of Paul the Apostle p 2

James Stalker says that it is hard to find men of such intellectual capacity combined with the practical and organisational abilities of Paul. He continues;

*'He was not only the greatest thinker, but also the very finest worker the church ever possessed.'*

We might say that Paul's great calling was to explain the meaning of the cross.

*'There was one great subject especially which Christ had to leave un-explained i.e.. His own death. He could not fully explain it before it had taken place. This became the leading topic of Paul's thinking.... To show why it was needed and what were its blessed results.'*

The Life of St Paul p 15

Stalker then gives us this description of Paul's character;

*'There never was such singleness of eye and wholeness of heart. There never was such superhuman and untiring energy. There never was such an accumulation of difficulties victoriously faced and of sufferings cheerfully borne for any cause. In him Jesus Christ went forth to evangelise the world, making use of his hands and feet, his tongue and brain and heart, for doing the work which in his bodily presence he had not been permitted by the limits of his mission to accomplish.'*

Ibid p 17

## The Life of St Paul

St Paul was born about the same time as our Lord, in the city of Tarsus, in the province of Cilicia, in the south east of Asia Minor now Turkey.

Paul of course was a Jew by nationality. His family was part of a large number of Jews scattered throughout the ancient world known as the Jews of the Dispersion, or Diaspora.

In New Testament times there were more Jews living outside Judea than living in it, as is still the case today.

The first dispersion of Jews came about by the scattering of the Ten Tribes of the Northern Kingdom, [See II Kings 15:19]. These were first taken captive by the Assyrians and were eventually absorbed into the populations of the extensive Assyrian empire and never emerged as a body in history again. Investigation into what became of the Ten Tribes has so far come to nothing.

The Jews of the Diaspora were those of Judea, the Southern Kingdom. These were carried away as captives to Babylonia. After a period of 70 years many of them returned, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah but others remained scattered in the various parts of the Babylonish Empire and beyond, in Persia, Egypt, and Asia Minor etc. By the time of the Roman Empire the dispersion of the Jews was extensive, throughout the newly conquered territories. It is estimated that about 40,000 to 50,000 Jews in Paul's day established themselves in the city of Rome and others eventually moving into other parts of Europe.

From Acts chapter II we learn that Jews, devout men out of every nation under heaven, were in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost.

Dean Farrar comments on the dispersion of the Jews;

*‘ This dispersion of the Chosen People was one of those vast and worldwide events in which the Christian cannot but see the hand of God so ordering the course of history as to prepare the world for the revelation of his Son.*

*The immense field covered by the conquest of Alexander the Great gave to the civilised world a unity of language, without which it would have been, humanly speaking impossible for the earliest preachers to have made known that good tidings in every land to which they traversed.*

*The rise of the Roman Empire created a political unity which reflected in every direction the doctrines of the new religion.*

*The dispersion of the Jews prepared vast multitudes of Greeks and Romans for the unity of a pure morality and a monotheistic faith. The Gospel emanated from the capital of Judea; it was preached in the tongue of Athens; it was diffused through the empire of Rome: the feet of its earliest missionaries traversed, from the Euphrates to the Pillars of Hercules, the solid structure of undeviating roads by which the Roman legionaries-‘those massive hammers of the whole world’ had made straight in the desert a highway for our God. Semite and Aryan had been unconscious instrument in the hands of God for the spread of the religion which, in its first beginnings, both alike detested and despised. The letters of Hebrew and Greek and Latin inscribed above the cross were a prophetic and unconscious testimony of three of the world's noblest languages to the underlying claims of him who suffered to obliterate the animosities of the nations which spoke them, and to unite them altogether in the one great family of God.’*

#### The Life and Work of St Paul p 83

Paul's ancestors had migrated to Asia Minor and settled in Tarsus of Cilicia [modern Tersoos] on the River Cyndus, ten miles inland, a thriving river port. It is estimated that half a million people lived in the city in Paul's day.

Paul was of the Tribe of Benjamin [Philippians 3:5] part of the Southern Kingdom, Judea. Paul was a Pharisee and a Roman citizen. { Acts 22:25 – 28 }

*‘How St Paul's father or grandfather obtained the highly prized distinction of Roman citizenship we have no means of ascertaining. It certainly did not belong to any one as citizen of Tarsus, for if so Lycias [ The commander of the Roman garrison of the fortress of Antonia, who took Paul into custody, during the riot in Jerusalem Acts 22;28] knowing that St Paul came from Tarsus, would have known also that he had the rights of a Roman citizen.’*

#### Farrar p 31

It was a remarkable Providence that Paul was born in Tarsus ‘a citizen of no means city’. Because of its geographical situation it had many contacts with the wider world through trade. It was also University City indeed one of the three principal university cities of that time, competing with Alexandria and Athens. It was a city about 1000 years old.

Stalker comments;

*Who does not see how fit a place this was of the apostle of the Gentiles to be born in? As he grew up, he was unawares being prepared to encounter men of every class and the race, to sympathise with human nature in all its varieties and to look with tolerance upon the most diverse habits and customs. In afterlife he was always a lover of cities. Whereas his master avoided Jerusalem and loved to teach on the mountain side on the shores of the lake, Paul was constantly moving from one great city to another. Antioch Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, Rome, the capitals of the ancient world were the scenes of his activity. The words of Jesus are redolent in the country, and team with pictures of its still beauty or it's homely, toil, lilies of the field, the sheep following the shepherd, the sower in the furrow, the fishermen drawing their nets. But the language of Paul's impregnated with the*

*atmosphere of the city and alive with the tramp and hurry of the streets. His imagery is taken from scenes of human energy and monuments of cultivated life.... The soldier in armour, the athlete in the arena, the building of houses and temples, the triumphal procession of the victorious general. So lasting are the associations of the boy in the life of the man.'*

The Life of St Paul, James Stalker p 21

See also Dean Farrar's note on Paul's omission of illustrations from nature. He is commenting on the text in Acts 14: 17

*'Left not himself without witnesses in that he did good and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness'.*

*'Apart from this allusion, I cannot find a single word which shows that Paul had even the smallest susceptibility for the works of nature. There are souls for which the burning heat of some transfusing purpose calcines every other thought, every other desire, every other admiration; 'And St Paul's was one. His life was absorbingly, if not solely and exclusively the spiritual life-the life which is utterly dead to every other interest of the groaning and travailing creation, the life hid with Christ in God. He sees the universe of God only as it is reflected in the heart and life of man. It is true as Humboldt has shown in his Cosmos-that what is called the sentimental love of nature is a modern rather than an ancient feeling. In St Paul, however, this indifference to the outer world is neither due to his antiquity nor to his Semetic birth, but solely to his individual character. The poetry of the Old Testament is full of the tenderness and life of the pastures of Palestine. In the discourses and conversations of our Lord we find frequent allusions to the loveliness of the flowers, the joyous carelessness of birds, the shifting winds, the red glow of morning and evening clouds. And St Paul's inobservance of these things-for the total absence of the remotest allusion to them by way of even passing illustration amounts to a proof that they did not deeply stir his heart--was doubtless due to the expulsive power and paramount importance of other thoughts. It may, however, have been due also to that early training which made him more familiar with crowded assemblies and thronged bazaars than with the sights and sounds of nature. It is at any rate remarkable that the only elaborate illustration which he draws from nature, turns not on a natural phenomena but an artificial process, and that even this process-if not absolutely unknown to the ancients-was the exact opposite of the one most commonly adopted.'*

*'The reader will recall the analogues case of St Bernard riding all day along the Lake Geneva, and asking in the evening where it was; of Calvin showing no traces of delight in the beauties of Switzerland; and of Whitfield who seems not to borrow a single impression or illustration from his 13 voyages across the Atlantic and his travels from Georgia to Boston'*

The Life and Work of St Paul p 15

### Paul's Background

Paul was born into an environment that was rich and varied. Its chief influence of course was the religion of the Hebrews. But it was also touched by the civilisation of the Greeks and the political and administrative genius of the Romans.

### Paul's Greek Inheritance

His birthplace Tarsus was a large and prosperous city and a river port. Intellectually and aesthetically it was a Greek city and a university town. It also showed its Greek ethos in its literature and in its sports and games.

The influence of Greek culture is evidence in Paul's quotation of three Greek poets.

Menander in 1 Corinthians 15: 33

*'Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners'*

Epimenedes in Titus 1: 12

*'One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, that the Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies.'*

It was Clement of Alexandria who told us that the quotation came from Epimenedes. Epimenedes was born in Crete in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, and is said to have lived 299 years, during 57 of which he was asleep receiving the inspiration that determined his future career.

From Epimenedes and Aratus in Acts 17:28...

*'For in him we live, and move, and have our being even as certain of your own poets have said, for we are also his offspring'.*

*'In him we live and move and have our being'*. This is a quotation from Epimenides the Cretan [c 596 BC], As we deduce from Clement of Alexandria and other sources. In Titus I:12 another line occurs *'Cretans are always liars'*, and it is from Clement's comment on this verse that we can state the authorship of Paul's quotation.

*'As certain also of your own poets have said, for we are also his offspring'*. This quotation comes from the poet Aratus who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and was a fellow citizen of Tarsus. It is from his *'Phainomena 5'* where Aratus is following Cleanthes in the *'Hymn to Zeus'*.

Paul also borrows illustrations from the Greek games; running, wrestling, the arena. He also used Greek and Roman ideas illustrating the process of Law especially the Roman custom of adoption.

#### Paul's Roman Background

The Mediterranean at the time of Paul was a Roman lake. One sailing from Palestine to Gibraltar would have the Roman Empire on both sides practically all the way. To the south the Roman dominions of North Africa, and to the north the whole of Asia Minor and all Europe south of the Danube and west of the Rhine. It reached all the way to Britain. Westward it was bounded by the Atlantic and eastward by the Euphrates.

Paul valued his position as a Roman citizen. Within the Empire the Jews claimed special treatment as adherents of a *religio licita* [a permitted religion]. Paul was additionally glad to accept whatever privileges he could, and took advantage of his Roman citizenship to gain freedom for the Gospel.

G. G. Findlay comments:

*'He had the Roman genius of the statesman and organiser. He planted His churches by preference in Roman colonies, Pisidian Antioch, Philippi, Corinth etc. It was to Rome that Paul addressed his most extensive and complete epistle i.e. the Epistle to the Romans. It was ultimately towards Rome, the centre of the Empire that all his missionary endeavours tended towards. The climax of the Acts of the Apostles is significantly Paul's arrival in Rome. It was only when at last he had made his defence and delivered his message before the Imperial Court that he the teacher of the Gentiles in the faith could say;*

*'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith'*

II Timothy 4:7

Paul had an ability to speak with relevance to the people amongst whom he lived, yet he did not marry the spirit of the age.

*'He, who marries the spirit of the age, will be a widower tomorrow.'* Dean Inge.

Findlay refers to Paul as a Roman gentleman.

*'His courteous dignity and bearing enabled him worthily to stand before magistrates and Kings.*

Acts 9: 15

*'But the Lord said unto him, go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.'*

He commanded the respect of governors like Sergius Paulus and Porcius Festus, and the deference and goodwill of Julius the centurion in whose charge he voyaged to Rome. There too as 'an ambassador in chains', he gained wide influence and his presence greatly stimulated and advanced the Christian cause.

Whilst in prison in Rome, Paul gained some of his loftiest conceptions of the nature and destiny of the universal Church.

*'Of his Gentile connections along with Jewish antecedents, the apostle was thinking when he spoke of God as 'having marked me out from my mother's womb' [Gal 1: 15] for the rabbinical student of Jerusalem was first a Jewish boy in the streets of a heathen city. St Paul's insight into the moral working of idolatry, and his ready appreciation of Gentile sentiment, speaks of this. He is everywhere at home in the synagogues of the Dispersion. In the Graeco Asiatic Tarsus where the products of East and West met, and ships of all countries lay at its wharfs – a place to stir in an impressionable child, thoughts and dreams of the wide world, and to implant an instinctive appetite for mixing with all sorts of men. In Paul's nature, Greek versatility was blended with Jewish tenacity'*

G. G. Findlay Hastings Dictionary of the Bible p 698

#### Paul's Jewish Background

Paul's Jewish religion and moral background obviously played a most significant and vital part in the work he was called to do as a Christian. His experiences a citizen of Tarsus, and as a Roman all played an important part, but his Jewish heritage and training was indispensable. It is said that the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. The Old Testament is the prophecy and the New Testament is the fulfilment.

God raised up Paul, a man saturated in the teaching of the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament and a man who was uniquely able to see and grasp and explain the significance of its fulfilment in Christ. Particularly the meaning of the cross, in the light of the Old Testament sacrifices and the ritual of the Tabernacle.

His Jewish background and rabbinical teaching enabled him to fulfil his destiny as the master theologian of the Christian age. It also enabled him to become under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit the principal writer of the New Testament. 14 epistles are attributed to his name.

It was here also that he would have gained and knowledge of those truths that lie at the heart of Judaism and of Christianity i.e.

1. *God is one.*

2 *God is holy and righteous in all his ways.*

3 *God is the creator and upholder of all things.*

4 *God is sovereign and Lord and king over all.*

5. *God is everlasting, without beginning and without end.*

6. *God intervenes and superintends and acts in the creation he has made.*

7. *Moreover that man is made in God's image and likeness and that man in his own nature reflects the divine personality.*

8. *That history is the movement of the human race under the hand of God towards the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose and plan.*

Paul was not the inventor of Christianity; he was however the unique individual raised up to set out for us the teaching of the Old Testament and the Life and Death of Our Lord, showing to us their true meaning and context.

Paul trained as a Pharisee

Without going into every detail of this, a point to note is the Paul was not brought up in as a liberal Jew.

According to Acts Paul went at a very early age [between 13 and 16] to Jerusalem and received instruction at the feet of Gamaliel.

Gresham Machen adds;

*'There is not the slightest evidence, therefore, for supposing that Paul spent his early years in an atmosphere of liberal Judaism—a Judaism really though unconsciously hospitable to notions and predisposed to relax the strict requirements of the Law and breakdown the barriers that separated Israel from the Gentile world. Whether such liberal Judaism even existed in Tarsus we do not know. At any rate, if it did exist, the household of Paul's father was not in sympathy with it. Surely the definite testimony of Paul himself is here worth more than all modern conjectures. And Paul himself declares that he was in language and in spirit a Jew of Palestine rather than that the Dispersion, and as touching the Law a Pharisee.'*

'The Origin of Paul's Religion' Gresham Machen p 47

*'Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee.'*

Philippians 3: 5-6

Paul the Pharisee discovered the impotence of the law as a means of justification and acceptance with God. He wrote 'through the law I died to the law'. Also that the law was 'a schoolmaster to bring me to Christ.' Paul's legalistic upbringing and training was an essential negative preparation for his conversion and apostleship.

Positively it grounded him in the essential doctrines of the Old Testament, the doctrine of God, his holiness and majesty, the doctrine of man, his fallenness and his redeemability, and also the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

James Stalker comments on Paul's time at college in Jerusalem:

*'Not all who are sent to college by their parents to prepare for life conduct themselves as the apostle Paul. The path of youth in every city of the world is beset with temptations which may ruin life at its very commencement. Some of the greatest teachers of the Church, such as St Augustine, have had to look back on half their life blotted with vice or crime. No such fall defaced Paul's early years. Whatever struggles with passion may have raged in his own heart, his conduct was always pure. Jerusalem was no very favourable place in that age for virtue. It was the Jerusalem against whose external sanctity, but internal depravity, our Lord had a few years afterwards, hurled such withering invectives; it was the very seat of hypocrisy, where an able youth might easily have learned how to win the rewards of religion, while escaping its burdens. But Paul was preserved amidst these perils, and could afterwards claim that he had lived in Jerusalem from the first in all good conscience'*

The Life of St Paul p 28

The Name 'Paul'

Paul's parents originally gave him the name Saul. The name meant, 'asked for', 'sought', 'inquired'. They probably named him after the first Jewish king, King Saul who was also of the tribe of Benjamin [II Samuel 9:1 - 2]. It was at the time that Saul and Barnabas were on their first missionary journey that Saul's name was changed to Paul.

*'Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him.'*

This change probably came about because the name Paul was more suitable to one exercising a ministry amongst the Gentiles. In Hebrew it means 'extraordinary, wonderful, one who stands tall [not necessarily in height], strong willed.'

Paul is generally regarded as being a man of small stature but he certainly was not mentally emotionally or physically or spiritually weak. See for example II Corinthians 10: 10.

Considering his ability to confound the Jews with his Old Testament reasoning, he was a man of extraordinary and wonderful ability, a man of great determination and strong will.

Did Paul see our Lord Jesus in the Flesh before His Crucifixion?

We cannot exclude the possibility that Saul Tarsus actually saw Jesus of Nazareth in the days of his earthly ministry. He may even have seen the crucifixion. The crucifixion certainly stands between the two points of time when we know that Saul was in Jerusalem and going up to the school of Gamaliel. He was certainly present at the martyrdom of Stephen. The fact that he was a rising member of the Pharisaic party and also a member of the Sanhedrin, all pointed to the conclusion that he was in Jerusalem for some considerable period of time. If the Church historian Harnack is right in saying that the interval between the crucifixion and conversion of Saul was only about 12 or 18 months, then the probability is increased that Saul was in Jerusalem at the time of our Lord's trial and crucifixion.

That Paul had at least seen Jesus, and that he remembered it is one of the possible interpretations of II Corinthians 5: 16;

*'Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more'*

Lessons from the Early Life and Preparation of the Apostle Paul

*'We must never represented God's choice of Saul for the task to which he called him as God having been reduced to look around, somewhat helplessly, for the best man to do a specific job he had in mind. If God wanted a man to do the particular job that Paul did and to write the specific letters that Paul wrote, he prepared a Paul throughout his early life to be that particular man. Paul himself realised this [God] set me apart from birth [for this task] Gal 1:15 see also Isaiah 49:1-2; Jer 1: 5; Luke 1:13 -17.*

*In the same way God is even now preparing and equipping certain men and women, unknown to them, to accomplish great works for him.'*

Paul Missionary Theologian Robert L Reymond p 54

*'It is a matter of common experience, that the lessons of youth often live for a time dormant and unnoticed, till they are suddenly kindled into flame by some electric stroke from without? The miraculous appearance on the way to Damascus produced in St Paul a change far greater indeed but analogous to that which the more striking incidents of life have produced on many another. It flashed a new light on vast stores of experience laid up unconsciously in the past. It quickened into energy influences long forgotten and seemingly dead. The atoms of his nature assumed a fresh combination. The lightning fused the apostle's character and moulded it into a new shape, and the knife of the torturer was forged into the sword of the Spirit.'*

Biblical Essays J P Lightfoot p 211