

I was born with the name “Saul” in honor of Israel’s first king, and shared his erratic temper. Later, my friends called me by my Roman name, Paul, to help differentiate my life as the man who persecuted Christians from the man who led people to become Christians. My close friend and publicity agent, Barnabas, claims he led the campaign for the name change. He could change people’s minds about anything.

I look at you and am full of envy. Not because you are good-looking, which you are. Not because you smell good, which you do. Not because you have many earthly goods, which you have. I envy you because.... eyeglasses. Invented in the 13th century, unfortunately for me. As was common, my eyesight started failing in my early thirties. I had to start having people read to me and write for me. The scrolls were too precious to waste on my increasingly large handwriting.¹ Good thing I memorized much of the Old Testament as a young man so I didn’t have to own my own copies.

You don’t really know very much about me up to the point of my failing eyesight. I have not established any churches yet, have not written any letters or books yet, and have not gone through the unpleasant maturing processes of beatings, starvation, and rejection. I have made a lot of progress, but Barnabas assures me that I have plenty of work left to do.

A Roman citizen born in the city of Tarsus, I was sent to Israel at an early age to study with Gamaliel. I wanted the intellectual challenge, but probably I was too young to leave my family. No matter how hard I tried, it wasn’t enough to please my parents. No matter how smart I was, I wasn’t smart enough to please my teachers. No matter how much I followed the laws of Moses and the Pharisees, it

¹ Galatians 6:11

wasn't enough to satisfy God. A vicious cycle of effort and anger and low self-esteem. Maybe you've experienced a cycle like that. I was the angriest young man in Israel.

That's why the Christians were such perfect targets. They seemingly broke the laws of Moses and blasphemed God, so I had absolute justification for taking out my anger on them. The more I persecuted the Christians, the more famous I became, the more my anger was fed. Vicious acts of violence resulted in fame and righteousness. I perfected the art of having Christians respond to my questions in such a way that they were seemingly blaspheming God, which made them subject to capital punishment. Christians all over the world began to fear me. Me! They all began to fear me! For the first time in my life, the harder I tried, the more approval I got... from my peers.

There is another thing in your lives that I envy, Country music. We had music, but nothing like that. I was looking for love in all the wrong places, and didn't even know it. Then, I saw the light. Literally. Upon receiving approval of the High Priest, I went on my way to Damascus in Syria to hunt down the Christians there. I was in a hurry, so I figured my companions and I could travel the 200 miles in less than ten days. The closer to Damascus, the angrier I got. Those blaspheming Christians were spreading like wildfire in dry summer.

Near the outskirts of Damascus, Whammo! A light hit me with such intensity I was knocked to my knees.² Then the kindest, most gentle voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" I knew...I knew in a heartbeat that the Christians were right... and I was wrong. Then, I said the stupidest thing ever, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice got even more gentle and kind, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

My companions led me into town, I was blind for three days and didn't eat or drink a thing. I just prayed. I didn't know it then, but the Lord was preparing me for the next step. He had been preparing me all of my life. Across town, another

² Acts 9:1-4

man, Ananias, was being prepared. Not Ananias the husband of Sapphira who was killed by the Holy Spirit, or Ananias the High Priest, but Ananias of Damascus, a disciple of Jesus.

In a vision, the Lord told Ananias to go to Straight Street and ask for Saul of Tarsus, for Saul had seen a vision of a man named Ananias who would come place hands on him and restore his sight. Ananias was terrified. He questioned the Lord, he did not want to come. Then the Lord declared my entire future to Ananias. He said, "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Ananias came to the house, laid hands on me. I was filled with the Holy Spirit, and something like scales fell from my eyes, and I could see again. I was immediately baptized and the Lord began to show me how much I was going to suffer on his behalf. OK with me, since I was now his slave, and slaves take on the identity of their masters.³

Remember how the apostles got to spend three years with Jesus? The Holy Spirit decided I needed to do the same thing before starting my career as a preacher. And, He probably wanted my reputation as a persecutor to fade. The Holy Spirit led me into the desert and, just like the first apostles, I got three years of revelation straight from Jesus.⁴ For the first time, I understood how the Old Testament Scriptures were pointing toward Jesus and how all men could be reconciled to God. I learned that salvation came through faith and grace, not by following the law. It was... such a time of peace and comfort that I wanted to stay forever. But Jesus had an entirely different plan in mind.

I went back to Damascus and began sharing the Gospel. After three years with Jesus, I understood the Scriptures in an entirely new way. And I already knew how to debate with the finest rabbis in the world. I could destroy anybody who

³ Acts 9:5-19

⁴ Galatians 1:11-24

wanted to argue with me. It made those Jews in Damascus so mad that they tried to kill me. How deliciously ironic that the Christians that I had come to kill had to lower me down through the city walls in a basket to escape the angry Jews.⁵ Some probably thought they should just let the Jews stone me... like I did Stephen.

I returned to Jerusalem because I needed to meet the other apostles and start making amends. I got to spend fifteen days with Peter.⁶ We developed a lifetime friendship, but also learned our personalities clashed a bit. He thought I was an arrogant educated Pharisee, and I thought he was blunt to a fault. We were both right, at least at that point in time. I also got to meet James the brother of Jesus, a man who had a crushing amount of humility, compassion and obedience. He must have learned that from his parents...just like his brother.

The Christians there were afraid of me, but for some unknown reason, a leader of the church, Barnabas, vouched for me, and they slowly accepted me. I've always thought that Ananias used his influence with Barnabas to get him to vouch for me, but neither one of them will admit it. From that time on, Barnabas took me under his wing.

It wasn't too long until I made the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem so angry with my preaching and devastating arguments about Jesus that they threatened to kill me. One time I was at the Temple, and the Lord appeared to me while I was in a trance and told me to leave Jerusalem immediately, and that he was sending me faraway to the Gentiles.⁷

I'm no mathematician, but it seemed like a pattern was beginning to develop. So, the Christians sent me to Philip at Caesarea, who sent me on to my hometown of Tarsus, where there were far fewer Jews. Once I was out of the way, the church in Jerusalem had several years of peace and continued growth.⁸

⁵ Acts 9:19-25

⁶ Galatians 1:18-19

⁷ Acts 22:17-21

⁸ Acts 9:26-31

I spent most of the next few years evangelizing by myself in the areas of Syria and Cilicia, but my caustic personality was a constant hindrance. Rough edges still needed smoothing. One day, I was enjoying a glass of cold lemonade at my house in Tarsus, when a knock came on my door. Barnabas, my old friend and mentor, was standing there, and was ready for me to come join him in Antioch. I think Barnabas was just trying to encourage me when he said the believers in Antioch were anxious for me to come join them. I knew I didn't have the most touchy-feely persona, but I was ready to start working with Barnabas again, and practicing on the people in Antioch seemed like a good idea.

With Barnabas running interference for me, I got to stay in Antioch a whole year before the Christians were ready to send me to Jerusalem. Based on a prophecy from Agabas of an upcoming famine, the brothers in Antioch generously chose for Barnabas and me to take a contribution to Jerusalem.⁹ Besides, I needed to get to Jerusalem to improve my friendships with the apostles and James, and get their approval for my plans to evangelize Gentiles throughout Asia.

Barnabas and I took my new young assistant, Titus, to Jerusalem. This was during the famine of Claudius and the people of Israel were suffering greatly. It is from the famine that this time period can be dated to about sixteen years after Jesus' resurrection. In Jerusalem, as we discussed the evangelization of the Gentiles, we agreed that the new Christians did not have to follow the laws of Moses. As an example, Titus was not required to be circumcised, to his great relief. Peter and the remaining apostles gave their approval to evangelize the Gentiles, and sent me back to Antioch with instructions to do the very things I wanted to do anyway.¹⁰ Barnabas brought his nephew, John Mark, with us. Our hope was he would learn from Titus about how to be a faithful assistant, although John Mark seemed like a spoiled rich kid to me.

⁹ Acts 11:22-30

¹⁰ Gal. 2:1-10

I am hesitant to take John Mark on this upcoming journey, but I owe Barnabas so much that I am not complaining. Well, not complaining out loud. I am pouting a little. Jesus wants me to evangelize the Gentiles, and I am ready to go!

When I think of how Luke will write about my story...being a doctor, I'm sure he will make things look orderly. And as a Christian, he will show us as the good guys in white hats who always win in the end. Victors get to write history, and we Christians are far from being victors at this point in time.

The Romans hardly know we Christians exist. Israel is just a tiny speck of the Roman Empire, and the Jews are just an unimportant irritant to the Romans. In Jerusalem and in the rest of Israel, Judaism is the only important thing. All of our lives as Jews revolve around following the laws of Moses in the best ways we know.

To the Jews, the Christians are the worst kinds of blasphemers. They completely misrepresent the character of God, and worship a human as if he were God. It is nearly impossible for any of the common people to understand, but the Jewish leaders have an additional problem. If the Christian are right, then the Jewish leaders are wrong. This not only represents a theological problem, but is a threat against the authority, and the wealth, of the leaders.

The more the Christians grow in numbers and in reputation, the more Judaism is threatened. Whether in Israel or in other countries, the arguments are growing angrier and more confused. The early arguments are boiling down to one basic question:

Will non-Jewish people be allowed to become Christians if they don't follow the laws of Moses? When the Holy Spirit made it clear that non-Jewish people should become Christians, he didn't make it clear if they did or didn't have to follow the laws of Moses. This is critically important, because if the Gentile Christians don't have to follow the laws of Moses, it is increasingly obvious that the Jewish Christians don't need to follow them either.

It has been more than fifteen years since Pentecost, and the Jews have persecuted the Christians in Israel and in other locations. It is a chaotic and unsure time for all of us. We don't know it yet, but ultimately, the questions will disappear for a very unexpected reason, at least unexpected by the Jews. We Christians will be well prepared for it because Jesus had told us to expect it.¹¹

In 70 AD, the Romans will completely destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and expel the Jews that they don't kill. When the Jews cannot sacrifice or celebrate at the Temple, their system of worship will have to be completely modified. Without the income of the Temple, the Jewish leaders will lose all of their economic power to control the people or threaten the Romans.

At the same time, the Christians will be growing quickly in numbers and economic power. It will be almost overnight that the persecution from the Jews stops. That will be the good news. The bad news will be that the Romans will soon start taking notice of the Christians and begin persecuting them. But that happens many years after the ending of Dr. Luke's second book.

This catches you up to the time when Barnabas and I start on our first long missionary journey to the Gentiles. What a trip it will be!

¹¹ Matthew 24:2