
St. Paul

The Conversion of St. Paul
January 25

Paul the Apostle (c. AD 5 – c. AD 67) is perhaps the most influential early Christian missionary and leader of the first generation of Christians. *But he didn't start out that way...*

He was born **Saul**, a Greek-speaking Roman Jew and devout **Pharisee**, a group devoted to preserving religious tradition and stamping out the new Christianity. He had believers tortured and condemned; he held the coats of those who stoned the first Christian martyr to death. So what happened? While he was taking a group of

condemned Christians to Damascus, a vision of **Jesus** appeared to him, asking *"Why do you persecute me?"* He fell down blind, and when his sight was restored 3 days later, he converted to Christianity, took the name **Paul**, and began preaching that Jesus was the messiah! Paul spent the second half of his life building up the faith he'd started out to destroy. He travelled throughout the ancient world, establishing churches where ever he went; his letters to these congregations form half the Bible's New Testament. His inspired preaching of Christ's Gospel won converts everywhere and his writings have had a profound effect on Christian thinking. Paul was passionate about his beliefs, and was imprisoned, tortured, and finally martyred for them.



Intrigued? Here's a more detailed history...

Among the many other apostles and missionaries involved in the spread of the Christian faith, Paul is considered one of the two most important people in the history of Christianity, and one of the greatest religious leaders of all time. Almost half the books of the New Testament are credited to him. He was responsible for spreading the Gospel through early Christian communities across the Roman Empire. From the mid-30s to the mid-50s he established several churches in Asia Minor and at least 3 in Europe, including the church at Corinth.

But he began life as 'Saul,' a Greek-speaking Jew born about the same time as Jesus, who grew into a well-educated Roman citizen. For the first half of his life,

he was a devout 'Pharisee', a strictly orthodox Jewish faction and formidable persecutors of the newly-forming Christian movement. Saul zealously persecuted the church, trying to destroy it, travelling from synagogue to synagogue urging the punishment of Jews who accepted Jesus as the messiah. He held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He went from house to house, dragging men and women to prison; he had believers bound and tortured to get them to deny their faith in Christ, all who refused were condemned to death.

On the road from Jerusalem to Damascus to deliver Christians for punishment, the resurrected Jesus appeared to Saul and said, ***"Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"*** Saul asked, ***"Who are you, lord?"***, to which the voice replied, ***"I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*** Saul was struck blind; when, after three days his sight was restored, he converted to Christianity and took the more Roman name 'Paul'. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, astonishing hearers, who asked, ***"Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? Hasn't he come to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?"*** Yet Paul grew more and more influential and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

Paul's conversion drastically changed the course of his life, and the course of history. In a dramatic reversal, he went from persecuting Christians to zealously preaching that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God. Through his missionary activities and writings he transformed religious belief and philosophy, travelling, in his zeal for Christ and the church, around the Mediterranean Basin, Asia Minor, Greece, and Turkey. In an era when travel was risky at best, he made 3 separate mission trips to establish and check on new churches, suffering imprisonment and ship wreck. His leadership, influence and legacy led to the formation of communities dominated by Gentiles that worshiped the God of Israel. Paul never claimed to be innovative in his doctrine or ideas. Instead, he saw himself as an ***"ambassador"*** for Jesus who carried out the directives and teachings of his Lord. He taught the life and works of Christ and Christ's teaching of a New Covenant or ***"testament"*** established through his death and resurrection. Paul preached an inclusive world view where ***"there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."***

More than half the book of Acts is devoted to describing Paul's pioneer activities and 13 of his letters to the new communities of Christians he established across the Roman Empire make up the last half of the New Testament. The influence of Paul's writings on Christian thinking has been profound. They are the writings of a martyr ~ Paul suffered gravely for proclaiming the gospel as he did and eventually died for his beliefs. He cared so deeply about what he had to say that he was willing to endure humiliation, physical torment, imprisonment, and ultimately death in order to say it.