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Welcome to this course entitled, “Saul of Tarsus: Apostle to the Gentiles.” The Apostle Paul is probably the most misunderstood writer in history. Many Christians and Jews believe that Paul was an anti-Law Jew who established a Gentile brand of Christianity that was different from his ancient faith. We learn otherwise when we study Paul’s writings from his biblical, Hebraic perspective.

In this course, you will get to know Paul by learning personal information about him as well as the historical, cultural, and archeological background of his letters. As we learn more of this man whose writings have changed the world, may we have a better understanding of the One about whom he was writing.

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We learn from Paul’s own words that he was a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia. When Paul was at the Temple in Jerusalem, an angry mob seized him and was beating him to death. When the commander of the garrison learned of the disturbances, he rescued Paul from certain death. The commander was confused about the identity of Paul. He thought Paul was an Egyptian who had earlier stirred up a rebellion in Jerusalem.

Around the year 54 AD, when Felix was governor, a false prophet came from Egypt to Jerusalem. He convinced many to follow him to the Mount of Olives, where at his command; the walls of Jerusalem would fall down. They could then enter the city and overwhelm the Romans.

When Felix was told about this, he sent his soldiers to put down the rebellion. They killed hundreds of the rebels, but the Egyptian escaped. The commander believed that Paul was this Egyptian who had returned to cause more trouble.

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Just like this commander, many people today are confused about the identity of Paul. Some consider him to be a Hellenistic Jew while others think of him as an itinerant Pharisee who converted to Christianity. This confusion has led us to misunderstand his person and his writings. In order to know the real Paul, we must not just learn what others have said about him but what Paul says about himself.

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When the commander asked Paul if he was the Egyptian, Paul replied, “ ... I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city” (Acts 21:30). When speaking to the crowd, Paul adds that he was born in Tarsus but raised in Jerusalem where he studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

Historians believe that the Hittites were the earliest inhabitants of Cilicia. They were followed by the Syrians, Phoenicians, Persians, Alexander the Great, Seleucid rulers from Antioch and finally, Rome.

Cilicia was an important province in the Roman world of Paul’s day. It was located in Southeast Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and was surrounded by mountains on three sides and on the south by the Mediterranean. Cilicia was accessible by land through its two famous mountain passes. The “Syrian Gate” opened to Antioch and the south while the “Cilician Gate” provided access to Greece and the West.

Cilicia was strategically located between these narrow passages. It was the only land route between East and West. It was the great caravan route for merchants and travelers, as well as armies marching through these passes.

Cilicia was a meeting place of nations and a melting pot of cultures, philosophies and religions. Greek philosophy, Roman order and pagan religions with their

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idol worship and immoral festivals existed side-by-side in this sophisticated “province of the world.”

Tarsus was the capital of Cilicia and its most important city. It was a lovely city located ten to twelve miles inland from the Mediterranean. When reading the description of Tarsus, one thinks of the beauty of San Francisco, California. The beautiful Cydnus river flowed through the city. It was so large that ships from the Mediterranean could graciously sail up the river and unload their exotic cargoes at the city docks.

The most famous ship that ever sailed up the river carried Cleopatra who came to meet Mark Antony, who was living in Tarsus at the time. Antony was so fond of Tarsus, he declared it a “free-city.” This means the citizens of Tarsus were able to make their own laws, appoint their own judges and did not have to pay taxes to Rome. The Emperor Augustus also greatly favored the city.

Tarsus was a university town. The university at Tarsus was renowned throughout the Roman world. It produced some of the leading philosophers and scholars of its time. The well-known Greek geographer Strabo noted the worldwide reputation of the university and said it rivaled the great learning centers of Athens and Alexandria.

“The people at Tarsus have devoted themselves so eagerly, not only to philosophy, but also to the whole round of education in general, that they have surpassed Athens, Alexandria or any other place that can be named where there have been schools and lectures of philosophers.”(1)

The head of the University of Tarsus was one of the most influential philosophers of his time. Athendorius was a wise man who was one of the favorite advisors of Augustus. Athendorius taught Augustus the wisdom of patience and prudence with this word of advice, “When excited one should not open one’s mouth before one has read the alphabet through in one’s mind.”(2)

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He also said, “You are only free from passion when you ask God for nothing that you would not ask for openly.”(3)

Because of his favor with the Emperor, Anthendorius was able to develop the university into a world-class center of higher education that influenced the citizens of Tarsus as well as the region.

When Paul said that Tarsus was not “mean or ordinary city,” his listeners would have certainly agreed with him. He had every right to boast that he was a citizen of Tarsus. Its strategic geographic location, cosmopolitan mix of different nationalities, religions and philosophies, and its renowned university provided Paul with a broad exposure to the world around him. This would later enable him to communicate a basic Jewish message to the Gentile world. The fame and influence of Tarsus gave Paul, its most famous citizen, the prestige he would need to speak to all classes of people – Roman, Greek, and Jew.

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Paul was not only a citizen of Tarsus, he was also a Roman citizen. When Paul told the commander he was not the Egyptian, but from Tarsus, the commander gave Paul permission to speak to the crowd. After listening to Paul, the crowd turned against him. To keep from having a riot, the commander bound Paul and led him away to be beaten. For his own protection, Paul told the officer he was a Roman citizen. The officer became frightened when he realized Paul was a Roman citizen whom he was going to flog without a fair trial.

We read the story in Acts, “And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, ‘Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?’ When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, ‘Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.’”

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“Then the commander came and said, “Tell me, are you a Roman?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ The commander answered, ‘With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.’ And Paul said, ‘But I was born a citizen.’

“Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him” (Acts 22:25-29).

On another occasion, Paul used his Roman citizenship to good advantage, but this time after he was beaten. Paul and Silas were in Philippi. Their preaching was upsetting the local economy so the rulers of the town had them stripped, beaten and thrown into jail.

God sent an earthquake that knocked open the prison doors, but Paul and Silas stayed in their cell. The prison guard, thinking they had escaped, was going to kill himself. Paul assured him they that not fled and not to harm himself. Needless to say, the guard received the good news of salvation and tended to their wounds.

The next day, the town leaders were going to secretly send Paul and Silas away. But Paul responded, “... They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out.”

“And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city” (Acts 16:37-39).

All Roman citizens had a Certificate of Citizenship containing their, their name, birth record and personal identification. It was given to them at birth and was their most important personal document.

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Roman citizenship was greatly prized by people living in a Roman world. It gave them class privilege and protection. It was their passport to social status throughout the empire. They were the elite of the Roman world. In 47 AD, the Roman Emperor Claudius took a census of the empire. Out of a total of 80,000,000 subjects, only 6,000,000 were citizens.(4) This gives us an understanding why the Roman commander was surprised that Paul was a Roman citizen by birth while the commander somehow had to buy his citizenship.

Roman citizens could travel anywhere in the empire and know they would be respected and protected by Roman law. They were guaranteed a fair trial and could not be flogged until proven guilty of a crime. Local government officials treated Roman citizens with the highest respect and privilege. If accused of a crime, Roman citizens could even appeal to Caesar himself. We see Paul using this privilege in Acts 25:10-12.

Even in death, Roman citizens were protected in that it was forbidden to punish a Roman citizen by crucifixion. The normal death penalty was by beheading. While any form of the death penalty is horrible, Roman citizens were spared the humiliation of crucifixion.

Paul's Roman citizenship was his passport to travel freely throughout the Roman Empire. His citizenship put him in the top eight percent of the social class in the empire. He had status and privilege and was protected by his citizenship. This enabled him to bring the "Good News" throughout the Roman world and kept him alive until his work was finished.

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More important than Paul being a citizen of Tarsus and Rome was the fact that he was a Jew. But he was not just "any Jew." Paul was raised by Orthodox Jewish parents who were strict Pharisees. They kept the letter of the Torah,

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as well as the traditions of the sages. When Paul addressed the crowd in Jerusalem in Hebrew, he told them that he has been raised according to the strictness of the law and that he was a zealous observer (Acts 22:3). The next day he told the leaders of the Sanhedrin that he was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6).

Paul explained to the Roman believers, "... I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (Romans 11:1). Paul wrote more information about his heritage to the believers at Philippi. He said that he was, "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, concerning the law a Pharisee" (Philippians 3:5).

Let's get to know Paul the Jew. He was probably born around 3 AD in Tarsus. Because he was a Roman citizen, he would have been given a Roman name at his birth. His given Roman name was Paulus. Paul was given his Hebrew name when he was circumcised on the eighth day. His father was proud of his ancestry and named his boy Saul (Sha'ul in Hebrew), no doubt after King Saul. Luke informs us that Saul was also called Paul (Acts 13:9).

Even though Paul was a zealous Pharisee, when he began his ministry, he used his Roman name rather than his Hebrew name. The reason is because he was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13). The Gentile world would more easily accept him and he could travel more freely throughout the empire by using his Roman name.

Paul explains his thoughts about this to the believers in Corinth with these words, "... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Paul was very specific about his heritage. He wanted his readers to clearly understand his orthodox background in order to make his point that his ethnic and nation origins did not make him righteous before God. Even though his

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father was Torah-observant, it was possible he could have been a convert to Judaism. A proselyte would have also circumcised his son.

So there would be no uncertainty, Paul also stated that he was “of the stock of Israel.” This means his parents were Jews by birth, not converts. Furthermore, his family was “of the tribe of Benjamin.” This tribe produced King Saul, the first King of Israel. When the rest of the tribes rebelled against the tribe of Judah and King David, Benjamin remained loyal. As such, one would be proud to be of the tribe of Benjamin.

In a final emotional outburst, Paul boldly declares that he is “a Hebrew of the Hebrews and concerning the law, a Pharisee.” He is driving home his point that he was raised, studied and lived as an orthodox, torah-observant Jew who spoke Hebrew and kept the letter of the law to the point where he persecuted the early believers.

Because Paul was born into an Orthodox Jewish home, we can know something about his childhood and how his parents raised him according to strict Pharisee beliefs and traditions. As just mentioned, Paul was circumcised on the eighth day, at which time he received his name.

Paul’s parents would have had a *mezuzah* attached to the doorpost of their house. This was in obedience to God’s instructions in Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21.

In ancient times, people decorated the entrance door of their house with some type of symbol or words which bore witness to their neighbors regarding their beliefs and values. It was a way for the people to identify with a god or cause. They would simply write the name of their god or a symbol on the doorpost of their house.

The *mezuzah* was the symbol that Paul’s household worshipped the One true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as opposed to the pagan gods of the citizens of

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Tarsus. As a baby and young boy, Paul would have touched the *mezuzah* with his hand and then kissed his hand to symbolize his love and reverence for God's Word.

Paul would have seen his father put on his *tallit* (Numbers 15:37-39) and *tefillin* (Deuteronomy 11:18) to pray the *Shema* as well as other prayers every morning and evening at home and at the synagogue. He would have learned to pray one hundred blessings everyday for awakening in the morning, washing the hands, for food and drink, for bodily functions, for the family, for the events of life, the beauty of creation, for the Sabbath and festivals, when doing a *mitzvah*, etc.

Paul would have known that his mother and sister would immerse themselves in the *mikveh* as a means of purification after their monthly cycle. He would learn that this was necessary because God declared that some circumstances would cause a person to be ritually impure (Leviticus 11-15, Numbers 19).

When Paul's mother went to the market to buy groceries, she passed by the vendors selling food that had been offered to idols as well as unclean animals. His parents only bought *Kosher* food according to God's dietary laws given in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. While the pagans ate anything, the table in Paul's home was considered an altar with spiritual significance. Paul would be taught that eating was an act of worship that set him apart from the Gentiles.

Every Friday evening Paul would observe as his mother lit the Shabbat candles and prayed for God's blessings for the household. His parents would pray God's blessings over he and his sister. Paul would learn from his father to pray the blessings over the bread and wine.

Unlike the rest of Tarsus, Paul, his family, and Jewish neighbors, did not spend their Saturdays at the theater or the athletic games. Instead they rested from their labors,

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worshipped their God and spent time with family and friends.

Paul's parents would have taken him to the synagogue each Sabbath where he would learn to worship God in community with his neighbors and friends. Here he would discover the God of his ancestors and listen attentively as the *Torah* Scrolls were brought forth to be read. When the worshippers faced Jerusalem to pray, Paul would come to understand that Jerusalem was their holy city and site of the great Temple where his forefathers worshipped God.

Paul grew up in a home that celebrated the Feast according to Leviticus 23. Every spring, mother would clean the house of leaven to prepare it for Passover (*Pesach*). They would have their Passover meal and recount the story of the Exodus. In the summer, they would celebrate the giving of the Torah at Pentecost (*Shavuot*). In the fall, they build *succahs* and live in them all week during the Feast of Tabernacles (*Succot*). They would fast on *Yom Kippur*, party at *Purim*, and light the candles at *Hanukkah*. Paul's household was anything but boring. He must have looked forward to these special days with eager participation. As strict Pharisees, the family would have made every effort to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts.

Paul says he was brought up in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3; 26:4). We don't know how old Paul was when he went to Jerusalem. Paul would have had his *Bar Mitzvah* either at Tarsus or in Jerusalem at the age of twelve or thirteen. This is the age when young people are expected to take on the responsibilities of an adult.

Before his *Bar Mitzvah*, Paul's father was responsible for his religious training. After his *Bar Mitzvah*, Paul would make his own decisions and fully enter into the religious life of the Jewish community as an adult. In Paul's case, this meant accepting the life of a strict Pharisee.

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While the citizens of Tarsus were educated at the renowned university, Paul was educated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul's parents were responsible for his early education (Deuteronomy 6:4-6; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41).

At age five, Paul would learn to read the Torah. At age ten, he would begin his studies of the oral traditions and prayers. He would learn Hebrew and perhaps Aramaic. Biblical study began with the book of Leviticus. The Scriptures were passed down by word of mouth and children were taught to memorize God's word from their youth (2 Timothy 3:15).

Around the age twelve to thirteen, the time for their bar mitzvah, young Jewish boys who excelled in learning were often taken to an academy where they would "sit at the feet" of a prominent scholar. Paul's father knew his son had great promise. He looked forward to the day when his son would be old enough to go to Jerusalem and study under the great scholars. Perhaps it was at his *Bar Mitzvah* when Paul's parents accompanied him to Jerusalem, as we will see in the next lesson.

Fathers were not only responsible for teaching their sons the *Torah*, they were also required to teach their sons a trade. The sages said, "Torah which is not combined with the teaching of skill with the hands leads finally to laziness and sin. He who does not teach his son a profession makes him a good-for-nothing." (5)

The province of Cilicia was famous for a special kind of cloth made from the hair of a goat. The cloth was called *Cillicium*. This goat hair was very coarse and the cloth woven from it was almost waterproof. It was the best kind of material for tents and is still used by Bedouins today.

Because Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), we can be certain that he learned his trade from his father. Paul's father probably made a good income which meant Paul was

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raised in a prosperous, financially secure home. A skilled tentmaker from Cilicia was in great demand and could always get a job. This trade would be a great asset to Paul as he traveled throughout the Empire. A skilled tentmaker from Cilicia would have no trouble making a living.

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In Bible times, as well as in our own times, people often judge others by their appearance. Although appearances can certainly be misleading (we don't judge a book by its cover), the way people present themselves can often be a clue to their character.

The following description of Paul was written in the *Acts of Paul 2.3*, a document which was included in *The Apocryphal New Testament*. It says that Paul was: "A man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of a good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel."<sup>(6)</sup>

We don't know if this description is accurate. If it is, we would not consider Paul a handsome fellow. However, what was considered to be physically desirable in Paul's day was not the same as what we moderns consider attractive.

To the Romans, a hooked nose was considered a sign of nobility. And men wanting to enhance their appearance would comb their eyebrows so they would join, as this was considered physically desirable. Crooked legs and a good state of body was also considered an asset for a man who did a lot of traveling as it gave him firm balance and physical endurance which was important for the rigors of miles of walking.<sup>(7)</sup> Paul also had a spiritual presence about him. This description tells us that Paul was physically and spiritually fit for his mission of carrying his message throughout the Empire.

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**Summary**

In getting to know Paul, we discover he was not a typical first-century man. He was a citizen of Tarsus, a leading city of the Empire. More importantly, Paul was a citizen of Rome, a man of privilege and status in the top eight percent of the Empire. He was a world traveler. He was well-educated in Hebrew and Greek. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews who would study under the leading scholar of his day. He was a zealot for his beliefs. He could think as a Jew but write as a Greek.

Paul had the physical and spiritual endurance to travel through mountain passes, narrow city streets, and dusty roads while surviving beatings, stonings, prisons, shipwrecks, robbers, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, fastings, heat, and cold, doing with and doing without. He understood and was able to appeal to all classes of people. He was just the man God would use to bridge the gap between the Jewish world and the Gentile world with the good news of the Jewish Messiah whom would also be the Savior to the Gentiles.

He wrote to the believers in Corinth a word that is also for us today, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that you labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

**Personal Study Review**

1. Explain the significance of the three faces of Paul.
  - A. Paul the citizen of Tarsus
  - B. Paul the citizen of Rome
  - C. Paul the Hebrew of Hebrews
  
2. How can you apply what you have learned in this lesson to your life?

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**Footnotes**

(1) Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.15, in *The Geography of Strabo* (LCL; trans. H.L. Jones; Cambridge: Harvard university, 1960) 6.347.

(2) Risto Santala, *Paul the Man and the Teacher in Light of Jewish Sources* (Jerusalem: Keren Ahavah Meshihit, 1995) 27.

(3) *IBid.*, 28.

(4) Ernle Bradford, *Paul the Traveler* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993) 12.

(5) Santala, 23.

(6) Acts of Paul 2.3, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (ed. M. R. James; Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 273.

(7) Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 43-44.

## PAUL'S CHRONOLOGY – ALL DATES APPROXIMATE

### **Paul the Persecutor**

Paul at Stephen's death (Acts 7:58) – **31/32**

Paul persecutes the Church (Acts 8:1-3) – **31/32**

### **Paul the Believer**

Paul on Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-2) – **32/33**

Paul in Damascus and Arabia (Acts 9:22-23; Gal. 1:17; 2 Cor. 11:32-33) – **33-36**

Paul's first visit to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-28; Gal. 1:18--19) – **36**

Paul returns to Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30) – **36-45**

Barnabas brings Paul to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26) – **45**

Paul's second visit to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30) – **46**

### **Paul's First Journey (Acts 13-14) – 47-49**

Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) – **49**

### **Paul's Second Journey – (Acts 15:36-18:22) – 50-53**

*[Paul writes 1 & 2 Thessalonians from Corinth– 50/51]*

### **Paul's Third Journey (Acts 18:23-21:16) – 53-56/57**

*[Paul writes 1 & 2 Corinthians from Ephesus and Macedonia – 55/56]*

*[Paul writes Romans from Corinth – 56]*

### **Paul's Arrest and Trials in Israel (Acts 21:15-26:32) – 56/57**

Paul appears before Felix (Acts 23:23-24:27) – **57-58**

Paul's trial before Festus – (Acts 25:1-12) - **59**

Paul's trial before Agrippa – (Acts 25:13-26:32) - **59**

Paul's Journey to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:10) - **59-60**

### **Paul's First Roman Imprisonment – (Acts 28:11-31) - 60-62**

*[Paul writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon]*

### **Paul's Release – 62-63**

Paul in Macedonia (1 Timothy 1:3)

*[Paul writes 1 Timothy]*

Paul in Crete (Titus 1:5)

*[Paul writes Titus]*

### **Paul's Second Roman Imprisonment – 64**

*[Paul writes 2 Timothy – 64]*

Paul is executed – **64**

*\*Paul writes Galatians* – Scholars differ on when Paul wrote Galatians. If he wrote it on his first missionary journey before the Jerusalem Council, Galatians 2:1-10 relate to his visit to Jerusalem in Acts 11:27-30. If he wrote it on his second missionary journey, Galatians 2:1-10 relates to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. We learn in Galatians 2:11-21 that Paul rebuked Peter at Antioch.