

The Apostle Paul, Part 1 of 6: From Persecutor to Christian!

By Joelee Chamberlain

I'm so glad that the Lord gave us the Bible, aren't you? It's just full of interesting true stories and tells us about the Lord God. It's very different from other books, though, in that in some way God told the people what to write down. Also, most other books are written by just one person and in a fairly short period of time. But did you know that the Bible is different in that way, too? Yes, it is. You see, the Bible was written by over 30 different people! And it was written in about a 1,500 year period!

Now, how did that happen?! Well, let's think about that for a minute before I tell you today's story.

First, though, do you remember how many big parts the Bible is divided into? That's right, 2 big parts. And what do we call these 2 big parts? Yes, the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Now, the Old Testament covers the thousands of years between the time that God created everything until about the time Jesus was to come to earth -- a very long period of time! And the Old Testament was written by over 20 different men who were writing over a period of about 1000 years! And many of these men lived at different times, so, of course, they would write at different times, wouldn't they? Moses and David and Solomon and Isaiah and Daniel were some of the authors of the Old Testament, some of the men that God had write things down. So that's the Old Testament. Many different authors writing over a very long period of time.

But the New Testament, on the other hand, covers a period of only less than 100 years! The first 4 books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell us about when Jesus was on earth, and then the book of Acts tells us what His apostles did after Jesus went back to heaven. Then almost all of the rest of the New Testament is made up of 21 letters that were written to different churches and people to encourage them and to teach them. And the whole New Testament was written by only 8 or maybe 9 different men in only about 60 years! The authors of the New Testament are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, and Jude. And they all lived at the same time and at least most of them knew each other.

Now, something I find very interesting is that in the New Testament, about a third of it was written by only one man! Yes, this one man wrote 13 of the 21 letters that are found in the New Testament! And though this man didn't write the book of Acts, about half of the big book of Acts in the New Testament is about this man! So this man must have been pretty important after Jesus went back to heaven, right? And this man preached about Jesus in many different places and was sometimes beaten for it and was in shipwrecks and was even bitten by a poisonous snake but lived!

But who was this man who had these adventures and who wrote so much of the New Testament? Well, this man is the apostle Paul, and that's whom I'm going to tell you about today! But there is so much written in the Bible about Paul that I'm only going to be able to tell you part of

it today. There will be other times that I'll tell you more about him. In fact, there is so much written about Paul in the New Testament that we will talk about Paul 6 different times! Does that sound all right to you? Okay. I will be looking mainly at the book of Acts in the New Testament but also a little at some of the letters that Paul wrote to different churches and people.

Now. Many of the Jews had 2 names then, one a Jewish name and one a Gentile (not-Jewish) name. And Paul had 2 names. When we first meet Paul in the Bible, he is called "Saul", his Jewish name, but then later on he is called "Paul", his Gentile name. But I'm going to call him Saul until the Bible starts calling him Paul. I don't think that should be confusing, do you?

But we've heard the name Saul before in the Old Testament in the Bible, haven't we? Yes, Saul was the name of the first king of the Jews. But he lived about 1000 years before the Saul in the New Testament that we're going to be talking about today. These 2 "Sauls" are two different men. Just like you probably know more than one boy or man named Jacob or Michael.

Anyway, let's talk now about the Saul in the New Testament, okay? Saul was a Jew, but he wasn't born in Is-ra-el. He was born in Tar-sus, the capital city of Ci-li-ci-a, a country north of Israel. Saul of Tarsus. Tarsus was an important city. You see, the Roman empire was very strong at that time, so Rome ruled all the countries around there. Some places were special places, though, and these special places were called colonies of Rome. And anyone born in these colonies was considered to be a citizen of the city of Rome itself, to be an actual Roman citizen. These people had special privileges, and this was a very important thing, to be a Roman citizen. And Saul was born in a Roman colony, so he was a Roman citizen. And later that will be important for Saul.

Saul was a Jewish man from the tribe of Benjamin. You remember about the tribes, don't you? Way back about 1,500 years before Saul was born, the Jewish nation had been formed from the 12 sons of Jacob, one tribe from each of his sons. You remember them, don't you? Judah and Levi and Benjamin and the others. And, as I just said, Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, Jacob's very youngest son. So Saul was a Jew. (The Jews were also called Hebrews or the children of Israel, weren't they?)

And Saul and his father were both Pharisees, that is, they belonged to a group of Jewish men called Pharisees. The Pharisees studied the Jewish laws very carefully and tried to obey them and to get others to obey them. They were very strict. Now, when Saul was of a certain age, he went to Jerusalem in Israel and studied the Jewish law and other things with a very great Jewish teacher, Ga-me-li-el. And Saul spoke both the language of the Hebrews (the Jews) and he spoke Greek as well. You see, Greek was the common language in the Roman empire, but there was also the special language of the Hebrews, though not all of the Jews spoke the language of the Hebrews; some of the Jews who didn't live in Israel just spoke Greek. So Saul was very well educated. If he lived now-a-days, we'd say he had a college education.

The first time the Bible tells us about Saul is very soon after Jesus went back to heaven, maybe even in the same year, and it was when a very sad and very bad thing happened. You see, there was a very godly Jewish man named Stephen. And Stephen talked about the Lord Jesus and

even did miracles. But some bad Jewish leaders didn't like this and got it so that Stephen was killed. He was killed by stoning, by having lots of stones, rocks, thrown at him. Some of the men who were throwing the stones took off their coats to do it and gave their coats to a young man to hold while they threw the rocks. And who do you think that young man was? Yes, he was Saul, Saul of Tarsus!!

You see, as I just said, Saul was a Pharisee, and he thought he was serving the Lord by just following a bunch of laws. And he didn't believe that Jesus was God. And though he knew that Jesus had died on the cross, he did not believe why Jesus had died -- that Jesus had died for our sins to make a way for us to be saved from our sins by trusting in Jesus, by believing God's promise that He would forgive our sins and save us if we trusted Jesus, and that then we'd be able to go to heaven when we die. And Saul didn't believe that 3 days after Jesus had died that He rose from the dead, was resurrected, and that He is still alive. No, Saul didn't believe any of those true things. So Saul thought he was serving the Lord by persecuting people who believed in Jesus, by being mean to them. And he was right there when Stephen was killed, agreeing that this was the right thing to do!

Saul hated people who believed in Jesus, and he had many believers beaten in their synagogues (the Jewish meeting places, sort of like churches) and had them put in jail or chased into different cities, and he even agreed that those who believed in Jesus should be killed. So, many believers left Jerusalem and went to other places to escape this persecution. And what do you think these believers did when they got to other cities and lived in them? Why, they told the people in those cities about the Lord Jesus, of course! They wanted other people to be saved from their sins, too, and to be able to go to heaven when they died! And then many people in those other cities believed in Jesus, too! They trusted Jesus to save them from their sins! So word about Jesus was spreading -- and Saul didn't like this at all!

So one day Saul, all mad at believers in Jesus and wanting to punish and even kill them, Saul went to the Jewish leaders and got a letter from them saying that he could go way far away to a city named Da-mas-cus in another country and arrest the Jews there who were believers. And then he would have them tied up and would bring them back to Jerusalem to have a trial and maybe even be killed. That was a very wicked thing for him to want to do, wasn't it? But Saul thought he would be serving the Lord to do it.

Now, what I'm going to tell you next is told 3 times in the books of Acts, sometimes with different details. But I'm just going to put all 3 together. Okay? That way you'll get the whole story.

So Saul and some other men started out on their way to Damascus, which is about 150 miles from Jerusalem. Of course, they didn't have cars then, so it would probably take them at least several days to get there. And one day at noon as they were getting near to the city of Damascus, what do you think happened? Why, suddenly there was a very, very bright light, brighter even than the sun in the middle of the day! And Saul and all of the men with him saw the bright light, and they fell to the ground! Then a voice speaking in the language of the Hebrews came to Saul. Saul could understand what the voice said, but the men with him couldn't.

And the voice said to Saul, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?!"

Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?!"

And the voice said to him, "I am Jesus of Na-za-reth, whom you persecute."

Well, then Saul knew that it was Jesus talking to him from heaven, didn't he?! And he realized that Jesus was really alive and that Jesus was God! And he realized that when he was persecuting those who believed in Jesus, it was like he was persecuting the Lord Jesus Himself!

So Saul was scared and was shaking. And Saul said, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

And Jesus said to Saul, "Get up onto your feet. I've come to you for a reason. I will make you a witness of the things you have seen and heard. I will appear to you, and I will keep you safe from both the Jews and Gentiles." (Remember, Gentiles are people who aren't Jews.)

Jesus said, "I am sending you to the Gentiles to turn them away from darkness and Satan." (Most Gentiles then worshipped false gods and idols.)

Jesus said, "Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles to turn them away from darkness and Satan, and to turn them to light and God, so that they may have their sins forgiven and have faith in Me."

Jesus said to Saul, "Now get up, and go into the city of Damascus, and there it will be told to you all the things that you must do."

Well, as I just said, the men with Saul could see the bright light and they were afraid. And they could hear the voice but not understand it. But Saul understood! So Saul got up -- and guess what? He was blind! He couldn't see -- because the bright light, which was the glory of God, had been so very bright! And the other men had to take his hand and lead him into the city of Damascus. And for 3 days Saul couldn't see. And he didn't eat nor drink anything during that time.

So what was going to happen to Saul now?!

Well, there was a very godly Jew in Damascus named A-na-ni-as. All of the Jews in Damascus thought very well of Ananias, and Ananias believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. And the Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision. The Lord said, "Ananias!"

And Ananias said, "I am here, Lord."

And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to a certain street and ask at a certain house for someone called Saul of Tarsus, because, look, he's praying. And he's had a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him so that he might be able to see again."

Well, Ananias didn't know what to think! He had heard of Saul of Tarsus before and knew that Saul persecuted believers!

So Ananias said to the Lord, "But, Lord, I've heard of this man, how much evil he's done to the saints in Jerusalem." (The Bible often calls those who believe in Jesus "saints". This just means someone who's set apart for God.)

And Ananias said, "And here he has letters from the chief priests to tie up everyone who believes in You."

As if the Lord didn't already know this!! God knows everything, doesn't He?!

But the Lord just said to Ananias, "Go on, because I have chosen him for Myself to carry My name to the Gentiles and to kings and to the children of Israel." (That's the Jews, isn't it?)

And the Lord said, "I will show Saul how much he's going to have to suffer for my name's sake."

So Ananias did as he was told. He got up and went to that house. And he put his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, the One who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, the Lord Jesus sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

And right away, it was as if scales had fallen from Saul's eyes, and he could see again! That was a miracle, wasn't it?! Now, Saul had been without food and water for 3 days, but the first thing that Saul did when he could see again was to be baptized. He did this to show everyone that he was now a believer, a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then he ate some food and felt stronger.

The Bible then talks about Saul's being in Damascus again but also that he went to Arabia, though we're not quite sure just what was the order of things here. But that really doesn't make a lot of difference to the story. At any rate, Saul was a while in Damascus, preaching in the synagogues and telling the Jews about the Lord Jesus. You see, now that he knew who Jesus really was and how believing in Jesus would save people from their sins, Saul wanted to serve God the real way, didn't he?

And everyone who heard Saul preaching about Jesus was very surprised.

They said, "Isn't this the man who was destroying those who believed in Jesus in Jerusalem?! And he had come here to arrest believers here and take them back to Jerusalem!"

But Saul just kept preaching and proving that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. He could prove this by showing all of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and how Jesus had fulfilled these prophecies (we've talked about that at another time, haven't we?) and by telling about the miracles that Jesus had done. Then sometime in here Saul went to Arabia. And at some time

Saul was taught more and more about Jesus.

Anyway, after a while when Saul was in Damascus and was preaching, the Jews who did not believe in Jesus decided they wanted to kill Saul. And they were watching the gates of the city day and night, watching for Saul to grab him. You see, Damascus had a wall around the whole city, and people could only go in or out of the city through the gates. So the bad men watched the gates figuring they'd catch Saul. But guess what?! Why, one night other Jews who were believers in Jesus took Saul and had him get in a big basket, and then they let him down in the basket through a window by the wall! So he got away safely! I'll bet the bad men were surprised when they couldn't catch Saul!

Well, 3 years after the Lord appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul went to Jerusalem. And there he tried to join the other disciples, the other followers of Jesus, but they were afraid of him and didn't trust him. They didn't believe that he was really a believer in Jesus. But there was a very godly Jew there who was a believer whose name was Barnabas. And Barnabas realized some way that Saul really was a believer in Jesus now. So Barnabas took Saul to the apostle Peter and to James, the half-brother of Jesus.

And Barnabas said to the them, "Look, the Lord appeared to Saul on his way to Damascus and spoke to him. And Saul preached about Jesus boldly in Damascus."

So the other believers listened to Barnabas, and then they accepted Saul as a believer, also. And Saul was able to be with them there in Jerusalem. And Saul talked about Jesus with people there for about 2 weeks. But then again some bad men decided that they wanted to kill Saul!

And one day Saul was in the temple, and he was praying, and guess what happened? Why, he had a vision of Jesus. And Jesus said to Saul, "Hurry! Quickly get out of Jerusalem! They aren't going to listen to you!"

Saul said, "Lord, they know that I used to put believers in jail and beat them in the synagogue. And that I not only thought it was good to kill Stephen, but I even held their coats while they did it."

But the Lord just said to Saul, "Go! Because I'm going to send you far away to the Gentiles."

So the other believers took Saul down to the seacoast and sent him back to Cilicia to his home town of Tarsus on a ship. Whew! Well, Saul seems to have been in Cilicia and Syria, the country next to it, for about 4 years. And he seems to have gone around doing a lot of preaching.

(By the way, it would be fun if you could get your parents or someone else to show you on a map the places we're going to be talking about. I like maps, and they make it so much easier to understand what's going on in the life of Saul. In fact, most Bibles have good maps in the back of them.)

But back to Saul! I had just said that he was in Cilicia and Syria teaching others about the Lord Jesus Christ, hadn't I? Well, the believers there heard about this and said, "Oh, the man who used to persecute those who believe in Jesus is now a believer himself!" And they glorified God because Saul was now a believer in Jesus and was preaching about Him!

Now, remember that I said that many believers had left Jerusalem because of the persecution there at the time that Stephen was killed? And what did I say that these believing Jews did as they went to new cities and new countries? Why, of course they began telling people the Gospel, the good news about Jesus and how He had died for our sins but was alive again and then went back to heaven and how that by trusting Jesus they could be saved from their sins! But since they were Jews themselves, they only talked to other Jews. And many of these Jews then became believers in Jesus, too. They trusted the Lord Jesus to save them from their sins.

Well, the apostles and other believers back in Jerusalem heard that the people far away were becoming believers. So they sent Barnabas to check up on things there. They told him to go way up as far as An-ti-och in the country of Syria. You remember Barnabas, don't you? He was the godly man who stood up for Saul in Jerusalem and took him to Peter and James.

So Barnabas went way up to Antioch in Syria, and he saw that many people there really were trusting in the Lord Jesus to save them, and he was very glad. And he encouraged them to be strong in the Lord. And many more people became believers in Jesus. (Isn't that wonderful?!)

Well, then Barnabas went over to Tarsus and began looking for Saul. When Barnabas found Saul, he took him back to Antioch with him. And they stayed in Antioch for a year, being with other believers and teaching many people about the Lord Jesus Christ. And there in Antioch in Syria is where believers were first called Christians. "Christians" means those who follow Christ, Christ-ians. Christians. So believers in Jesus are called saints and Christians and disciples, aren't they?

Well, about that time a prophet named Agabus went to Antioch. And some way the Holy Spirit had told Agabus that there was going to be a big famine. And evidently the Christians in Jerusalem were having a hard time, because the Bible says that all the believers in Antioch who could, took up a collection for the saints in Jerusalem. And the church in Antioch had Barnabas and Saul take this collection down to Jerusalem and give it to the leaders of the church there to help the believers. After doing this, Barnabas and Saul went back up to Antioch, and they took with them Barnabas' nephew, John Mark. This is the same Mark who later would write the book of Mark in the New Testament.

Well, one day after they were back in Antioch, some of the men who taught about Jesus were together, and for some reason they were fasting, not eating. And the Holy Spirit spoke to them! The Holy Spirit said, "Set Barnabas and Saul apart for me. I have work for them to do." And when they had fasted and prayed, they sent Barnabas and Saul away to do the work of the Lord in other places.

And that is as far as we're going to go today. We'll continue talking about Saul next time and see where he and Barnabas are going to go and what happens to them. They will have some dangerous adventures that I'm sure you'll want to hear about!

But what have we talked about here today? We've talked about the apostle Paul, haven't we? But so far we've called him Saul, which is what the Bible has called him so far. Saul of Tarsus. Saul was born in a Roman colony, so he was a Roman citizen, which will be very important for him later on. Then very soon after Jesus went back to heaven, Saul, a young man then, did a lot of persecuting of believers in Jesus, didn't he? But when he was going to the city of Damascus to arrest believers, Jesus appeared to him in a bright light and talked with him. And Saul became a believer in Jesus then. After that Saul was blind for 3 days, but the Lord sent a man named Ananias to heal him, to let him see again. Then Saul began talking about Jesus to other people. But twice the Jews who didn't believe in Jesus wanted to kill Saul, didn't they?! Once in Damascus, where his friends let him down out of a window in a basket over the city wall, remember? And then again in Jerusalem where some other of his friends took him down to the seacoast and sent him to Tarsus to be safe. And in Jerusalem is where Saul first met Barnabas, isn't it? Later Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to Antioch in Syria to go check on reports that there were lots of believers in Antioch. Barnabas was very happy to find that there really were lots of saints, lots of believers in Jesus there. And, remember, there in Antioch in the country of Syria is where the believers were first called Christians, wasn't it?

Then Barnabas went over to Tarsus looking for Saul and brought Saul back to Antioch where Barnabas and Saul taught about Jesus for a year. Then a prophet named Agabus came to Antioch and told about a great famine that was to come. And the saints in Antioch took up a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. And Barnabas and Saul took the collection to Jerusalem and then went back up to Antioch. Do you remember who they took back with them then? Yes, it was Mark, who is also called John Mark. And then the Holy Spirit said to send Barnabas and Saul to some other places to preach about the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's where we stopped talking about Saul today. Next time we will talk about where they went and what they did and what happened to them there. They will have some exciting adventures that I know you'll want to hear about!