

PAUL – life is choices

The ministry of Jesus drew the interest of the religious leaders of Judea early on because of the large numbers of followers that Jesus attracted to Him. Also, the rabbis heard that Jesus had healed sick people, restored sight to the blind, and had cast out demons. Moreover, He was saying things that did not agree with the traditions of the fathers. The chief priests and elders confronted Him once and demanded that He tell them, "... by what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?"¹

These chief priests and elders considered themselves to be the source and arbiters of religious instruction and many of them regarded Jesus as one without credentials. Their attitude was similar to that of the synagogue officials who in John's gospel answered the blind man by saying,

John 9:29 "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from."

Nevertheless, a few of the religious leaders found Jesus at least interesting and some of them met with him to ask Him questions. Among these were Pharisees.² These encounters were the exception, however.

The teachings of Jesus regarding the Sabbath, purity, tithing and prayers came into direct conflict with the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees. The Pharisees demanded that their members show external evidence of religious devotion and purity; the teaching of Christ in this regard was as He said in the gospel of Matthew,

Matthew 15:17 "Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? 18 "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. 19 "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. 20 "These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man."

The Pharisees belonged to religious communities with strict rules for admission. Groups that followed the two main rabbis, Shammai and Hillel, required a candidate to undergo a period of probation before they could be admitted. During the probationary period the candidate had to prove his ability to follow the ritual laws. After the probation the candidate had to pledge himself to observe the laws of purity. The object of his new association was twofold: (a) to observe in the strictest manner, and according to traditional law, all the ordinances concerning Levitical purity, and (b) to be extremely punctilious in all laws connected with religious dues; i.e., tithes and other dues. A person might undertake only the second, without the first obligation. In that case he was a *Neeman*, and "accredited one" with whom one might freely enter into commerce. One who undertook both was *Chabher*, an associate.³

¹ Luke 20:2-8.

² John 3:1-15: Nicodemus, a Pharisee, visited Jesus by night. Simon the Pharisee, Luke 7:36-50.

³ Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. I, p. 311.

There were four degrees marking the ascending scale of Levitical purity; i.e., separation from the profane. The lowest were merely members of the fraternity, only initiated in its lowest degree, perhaps even a novice. A *Neeman* undertook four obligations: (a) to tithe what he ate, (b) what he sold, (c) what he bought, and (d) not to be a guest with an *Am ha-arets* (these were the country people). The most advanced was a *chasid*, or “pietist.” (*Chasidim* was a title the Pharisees assumed for themselves; i.e., they were the pious.⁴) The pietist would for example bring every day a trespass offering in case he had committed some offense of which he was doubtful. The full *Chabher* undertook not to sell to an *Am ha-arets* any fluid or dry substance (nutriment or fruit), not to buy from him any such fruit, not to be a guest with him, not to entertain him as a guest in his own clothes (on account of possible impurity).

In opposition to these were the *Am ha-arets*, or “country people.” These were the people in the view of the Pharisees who knew not, or who cared not, for the Law, and were regarded as “cursed.”

How extreme they were in observance of the laws of purity may be seen in the statement of a Rabbi who would not allow his son to remain in the room while he was in the hands of a surgeon, lest he be defiled by contact with the amputated limb. (The amputated limb was dead and therefore impure.) Another *chasid* went so far in his zeal for the Sabbath observance that he would not build up again his house (that had burned) because he had **thought about it** on the Sabbath. It was even declared improper by some to entrust a letter to a Gentile, lest he should deliver it on a holy day. More extreme *Chasidim* refused to save a woman from drowning for fear of touching a female, or waited to put off his phylacteries before stretching out a hand to save a drowning child.

Alfred Edersheim says of Pharisees,

“There was probably no town or village inhabited by Jews that did not have its Pharisees, although they would prefer Jerusalem.”

“There would be no difficulty recognizing a Pharisee. If you were to walk behind him, he would soon halt to say his prescribed prayers. If the fixed time for them had come he would stop short in the middle of the road, perhaps say a section of them, then move on, again say another part, and so on, till, whatever else might be doubted there could be no question of the conspicuousness of his devotions in the market-places or corners of streets.”⁵

In this connection is the well-known anecdote about Rabbi Jannai, who was observed saying his prayers in the public streets of Sepphoris, and then advancing four cubits to offer the so-called supplementary prayer.⁶

The Pharisee in prayer, “...would stand, as taught by the traditional law, would draw his feet well together, compose his body and clothes, and bend so low ‘...that every vertebra in his back would stand out separate.’ The workman would drop his tools, the burden-bearer his load; if a man had already one foot in the stirrup, he would withdraw it. The hour had come and nothing could be suffered to interrupt or disturb him. The very

⁴ Ibid., Edersheim, Vol I, p. 323.

⁵ Edersheim, A., *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, p. 214.

⁶ Edersheim, A. *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, i. 536.

salutation of a king, it was said, must remain unreturned; nay even the twisting of a serpent around one's heel must remain unheeded."⁷

On entering a village, and again on leaving it, he must say one or two benedictions; the same in passing through a fortress, in encountering any danger, in meeting with anything new, strange, beautiful, or unexpected. And the longer he prayed the better.

The Rabbis taught that, "...much prayer is sure to be heard. And lengthy prayer prolongs life." At the same time, as each prayer expressed, and closed with a benediction of the Divine Name, there would be special religious merit attaching to the mere number, and a hundred benedictions said in one day was a measure of great piety.

Thus was the passion of the Pharisees for observing the minutest rules of the traditions of the fathers. Equally great was their zeal for making proselytes, and for their punishment of Jews who might violate the orders from the synagogues and councils.

As Jesus said,

Matthew 23:15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

And Jesus added,

Matthew 23:29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. 33 "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? 34 "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 35 so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

Such were the Pharisees.

Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee.

Tarsus of Cilicia stood in a wild and fertile plain on the banks of the Cydnus River about 12 miles upstream from the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. In this city of education and commerce perhaps ten years after the birth of Christ a boy was born to Hebrew parents. They named him Saul, after the first king of Israel.⁸

Saul's family ranked with the privileged class. The city in which Saul was born had taken the side of Caesar in the civil wars of Rome. When Caesar once visited Tarsus, he

⁷ Ibid., Edersheim, *Sketches*, p. 214.

⁸ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). Tyndale Bible dictionary. Tyndale reference library (1240). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

changed the name to Juliopolis. Augustus made Tarsus a free city. Saul's father was of the tribe of Benjamin. (Phil. 3:5.) So, Saul was a Hebrew, but he was also a citizen of Rome. For as he wrote, he was actually born a citizen. (Acts 22:28.) His parents gave him the Hebrew name, Saul, after the first king. But his Roman name was Paul. Saul-Paul. Was there here an indication of a conflict of purposes? Great Roman? Great Hebrew? What will he become?

Tarsus was widely known as a center of education, for the historian Strabo compares Tarsus to Athens and Alexandria. But what Hebrew parent would want his child to learn the chants of the idolaters? Or learn to bow before the images of stone? Tarsus was gentile and it was pagan. Growing up there, Paul could not have escaped exposure to the rampant vices of the gentiles; yet in Tarsus, Saul was brought up as a strictly Jewish child. He got some insight into pagan literature, for he quoted from the Greek poets in Acts 17. But mainly he occupied his studies with the Hebrew old testament.

Being Jews—and more than that, having a reverence for God—the parents of Saul wanted their son educated in higher laws than were available in Tarsus. While he was still young, the parents of Saul sent him to Jerusalem to learn the law of Moses. The Lord Jesus would have been about twenty-three years old when Saul made the journey to Jerusalem, probably going by ship from Tarsus, then overland to Jerusalem by caravan. He reached the school in Jerusalem as a lad and there began to perfect his knowledge of Hebrew, Latin and Greek. In a few years he became a scholar, a man of arts and letters, a Jew schooled in the Law.

At Jerusalem, Paul became a disciple of Gamaliel, a celebrated doctor of the Jewish law. Gamaliel was the son of rabbi Simeon, and grandson of the celebrated Hillel. He was president of the Sanhedrin under Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius, and is reported to have died 18 years before the destruction of Jerusalem. So Paul was instructed in the law of Moses by the most eminent authorities. Moreover, he was instructed in the traditions of his fathers, and he became a Pharisee.

Josephus says of the Pharisees, "The Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason."

"They also pay respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced ...

"They also believe that souls have an immortal vigour in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have a power to revive and live again; on account of which doctrines they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction; insomuch that the cities gave great attestations to them on account of their virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also."⁹

These were the Pharisees who had such power among the common people. They had a supreme regard for appearances. They wore long garments, and attached phylacteries to

⁹ *Antiquities*, Book xviii, ch. I, sect. 3. *Josephus was also a Pharisee.

their garments.¹⁰ They took many baths. They prayed in the public places to be seen. When they gave alms, they sounded the horn.

Thus Pharasaism was a religion that relied upon outward appearances.

Owing, perhaps, to a higher plan, Saul gained his education in one of the schools less given to extremes, less prone to fanaticism. The scripture records of Gamaliel in Acts the 5th chapter, as Peter and the other disciples stood before the council, charged with teaching the "heretical" doctrine of the Jesus who had been crucified, Gamaliel took a more moderate stand. He said,

Acts 5:35 "... Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For sometime ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody; and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. And he was slain; and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After this man Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. And so in this present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God."

Saul's education in the written law and in the oral law increased above that of many of his kinsmen. He later wrote to the Galatians,

Galatians 1:14 "... I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions."

He called himself a "... Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee ..." (Phil. 3:5) Therefore, he was a strict disciplinarian and law keeper.

Matthew, in his gospel, wrote that John the Baptist told the people,

Matthew 3:11 "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

So it happened that while Saul was learning the outward habits and the rituals of the Pharisees, there came one who looked, not upon the outside, but upon the heart. In Matthew we also read,

¹⁰ phylactery—a strip of parchment inscribed with certain texts from the old testament, enclosed within a small leather case, and fastened on the forehead or on the left arm near the region of the heart.

Matthew 4:13 ... and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. 14 *This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:*

15 "THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI,
BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE
GENTILES—16 "THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A
GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW
OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED."

17 From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

In stark contrast to the teaching of the Pharisees, Jesus said that an outward show of piety was quite consistent with wickedness of heart. This statement contradicted the beliefs of the Pharisees. Once, Jesus had lunch with a Pharisee, but Jesus did not wash his hands before he ate. (Luke 11:37)

Jesus told his host,

Luke 11:39 ... Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness. 40 "You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? 41 "But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you.

The teaching of Jesus completely contradicted the teaching of the Pharisees—and the rules Saul was learning. Jesus admonished the Pharisee to have inward righteousness, and not mere externalism.

Jesus went on to say to the Pharisees,

Luke 11:42 "But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithes of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 43 "Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. 44 "Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it."

So Jesus compared the Pharisees to concealed tombs, to "... graves, from the wood and stone of which the whitewash had worn off, and the passersby would walk over them, and touching them they would contract ceremonial defilement, without being conscious of what they were walking over and touching."¹¹

Thus Saul of Tarsus was advancing in a religion and tradition which set him in opposition to the God he was trying ignorantly to follow.

The Passover celebration that came when Saul was about 23 years old was marred by the crucifixion of the prophet from Galilee. Saul might have heard him speak, but it could

¹¹ Note: all contact with sepulchers involved ceremonial defilement; hence the fact of their being constantly whitewashed in order to warn passersby of their presence. Pulpit -- LK I p 308.

not have resulted in belief. Saul's traditions and beliefs would not permit him to listen to Jesus with his heart. The doctrine of the Pharisees he was learning only made the repentance more difficult.

Jesus made enemies of the Pharisees when he criticized their hypocrisy. It is reasonable to conclude that Christians would have been regarded as enemies of the Pharisees also. Christians would have been seen as worse than heretics -- to Saul they were rebels and traitors. At that time Saul would have believed in political emancipation for Israel, and that the Christians were working against that.

Although Saul was a pupil of Gamaliel, he did not pursue the course of tolerance advocated by his teacher. Rather, Saul fought against the Christians -- who were now preaching that the prophet from Galilee was the Messiah. They were even saying that he had risen from the dead. In spite of the warnings and threatenings of the Jewish council the disciples of Jesus "kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." Acts 5:42

The Pharisees and Sadducees reacted by ruling that if anyone should confess Jesus as the Messiah, they should be put out of the synagogue. John 9:22

The high priests seized principal disciples of Jesus, who were called apostles, and put them in a public jail. But it was reported that an angel had freed them during the night. A few hours later they were found in the temple teaching and preaching.

All of this must have deepened the anger and hostility felt by the Pharisees, including Saul of Tarsus.

But this new teaching kept on spreading in spite of what the Pharisees could do. "... The number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient ..." Acts 6:7

The rapid change in public sentiment for the crucified Galilean would have, at least, a detrimental effect on the influence and following of the Pharisees, and might yet cause them to "... Lose both their place and their nation." A greater level of force, it appeared would be necessary to reverse the sentiments of the people.

Luke wrote in the book of Acts that,

Acts 6:7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

Acts 6:15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

Acts 7:1 The high priest said, "Are these things so?"

Stephen went on to recount the history of Israel, beginning with the call of Abraham and concluding with the rebuttal of their charge that Jesus would destroy the temple, which the Pharisees believed to be the dwelling place of God.

Then Stephen said,

Acts 7:48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:

49 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE,
AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET;
WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' SAYS THE LORD,
'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE?
50 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?'

Acts 7:51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

The Jewish priests, rulers and Pharisees were cut to the heart by the words of Stephen -- for they were true. In anger and hatred, the Jews rushed upon him and drove him out of the city. There, they began to stone him.

Because it is difficult to throw a stone when one is wearing a robe, the accusers and false witnesses took off their robes. They laid them at the feet of "... A young man named Saul." Acts 7:58

And as Stephen called upon the name of the Prince of Peace, the priests, rulers, and Pharisees stoned him until he was dead. The scripture says that Saul was in "hearty agreement" with putting him to death. Acts 8:1

In this episode Saul had plumbed the depths of rebellion through devotion to his paternal traditions. The Pulpit Commentary says of this incident,

"This example should be a standing warning to us against trust in mere feeling and enthusiasm. The fumes of anger and violence are no signs of pure glowing zeal for the truth, but rather of the spirit that is set on fire of hell. It is when we are most passionately excited in the cause of party conflict that we have most need to be on our guard."¹²

On that blackest of days when the Pharisees stoned Stephen to death, Saul had made his choice. He had cast his lot with the enemies of Jesus. He had approved of the death of

¹² The Pulpit Commentary, Vol. 18, Acts & Romans, p. 260.

a man who was totally innocent, although Saul thought he was justly accused. On that day he joined in the persecution of the disciples of Christ.

So, as the devout Christians lamented over the grave of Stephen, "Saul laid waste the church, entering every house, and dragging men and women committed them to prison." Acts 8:2-3

Not satisfied with the threats and slaughter he could bring against the church in Jerusalem, Saul went to the high priest and asked for letters that he might take to the synagogue in Damascus. Wanting to show his zeal for God by eliminating the growing number of Christians, Saul asked for permission to go to Damascus to find the Christians in that city, to bind them, both men and women, and to bring them back to Jerusalem where they could be cast into prison.

Saul got his letters and set out for Damascus. In Luke's account we learn of the incident that occurred.

Acts 9:3 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; 4 and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, 6 but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."

At one moment Saul is seen as the violent and passionate enemy of Christ and the church. The next moment he is the humble and penitent sinner. From that day forward, Saul of Tarsus never looked back. Whereas before he had carried out the wrath of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, afterward he dug furrows straight and deep for the Lord he had been resisting. From then on he was not Saul the Pharisee, but Paul the dedicated servant of Jesus Christ.

What cause could have wrought such a wondrous effect? In the beginning we see Saul the Hebrew and Pharisee, a rabid enemy of Christ. When we first meet him he is a passionate Pharisee, a man zealous for the Law of Moses and ardently opposed to anyone who contradicted the traditions of the fathers. After the incident on the Damascus Road we see him as a totally penitent believer and follower of Christ. The cause of the change in him was one thing: Saul of Tarsus met Jesus of Nazareth on the road to Damascus. There is no other cause.

What we know of Paul's life comes down to us as a witness. His experience bears witness to the reality and power of the gospel. After that meeting on the road to Damascus Paul never changed in his obedience to Christ. He followed his Lord through trials, persecutions, imprisonments, and ultimately -- death. The effect of the change on him he described to the Philippians:

Philippians 3:3 for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, 4 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

Philippians 3:7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Truly, the only adequate explanation for such a complete reversal of attitude is that Saul the Pharisee encountered Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and became Paul, the follower of Christ, and apostle to the gentiles.

He was a man whose life was wrung out of him, and then put back. And when it was put back, those conflicts which had followed him from birth, which had been in the Hebrew child who had been born a Roman, but became a Pharisee, those conflicts had been combined by the master Craftsman, and what could have been shameful rebellion and hypocrisy, became humble obedience and stirring character.

You may not meet the Lord on the Damascus Road as Paul did, but you can meet him just the same, and your conflicts can be resolved as were Paul's.

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