

PART ONE Major Events in the Life of St. Paul

A FIERY PERSONALITY

We don't have a biography of the apostle Paul. None of his contemporaries chose to chronicle his life, and this is somewhat surprising, given its drama, passion, danger, and faith. The Acts of the Apostles tells us many things about Paul, but only in the sketchiest of details.

We also know almost nothing about his physical appearance. This subject has intrigued Christians for 2,000 years, as Paul himself seems to indicate that his appearance was an obstacle throughout his life. In 2 Corinthians chapter 10, he writes: "Look at the evidence of your eyes. . . . For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible' " (vs. 7a, 10).

As for his personality, he must have been fiery. He went from reveling in the persecution of early Christians, to being treated equally roughly by his Jewish brothers after his own conversion. In one instance, for example, Luke writes in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 23, of Paul's being brought to trial before the Sanhedrin—the same group that had tried and sentenced St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to death: "Paul looked steadily at

the Sanhedrin and began to speak, ‘My brothers, to this day I have conducted myself before God with a perfectly clear conscience.’ At this the high priest Ananias ordered his attendants to strike him on the mouth” (v. 1–2).

IMPORTANT DATES IN ST. PAUL’S LIFE

Although biblical scholars do not agree on the precise dates of the major events in Paul’s life, the following may be their best estimate:

	ca. AD
■ The Crucifixion of Christ	31–33
■ Saul’s persecutions of the early Christians	33–35
■ Paul’s conversion	35–36
■ Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem	38
■ Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem	46
■ The first missionary journey	47
■ Council at Jerusalem, second missionary journey	49
■ Paul arrives in Corinth	50
■ First epistles (1 and 2 Thessalonians) written	51
■ Again in Jerusalem, third missionary journey	52–53
■ Paul leaves Ephesus	55–56
■ Again in Jerusalem, arrested at Pentecost	56–57
■ Paul reaches Rome	59–60
■ Conclusion of the events told in book of Acts	61
■ Last epistle written	62
■ Martyrdom in Rome	64–65

HIS BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

(date unknown)

We know very little about Paul's childhood, except that he was born as Saul, in the city of Tarsus, a commercial and intellectual center of the Roman Empire, in what is now part of modern-day Turkey. Tarsus was a university town, and two schools of Greek philosophy were centered there: the Stoics and the Epicureans.

Saul was a common name for Jewish boys, usually given in memory of the Saul who was the first king of the ancient kingdom of Israel (cf. 1 Samuel 9–10). As a son in a devout Jewish family, Saul of Tarsus was sent to Jerusalem, probably at about the age of thirteen, to further his studies. There he studied under the renowned Rabbi Gamaliel, also known as Gamaliel the Elder, one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin at that time. Rabbi Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel, perhaps the most important figure during the entire period known as Second Temple Judaism (from the building of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 516 BC until its destruction in AD 70).

In Acts 22:3 Paul gives his own testimony:

‘I am a Jew,’ Paul said, ‘and was born at Tarsus in Cilicia. I was brought up here in this city. It was under Gamaliel that I studied and was taught the exact observance of the Law of our ancestors. In fact, I was as full of duty towards God as you all are today.’

It was probably at the conclusion of these studies in Jerusalem that Saul became a Pharisee, a strictly observant, religious Jew.

Paul continues his story in Philippians 3:4–5:

I myself could rely on these [physical qualifications] too. If anyone does claim to rely on them, my claim is better. Circumcised on the eighth day of my life, I was born of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents. In the matter of the law, I was a Pharisee.

PERSECUTOR OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

(AD 33–35)

Saul was a fierce opponent of the early Christians. As a Jewish religious authority, he zealously persecuted them, fighting for the traditional Jewish faith against the young movement of the disciples of Jesus Christ.

As he says in Acts 22:4,

I even persecuted this Way to the death and sent women as well as men to prison in chains.

He addressed Jesus in Acts 22:20, saying,

When the blood of your witness Stephen was being shed, I, too, was standing by, in full agreement with his murderers, and in charge of their clothes.

In Acts 26:9–11, he described his persecution of the Christians: