

*Pastor's Papers* | Ronald H. Gann  
Bible/Apologetics

### ***The Conversion Of Paul***

A Survey Of The Life & Ministry Of The Apostle Paul (Part 2)  
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In 1933, a 44-year-old former Intelligence Commando from Austria rose to power in Germany amid social, political, and economic unrest. Primed with an ambitious plan to dominate Europe and to rid the continent of its ethnic undesirables, Adolf Hitler's tenure as Germany's Führer is one of history's more sinister tales. Few men have scarred humanity or sullied a nation's legacy more than the maniacal leader of the Third Reich.

Hitler's partisan vitriol helped to win him the German Chancellorship. Once in power, his political perspective escalated into despotism and fuelled the resentment that eventually gave rise to the Nazi regime. In his bid to regain Germany's former glory, which had eroded considerably following World War I, Hitler spread his mayhem further than any other sociopath in modern history. "Have no pity! Act brutally!"<sup>1</sup> he charged the German army, as they fought to overthrow the Eastern bloc. The world watched in disbelief as Nazi stormtroopers responded by massacring scores of innocent civilians with the battle cry, "Heil Hitler!"

World War I set the stage for Hitler's rise in 1933. The German Empire's fatigued military conceded defeat to Allied forces in 1919, bringing an end to the First World War. After six months of negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference, a destabilized Germany surrendered her dignity to the Treaty of Versailles. The key provision in the treaty required Germany to unilaterally disarm and to confess responsibility for instigating the "War to End All Wars." Furthermore, the Allied forces required Germany to surrender all territories previously occupied and to pay financial reparations to the victimized nations. The demands humiliated Germany and left the nation demoralized.

When Hitler came to power a decade and a half later, the Treaty of Versailles still haunted many Germans. The Führer's promises on the campaign trail were therefore deliberately crafted to expunge the treaty from the public's memory and to rejuvenate their sense of patriotism. Specifically, Hitler vowed to rebuild the country's crippled financial system and transform its military into a formidable force capable of dominating the world for over a thousand years. Such an audacious objective and display of confidence seduced the average German.

Soon after assuming control of the Reichstag, Hitler made good on his promises. He swiftly recaptured some of the territories relinquished after World War I, including western Lithuania and Austria. Moreover, Germany ceased paying reparations for crimes committed in World War I, secretly worked towards rearmament, remilitarized Rhineland, rescinded her role in the League of Nations, and began to forcefully expand her borders. Cowering from intimidation was an ineffective League of Nations held

spellbound by the Führer. Their only call to action, sadly, was a public censure of the Chancellor and, eventually, full appeasement.

Offsetting Hitler's treaty violations abroad were his economic successes at home. He created jobs, devised domestic programs, and eventually resuscitated a dead economy by investing in new infrastructure. Hitler was well aware that all his political misconduct could be easily forgiven so long as his economic programs succeeded. Thus, his abjuration of the peace treaty went unchecked by many Germans, including the German press, who looked favorably upon his domestic accomplishments. Inexplicably, Adolf Hitler earned international accolades for his nation's economic boom, including the conspicuous nod as *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year" in 1938.<sup>2</sup>

Hitler's rise to power was due in large part to his charisma. The National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP, or more commonly, the Nazi Party), a right-wing political group formed in 1919 primarily by unemployed veterans, selected the then 32-year-old as the head of its party in 1921.

By the early 1930s, Nazi ideology had morphed more into a political system bent on global supremacy and racial purification. The Nazis promoted the notion that Aryan Germans were superior to other nationalities, distributing scientific propaganda which purported to authenticate their bigotry toward Jews, blacks, homosexuals, and the infirmed. These so-called inferior groups, or undesirables, were considered a threat to the purity and strength of Germany's pedigree. In effect, Hitler and his Nazi party advertised Aryans as the undisputed 'master race.'

Hitler's abhorrence of the Jewish people is renowned. He regarded them as responsible for everything unsavory in the modern world, including contemporary art, pornography, social vices, white slave trafficking, and prostitution. Blaming the Jews for Germany's loss in World War I, Hitler was paranoid that the 'wholesomeness' of Deutschland had become diluted by a growing Semitic presence.

Suspicious of his political rivals—specifically the Social Democrat Party—Hitler was convinced that Germany's egalitarianism, together with many of the country's leading companies and newspapers, had fallen victim to Jewish cartels. Moreover, the fact that some Jews had achieved prominent positions in a democratic society was, according to the Führer, an argument against democracy. Hitler consolidated his power through murder and intrigue and established totalitarian rule. He ended democracy, restricted basic rights, dismantled freedom of speech, policed the press, and halted public assembly throughout the country.

It was Hitler's conviction that the natural laws of Darwinism, particularly "the survival of the fittest,"<sup>3</sup> were based on aggression, not tranquility, and only through unadulterated strength could social problems be solved. In Hitler's mind, democracy was the enemy of the people because it circumvented brutality in favor of diplomacy, thereby soft-pedaling the animalistic character of man. In his 1925 semi-autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, which means *My Struggle*, he admitted the following:

Either the world will be ruled according to the ideas of democracy, or the world will be dominated according to the natural law of force; in the latter case the people of brute force will be victorious.<sup>4</sup>

Hitler's dictatorship was a reign of horror. His persecution of Jews reached its pre-war peak with *Kristallnacht*—or The Night of the Broken Glass—when on November 9, 1938, the Führer unleashed his fury.

The precipitating event leading to The Night of the Broken Glass was a misdeed performed by Herschel Grynszpan. Grynszpan, a German-Polish Jew living in Paris, had received a letter from his family describing the appalling conditions they had experienced in their deportation. Seeking to alleviate their situation, he appealed repeatedly to Ernst vom Rath, Third Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris, who was apparently indifferent to his complaint. On Monday, November 7, an angry Grynszpan fatally shot vom Rath. The assassination of the German diplomat by a disgruntled Jew served as the pretext for launching a national crusade against German Jewry.

The next day Hitler ordered a campaign of anti-Semitic persecution to be carried out by Heinrich Himmler, commander of the German Gestapo. Forty-eight hours later, the bloodbath had resulted in the looting or destruction of over eight hundred stores owned by Jews. Homes were ransacked and local shops laid to waste, as non-Jewish civilians and stormtroopers took to the streets and destroyed Jewish property with sledgehammers and axes. Owing to its massive vandalism, specifically the shattered glass, the events that night earned the moniker “The Night of the Broken Glass.”

Countless Jews were harassed in the carnage. Many were beaten to death, while twenty thousand Jewish men were imprisoned without legal recourse and 1,668 synagogues were looted. In addition, 267 Jewish synagogues were set on fire and left as burning rubble. Then, despite the enormous damage to Jewish property, the Jewish community was ordered to pay a hefty fine for the cost of the clean up.

Hitler followed *Kristallnacht* with ‘The Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ four years later. This formal Nazi plan daringly called for the annihilation of all European Jewry. Adolf Eichmann, a top Nazi official who coined the term ‘Final Solution,’ was appointed to helm the genocidal campaign. Although the murder of over one million Jews had already occurred prior to 1942, it was with its official codification during World War II that the wholesale slaughter of Jews began in earnest.

Hitler established six extermination centers in occupied Poland to carry out the Final Solution's directive—Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. The Nazis not only arrested those deemed to be racially inferior, but also those who balked at the Führer's authority to do so. Political dissidents were sent to forced-labor or concentration camps while the ethnically expendable were sentenced to one of the six extermination camps. Equipped with gassing facilities to expedite mass murder, Jews were slaughtered by the thousands, as were an incalculable amount of Gypsies, Soviet prisoners-of-war, Poles, and others.

Torture, forced labor, chemical gas, starvation, foul weather, scientific experimentation, disease, and cold-blooded execution were the fate of most Jews interned at the camps; their corpses were then callously disposed of in mass cremations. According to confiscated records from the *Schutzstaffel (SS)*—Germany's secret police—more than seven hundred thousand prisoners from every German-occupied nation in Europe in 1945 were registered in the camps.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘Holocaust’ of World War II was the name given to the ghastly annihilation of over five million<sup>6</sup> Jews by Hitler's Nazi regime. Frenzied by a delirious hatred of Jews

and a zeal for Aryan supremacy, only a resounding defeat by the Allied forces leading to a fatal, self-inflicted gunshot wound to his head could stop the German Chancellor. In 1932, on the eve of Hitler's rise to power, approximately nine million Jews lived in the twenty-one countries of Europe that would be occupied by Germany during World War II. By 1945, at the war's end, two out of every three European Jews had been liquidated.<sup>7</sup>

While the heinousness of Adolf Hitler's acts is without equal in history, one man of antiquity is, in terms of principle, able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the German tyrant. Demonstrating a consuming hatred toward his enemies and a bigoted sense of nationalism—together with the political clout to tyrannize through force—Saul of Tarsus rivals Hitler. While Hitler demonized the Jews of the twentieth century, Saul, an impeccable Jew himself, persecuted the first century Christians as the chief henchman of the Pharisaic order.

In the manner of Hitler, Saul was jealous for his heritage. As a leading rabbi, he was determined to defend the purity of Judaism with the same vigor that Hitler, as a Nazi, sought to safeguard the 'master race.' To that end, both men sanctioned the use of violence as a means of achieving their desired outcome. In Saul's case, his objective was to abolish Christianity from Palestine by the sword; whereas Hitler's ambition was to exterminate the Jewish race in Europe by chemical gassing. Their vendettas were eerily similar and resulted in an untold number of murders and incarcerations. Despite their uncanny resemblance, however, each man's destiny and legacy proved to be diametrically different.

Consider the following 'what ifs?' What if, while in the throes of World War II with the concentration camps in Poland at their fullest, the most infamous villain in modern history mysteriously converted to Judaism? What if, rather than committing suicide, the newly converted Hitler relinquished his position as Führer to devote his life to the Jewish people? Imagine Hitler not only rebuilding the synagogues he once destroyed, but also establishing new ones. And finally, suppose Adolf Hitler, who made the Nazi swastika notorious, replaced the ominous insignia on his armband with the polished Star of David.

As difficult as it is to accept such fiction, such is indeed the true story behind one of Hitler's likeminded predecessors, Saul of Tarsus.

## Persecution Of The Saints

**W**ith the Christian movement reaching a crescendo after the Holy Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost (30–35 AD), the ugly dawn of persecution loomed in wait over the horizon. Judaism's entrenched leadership, namely the Sanhedrin—an assembly of seventy-one judges consisting of the Pharisees and Sadducees—were determined to preserve Judaism from the pollution of Christianity. Israel's legislative body, in league with Roman provincial officers, rallied to subdue the increasing number of defectors to the new religion.

While Christ had warned his followers of persecution (John 15:20), the infant Church staggered under the religious attack waged by her opponents. The Jewish and Roman authorities instituted every law necessary—no matter how sadistic—to purge the

followers of Jesus from Israel. This maltreatment of Christians and attempts to suppress the gospel was spearheaded by the most prolific nemesis<sup>8</sup> of Christianity—the merciless Saul of Tarsus.

At the time, Israel was at unrest both politically and spiritually. Rome’s growing occupation of the holy land and the rising tide of Christian proselytizing threatened to inflame a nation already on the brink of combustion. Many in Israel were being swept away in the mania stirred up by a group of men called ‘apostles’ who represented an offshoot religion of Judaism. Although largely isolated to Jerusalem, their preaching threatened Rome with a potential insurgency. That twelve Galilean men of poor backgrounds were able to rebuff Rome’s muscle and induce a wave of Christian enthusiasm defied reasonable explanation. The people’s allegiance to a criminal, who had been put to death on a Roman crossbeam but then purported by the apostles to have risen from the grave, was the height of folly to the Romans and profanity to religious Jews (1 Cor. 1:23).

Withstanding the cultural mainstay, a Christian revival swelled throughout the Mediterranean region, much to the chagrin of Jewish traditionalists (Acts 2). Crowned by the Holy Spirit and championed by the twelve apostles, the new religion flourished like wildfire:

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand (Acts 4:1–4).

Most Jews in Judea, including Grecian Jews throughout the neighboring regions, were staunch opponents of this new movement commonly referred to as “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 24:14). Particularly offensive to them was the apostles’ assertion that a crucified carpenter—who hailed from despised Nazareth of all places—was the heir-apparent to Israel’s much anticipated theocratic kingdom. To the Jews, it was heresy that lampooned their quest for political liberation. It was not long, therefore, before many Jewish leaders conspired to put an end to the religious insurrection.

From among the most zealous and outspoken adversaries of Christianity arose a devout hardliner from Tarsus, named Saul. A leading Pharisee in Cilicia, Saul’s reaction toward Christianity was deadly.

### **The Pharisaic Terrorist**

**T**he group with which Saul was affiliated, the Pharisees, was a compelling but misguided Jewish sect famous for their religious fanaticism. As the most influential party among the Jews, the Pharisees saw themselves as guardians of Jewish canon and ceremony, in particular the Law of Moses. They emerged out of a

resistance movement during the intertestamental period in protest to the Seleucid Empire who sought to impose Greek culture upon them. The attempt made by Antiochus IV Epiphanes to Hellenize the Jews rallied a select group of Hebrews to reinvest their patriotism back into fundamental Judaism, leading to the Maccabean revolt in 167–165 BC and the institution of Pharisaism.

The Pharisees' rivals during Saul's day were the Sadducees, a secular group recruited mainly from the aristocratic and priestly classes. While these two groups shared common ground on Israel's political landscape, they diverged quite a bit in their theological thinking. The Sadducees applied a loose, if not liberal, interpretation to the Torah; rejecting its supernatural claims outright. The Pharisees, on the other hand, tended to be middle-class conservatives who fostered a separatist agenda. In their fundamentalist reading of the Mosaic Law, the Pharisees believed and taught in the resurrection of the body and the afterlife, including angels, demons, and Satan (Acts 23:8). The struggle for power between these two parties extended beyond religion and often led to political rancor and, in some isolated cases, even violence.

Saul of Tarsus was no stranger to religious extremism. As a Pharisee armed with the pulpit of the synagogue, he was ferocious in his devotion to Judaism and his pursuit of piety. To that end, his insistence that the purity rules for the Levitical priests (Lev. 21) applied to every Jew in every aspect of life, and not merely to the priesthood, developed into a staple tenet of Pharisaism. In due time, Saul and his fellow rabbis imposed ritual cleanliness beyond the ceremonial tribe of Levi.

Saul's group was one of five parties in post-exilic Israel who commanded respect among the nation (together with the Sadducees, Herodians, the Zealots, and the Essenes). The Pharisees' main function was to teach and preach the Torah, both from the written scroll as well as the equally-authoritative verbal customs, known also as "the tradition of the elders" (Mark 7:31). By flaunting their imposing command of the Torah, they assumed "Moses' seat" in Israel (Matt. 23:2). Their commitment to holiness and their outspoken allegiance to Judaism in the face of pervasive Hellenism were much admired, affording them significant influence in the nation's bureaucratic affairs.

In due course, the Pharisees became watchdogs over the nation's spiritual pulse, controlling the synagogue system throughout Israel. They studied, taught, and worshipped as theological renegades, holding tenaciously to the monotheism of the Torah. Their popularity eventually increased during the lifetime of Christ to the point where they easily eclipsed the Levitical priesthood in public standing.

With calculated resolve, the Pharisees endeavored to separate themselves from their secular culture,<sup>9</sup> going so far as to live in their own settlements and to ostracize those who failed to meet their arbitrary standards of piousness. Their separation from the unseemliness of society found its origin in the priestly writings of Ezra:

“Now make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers, and do his will. *Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives*” (Ezra 10:11, emphasis added).

One writer notes: “And in spite of many noble individual exceptions, the deepest tendency of Pharisaism was towards an over-evaluation of external things, Levitical correctness and precision, that made their spirit strongly antagonistic ... They developed

a proud and arrogant orthodoxy, until the monotheism of the prophets became in their hands wholly incompetent to found a society where Jew and Gentile should be one.”<sup>10</sup>

The Pharisees developed a hyper sense of legalism, eerily reminiscent of the rabbinic tradition of Isaiah’s time, seven hundred years earlier. In Paul’s era, they were reputed to have codified from the Mosaic constitution 365 prohibitions and upwards of 240 commandments.<sup>11</sup> In Isaiah’s day, they were reputed to “do and do” and impose “rule on rule” (Isa. 28:10). God lamented the legalistic formalities of both eras: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men” (Isa. 29:13 cf. Matt. 15:6–8).

The Pharisees’ allegiance to the rule of law, as opposed to “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23b), eventually led to their terse denouncement by Christ. With scathing indignation, the Lord condemned the Pharisees as “hypocrites” (v. 15), “son[s] of hell” (v. 15), “blind guides” (v. 16), “fools” (v. 17), “greed[y] and self-indulgen[t]” (v. 25), “whitewashed tombs ... unclean” (v. 27), “full of ... wickedness” (v. 28), “snakes,” “brood of vipers” (v. 33), and “murderers” (v. 28). He even went so far as to characterize them as insolent children of Satan because of their disobedience to the Spirit of the Law (John 8:44).

Because the Pharisees’ strength was in the size of their membership (approximately six thousand strong), they enforced these codes with relative ease. Those who were found to be noncompliant were deemed reprobates and publicly ostracized through peer pressure (Luke 15:1–2). In severe cases, such as adultery or blasphemy, punishment by stoning was tolerated (John 8:1–8; 10:22–33).

Saul of Tarsus emerged from this band of sanctimonious men. If ever there existed a true Jew who personified legalistic Judaism, it was the Pharisee from Tarsus.

Saul’s hometown of Tarsus was “no ordinary city” (Acts 21:39). It was the epicenter of education and commerce, and home to one of four accredited universities in the Roman Empire (along with Alexandria, Athens, and Rhodes). The city was conveniently located near the Mediterranean coastline and served as a leading agricultural, industrial, and cultural hub. A Roman province, Tarsus afforded Saul a Greek education and Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28), two highly esteemed Greco-Roman credentials few Jews could claim.

Saul was a pupil of Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel, the most distinguished rabbi in Jewish history. Under Gamaliel’s tutelage, an adolescent Saul became conversant in Greek study while deluged with the Law of God. To that end, he matured into “a Hebrew of Hebrews” whose zeal for Judaism and righteousness left him “faultless” (Php. 3:5–6). Saul rapidly advanced within the Jewish pecking order. He earned advanced degrees in rhetoric before he was nineteen,<sup>12</sup> and evolved into the quintessential rabbi of his day, second only to the High Priest Theophilus who served as president of the Sanhedrin.

He was considered the premier Pharisee among his colleagues (similar to his father before him),<sup>13</sup> yet it was only a matter of time before the popular Saul of Tarsus fell victim to his own fanfare. In his courtroom testimony before King Agrippa years later following his conversion, and in his epistles to his constituents in Philippi and Galatia, he offered his résumé as evidence for his hatred of the Christian faith:

“The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee ... [I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless ... I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers ... I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them ...” (Acts 26:4–5; Php. 3:5–6; Gal. 1:14; Acts 26:9–11).

Saul was the foremost zealot bent on destroying the Christian Church during her infancy. In his fever to eradicate the Way, he ordered the arrests and oversaw the martyrdom of believers—including the murder of Stephen, the earliest martyr in Christendom (Acts 7:54–60). Dr. John MacArthur, a New Testament scholar and commentator, writes of Saul: “He became like a war horse with the smell of battle in his nostrils, snorting out unrelenting fury against everyone and everything Christian. Toward the Christians, he became like the wicked Haman—the enemy of the Jews who determined to exterminate every Jew in the vast Persian empire of King Ahasuerus (Est. 3:8–10).”<sup>14</sup>

Corroborating Saul’s testimony before Agrippa, Luke attests how the Pharisee’s revulsion for Christianity even extended beyond the borders of Jerusalem. He vigorously sought, and was granted, the legal edict to take his crusade of persecution “to the synagogues in Damascus” (Acts 9:2):

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison ... Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem (Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–2).

## **The Damascus Road Experience**

It was on the road to Damascus that Saul would be forever changed. Hearing of a group of Christians in Syria, Saul and his entourage obtained the necessary warrants from the Sanhedrin and set out for the Syrian capital city. Damascus was widely regarded as a caravan city where certain trade routes from southern Arabia, Petra, and China all converged, satisfying the Roman demands for eastern luxuries. Paul knew its landscape well having undoubtedly traveled through the city many times on route to Israel. Located a hundred and fifty miles north of Jerusalem, Damascus had become a sanctuary for fleeing Christians as the flames of persecution intensified.

Forced to travel the customary route through despised Samaria, Saul became all the more agitated due to the lingering effects of a recent revival among the Samaritans—led by the renegade apostles Philip, Peter, and John (Acts 8:4–17). He charged full speed on route for Damascus with deadly ambition when, “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him ... brighter than the sun, blazing around [him] and [his] companions” (Acts 9:3b; 26:13).

Confronted with the blinding glory of Jesus Christ, the fearless persecutor collapsed to the ground. Dazed and confused, he “heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads*’” (Acts 26:14, emphasis added). Chuck Swindoll explains:

The unusual expression “kick against the goads” rang familiar to Saul. It was a Greek proverbial phrase that referred to the goads used to prod oxen or other beasts of burden. To encourage his oxen to pull harder, a farmer would use a pointed rod to prod the hind parts of the beasts. In protest, the animals would often kick against that action. The result would be a painful reminder of who was in charge.<sup>15</sup>

The brilliant light that accompanied the voice was a common Old Testament picture of God’s illuminating presence (cf. Ezek. 1:27; 8:2; Psalm 104:2). This voice left no doubt in Saul’s mind that he was in the presence of the holy Christ. Inquiring of his name, the Pharisee could barely muster his retort: “Who are you Lord?” (Acts 9:5).

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied. “Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith” (Acts 26:15b–18).

Like Saul, the men traveling with him fell prostrate at the flash of heavenly glory. Moments later they “immediately got up and stood there speechless: they heard the sound but did not see anyone” (Acts 9:7). To Saul, for whom the spoken message was even more traumatic than the light, his encounter with God was literally blinding. The sightless Saul was led by his companions into the city of Damascus where they stayed for three days, during which time he neither ate nor drank, awaiting further instructions.

MacArthur observes, “It is likely that Saul was so vehemently bent on destroying Jesus’s followers that no Christian would have been able to present the gospel to him successfully. Only God, by miraculous intervention, could get his attention.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Swindoll asks, “How could such a high impact New Testament apostle and writer emerge from a man of such spiritual blindness and physical brutality? The answer: amazing grace! It was God’s grace alone that transformed Saul.”<sup>17</sup>

Saul would eventually adopt the Greek version of his name, ‘Paul’, as a more suitable surname for his Greek audiences, suggesting further that he had become a new person and that the treacherous Pharisee of his past had been crucified (Gal. 2:20). In the months that followed Saul’s miraculous encounter, he changed more than his name: his mental perspective was transformed from legalistic righteousness to one of grace and humility; his religious passion was redirected to spreading the very news he fought so hard to stifle; and his zeal was focused on proclaiming Jesus Christ rather than on stopping His movement.

So startling was his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road that Saul needed time to reflect on his transformation and his life. Certainly the revelation that all his religious zeal had been misdirected was almost impossible for him to digest, let alone having to come to terms with the blood on his hands as a persecutor. The Lord led him through the healing process graciously and began restoring him emotionally and spiritually.

While the blinded Pharisee recovered in Judas’ household—fasting, praying and in need of counsel—God divulged to Ananias, a nearby prophet in Damascus, the conversion of the notorious persecutor:

The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:11–15).

Although Ananias was a leading Christian among the Damascenes, his Jewish devoutness earned him the respect of “all the Jews living there” (Acts 22:12), including Paul’s former colleagues in Cilicia and northern Judea. His dual-devotion to both Christianity and Judaism made him the consummate born-again Jew of his day, second only to James. (In fact, Ananias’s involvement in Paul’s conversion story would bolster the apostle’s credibility two decades later when arrested in the temple courts).<sup>18</sup>

At Damascus, Paul was eventually visited by the reluctant prophet. He informed Paul that God had summoned him as His courier to restore Paul's sight and to announce the Lord's purpose for him as a witness to Gentiles. During their exchange, "something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again" (Acts 9:18). The prophet then gazed into the seeing eyes of the Pharisee and said, "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:14–15).

Having faithfully delivered the Lord's message, Ananias called on Paul to respond: "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (v. 16). Shortly thereafter, the would-be apostle was baptized into the family of faith and ordained into the apostolic ministry. This classic moment in which God called, healed, ordained, and anointed the apostle into service for the gospel forever changed the face of Christendom.

After his conversion, Paul not only testified what had happened to him on the Damascus road but also defended the gospel so powerfully that he confounded every unbelieving Jew who dared to debate him. In the very synagogues to which he had come with arrest warrants for Christians, he now began to proclaim Jesus. The most zealous defender of Judaism had become the most zealous evangelist for Christianity. The shock that his preaching produced among Christians was only outweighed by the consternation and sense of betrayal many religious Jews felt. Both parties were equally mystified as they listened to him preach. "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" (Acts 9:21). Christian and Jew alike could not fathom the drastic change in Saul of Tarsus.

Paul began his commission first in the Damascus synagogues—serving the gospel with all of the fanaticism he had formerly used to persecute it—and then moved onward to the kingdom of the Nabataean Arabs, to the east and south. There he fearlessly preached the gospel among the Arabians, "proving that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9:22).

As Paul later explained in his epistle to the Galatians, he led a three-year ministry in Arabia<sup>19</sup> where he presumably received direct revelation from the Lord (Gal. 1:17–18). Referring to these oracles, he later wrote: "The gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11–12). In the same way, Paul wrote the Corinthians, "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you ... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3).

While ministering among the Nabataean Arabs, Paul's understanding of Christianity sharpened as did his oratory skills. So pervasive was his preaching that he eventually attracted the hostility of the king of Arabia—Aretas IV.

King Aretas IV Philopateris, the former father-in-law of Herod Antipas, ruled over the Nabataean Arabs from 9 BC to 40 AD. His frequent military provocations along the West Bank of the Jordan River belied his overtures for peace with the Jewish nation. Always on the lookout for spies, rabble-rousers, or those who would disrupt the Arabian community, he received the apostle into his province with misgiving. He believed it unlikely that the illustrious Saul of Tarsus—a man known for stirring up commotion wherever he went—would sojourn in his territory quietly.

Although subdued at first, Paul's three-year ministry eventually polarized Arabia's capital city. Luke records that "Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus" (Acts 9:22). The Jewish community found Paul not only to be a nuisance, but a religious turncoat. Aretas, on the other hand, saw him more as a provocateur. He ordered his provincial governor to put a stop to the public disturbances at once by any means necessary, including murder. Thus, the governor "had the city of the Damascenes guarded ... [and] kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him" (Acts 9:24).

Learning of Paul's death warrant, Luke reports that Paul's "followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall" (vv. 9:24b–25). In Paul's own words to the Corinthians years later, "I ... slipped through his hands" (2 Cor. 11:33).

John Charles Pollock, the recognized authority on numerous Christian biographies, observes:

... The crusade on which [Paul] had embarked so gloriously had come to a summary stop; the appointed leader was a fugitive already ...

... The irony was not lost on him that the mighty Paul who had originally approached Damascus with all the panoply of the High Priest's representative should make his last exit in a fish basket, helped by the very people he had come to hurt.<sup>20</sup>

Paul fled to the place he knew best; his surrogate home in Jerusalem. There he had hoped to gain the acceptance of the Twelve Apostles and share the good news with them about how the gospel was received among the Arabian Gentiles. Three years was more than enough time to have quieted any speculation thought to still exist around his conversion; and if they would not trust his testimony they would surely have to take into consideration the fruit of his labors abroad. Richard N. Longnecker writes:

Certainly [the Twelve Apostles] must have heard of his conversion and his preaching in Damascus. Yet, it seems, they never knew him personally, either as a persecutor or as a Christian; and stories about his motives and activities during a three-year period might well have become distorted. Many might, in fact, have asked why, if Saul had really become a Christian, he remained aloof from the Twelve and the Jerusalem congregation for such a long time.<sup>21</sup>

On word of Paul's arrival, an influential Christian leader—Barnabas from Antioch—sought the apostle out. Most likely it was not very long before the two men became dear friends. Convinced by what he saw and heard about Paul, Barnabas felt the time was right to introduce his new brother in Christ to the other available disciples, especially Peter.

But when Barnabas and Paul attempted to arrange the meeting, they were rebuffed. Apparently, "those reputed to be pillars" (Gal. 2:9) did not look kindly on Paul being in the capital city of Christianity. Even though three years had passed, Stephen's

martyrdom still haunted them (cf. Acts 7:54–60). It is hardly surprising that the man responsible for Stephen's death was unable to convince the apostles that he was not his former persecuting self. He came to them now as a brother, he assured them through Barnabas, and not under false pretense to infiltrate the inner ranks of the Church to sabotage it.

Barnabas defended Paul in a private meeting with the apostles. As one of the first prophets and teachers of the Antioch church (Acts 13:1), he was a solid character witness, bearing testimony that the former Pharisee now “preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus” among the Gentiles in Arabia (Acts 9:27b). The trusted friend of the disciples insisted that Paul hoped to partner with them in sharing the good news of Christ Jesus. His advocacy eventually won them over.

The apostle Peter personally accepted Paul into his own home. During his fifteen-day stay in Jerusalem, Paul was also introduced to James, the Lord's half-brother and senior cleric of the Jerusalem congregation. Both apostles were moved in spirit by his transformed heart and his candor. They were equally impressed with the work he had accomplished, alone, among the Nabataean Arabs. With much rejoicing and praise, they extended to their one-time nemesis the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9).

Paul could not stay in Jerusalem long because of the animosity of his former associates; word had spread about his bold preaching and lively debates among the Grecian Jews. His shocking turnabout from Christian persecutor to Christian preacher infuriated the Jews, who reckoned him a traitor and blasphemer, let alone embarrassed them.

While praying in the temple, Luke records that the apostle Paul fell into a deep stupor. Entranced, the apostle was cautioned by the Lord: “[L]eave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me ... Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:18, 22).

Fearing Paul's assassination on word of his vision, the other apostles arranged for him to travel to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast where he eventually set sail for Tarsus, his hometown. There Paul remained long-sufferingly, perhaps earning his keep as a tentmaker (cf. Acts 18:3), in preparation for his next assignment. But the apostle would have to wait on God's timing. It would be ten years later before he would receive his marching orders to venture out into the world to preach the gospel.

Standing on equal footing with Adolf Hitler in terms of his mistreatment and disdain for European Jews was the ferocious Saul of Tarsus; a Pharisee whose religious delirium led to the persecution of Christians in the Mediterranean world. That Luke implicates Saul in the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, by his overseeing a mob of stone-throwers is reminiscent of Hitler's vendetta against Jews on “The Night of the Broken Glass” that was also carried out by a ruthless mob.

Saul's inspiration to harass and persecute soon gave way to the Holy Spirit who, in turn, transformed the belligerent Pharisee into a congenial apostle with the inspiration to preach (1 Cor. 9:16). Through his miraculous conversion and the renewing of his mind, the apostle Paul changed what was to be his horrific legacy into an inheritance of greatness. The imprint of his missionary work transformed a primitive culture into an enlightened community. Whereas Hitler stained the twentieth century

with his barbarism and went to the grave disillusioned and defeated, Paul is celebrated as a defeater—a man of great learning who discovered “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Php. 4:7) and whose own conversion story tells the tale of a loving and forgiving God.

—Ronald H. Gann

<sup>1</sup> Cited at [www.worldbook.com](http://www.worldbook.com).

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Hitler, Man of the Year; *Time Magazine*, January 2, 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Adolf Hitler endorsed a program in Germany called “eugenics.” It was founded by Charles Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton. The idea of eugenics was to improve the human race using principles promoted in the theory of evolution. Eugenics called for the partitioning of the human race into two groups, the “fit” and the “unfit.”

<sup>4</sup> Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf* (“My Struggle”), (originally 1925–1926), Reissue edition (September 15, 1998), Publisher: Mariner Books.

<sup>5</sup> Cited at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org).

<sup>6</sup> Many volumes of prison documentation were incinerated by the Nazis. More were lost or became illegible because of the various Allied military incursions. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the precise number of Jewish victims. However, according to the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, the general consensus among scholars is that the total exceeded 5.1 million.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Jews were not the only group singled out for persecution by Hitler’s Nazi regime. As many as one-half million Gypsies; at least two hundred and fifty thousand mentally or physically disabled persons and more than three million Soviet prisoners-of-war also fell victim to Nazi genocide. Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, Social Democrats, Communists, partisans, trade unionists, Polish intelligentsia and other ‘undesirables’ were also victims of the hate and aggression carried out by the Nazis.

<sup>8</sup> Unquestionably, Saul was the most feared persecutor of the Church in the aftermath of Christianity’s birth (cf. Acts 8:1–3; 9:1–2). However, only two decades later, Emperor Nero of Rome would assume the title as the archenemy of God and implement a massive wave of persecution against the Christian Church.

<sup>9</sup> The name Pharisee in its Hebrew form means separatists, or the separated ones. They were also known as *Chasidim*, which means loyal to God, or loved of God.

<sup>10</sup> Nash, Henry. *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible, Abridged Edition* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 720.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, John. *Exploring the Gospel of Luke* (Kregal, 2005), 76.

<sup>12</sup> Most scholars believe from the inferences in Scripture, including his own statements, that Paul had a complete rhetorical education, which would mean that he had the attained the highest level of education possible for a person living in the Greco-Roman world.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 23:6; Philippians 3:5.

<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 1–8* (Moody Press, 1991), xiv.

<sup>15</sup> Swindoll, Charles R. *A Man of Grace and Grit: Paul* (Insight for Living, 2003), 14.

<sup>16</sup> MacArthur, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Swindoll, Charles R. *A Man of Grace and Grit: Paul* (Insight for Living, 2003), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to Acts 22:12ff.

<sup>19</sup> The area in Arabia where Paul ministered was nearby Damascus south to the Sinai Peninsula and not to be confused with the territory of modern Arabia today.

<sup>20</sup> As cited in Swindoll, Charles R. *A Man of Grace and Grit: Paul* (Insight for Living, 2003), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Longnecker, Richard L. *Acts of the Apostles; The NIV Bible Commentary, vol. 2: The New Testament*, Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, eds., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 435.