

The Fingerprints of God

Galatians 1:15

INTRODUCTION: We are in a study of Paul - the Apostle of Christ. In these first few weeks we will refer to him both as SAUL and as PAUL. His given name was SAUL, after Israel's first King, the Hellenization (or Greek accommodation) of Saul is Paul. So his name wasn't actually changed, but it was written differently to accommodate his Greek audience.

The first time scripture introduces us to Saul of Tarsus is when he sanctioned the unjust execution of Stephen. Thus opening the door to every Martyrdom that would follow over the next two Millennia.

One would expect that the next logical event for us to study would be Saul's encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road and subsequent conversion.

But rather than follow the logical progression of the story, I would like to camp out for one more week on the unconverted Saul.

Why? Well simply because - according to Saul himself - God's work in his life did not begin on the Damascus Road, but much, much earlier.

TEXT: Galatians 1:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace,

You say, "But Pastor, I've always been told that Saul was converted on the Damascus Road - *he was*. Well how can he say he was set apart from before he was born?"

Even when Paul was far from Christ, Christ was not far from Paul.
Might I say, even when you were far from Christ, Christ was not far from you!!!

Nothing about your life, and nothing about the life of Paul was accidental or incidental. Even your worst days were allowed by a Sovereign God to prepare you in some way.

To say that he was SET APART FROM HIS MOTHER'S WOMB, was no rhetorical figure of speech, but rather a factual declaration. Through many years of rebellion and lostness, God was forming, preparing and shaping the young man into a man who would assume a **universal Apostleship**.

According to Strong's Lexicon - the Greek word translated, "set apart" is the word - **aphorizo** /af·or·id·zo/] which means to mark off from others by boundaries, to limit, to separate.

The same Greek word is used in:

- **Acts 13:2 (NASB95)** 2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

- **Romans 1:1 (NASB95)** 1 Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

Kettle points out that this word is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word **Pharush** (in english letters) Which is thought by many to be the root of the word Pharisee or separated one.

So Saul the Jewish Pharisee was a Pharisee in the true spiritual sense of the word, for God has literally marked him and set him apart from his mother's womb for a greater purpose.

- In the same way Jeremiah was set apart as a prophet to the nations. **Jeremiah 1:5 (NASB95)** 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."
- Speaking of Jesus the Messiah and those who are His people Isaiah writes in **Isaiah 49:1–6 (NASB95)** 1 Listen to Me, O islands, And pay attention, you peoples from afar. The Lord called Me from the womb; From the body of My mother He named Me.

Date of Birth and Life:

We have no biblical indication of the exact date of Paul's birth, however there is a popular tradition that recounts Paul serving God for 35 years and perishing in Rome in 67 AD at the age of 68. If there is any truth to that tradition, he was born about 1BC and converted about 31 or 32 AD. There is nothing in what we know from the New Testament Text that would make that dating inaccurate.

Paul would have lived through five different Roman Caesars. At his birth Augustus ruled. In his years as a young man Tiberius and Caligula ruled. At middle age Claudius ruled. And then Paul died during the reign of Nero.

- When Paul was a middle aged man, Rome invaded Britain and founded London.
- Josephus would have been about 30 at the time of Paul's death.
- Ovid the Poet would have died when Paul was a young man.

Three great tributaries formed the mighty river of Paul's life - The Greek Roots, Jewish Roots and Roman Roots. Let's look at each of these influences..

1. Saul's Greek Roots -

City of Origin: Paul's birth name was Saul. Saul was born in Tarsus which he called in **Acts 21:39**, "...no insignificant city..."

Tarsus was situated in S.E. Asia, 12 miles from the coast, on the banks of the Cydnus river. This provincial capital, was a fortified city from ancient times. It boasted a natural harbor as well as close positioning to an ancient trade route running west from Syria

through the Taurus Mountains. There was a very small path through the Taurus Mountains only wide enough for one wagon at a time to pass through called the Cilician Gates. Tarsus was positioned well for traders passing through the area.

In the year 46 BC Tarsus was visited by Julius Caesar. Anthony and Cleopatra had a rendezvous there 5 years later. It was also a University city, some would say second only to Alexandria. It would have had a theater and a stadium as a Greek city.

A. GREEK GAMES -

As a boy growing up in Tarsus, Saul developed an affinity for the games. He would refer to them frequently throughout his writings. He used illustrations of boxing, running, winning a race, wrestling.

Have you ever considered that the simple pleasures of life that you enjoy are something God can use? There is a tendency to assume that God only wants us studying the scriptures and hanging around Sunday school, anything else is worldly - Paul didn't see it that way.

God does not want to eradicate your tastes, your style, your culture, your hobbies, your enjoyment - not at all - but rather redeem them, even use them for His glory.

B. GREEK PHILOSOPHY -

It was likely the influence of Tarsus that gave Saul his deep understanding of Greek Philosophy and Poetry.

- In Athens he would quote Paul "The Eumenides" verbatim extemporaneously.
- He would quote a Poem written by a Cretan called Epimenedes.
- He would quote Stoic Philosophy at length.

Sometimes we get the idea that God wants us reading only the Bible and anything else is ungodly.

Listen - whatever you read, whatever you watch, whatever you listen to... learn to tune into the Holy Spirit and filter it all through scripture.

Ask yourself - is this true? Is this how God would want me to look at things? Do the things this person is doing lead toward a life that knows God and enjoys Him fully?

C. GREEK COMMERCE -

Tarsus was a leading producer of a material called, **Cilicium**. This was a thick cloth woven from black goats hair. It was both water-proof and heat retaining making it suitable for the production of **tents**. When Paul met Aquilla and Pricilla in Corinth the three were called tent makers which was a trade he probably learned in Tarsus he worked in the production of Cilicium.

We know from Archeology that Tarsus was a closed community - you had to have property worth 500 Drachmas to obtain citizenship. Which indicates that Paul probably came from a relatively wealthy family.

Perhaps Saul's father was a manufacturer of Cilicium mostly likely employing several men, including Paul who as a good Jew would have to master a trade, being able to make a living with his own hands.

Have you ever considered that your occupation or that of your Parents was being shaped and molded by God.

ILLUSTRATION: The Puritans held to a doctrine of the Priesthood of Every Believer - so no longer was there some curtain between the clergy and the laity. According to scripture we are all priests before God. Out of that came what is known as the Protestant Work Ethic. So if you were a farmer driving the plow you were just as accountable to God for your work as the Pastor writing his sermon - that is what made America great.

That is why if America is to be great again, it must experience a spiritual revival, not just a political one.

Not only his Greek Roots, notice secondly...

2. Saul's Roman Roots

While the culture was Greek, political power rested with Rome. Saul was one of the rare specimens among the Jews who was also a Roman citizen.

Acts 22:27–28 (NASB95)

27 The commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" And he said, "Yes." 28 The commander answered, "I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money." And Paul said, "But I was actually born a citizen."

For Paul to have been born a Roman citizen, Paul's father must have been a Roman citizen. At this time Roman Citizenship was a rare privilege seldom granted to none Romans it was most unusual for it to be enjoyed by a Jew.

Perhaps Paul's father or grandfather provided some extraordinary service to a Roman general and in turn was granted his citizenship in Rome.

F.F. Bruce where he writes, *"A Firm of tentmakers could have been very useful to a fighting proconsul"*.

As a Roman Paul would have had a three part name (name, pre-name, surname) of which we only know one. His full name would have been something like - Markus Aralius Saulus.

As a citizen of Rome he had protection against certain kinds of punishment, could not be crucified and could at any time appeal to Rome.

This shows the genius of God's Sovereign plan which we will recognize as the story unfolds. As his Roman Citizenship ultimately carries Paul to Rome to preach the Gospel.

Where can you take the Gospel that others cannot effectively? For example -

- I cannot effectively take the Gospel to Fernandina Beach High School - but some of you can.
- There are certain communities that are gated that I cannot take the Gospel to, but some of you own properties in those communities.
- There are people groups that have customs, conversations, rituals that I don't fully understand, but some of you spent half your life in. That was no accident.

We've look at Saul's Greek and Roman roots...

3. Saul's Jewish Roots

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Each phrase quoted by Paul has distinct implications.

- **Tribe of Benjamin** - was considered the *most Jewish* of all the tribes. In the territory of Benjamin we find the holy city **Jerusalem** and the **temple** of God. The most outstanding Benjaminite was **Saul** the first king of Israel. It is certain that many of the young boys were named Saul after their great tribal ancestor.
- **Hebrew of Hebrews** - This is a technical expression that was more specific than the word Jew. It was usually contrasted with the Greek term *Hellenist*. This can be seen in the controversy that led to the election of the first deacons in the Church at Jerusalem.

A *Hebrew* spoke Aramaic and worshiped God in Hebrew. A *Hellenist* spoke Greek as his native language and worshipped God at a Synagogue that taught in Greek. Most Jews in Paul's day were Hellenist, the Hebrews among them were either recent immigrants from Palestine who hadn't had time to change their ways or they were very strict in their religion, which was probably the case with Paul's family.

Interestingly, when the Lord appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road he spoke to him in Aramaic his native tongue.

- A **Pharisee** - More than just a Pharisee, Saul was born into a lineage of Pharisees as he made clear in **Acts 23:6** ...“Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees...”

John Pollack author of The Apostle: A Life of Paul writes

Paul's parents were Pharisees, members of the party most fervent in Jewish nationalism and strict in obedience to the Law of Moses. They sought to guard their offspring against contamination. Friendships with Gentile children were discouraged. Greek ideas were despised. Though Paul from infancy could speak Greek and had a working knowledge of Latin, his family at home spoke Aramaic, the language of Judea, a derivative of Hebrew.

They looked to Jerusalem as Islam look to Mecca. Their privileges as freemen of Tarsus and Roman citizens were nothing compared to the high honor of being Israelites, the People of Promise, to whom the Living God had revealed his glory and his plans...

By his thirteenth birthday, Paul had mastered Jewish history, the poetry of the psalms, and the majestic literature of the prophets. His ear had been trained to the very pitch of accuracy, and a swift brain like his could retain what he heard as instantly and faithfully as a modern, "photographic mind" retains a printed page. He was ready for higher education.

Probably in the year Augustus died, A.D. 14, the adolescent Paul was sent Jerusalem where for the next five or six years, he had sat at the feet of Gamaliel.

GAMALIEL - Paul must have shown tremendous promise as a boy because his parents sent him to Jerusalem to train under the great teacher Gamaliel. This was easily the most prominent rabbi of that time and one of the greatest of all antiquity. He was the grandson of another prominent rabbi, Hillel.

Gamaliel was one of the few honored with the title **rabban**, instead of the usual title "rabbi".

The Jewish Mishna states: *"When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died"* .

Pollack writes, *"Under the fragile, gentle, Gamaliel, Paul learned to **dissect** a text until scores of possible meanings were disclosed according to the considered opinion of generations of rabbis... Saul learned to debate in a question and answer style known in the ancient world as the "**diatribe**", and to **expound** - for a rabbi was not only part preacher but part lawyer, who prosecuted or defended those who broke the sacred Law.*

In the school of Gamaliel he was taught to anticipate and answer objections.
In **Galatians 1:14 (ESV)** ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

APPLICATION OF TRUTH:

As we study the Apostle Paul we notice that God had prepared him for his future ministry by placing him into three distinct cultures, each which he would one day preach the Gospel to. Paul was born a Hebrew, raised in the Greek city of Tarsus and enjoyed the privileges of being a Roman citizen.

Phillip Shaffe says, *“He combined in himself the three great Nationalities of the ancient world and was endowed with all the natural qualifications that would produce a universal apostleship”*.

As a young man, Paul didn't yet know God through Christ, but God knew him and God was actively involved in preparing him for his ultimate calling.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION: Recently, at a sight dating from the Bronze age, shards of pottery were discovered by Archeologist. Most were broken pieces that had to be reassembled in order to get any semblance of their original purpose. But one careful archeologist noticed something is one of the shards - A fingerprint.

At first it didn't seem like that big of a deal, but with further study scientists could positively identify the fingerprint as belonging to a male. As other shards were investigated, it was concluded that this man made dozens of pieces that have now been discovered. His finger prints were found in other cities as well suggesting that this was a traveling artisan or a businessman who sold his wares to travelers. Ancestral heritage is coded in the ridges of finger prints in subtle ways. So we can determine the ethnicity of this potter.

All of that from the fingerprints of the Potter.

We can certainly see God's fingerprint on Paul. Look closely my friend, and you will see his fingerprint on you as well.