



NAC-USA
DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE

God's plan
for Paul's
life

Called to
serve

Paul: A
living
sacrifice

MIDWEEK SCRIPT

2017

September

Session 1 – God’s plan for Paul’s life

Hello everyone, it’s wonderful to be together again. In the month of September, our small group sessions will focus on the life of Apostle Paul. His journey from his birthplace in Tarsus to being an ardent persecutor of Christians to ultimately becoming a zealous messenger of the gospel is an example to all of us that God’s plans are certainly above our own. Our sessions this month will specifically focus on the following:

- Paul’s early life and unwitting preparation for his Christian mission;
- Becoming the instrument God would use to share the good news of Jesus with the Gentiles;
- And finally, how being rooted in Christ gave Paul the strength to persevere in spite of struggles and obstacles.

Let’s begin by learning about Apostle Paul’s life before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

During your schooling, did you ever think to yourself, “When am I ever going to use this in life?” And then, years later, did you find yourself employing that very thing you thought you’d never use? God began preparing Paul for his future work long before he met Jesus. We can learn about Paul’s early life from his words written down for us in the book of Acts and his own letters.

In Acts 22:3 Paul, speaking in the Hebrew language, confirmed his Jewish heritage, saying: “I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.”

We get an even clearer picture of his upbringing as a Jew and his devotion to Mosaic law in Philippians 3:4-6, “If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

In addition to being a Jew, Paul was also a Roman citizen, which he told the centurion in Acts 22:25, “And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, ‘Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?’” (Acts 22:25).

And to round out our picture of Paul, we learn from Acts 18:1-3 that Paul also knew the skill of tent making and could sustain his natural life.

What does all of this teach us? God was preparing Paul for his future from his birth. Paul spent his first thirteen years of life in the merchant city of Tarsus, which is in modern day Turkey. Tarsus was a busy metropolis of diverse culture and international commerce – a hub on a trade route that connected cities in the east, like Rome, to cities in the south. It was here that Paul was introduced to different cultures, learned the skill of tent making, and because of the university housed there, he experienced an academic atmosphere that fueled his desire for learning.

Paul was born to Jewish parents and inherited the rights of being a Roman citizen. By the time Paul left to study under Gamaliel in Jerusalem at the age of thirteen, it is most likely that he had already mastered Jewish history, the poetry of psalms, and the literature of the prophets. Paul would study under Rabbi Gamaliel for five to six years, and would become a successful lawyer in Jerusalem. As a result of his studies, he was a master of the Jewish law and was knowledgeable in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. As a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” a native of Greek culture, and a Roman citizen, he was well connected to the three great nationalities of the ancient world. As a Pharisee, Paul was a devoted disciple of God, a firm believer, a committed follower, and a dedicated testifier and teacher of the law, as he knew it.

All of these things prepared Paul well to fulfill the calling Jesus had for him. His knowledge of different languages would allow him to meet people where they were and speak the gospel to them in a way they could easily understand. His being a Roman citizen gave him the necessary rights to travel freely to the places he learned about from the traders who passed through his hometown. As a tentmaker, he could even support his

missionary journeys. His knowledge of the Old Testament and the Jewish law would assist him in speaking to the Jewish people and explaining to them the difference and beauty in believing and following Jesus Christ.

But most importantly, Paul was already a disciple of God in that he completely bowed to the will of God as he was taught it. When Jesus showed him the gospel as the will of God, being a true disciple, Paul adjusted to this new understanding.

God clearly had a plan for Paul, and He provided him with what was necessary to carry out his mission even before he was converted to a disciple of the gospel of Christ. God also has a plan for each one of us. It may not be clear to you today what God is preparing you to do in the future, but you can be confident in the knowledge that God has a calling for you just as he did with Paul, and that He will provide you with all that is necessary to carry out that calling. As we reflect on what God is doing in our own lives, we should also be aware and respect that God is also preparing others in their journey. Each one of us has a purpose in God's plan, just as Paul did.

Session 2 – Called to serve

Hello all and welcome back! In this session, we'll continue looking at the life of Paul, starting with his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Paul's dramatic conversion written about in Acts 9 is the catalyst for his faith journey following the gospel of Christ. Before he left Jerusalem to travel to Damascus, Paul was intent on hunting down Jesus' disciples. His only aim in traveling there was to arrest any of Jesus' followers and bring them back to Jerusalem. Paul would soon find out that he would not be returning to Jerusalem for quite some time, and only then with a completely different perspective. Let's take a look at the moment when Jesus stops Paul, then named Saul, in his very tracks. In Acts 9:3-6 (NLT) we read:

As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Paul was transformed and converted through this encounter with Jesus. He went from persecuting the church to being devoted to it. Our encounters with Jesus also have the ability to transform **our** lives. The key is to be willing to recognize Him as the Lord, to be humble before Him, and to become His disciple, just as Paul did. God can then lead us into new paths and understandings through our encounters with Him.

A major component of following God's call is trusting Him. Paul's trust in Jesus was immediate because when he rose from the ground after hearing Jesus' voice, he realized he could not see. His blindness continued for three days, and the only thing he could depend on was what God showed him in a vision when he reached Damascus: a man named Ananias would come and give his sight back (Acts 9:8-12). Ananias, also a disciple of Christ, was called by God to go and restore Paul's sight and to baptize him. Even though he knew what Paul's reputation was as a Pharisee who persecuted Christians, Ananias was willing to go because God showed him that He had chosen Paul to spread the gospel. As a disciple of Christ, Ananias also trusted God and followed His instruction readily, even to the point of addressing Paul as "Brother Saul."

After Ananias restored Paul's sight, Paul spent time with the disciples in Damascus and preached about Christ in the synagogues. People who witnessed his profession of Christ were amazed. They didn't understand how Paul could have changed so dramatically from his days of persecuting Christians. Seeing the people's confusion only pushed him to more strongly profess and share his testimony to prove that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:22). God used the best and the worst parts of Paul's personal history to shape him into the servant he was called to be. Can't He also do the same for us? We don't have to be **perfect** in order to serve the purposes that God has for our lives. We only have to accept that He has a plan for us and then be committed to serving Him through fulfilling that purpose.

Another aspect of Paul's testifying and sharing Christ with all people was his commitment to preaching the true gospel. How did Paul know he was preaching the true gospel? In Galatians 1:12, he says, "For I neither received [the gospel] from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ." Paul's knowledge of the gospel, the good news of salvation through Christ, was firsthand. He had experienced the grace and saving power of Christ, and that's what the gospel is all about. As part of our calling as Christians, we serve others through our testimony of Christ. While we can always learn more about the Bible and the strength and hope found there, our strongest profession of God is in sharing how He is present and active in our individual lives and how His Son has saved us, personally. Paul knew his story of transformation was meant to be shared with others so they could hear of Christ's power. Our stories are also meant to be shared.

Paul also served with other faithful missionaries in a true sense of shared leadership. We can recount how he served along Barnabus in the city of Antioch. Barnabus was a great testifier and encourager of the faith, while Paul was a gifted preacher and teacher of the scriptures and the gospel. Through his missionary journeys, he served along with many others as he sought to recognize God's gifts in all.

Paul was called to serve many people in many regions, and we'll hear a little about his missionary trips in the next small group session. However, we must always keep in mind the focus of his travels: to serve God and spread the gospel of Christ. In all that we do in this life, let us also remember our calling to serve and share the Lord with others.

Session 3 – Paul: A living sacrifice

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2 NRSV)

These were the words of Paul written to the Romans in chapter 12, verses 1 through 2. Today, we're going to use these verses as a guide, not only to take a deeper look at Paul's life, but also see how it may apply to our own.

Let's take the first part: *I appeal to you...by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

Paul surrendered his life to the gospel of Christ "by the mercies of God." In this verse, these "mercies" refer to how God redeemed humanity through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Paul offered his life in service to God and His Kingdom as a thank offering for God's mercies, not as a guilt offering for his own sin. He wasn't trying to atone for his persecution of the Christians in his old life. Paul had a deep understanding of the sacrifice of Christ and what it meant for him personally: a new life, freedom from his guilt, and eternal salvation. When we present our lives as a sacrifice to God out of thankfulness, not guilt, then we can set our minds on what God wants us to do, instead of dwelling on the past.

As part of his sacrifice, Paul offered his physical body. His life reads similar to an *Indiana Jones* movie script: shipwrecked, tortured, captured, held prisoner, and even stoned! But he also had to endure constant spiritual and emotional attacks. He was mocked, debated, threatened, tried, thrown out of many places, and his apostleship was questioned. But nothing stopped him from sharing the gospel of Christ. When he preached in the synagogues and was rejected by the Jews, he went out into the streets and preached to the Gentiles. When he was chased out of the cities with threats to his life, he went to nearby villages to proclaim the gospel. Paul's life changed dramatically when he became a disciple of Christ. As followers of Christ, are our lives different? What are we presenting as a living sacrifice to God?

Let's look at the next line of our verse: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...*

What a story of transformation we have in Paul! Not only in his conversion on the road to Damascus, from persecuting Christians to planting churches in the name of Christ, but also in the constant renewing of his perspective to the will of God. As a Jew, and as a Pharisee, Paul was steeped in the Jewish law his whole life. But when he realized God's will to save all, not just the Jewish people, he spread the gospel far and wide and grew churches in more countries than any other apostle of his time. Paul was confident in his calling to preach the gospel because he was certain of the saving power of God, as he wrote in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile* (Romans 1:16 NIV). His inclusion of the Gentiles into Christianity was perhaps shaped by his involvement in the congregation in Antioch, where a multiethnic church made up of Jews and Gentiles was founded. Living in community and sharing meals together with this congregation illuminated for Paul the ways in which God was using the gospel to restore the unity of humanity through Christ. Paul was so passionate about his experiences with the Gentiles that he went to Jerusalem to meet with the other apostles and argued their case in what became known as the Jerusalem Council, where it was agreed upon that Gentiles did not have to adhere to the Jewish law to be Christians. Paul understood the importance of not letting human laws or traditions get in the way of salvation. What old teachings, however ingrained in us, do we yet need to let go?

Let's finish up with the end of our Roman's verse: *...so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Paul's goals, his measurement of success, his self-worth, his happiness, and his fulfillment were not impacted by earthly influences. He was rooted in the love of Christ and the power of God's plan of salvation. He knew God was with him and loved him. The words of Jesus recorded in John 16 seem to have specific relevance to Paul's life: *In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world* (John 16:33). Through everything that Paul lived through, he never let the circumstances overwhelm him. Where he met obstacles, he sought God's will to get through them. So, let's take this message of Paul and reflect on our own lives. After all, as it said in the beginning of our verse, he is appealing to us! If we truly live the life of sacrifice that we see in Paul's, perhaps we can also say, as he did in his letter to Timothy: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* (2 Timothy 4:7).