

Question: Who was the apostle Paul?

Answer: The apostle Paul was born roughly the same time as Jesus. His ministry is typically dated from 36-60 A.D. During this time, Paul visited and wrote several letters to various churches throughout the Roman Empire. Most notably, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, Rome, and Ephesus. It is believed that Paul was put to death in Rome between 62 and 64.

Previous to his conversion he was known as Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a Jewish Pharisee. A Pharisee in the first century Roman Empire was typically defined by three criteria: a zeal for the Jewish Law or Torah, the importance of the purity of Israel, and the belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead (*Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, Pg 53). These three standards allowed Paul to persecute and ostracize those Jews who did not follow the standard orthodox beliefs that he worked so hard to protect. One sect of Judaism that Paul particularly disliked was the church that claimed Jesus as Messiah. He believed that this heretical movement was corrupting the pureness of Israel. In his opinion, because the Christians worshipped Jesus as Christ they no longer lived according to the standards of the Torah and were boldly contradicting the teachings of the Pharisees. It is well documented within the book of Acts and Paul's own letters to the various churches throughout the Empire that prior to his conversion he persecuted the early church of Christ. In his own words Paul writes, "I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it." (Galatians 1:13)

Paul's conversion story began by the order of the High Priest. The High Priest told Paul to go to the town of Damascus that, "if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way (belief in Jesus as Messiah), he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains." (Acts 9:2) As Paul neared Damascus, "a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:3-5). As Paul got up from his fall he found that he had been blinded. For three days he neither ate nor drank and was unable to see. It was at this time that a man named Ananias was called by the Lord in a vision to go and lay his hands on Paul. Ananias was afraid for he knew the reputation of Paul as a man who had done many evil things to the followers of Jesus. Through affirmation from the Lord, Ananias found Paul and laid his hands on him. Paul immediately regained his sight and began at once to proclaim Jesus as Christ in the synagogues.

Shortly after his conversion, Paul decided that his ministry would be to the Gentiles. He believed that for the Gentiles to become Christian they did not have to first convert to Judaism and follow the laws of the Torah. Peter and the rest of the apostles who lived and knew Jesus during his ministry believed that to truly become part of Christ's church, a convert from the Roman Imperial Cult (Gentiles) needed to adhere to all Jewish laws and customs. Paul believed that it was not these things that made one a follower of Christ, rather, it was the grace of the Lord Jesus. After much debate and discussion the apostles and Paul came to agreement that beyond unlawful marriage, not eating meat sacrificed to idols or from strangled animals, one could be a Christian (Acts 15:22-29). With this agreement, the rest of Paul's life was dedicated to the ministry of the Gentiles. He reached out to churches and individuals throughout the Empire who had previously worshipped the gods of the Romans.

Additional Reading:

Paul: A Very Short Introduction, E.P Sanders

Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters. Michael Gorman