

PAUL: HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 4

Paul's Hebrew Training

I am writing this lesson from Houston, Texas. The border of Mexico is nearby. I would love to share my faith with some folks in Mexico. Trying to do so, however, I would run into some difficulties. First, I really am not familiar enough with the Spanish language. Even if my Spanish were adequate, I would still be at a disadvantage – I am not really familiar with the culture of Mexico. Without the cultural familiarity, my efforts to teach the gospel are going to be seriously impeded. Do not misunderstand me, God and his Word can still reach and touch those who hear it, for God is at work in spite of our shortcomings. Still, we should always prepare ourselves for our mission work as best as we can. The best preparation for mission work in Mexico would involve understanding both the language and the culture.

In this class, we are studying Paul, perhaps the greatest missionary tool in God's history of his church. Paul was a missionary called to take the gospel to the Greeks. Last week, we discussed Paul's background and childhood, emphasizing Paul's Roman and Tarsian citizenships and the Greek cultural exposure he likely received.¹ We saw how the Greek aspects of his personality produced an individual perfectly suited to God's call for taking the gospel message to the Gentile world. Paul knew both Greek language and culture. But, we are amiss if we fail to focus on another reason Paul was so clearly God's missionary for the job. Paul had the Hebrew language, culture, and understanding that allowed him to discern the basics as well as the intricacies of God's work through the Jewish faith and through Jesus, the pinnacle of Judaism.

This gospel message was not, in its own origin, a Greek message. The gospel grew out of the Hebrew faith, and was a living expression of Hebrew ritual, scripture, and custom. To fully understand the religious context of the gospel message, one needed to understand both contemporary and historical Judaism. In this sense, one who was to take the gospel to the Greek and Roman world, needed to be fully bilingual – not only in vocabulary, but in culture and religious understanding. We have seen Paul's Greek culture and exposure. We have examined his familiarity with Greek life that enabled his fluent use of Greek metaphors and education. This week, we will see that Paul had all the Hebrew qualifications as well. Paul was not merely fluent in Hebrew culture and doctrine; he was a master!

¹ This and all other lessons are available in written and oral format with Power Point from the website www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

We get our background from a few scriptures we set out in context last week. Rather than reproduce the context this week, we will set out the scriptures and refer the reader back to the last lesson for context. Then, we hope to set out core ideas we can fairly glean from the texts.

THE RELEVANT SCRIPTURES

"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. (Acts 22:1-3).

Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." (Acts 23:6).

"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." (Acts 26:4-5).

"I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them." (Acts 26:10).

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 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. (Phil. 3:4-6).

IMPLICATIONS

These scriptures teach us much about Paul's Hebrew background and training, especially when viewed in light of the context and information history provides us. We can fairly determine that:

- Paul moved to Jerusalem early in life;²
- Paul and his family were Pharisees;
- Paul trained under Gamaliel;
- Paul was zealous in his Judaic faith and life; and
- Paul "cast" his "vote" against the Christian martyrs.

THE HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

Pharisees What are your reactions to that noun: Pharisees? Does the term leave a bitter taste in your mouth? Does it make you wonder whether there might be anything good or useful we can say about them?

Paul repeatedly says that he was a Pharisee. While Paul speaks of his past in Acts 26:5 saying he "lived as a Pharisee," Paul also uses the ***present tense*** in Acts 23:6 saying, "***I am*** a Pharisee." This provides us a great starting point as we seek to understand just what was a Pharisee. In so doing, we hope to understand Paul's meaning that he had lived as a Pharisee as well as his contemporary claim to still be a Pharisee.

We have a number of places where we learn of Pharisees in the 1st century. One source is the New Testament. The gospels give us a number of encounters Jesus and his disciples had with the Pharisees. In addition to those references, we have some good insight from some writings outside of the New Testament, yet still made contemporarily with the Pharisee movement. The main sources outside the

² Scholars debate over how early Paul moved. There is a considerable debate over whether Luke's terminology means a very early move such that Tarsus really had little to no impact over Paul, or whether the move was at a time around adolescence. We find greater strengths in the arguments of a later move, but the evidence can be read fairly either way. We do know that Paul returned to Tarsus after his conversion for some period of time. It is there that Barnabas went to find him as Luke details in Acts 11:25. Certainly, Paul had exposure to the Greek education and culture on a significant level, for he quotes Greek teachers and writes in Greek metaphors.

New Testament are the Jewish historian Josephus³ and the early rabbinic literature.

Scholars have written books of speculation and historical observations trying to reconstruct exactly who the Pharisees were, where they came from, and what they believed. We are not in a position in this class to wade through those debates beyond noting that they exist. What we do here is note some of the generally accepted information, especially by looking directly at the original source material.⁴

Josephus provides the information that scholars use to deduce the history of the Pharisees. Through his writings, we read of Pharisees as one of the main powerful sects within Judaism in the first century. According to Josephus, Pharisees were influential two centuries before Paul and Christ as they sought to ensure the Jewish way of life against external and internal forces.⁵ Josephus notes that after the death of Herod (4 B.C.), the Pharisees were scheming for power in Herod's replacement. Josephus writes,

There was also a group of Jews priding itself on its adherence to ancestral custom and claiming to observe the laws of which the Deity approves, and by these men, called Pharisees, the women were ruled.⁶

This perception of the Pharisees is consistent with what we read in the gospel accounts. The Pharisees were concerned that Jesus ate with the unholy (Mt. 9:11; Mk 2:16; Lk 5:30); the Pharisees were consistent with fasting (Mt. 9:14; Mk 2:18; Lk 5:33); the Pharisees took offense at indications they were less than appropriately holy (Mt 15:11-13); the Pharisees sought to challenge Jesus on issues of the law and custom (Mt. 19:3; Mk 2:24; 10:2; Lk 6:2); the Pharisees tithed down to the very herbs they harvested (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42); by all outward appearances, the Pharisees seemed pure and holy (Mt. 23:27); and they would always wash their hands before eating (Mk 7:3, 5).

³ Josephus (37- after 100 A.D.) wrote Jewish histories following the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73 A.D.).

⁴ Much of the fuss over Pharisaic issues comes in spite of the clear statements in these sources. Scholars debate the statements using a "critical approach" they bring to the sources. They examine the authenticity of the statements, the purpose behind the statements, and the agendas that might influence the adequacy of the information and portrayals therein. These debates we avoid here, beyond recognizing they do exist.

⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13 §288-298.

⁶ *Ibid.* 17 §41.

When we read of the negative interactions between Jesus and the Pharisees, we find several concerns Jesus shows with Pharisaical living. Jesus was concerned with the tendency of some Pharisees to elevate the law and its finer points over people. For example, Jesus points out to the Pharisees that were upset over his disciples plucking grain to eat on a Sabbath that, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:23-28).

Jesus was also concerned that some Pharisees had a tendency to externalize their religion into the list of do’s and don’ts that forgot the need to purify and live holy in the heart. In Matthew, we read Jesus saying:

You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Mt 23:26-28).

A third problem Jesus had with the Pharisees concerned some of them who viewed themselves the moral police of others, rather than teachers who through word and example lead people in morality. These Pharisees often came to test Jesus on points of law (Mt 19:2-4; Mk 10:1-3; Jn 8:12-14). Remember the story of the moral police catching the woman in adultery and bringing her before Jesus to test him as well as execute her? They were Pharisees! (Jn 8:3)

Yet, not all Pharisees are so poorly betrayed in the gospels. Some Pharisees would have Jesus over for dinner (Lk 7:36; 11:37; 14:1; 17:36); and while some plotted to kill Jesus (Mt 12:14; Mk 3:6; Jn 7:32), other Pharisees warned Jesus about death threats (Lk 13:31). It was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, John tells us, that came to Jesus by night and got to hear the wonderful words of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This same Pharisee Nicodemus brought expensive treatments for the body of Christ following the crucifixion (Jn 19:39). One wonders if Nicodemus was among the Pharisees in the church Luke referenced in Acts 15:5!⁷

Josephus also sets out basic beliefs of the Pharisees. According to Josephus, Pharisees believed in life after death and a resurrection for reward and

⁷ In Acts 15:5, we read that in the Jerusalem conference, some of the Pharisees in the church believed that Gentiles needed to first convert to Judaism before becoming Christians. “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’”

punishment. Josephus contrasted this belief with that of the Sadducees who did not believe in such a resurrection with corresponding rewards/punishments.⁸ Hand in hand with their belief in the afterlife, Pharisees firmly believed in the world of hierarchy among demons and angels, in contrast to the Sadducees who held no such beliefs. Pharisees also were believers in God's divine provision (we might use the term "predestination") that somehow combined with man's free will while the Sadducees emphasized the free will of man and human responsibility.⁹

This is consistent with what Scripture relates about the Pharisees, at least as far as believing in the resurrection of the dead and the hierarchy of demons. The Pharisees accused Jesus as working under "Beelzebub, the prince of demons" when casting out demons (Mt. 12:24). Paul was able to use the Pharisees' views on the resurrection to benefit from a shouting match over the issue between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in Acts 23. As Luke tells the story:

Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. (Acts 23:5-8)

Paul's usage of the ideas and language of predestination and man's choices will come in later classes, but we do well to note that the issues were ones Paul studied as a Pharisee.

What do we do with this material? How does Paul consider himself a Pharisee when a Christian? Why are some Pharisees so poorly portrayed and others portrayed somewhat positively? We find some answers to these questions from common sense, as well as from some other sources.

⁸ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 2.8.14, "the Pharisees ... say that all souls are incorruptible; but that the souls of good men are only removed into other bodies, -- but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment. But the Sadducees ... take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades." (Whitson translation).

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.5.9, "Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate... And for the Sadducees, they take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our power, so that we ourselves are the cause of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly." (Whitson translation).

First, anyone who studies a modern Christian denomination will quickly find diversity in the midst of the group. For example, were one to study the Baptists, one would have difficulty ever assigning a full set of beliefs and behaviors that would cover all Baptists 100 percent.

We see this also true when we probe the rabbinic sources on Pharisees.¹⁰ In the “Babylonian Talmud” (a discussion of legal debates on the law finally put into final form around 700 A.D. but dating back several centuries before), we read of seven types of Pharisees, almost all of which are not praiseworthy! Only the Pharisees who study the law out of love, out of fear, or simply because it is the law of God are praiseworthy.¹¹

In Pharisees, as in other religious groups, we have a wide variety of people. But, we find people who are convinced that God is holy, that God is to be obeyed, that a resurrection follows death, that reward and punishment are found in the resurrection, that angels and demons are working on earth in the lives of humanity, and that the hand of God is active in protecting and providing for people. The variations come from motives and finer points of “doctrine.” No doubt many Pharisees acted out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, envy, or even rivalry. Yet, those same motives Paul finds among those carrying the Christian gospel message, with no Pharisaic affiliation whatsoever. I dare say, we could probably find it in the midst of most Christian groups even today.

So we see Paul, who was raised a Pharisee, but who has no trouble calling himself a Pharisee deep into his years as a Christian. For Paul, he carried the core Pharisaic beliefs. He not only believed in the resurrection for humanity, but he also knew he had witnessed a resurrected Lord. Paul says without that resurrection, Christian “are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

Gamaliel In Acts 22:1-3, Paul reminds the crowd that he studied under the feet of Gamaliel. We know of Gamaliel both from Scripture and from Jewish writings.

¹⁰ The rabbinic literature about the Pharisees is subject to significant scholarly debate. Many of the references to 1st century Jewish laws and customs some scholars deem appropriately understood as that of the Pharisees. Others dispute these conclusions. There are a few times, however, when early Jewish writings actually reference the Pharisees by name. The dates of these entries are also subject to heated debate.

¹¹ See the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 3:4. There are seven types of Pharisees: One who does the right thing for the wrong reason; one who walks with exaggerated humility; one who does right to his own hurt; one who does right to the hurt of others; one who does right out of duty; one who does right out of love; and one who does right out of fear.

During the turn of the era from B.C. to A.D., there were two prominent rabbinic schools of thought in Jerusalem. One was that of Shammai; the other was that of Hillel. These two scholars debated many different positions which we can still read today. Not only were these two scholars pinnacle figures in interpreting the law, but their students became famous as well.

Shammai was the more strict of the two; Hillel the more accommodating. Jewish tradition kept an example of the difference in approach to conversion between Shammai and Hillel. In the Babylonian Talmud,¹² we read of “a gentile who came before Shammai.” The gentile says he will convert to Judaism if Shammai can teach him the whole law while the gentile stands on one foot. Shammai drives the gentile off with a stick. The gentile then goes to Hillel with the same offer. Hillel tells the gentile, “What is hateful to you, to your fellow don’t do.” Then, Hillel adds, “That’s the entirety of the Torah; everything else is elaboration. So go, study.”¹³

A successor of Hillel, and head of his school was Gamaliel, at whose feet Paul studied. History teaches that Gamaliel was either Hillel’s son or grandson. Gamaliel was a devout Pharisee of whom we can read about both in the New Testament and in Hebrew histories. One can readily see the teachings of Hillel in the approaches of Gamaliel.

Just as Hillel brought a more moderate view towards life and faithful practice than that of Shammai, so did Gamaliel. McRay writes “Hillel realized that the law must take account of actual conditions rather than imposing regulations and making demands on people that are impossible for them to fulfill.”¹⁴ Some examples of Hillel’s “laxity” are found in teachings on the Sabbath. Since the law allowed an ox to be taken out of the ditch on the Sabbath, Hillel believed that one could eat an egg that a chicken laid on the Sabbath.

Gamaliel took a similar pragmatic approach as recorded in Acts 5. Peter and the apostles are called before the High Priest and council for questioning. The reaction of the council and priests was one of murderous rage. But Gamaliel enters the picture with sound words of practical advice. As Luke records it, Gamaliel says, “take care what you are about to do with these men...keep away

¹² The Jews kept oral traditions and commentaries for decades and centuries before finally reducing them to writing. The Babylonian Talmud was such a written product. Scholars debate the final dates of the Babylonian Talmud, but it was finished in different sections starting around 200 A.D. and finished likely by 500 A.D.

¹³ b. Shabbat, Chapter 2, I.12 (Hendrickson Publishers 2005) Neusner translation.

¹⁴ John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching* (Baker Academic 2003) at 45.

from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”¹⁵ (Acts 5:33-39)

McRay perceives an example of Paul’s influence from Gamaliel on the issue of divorce in mixed marriages. McRay writes,

Gamaliel, was a representative of the Hillel point of view, and Paul’s approach to Jewish law seems to have been the same. In dealing with the question of divorce among believers, Paul could draw on Jesus’ teaching to Jews, and so he wrote: Now this says the Lord, not I (see 1 Cor. 7:10). But in dealing with mixed marriages, those in which one of the partners had converted to Christianity, Paul could only say, as Gamaliel or Hillel would have said: ‘To the rest I say, not the Lord...’ (1 Cor. 7:12). Jesus never taught on the subject, since marriage outside the Jewish religion was not permitted (Ezra 10:11; Neh. 13:25). Paul, facing a new situation, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the new faith, which the law did not envision, had to make the necessary adjustments to embrace the new circumstances.¹⁶

Alan Segal, a Jew who has written on Paul, notes that Paul’s placement in the school of Hillel/Gamaliel was placement into a Pharisaic branch that was supportive of and even sought Gentile conversion into Judaism.¹⁷ We see God’s provident hand on Paul’s life prepared him for a fuller understanding of the gospel as a fulfillment of Jewish history, even as God was preparing Paul to be His voice in interpreting and spreading that gospel in a Gentile world.

It is worth noting, having spent time looking at the Pharisees in the gospel accounts, that the school of Shammai was in power and prominence during the ministry of Jesus. Hillel’s school was in the minority.¹⁸ This might help explain some of the more intense run-ins the Pharisees had with Jesus and the apostles during Christ’s ministry years.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that while Paul trained in his growing years under Gamaliel, Paul certainly did not follow Gamaliel’s advice here. Paul chose to persecute the church, proving the truth of Gamaliel’s position. Paul’s efforts to destroy the church were both futile and were in opposition to God!

¹⁶ McRay at 45.

¹⁷ Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert, the Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (Yale 1990) at 96-105.

¹⁸ See discussion and footnotes of W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (S.P.C.K. 1955) at 9.

Paul's Vote In Acts 26:10, we read Paul telling Festus and Agrippa about casting his vote against the Christians martyrs. Scholars differ on the meaning of Paul casting his vote. The standard face meaning of the passage would imply that Paul was a voting member of the Sanhedrin.¹⁹ The Sanhedrin was the highest leadership/judicial court within Jerusalem's Jewish circles at the time of Christ and Paul. It was the Sanhedrin that Luke terms the "council" in Acts 6:12 that had the power to vote for the stoning of Stephen.

Some scholars opt against the idea of the common meaning of Paul's phrase "cast my vote." The main reason concerns requirements for membership in the Sanhedrin. There are some later rabbinical writings that indicate prerequisites for membership in the Sanhedrin included being married and being at least 40. Many scholars refuse to believe that Paul was married or that he was quite that old, even though Scripture never tells us Paul's age or whether he had at one point been married.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. What a phenomenal resume Paul had for his mission. Paul was able to go to synagogues throughout the Greek/Roman world and attend services as a man who had studied under the great Gamaliel. Paul had impeccable rabbinical credentials! Not surprisingly, every synagogue offered Paul a chance to teach. Then Paul, the resurrection believing Pharisee, could speak of the resurrected Christ! We can find many layers of how God's Spirit used Paul and worked through Paul. That same Spirit is at work in us! (Phil. 2:13 "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"). We are remiss if we fail to see how God sculpts each of us uniquely for his purposes and work. Too many of us convince ourselves that God cannot use us, either because of lousy past choices, inadequate training, addictions, or whatever. Truly there is nothing in our pasts, sin and all, that God will not use in powerful ways to bless others and glorify Him.
2. It is good to seek holiness before God. ("You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" Lev. 19:2). It is right to have zeal about how we live our lives, but we must never forget that our motive is one of love (1 Jn 5:3 "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments") growing out of God's love for us. (1 Jn 4:19 "We love because he first loved us."). Paul never left his Pharisaic concern for holiness; he just found its place in God's order of things. Every one of Paul's letters to churches starts with a

¹⁹ The Greek word used is *psephos* (ψηφος). Moulton and Milligan give the standard for translation in *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Eerdmans 1952) at 698.

section on doctrine and teaching, followed by a section on holiness and moral living!

3. As we sit before teachers, we should remember to measure what we hear with what God reveals through his word. We should never believe that simply because one claims to be a Christian teacher, their teachings are right before God. (1 Jn 4:1 “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”). It is appropriate to keep what is right, but cast off what is not. Remember the Bereans! Luke writes, “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).