The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul was a pattern-setter for all times. His ministry impacted the entire world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This former Christian-persecuting-Pharisee turned apostle turned the world upside down. His apostleship was unequaled, even by the twelve. Having wrote over half of the New Testament, his ministry is still alive today as believers everywhere study his writings, which were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit.

II Timothy 3:16-17
All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

To understand Paul's ministry and apostleship it is necessary to understand Paul the man. To do this, Paul's background and religious history must be examined. Therefore, this section will be devoted to Paul's personal history prior to his conversion. This will be of great value in understanding how God, in His sovereignty, used Paul's history to shape his future as an apostle.

Paul the Persecutor

Paul, whose Jewish name was Saul, was of pure Jewish descent, of the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews as he stated in Philippians chapter three:

Philippians 3:5-6
Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness
which is in the law, blameless.

Paul was a Pharisee, as was his father (Acts 23:6). Pharisees were separatists, which is the meaning of the word "Pharisee." Their origin came about during the period of time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, commonly referred to as the “silent years.” The silence is in reference to Scripture. During this period two religious parties developed from the ranks of the priests and scribes. The Sadducean party arose from the order of priests and the Pharisees from the scribes. While the Sadducees were concerned primarily with social position, the Pharisees dedicated themselves to legalistic views. Ceremonial law was the passion of every Pharisee. It was under this influence that Paul was brought up.

Jesus denounced the hypocritical practices of the Pharisees in His ministry. Their religion was an outward show, but inside, their hearts were far from God. When questioned by the Pharisees about not keeping the tradition of the elders, Jesus responded with complete denunciation (Mark 7:6-9, 13). Jesus preached a sermon against Phariseeism in Matthew chapter 23. Below is a list of names that our Lord referred to them as, in just one sermon!

- Hypocrites (w. 13, 14, 15, etc.)
- Child of Hell (v. 15)
- Blind Guides (v. 16)
- Fools (v. 17)
- Whited Sepulchres (v. 27)
- Serpents (v. 33)
- Vipers (v. 33)

Remember, these were the religious leaders of the day. Pharisees were very proud of their outward observance of the law, but Jesus could see straight through their feigned piety. Though Jesus denounced the Pharisees as a sect, this is not to say that every Pharisee intentionally rejected God. Surely there were some who were sincerely trying to serve God, however sincerely wrong they were. It is of this category that Paul fit into.

Being raised in Tarsus of Cilicia, Paul went to Jerusalem at the age of about 13 to further his studies. There he studied at the feet of Gamaliel, a distinguished and prominent teacher of the
law (Acts 22:3). From his youth, Paul was zealous with the things of God. His spiritual blindness prevented him from seeing the reality of his true spiritual state. He sought to please God with an outward observance of God's law.

Paul's introduction to New Testament readers is in connection with Stephen's stoning in Acts 7:58: And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. At this time Paul was probably about thirty years of age. Paul supervised the first martyr of the Christian Church. Jesus warned the disciples that there would be those who persecuted them as doing service to God:

John 16:2-3
They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever kills you will think that he does God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.

Because they have not known the Father, nor me: this was Paul's predicament. He was advancing up the religious ladder by persecuting the thing that most threatened the existence of their elite religious sect: Christianity. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison (Acts 8:3). After his conversion, Paul made these statements in regards to his persecution of the Church:

Acts 22:4
And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.

Acts 26.9-11
I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.
Paul's Conversion

Just prior to his conversion, Paul went to the high priest himself and requested letters of authority to go to Damascus and arrest any Christians he found there (Acts 9:1-2). Having his request granted, Paul began his journey to Damascus. Little did he know what this journey had in store for him.

Acts 9:3-9
As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” Then the Lord said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Paul had been apprehended by Jesus Himself. This is where Paul's motivation for his persecution of saints comes to light. Paul is instantly humbled and says: Lord what will You have me to do? Instructions were given to go into the city and wait. For three days Paul was there without sight, food and drink. Imagine the contemplations going through his mind. Everything he had dedicated himself to was exposed as lie! Deep humbling was upon this once proud Pharisee of Pharisees. The light of Jesus Christ had driven him to his knees. This "great" leader now had to be lead by the hand. God's sovereignty was at work.

A Chosen Vessel

In the city of Damascus there was a certain disciple named Ananias. While Paul was praying he had a vision of this man
coming in and laying hands on him to receive his sight (v. 12). However, Ananias had heard of Paul's persecution against the Church. Upon his certainty that God was indeed talking to him, Ananias received this message for Paul:

Acts 9:15-16
But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

Paul was a "chosen vessel." Paul's apostleship was appointed before the foundations of the world. Paul had been uniquely qualified for his apostleship to the Gentiles through his upbringing as a Roman citizen living in a Greek speaking city. Paul was essentially a man of two worlds – the Hebrew and the Greek. He had been trained in the law of God, and at the same time been educated in Greek and Roman culture. It is imperative for an apostle to know and understand the culture of those to whom he is sent.

Gentiles, who were once strangers and foreigners to the covenants of promise (Eph. 2:12), needed to be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It would take an extraordinary man to bridge the gap between the Jew and the Gentile. Paul was that unique man. Paul was a man who was Jewish in every way, to the core of his being. However, he was also a man that knew and understood the Greeks and the Romans like few Jews did. And, vital to his apostleship, he was a Roman citizen. Access was his to the great Roman Empire, to preach the gospel with liberty. His greatest obstacle was to be from his own people, not Rome.

Paul was a chosen vessel. What exactly did Ananias mean when he told Paul that God had called him as a chosen vessel? Later, in Paul's preachings, he looks back on that divine encounter:

Acts 22:14-15
Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.

From that moment forth Paul began to a) know God's will; b) see that Just One; c) hear God's voice; and d) witness unto all men.
A divine calling is the prerequisite for any five-fold ministry. Paul's life had been apprehended by God; he was no longer his own, but the property of Jesus – his newfound Lord!

Paul immediately began to preach and testify that Jesus was the Son of God:

Acts 9:20-22
Immediately he preached the Christ[c] in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?” But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

A mighty anointing was upon Paul's life, even in the baby-stages of his Christian walk. That anointing amazed those who heard him. They could not believe that this was the same Saul of Tarsus that persecuted the Church. In fact it was not! Paul had been transformed into a new man. What better candidate could the Holy Spirit find to pen the inspired words: Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new (II Corinthians 5:17).

At this point, Paul could have had a dynamic ministry just giving his testimony. Had Paul never deepened his revelation of Jesus he still would have had an outwardly successful ministry. But Paul had been called as an apostle before the foundations of the world (cf. Jer. 1:5). The apostolic call requires more than a good testimony, or even a good understanding of Scripture, which Paul certainly had. There are two fundamental requirements for apostleship: 1) a history with God – experiential knowledge; and 2) revelation knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul had neither, but that was all about to change.
The Revelation Years

Galatians 1:11-18
But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.

For three years Paul did not confer with flesh and blood regarding his experience. On the backside of the desert, Paul received revelation knowledge from the Lord Jesus Himself. This occurred partially through visitations of the exalted Lord, and partially through the person of the Holy Spirit. God was unfolding to Paul the message of the New Covenant. Hidden and tucked away in the pages of the Old Testament were the glorious truths of the New. Like no other apostle, Paul was able to extract these weighty revelations from the Law and the Prophets.

Revelation knowledge is a prerequisite to apostleship. Without it, one only has book knowledge, which is incapable of destroying the yokes of bondage. Paul had such powerful revelation that at times he would refer to the gospel as "my gospel."

- In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel. (Romans 2:16)
- Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to
Notes

my gospel... (Romans 16:25)

- Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel. (2 Timothy 2:8)

When Paul went up to Jerusalem, fourteen years after his conversion, he was confident in the revelation God had given him. His apostleship had covered four years and his first missionary journey (Acts chapters 13 and 14). Paul wrote, that there was nothing that the apostles at Jerusalem could add to his revelation:

Galations 2:6
But from those who seemed to be something—whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man—for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me.
Separation to Apostleship

Acts 13:1-4
Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

Paul received his separation to apostleship some ten years after his conversion (AD 45). Up to this point he had been functioning in the office of prophet and teacher. The call to apostleship was always there but the time for separation to that call hadn't arrived. It is almost certain that Paul had revelation of this calling, but he did not take the office upon himself without divine order. Part of divine order is confirmation from the Body.

This is likened unto David in the Old Testament. David was anointed King by the prophet Samuel (I Sam. 16), yet Saul still stood in the office of King. David had opportunity to kill Saul and usurp the throne, but he would not take the throne without divine order. In fact, it was many years before David was made King over Israel. Those years were full of suffering and misunderstanding. But through it all God made that little shepherd boy into a King. After Saul's death, the private anointing that took place so many years prior was made public by the confirmation of the people: And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah (II Sam. 2:4a).

When was David King? Was it at God's anointing or the people's anointing? The first may be seen as calling, the latter separation. Did God one day decide to make Paul an apostle, or was he predestined from his mother's womb? Paul answers that question in his epistle to the Galations:

Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by
Jesus Christ, and God the Father... But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace... (Galations 1:1, 15).

The calling to apostleship most likely was revealed to Paul in the early years when he was in Arabia receiving revelation from Jesus for the space of three years (Gal. 1:16-18). However, as with David, that call needed time for development and confirmation. When the Holy Ghost spoke at Antioch it was in the presence of all the church leadership. Upon receiving this message, the church at Antioch confirmed Paul and Barnabas’ apostolic calling and laid hands upon them: and when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away (Acts 13:3). Thus, apostolic calling requires confirmation from church leadership, even more so than any other ministry. If one has received the call, he must humble himself under God’s mighty hand until the due season of confirmation and separation (see I Pet. 5:6).
Paul's Missionary Journeys

Missionary work is central to the life of an apostle. Not all missionaries are apostles, other qualifications must be met. Not all apostles are missionaries, per say. That is, an apostle will do missionary work, but not necessarily be a missionary. Paul was not just a missionary, but it was the most outstanding aspect of his ministry. Paul took three major missionary journeys in his life.

First Missionary Journey

After being separated as an apostle, along with Barnabas, in Acts chapter 13, Paul set out on his first missionary journey. Barnabas and John Mark were his companions and co-workers. Early on, Barnabas was mentioned first in the team, but after a while Paul was spoken of first. An obvious indication of Paul's leadership as the head of their apostolic team.

Early church ministry was done by apostolic teams. This began with Jesus sending out the seventy, two by two (Luke 10:1). However, on Paul’s team, John Mark got homesick during their travels and returned home. This would later be a point of contention that would break up this apostolic team.

During the two-and-one-half-year missionary journey (spring of 47 A.D. to fall of 49 A.D.), Paul and Barnabas made disciples, built churches and trained leaders in the following places:

- Seleucia
- Island of Cyprus (struck sorcerer blind)
- Perga
- Antioch of Pisidia
- Iconium
- Lystra (crippled man healed; Paul stoned and left for dead)
- Derbe

After completing these stops, Paul and Barnabas went back to each of these new churches and followed up on their work.

Acts 14:21-23
And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Ordaining elders is an important function of apostles. They didn't perform this function on their first trip through. Time was needed to develop the qualities and characteristics that were necessary. Those who had distinguished themselves as leaders were set apart to lead these new congregations, under the supervision of the apostolic team, and more specifically, Paul.

After this lengthy, prosperous apostolic journey which spread over 1,200 miles, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, their home church. Regardless of how large and successful Paul's ministry became, he never saw himself as being above, or better than being accountable.

Acts 14:26-28
From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Second Missionary Journey
After a Church Council at Jerusalem (Acts chapter 15), Paul began to feel the stir once again to visit the newly formed churches he had founded. When the Word said that Paul and Barnabas "abode long time" at Antioch, it is estimated that it was two years. Antioch was a training center among churches. Paul's leadership skills were put to good use. But the call to return to the mission field stirred his nest. However, the contention was so strong between Paul and Barnabas regarding John Mark, that they parted ways: And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed
asunder one from the other (Acts 15:39).

Paul chose Silas as his new partner and received the blessing of the brethren (Acts 15:40). They set out on Paul's second missionary journey which is spoken of in Acts 15:36-18:22. They visited the following places:

a. Syria  
b. Cilicia  
c. Derbe  
d. Lystra (Timothy joins team)  
e. Troas (Paul receives vision)  
f. Philippi (beaten and jailed; first European church)  
g. Thessalonica  
h. Berea  
i. Athens  
j. Corinth (joined by Aquilla and Priscilla; stayed at Corinth 18 months)  
k. Ephesus

Once again Paul returned to Antioch, his home church and spent time there.

Third Missionary Journey

Acts 18:23-20:38 covers the third missionary journey of Paul. Once again, Paul began by retracing his steps to visit the churches he had founded. He immediately set out for Ephesus. Paul stayed at Ephesus for over three years, building the church.

The following are the places Paul went to on his third missionary journey:

a. Ephesus  
b. Macedonia  
c. Philippi  
d. Troas  
e. Miletus

The three journeys covered a period of twelve years. Paul was used by God to establish churches in the majority of the cities in Asia Minor and Greece.
The Writings of an Apostle

Paul wrote a total of thirteen epistles, fourteen if you count Hebrews (no author named). These epistles were later canonized as being divinely inspired as Holy Scripture. Paul wrote to the newly founded churches across Greece and Asia Minor, as well as Rome. There were many issues in the early Church that needed addressed. As an apostle, Paul wrote as a spiritual father, caring for his children.

Winds of doctrine were blowing through these churches. False teachers were on the prowl, seeking to devour these new converts. Paul's writings were passed from church to church as a compass to keep them on the right track.

Today, we are blessed to have the writings of the greatest apostle to ever live. The Pauline revelation is the heart of the New Testament. He brought the deep truths of God out in an understandable way. Paul was a master of the Greek language. He could have written in classical Greek, but instead chose Koine Greek, the language of the people. Though easy to understand, Paul's writings were weighty and hard to discern without the Holy Spirit's help. Listen to Peter's words concerning Paul's writings:

2 Peter 3:15-16
And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which uttaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

Though apostles today cannot write divinely inspired Scripture, it is still vital for an apostle to wield the power of the pen. His teachings and testimony should be recorded for the continuing blessing of generations to come.
The Hardships of an Apostle

The book of 2 Corinthians offers us a unique peer into the personal life and hardships of the apostle Paul. It was extremely difficult for the apostle to the Gentiles. But God was always faithful to deliver him in times of trouble. Let him who thinks apostleship is an easy road, one to be desired, consider the following from just one of Paul’s epistles, 2 Corinthians:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. (2 Corinthians 1:8)

We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love (2 Corinthians 6:5-6)

For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears. (2 Corinthians 7:5)

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things,
what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. (2 Corinthians 12:7)

Paul's hardships served only to make him greater. Some say that he had to suffer because he had no faith. This is ridiculous thinking. Paul did not operate in the "cadillac faith" that some modern prosperity preachers teach. Paul was a living example of faith in everything he did. Paul was the greatest apostle of all because he made himself the least. The following passage portrays the heart of Paul throughout his life, ministry, and death as a martyr:

Phillipians 3:7-14
But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.