

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of Saint Paul

Part 1: Meet Saint Paul¹

Who is this man named Paul who some people have referred to as the “second founder” of Christianity? Pope Benedict XVI announced last year that, beginning with the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, the universal Church would dedicate an entire year in honor of Saint Paul. In tribute of this great celebration, I am going to dedicate the next twelve articles of my “Celestial Musings” to the life and writings of Saint Paul. And, there is no better way for me to begin by looking at the answer to the question, “Who is Paul?”

Since Saint Paul wrote over one-fourth of all of the New Testament writings, the primary sources of our information about him are his Letters. A good secondary source is the Acts of the Apostles.² The New Testament Letters that most scholars agree are genuinely from Saint Paul include: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

Before Saint Paul was “Paul,” he was Saul. More than likely, he was born between 5 and 10 A.D. in Tarsus, a city located in modern-day Turkey. While he was born a Roman citizen, Saul was ostentatiously Jewish. He was trained in his faith by a very famous Rabbi, Gamaliel, and was proudly a member of the Pharisaic party. He might have also been a member of the Sanhedrin, a council of elders within the Jewish religion, but many scholars think otherwise. By trade, Saul was a tentmaker and leatherworker. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he takes pride in the fact that his trade allows him to not be a financial burden to those whom he is evangelizing.³ We also know from his own admission that Paul was not a great public speaker. From apocryphal writings, we also know that he was not a handsome man, but that he was short, bow-legged, bald, with eyebrows that met in the middle, and a large nose. Yet, despite his religion, profession, oratory abilities, and looks, Paul is one of the most influential people in world's history.

The most notable moment in Saul's life is also one of the most notable moments in the history of humanity—his conversion on the road to Damascus. Besides the death and resurrection of Christ, there has probably not been a single event that has so changed the face of the world than the encounter that Saul had with Christ on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus. In a brief moment, Saul went from being a great persecutor of Christianity to being Paul, the great Christian evangelist. One of the most striking features of his conversion was that it did not constitute a moral repositioning or the belief in a new God.

Most of the time when we talk about “conversion,” we are referring to someone who has persisted in a life of sin and finally surrendered to God's grace. This was not the case with Paul. He was living as a very righteous and pious Jew before his conversion. He was also worshipping the one true God. Paul's conversion consisted in God revealing a new Truth to him—that Jesus Christ as not a rebel trying to disrupt Judaism, but a Savior who *is* God and who came to *fulfill* Judaism. In that conversion experience, Paul personally met the God he had worshipped all of his life. He would never be the same, nor would the world.

One beautiful way that we can celebrate the “Year of St. Paul,” is to take some time to reflect on our own conversion experiences. While I'm sure none of us have had a conversion quite like Saint Paul's, each of us *have had* encounters with Christ that fundamentally changed us and/or redirected us. What did those encounters look like? What did they feel like? What did they tell us about God's love for us? How did we live the awesome zeal we felt after those experiences?

¹ In honor of the “Year of Saint Paul,” this is part one of a ten part series on his life and writings.

² There are a few inconsistencies between information in Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles, mainly due to the author of Acts putting his own theological “spin” on various events.

³ 1 Thessalonians 2:9. Also see 1 Corinthians 9:6.