

# “Biblical Characters of the Bell Curve: Pioneers (Paul)”

Acts 9:1-6 <sup>1</sup>

Good morning! Your pastor told me that your subject for this morning is “spiritual pioneers.”<sup>2</sup> Pioneers are persons who are among the first to move into a new area. They are also persons who help to create new ideas and methods. There’s a sense in which both definitions apply to me, but I’m really an “ideas and methods” person more than anything else.

I was born about the year 5 AD in Tarsus, in what you know as south central Turkey. Tarsus was a cosmopolitan city with a proud history. Located on the Cydnus River, not too far from the famous mountain pass known as the Cilician Gates, Tarsus had been an important city for 2,000 years.

Tarsus was a wealthy city, and a university town as well. Because Tarsus was one of the “free cities” of the Roman Empire, anyone born in Tarsus was automatically a Roman Citizen. That was a Really Big Deal. Being a Roman Citizen meant that you were among the elite of the Empire and that you had many protections non-citizens didn’t have.<sup>3</sup>

Now while being born in Tarsus made me a Roman Citizen, I had another citizenship as well—two more, in fact. My second citizenship was in Israel. I was born of Jewish parents from the tribe of Benjamin—the tribe that gave Israel Saul, her first king. In fact, I was named “Saul,” after him, though I later changed my name to Paul.

Because my parents were fervent in their Jewish faith, I went to the best Hebrew schools in Tarsus, and then my parents sent me to Jerusalem—to the Holy City itself!—to complete my education with Gamaliel, one of the most famous Rabbis of our people.

I don’t mean to brag, but the truth is that when I was a young man, I was regarded as “hot property” among my people. I had an impeccable pedigree, and I was unmatched in my zeal for religious purity. I was in my early twenties when an upstart Rabbi named Jesus showed up in Jerusalem. This Jesus was a nobody from nowhere, but he really caused trouble for the religious leaders of our city.

Jesus did some good things, such as feeding the hungry and healing the sick, and some even said he had brought dead people back to life! But Jesus also broke many of the religious laws of our people, and he taught others to disregard those laws as well.

Well, one thing led to another, and conflict between Jesus and my teachers escalated over a period of several years. It eventually became necessary for them to have Jesus arrested and executed. “Finally that’s over with,” we thought! But no! It got *worse*! *Now* the people who followed this Jesus multiplied like crazy, preaching senseless things about Jesus being alive again and continuing to cause the same kinds of trouble that Jesus did.

This went on for several years. Finally, as the favorite son of the Pharisees, in line for top positions, I felt it necessary to stamp out these followers of the Way of Jesus at any cost. I went from house to house in Jerusalem, dragging out both men and women who followed Jesus and throwing them in jail. I even assisted in the stoning of a man named Stephen who talked too much about this Way.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on October 5, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The only person actually called a “pioneer” in the Bible is Jesus, but there is a sense in which it applies to Paul as well (Hebrews 2:10, 12:2; Romans 15:20).

<sup>3</sup> Citizens alone had the right to a fair and public trial. Citizens alone were protected from cruel and degrading punishments. And only Citizens had a guarantee against summary execution.

We learned that there was a large contingent of Jesus followers in the ancient city of Damascus, about 175 miles north of Jerusalem, and I was so bound and determined to get rid of these Jesus People that I obtained extradition papers from the High Court and headed for Damascus to capture all who followed Jesus and bring them back to trial in Jerusalem. But that trip didn't end at all as I'd planned.

At about noon on the day we were to reach Damascus, an incredible light appeared, a painful light, far brighter than the sun. As I put my hands over my eyes and fell to the ground to get away from the light, I heard a voice say to me, "*Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?*" "Who are you?" I asked. "*I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! It is hard for you to fight against me, isn't it?*"

When the Voice and the Light were gone, I found that I had been blinded by the light, and my friends had to lead me into the city. I sat for several days in blind darkness, wondering what in the world was happening to me. Then, after a few days, I had a vision that told me that a man named Ananias would soon come to tell me what to do next. Ananias was a follower of Jesus, and he didn't want to visit me, you may be sure! Even so, when the Voice came to him, he obeyed.

When Ananias came in, he called me "Brother Saul." "*Brother!*" . . . to one who had come to town to kill him! Through Ananias, God restored my vision, and I was immediately baptized into the Way of Jesus. I had now received my third citizenship: first Rome, then Israel, and now the eternal Kingdom of God, but my world had been turned completely upside down along the way. I didn't need any more convincing that Jesus was our promised Messiah, but I badly needed some time to sort things out.

I went into the desert for a while, just to think and to pray. Later I returned to Damascus, and I both surprised and aggravated the Jews there by preaching that Jesus really *is* the Messiah. In fact, I preached so boldly about Jesus that the Jews in Damascus decided to kill me, as I had intended to do to the other believers in town. I escaped by being let down over the city wall in a basket under the cover of darkness. And that wasn't the last time I would be in great danger because of Jesus . . . not by a long shot!

I went back to Jerusalem to learn more about Jesus from those who had known Him, but the believers there were afraid of me, as you can well imagine. It wasn't until Barnabas spoke up for me that the others were willing to trust me at all. I set about preaching about Jesus again in Jerusalem, with a similar result: my former friends and teachers decided that I had to be eliminated, and my friends spirited me off to Tarsus to stay out of sight.

My parents never could understand what had happened to me, and that was a grief to me all my life. That sorrow is part of the background for what I wrote in what you know as the ninth chapter of Romans. I worked, lived, and preached in Tarsus for several years, still sorting things out in my mind. I made a living as a tent maker, and continued to preach about Jesus.

After a while, Barnabas showed up and asked me to come back with him to Antioch in Syria. There were many believers there, and it was in Antioch that we were first called "Christians," or "little Christs." The term was intended as an insult, but we wore it proudly. And as you know, the name stuck.

From the very beginning, back when Ananias restored my sight, I had known that God's purpose was for me to become the "Apostle to the Gentiles," even as Peter was the "Apostle to the Jews." As time went by, my call became apparent to the brothers and sisters in Antioch, and they

commissioned Barnabas to go with me on what you call my First Missionary Journey. Antioch in Syria is really the Mother Church of the Mission to the Gentiles.

To tell the truth, Barnabas and I were pretty much “following our noses” on that first trip, which lasted about two years. Our basic strategy was to find cities where we knew synagogues were located and to try to convince the Jews there that Jesus was our promised Messiah. We talked with Gentiles, too, of course, but we expected to find the best reception among those who were already watching for the Messiah to come.

We sailed first for Cyprus, and then to Perga in Pamphylia. We traveled to Pisidian Antioch, and then on to the Galatian cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, preaching all the while. By God’s power, I was even able to heal a man who was crippled so that he could walk again, and many people believed in Jesus. I could talk all day about what happened in any one of those cities, but you’ll be relieved to know that I won’t. I didn’t even bring my slides.

The downside of the trip was that, while the Gentiles who heard about Jesus were very open and eager to follow him, not many Jews believed in Jesus. In fact, the Jews often became angry at my preaching and harassed me along the way. Some of the Jews followed me from city to city, and in Lystra they even organized a mob to stone me, as I had done to Stephen. Talk about payback! They left me among the rocks for dead, but somehow God protected my life. After visiting some of the churches again, Barnabas and I made our way back to Antioch in Syria . . . but there was more work to do!

Hardly had we arrived in Antioch before word came that the churches in Galatia were becoming corrupted in their faith. Some of the Jews who had become believers were telling the Gentiles that, since Christianity grew out of Judaism, Christians had to follow all the Jewish laws and rituals in order to follow Jesus. I desperately needed to talk with them and to correct these false teachings that had led them astray.

How I would have loved to have cell phones and email as you do! But in those days, in order to communicate with the Galatian churches, I had to write a letter that was hand carried 300 miles across the mountains and through the Cilician Gates! Talk about “snail mail”!

But you do what you have to do, and, as you know, writing letters would quickly become my primary way of communicating with the new churches I’d founded. I sat down to consider what I needed to say to the Galatians. Here’s part of what I wrote:

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.<sup>4</sup> A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.<sup>5</sup> If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!<sup>6</sup>*

*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery [to*

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<sup>4</sup> Galatians 1:6

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 2:15-16

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 2:21

the law]. *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*<sup>7</sup>

*When the Holy Spirit controls our lives, we will increasingly develop the character qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*<sup>8</sup>

Well, you may be wondering what all this has to do with you. It's just ancient history, right? I wish that were true. No, most people today are making the very same mistake the Galatians made. Even now. Even today. Even here.

You're doing "Galatian thinking" whenever you take satisfaction in "what a good person" or "what a good Christian" you are; when you congratulate yourself on your activity in the church, on your gifts to the church, or on the good you do in the community, saying quietly to yourself, "I'm a pretty good person. God is pretty lucky to have me on his team. I'm a real asset."

Now it's true that God does have a plan for your life. God recreates us spiritually in Jesus so that we can do the good things He planned for us before the very creation of the world. But we do these things, not so that we will earn credit points with God, but because our complete and total redemption has been paid for by Jesus—and by Jesus alone.

My friend, if you're still "trying to be good enough," you're in real trouble, because you don't get to pick and choose which of God's laws you're going to keep. Jesus said this law thing is all or nothing. If you try to be right with God by how good you are, then Jesus said that you have to be absolutely *perfect*. That's right—perfect. After all, how many cracks does a mirror have to have before it's a broken mirror? Just one failure, and the whole tower comes tumbling down.

My friend, you have to choose either the Law or Jesus. Each of us must approach God either with our "broken mirrors" or with the Cross of Jesus. There are no other choices.

Friends, don't be misled like the Galatians were. Trying to impress God with how good you are is a losing strategy. The same Jesus who confronted my wrong-headedness and sin on that long-ago road is here today through His eternal Spirit, and He's asking the very same question that He asked me: "It's hard for you to fight against me, isn't it?"

My friend, do you know that you've been born again in Jesus? Do you know that you belong to Him, and that, if you died today, you would be welcomed into His presence? Are you living in daily friendship with Him and in obedience to Him? Is your life characterized by spiritual power? *What would your family and friends say?*

Sisters and brothers, the Lord Jesus has sent me to you today so that you can experience God's wonderful gift of soul freedom. Will you come to Jesus? You can come today!

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<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:1, 5:1, 13

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 5:22-23, 6:9