



### Introduction

The following questions, prayers and comments are intended to assist you through a Bible study time this summer. Watch on Facebook Live or [commhope.freeonlinechurch.com/live](http://commhope.freeonlinechurch.com/live) at 9 am on Sundays. This study and Pastor John's sermons will cover 15 men & women of the Bible. Weekly studies like these will be available each week. If you have any questions, please e-mail [koko@commhope.org](mailto:koko@commhope.org).

## **Week 15: Paul – Religion and Grace**

**Prayer of preparation:** Lord, help me to grow in grace and seek forgiveness so that I may be free. Amen.

**Comments & Readings:** Please, read Acts 7:57 – 9:31, 11:19 – 30 & chapter 13: to the end of Acts

In exploring the person of Paul, I came to recognize how volumes can be written about one character, like the 6 volumes that Carl Sandburg wrote about Abraham Lincoln. The personal history, character and times of Paul are complicated, fascinating and an enormous influence on how we understand who Jesus is, to this day. I have always thought of Paul as a singular entity. I know he went on missionary journeys, usually with a partner. In this study I became interested in some of the people that had influence on and worked with, the Apostle Paul.

I have included some things in this lesson that caught my attention. In the hope of keeping this study to something that can be done in under an hour I have chosen two things on which I will focus, the people associated with Paul and what forgiveness did to Paul.

I was impressed by some of the characters that appear in association with Paul, i.e., Gamaliel, Ananias, Stephen and Barnabas. The following is a description of who Gamaliel was and how he influenced Paul's early life and grasp of Old Testament scripture.

Gamaliel the Elder was the grandson of the great Jewish Rabbi Hillel the Elder, and he kept to Hillel's interpretation of Jewish law. Gamaliel became a leading authority in the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court in Jerusalem. In fact, it is in this capacity where he is first mentioned in Acts 5. The apostles were on trial for preaching about Jesus, and the Sanhedrin wanted to put them to death. "But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up" (Acts 5:34). Gamaliel urged the court to "let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38–39). Because he was well respected "by all the people" and his speech was measured and persuasive, "they took his advice" (Acts 5:39). Thus, the apostles' lives were spared because Gamaliel stepped in.

Defending and successfully saving the apostles are not Gamaliel's only biblical claim to fame. He was also the rabbi who had instructed Paul before his

conversion. Paul touted this tutelage under Gamaliel as a credential for why the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem should hear him out in Acts 22:3. He said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day." Under Gamaliel's teaching Paul developed an expert knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, and this educational pedigree gave him access to preach in the synagogues wherever he traveled (Acts 17:2). Gamaliel's influence extended beyond just his own teaching, then, and also filtered down to Paul and Paul's understanding of Jesus being the fulfillment of the Jewish law (Matthew 5:17).

<https://www.compellingtruth.org/Gamaliel-in-the-Bible.html>

Most of us have had teachers that were a great influence on us. Paul's father, a Pharisee, gave Paul this early association and helped set him up with a love of God that would bring us all, to this day, into a way of understanding God that paves the way to understand who is Jesus.

Ananias is another of Paul's associates. Ananias was a disciple in Damascus, to whom the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was made known in a vision, and who was the instrument of his physical and spiritual restoration, and the means of introducing him to the other Christians in Damascus (Acts 9:10-19). Paul makes honorable mention of him in his account of his conversion spoken at Jerusalem (Acts 22:12-16), where we are told that Ananias was held in high respect by all the Jews in Damascus, on account of his strict legal piety. No mention is made of him in Paul's address before Agrippa in Caesarea (Acts 26). In late tradition, he is placed in the list of the seventy disciples of Jesus, and represented as bishop of Damascus, and as having died a martyr's death.

Ananias spoke essential truth to Paul in Acts 22:16. This is the place where Saul becomes separated from Paul. This is such an exciting announcement of healing and freedom for the new creation that God has made. It is especially pretty when Paul affirms what he learned, at that moment, again in 2Cor. 5:17.

Barnabas was a person I always thought of as Paul's helper. This is an inspiring description of who Barnabas was and how the Holy Spirit enlivens and strengthens us to do and live out deeds we only dream of doing. Check it out; get inspired. <https://disciplr.com/barnabas-facts-lessons>

Another of the folks in this story of Paul has to do with Stephen. In 1Cor. 2:10 Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit and how He makes the foolish wise. I wonder if this is part of how Paul understood what He had done, in his own foolishness, in supporting the violence of Stephen's death. This description of who Stephen was, helped me understand how outrageous, was Paul's behavior at that time. Paul's blindness on the road to Damascus was mild compared to the blindness he had when he participated in the murder of such a Holy Spirit filled leader as Stephen. Check this out: [https://www.biblewise.com/bible\\_study/characters/stephen.php](https://www.biblewise.com/bible_study/characters/stephen.php)

There are many other characters that we encounter when we read of Paul's life, in and out of Christ, such as, Silas, Timothy, Lydia, the Jailer and the Important Women.

All of us have people that influence our thinking, planning and state of mind. In turn, we all influence others. As a young person, Saul had wonderful influences to emulate. Somewhere, those positive influences were lost and he endorsed the kind of arrogance that enabled him to support the stoning of Stephen. How amazing it is that the good Lord was able to call him back to the truth. Max Lucado in his book 10 Men of the Bible on page 225, puts it this way: *"The message is gripping: Show a man his failures without Jesus and the result will be found in the roadside gutter. Give a man religion without reminding him of his filth, and the result will be arrogance in the tree-piece suit. But get the two in the same heart - get sin to meet Savior and Savior to meet sin - and the result just might be another Pharisee - turned preacher who sets the world on fire."* Max describes, really well, how religion can set us up with an arrogant perception of ourselves, as being right and holy, when in truth we are not. Likewise, when we use God's gracious and persistent acceptance and love for us, as a way to, not have to make the changes in our living that He calls us to, we lose our place in closeness to Jesus.

Jesus knew all about Saul when He called him to start over by healing his blindness, both physical and spiritual. He knew the arrogance that religion had instilled in Saul, but He called him anyway. In John 3:3-8 Jesus describes what Saul went through; rebirth. Like Matthew, Joseph and Abigail, Paul got up and went, Acts 9:15. I think it is ironic that this healing happened on the "Street called Straight" Acts 9:11.

When I sin, I want to have the same kind of courage to recognize how I have missed the mark and how I am blessed to be able to start again, see what Paul wrote in Philippians 3:12. I hope you do to.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I am embarrassed when I think of the many hurtful words and attitudes that I have formed from my life in this world. Forgive me and others like me. Cover us in the precious grace that is the reflection of your holy love for us all. Amen.