

CALLED TO FOLLOW CHRIST

Lesson 1 : Paul's Background, Conversion, and Early Ministry

Session Goals

As a result of conversations and activities connected with this session, group members should:

- begin to form a picture of the man Paul;
- explore how the early experiences and influences in Paul's life were formational;
- begin to make connections between the life and message of Paul and our own life and faith.

Biblical Foundation

[And Paul said,] "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia . . . a citizen of an important city . . . circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews . . . brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God . . . I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age. . . . I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison." —Acts 22:3a, 21:39b, Philipians 3:5, Acts 22:3b, Galatians 1:14a, Acts 22:4

Adam Hamilton takes us to key places where the Apostle Paul lived out his ministry. We travel to Tarsus to see where Paul grew up and to Damascus, where as a persecutor of early Christians he met the risen Christ and became a believer. Fourteen years later, Barnabas took Paul to the church at Syrian Antioch, and Paul's missionary ministry began.

- Paul, in his early training, had "one foot in two worlds" (Greek and Jewish). How do you think this may have affected his life and ministry?
- Paul stood by and may even have approved the stoning of the early church martyr Stephen. How could Paul, as an observant Jew, condone and participate in such actions?
- Paul, blinded physically and spiritually on the road to Damascus, was "right where God needs him to be." What do you think is meant by this?
- How would you have felt if you were Ananias, told by the Holy Spirit to help Paul, the persecutor of Christians? What would you have done?

How do you imagine the location and circumstances of Paul's early life influenced the man he became?

Hamilton observes that in his experience, the most difficult or painful parts of his past are often the very events that have made good things possible in his adulthood. Would you agree? What are some of the difficult things that have shaped you?

Read Acts 7:58-60; 8:1, 3; 9:1-2, 11, 13, 17-18; 26:12-15.

- Hamilton observes that it was Paul's personal ambition, coupled with his unwavering religious conviction, that motivated his persecution of the followers of the Way and specifically his volunteering to oversee Stephen's execution. He suggests that these two motivating factors can be a dangerous combination. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- In what ways or in what circumstances do you struggle with ambition?
- What is a goad? Have you experienced God goading you through the gentle nudgings of someone else? How did you respond?
- Has someone served as your Ananias? Looking back, can you identify a time when you believe God was using you as an Ananias for someone else?

Read Acts 9:19b-22; 23; Galatians 1:11-17.

- Which other biblical figures spent time in the wilderness? How was their time spent there?
- While we cannot be sure about Paul's sojourn, the author speculates that Paul may have spent the three years working out his theology. What do you think?
- The author suggests that we all need times for silence and solitude for study, prayer, reflection, and listening for God's voice. How and where in your life do you make time for these spiritual practices?

Read Galatians 1:18-19 and 2:1-11 and Acts 9:26-27; 28-30.

- Hamilton suggests reasons why there may have been tension between Paul and Peter. What is your response to these suggestions? In what ways might the differences between the two men have played into their strained relationship?
- How do both the Gospel accounts and Paul's letters contribute to your understanding of the gospel?

Read Acts 4:36-37, where Barnabas enters the story, and Acts 11:19-26.

- How did Barnabas exemplify the meaning of his name?