

Why Did God Choose the Apostle Paul?

During interviews about my most recent book, "Jesus Is Risen: Paul and the Early Church," many hosts have asked me why the greatest persecutor of Christians, Saul of Tarsus (later known as Paul), became Christianity's foremost evangelist.
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This is a fascinating question because Paul, by all appearances, was the least likely person to pioneer early Christianity's missionary efforts. He was born a Jew in Tarsus but raised and educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, a highly respected rabbi and Jewish scholar who mentored him on the "strict manner of the law of our fathers" (Acts 22:3). Paul touted his own Jewish bona fides, saying, "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:4-6).

When Paul saw some of his Jewish brothers converting to Christianity, he was more than a little upset. He viewed Christianity not as some harmless competing religion but as one that was seeking to co-opt his religion, corrupt it at its core and twist it into something it was never intended to be. So he set out to bring to justice the heretics who were betraying the God he'd worshipped his entire life.

Why would God choose such a man to present the very Gospel that drove him to persecute and even execute early Christians? Scripture clarifies that God specifically chose Paul, before he was born, to proclaim the Gospel, mainly, but not exclusively, to the gentiles (Galatians 1:15-16).

When you study the Book of Acts -- the history of the early church -- and Paul's Epistles, you can see quite clearly why God set Paul apart for this crucial role. Paul was fluent in the Greek language and Greek culture and learned in Greek literature, which enabled him to relate to the Greeks (gentiles) on their level. In some cases, he cited their poets to get his foot in the door as a prelude to revealing God to them.

He was a Roman citizen, which entitled him to legal protections unavailable to noncitizens and which, in some cases, facilitated his presentation of the message.

He was highly intelligent, and he would call on his intellect to expound on critical matters of Christian doctrine in his letters, 13 of which are preserved for us in the New Testament as Holy Scripture.

Ironically, Paul's Jewish background greatly enhanced his evangelistic efforts. His intimate knowledge of the Old Testament and the Mosaic law perfectly equipped him to explain the Gospel as part two of God's two-part story of His salvation plan for mankind. Paul confirmed that Christ had come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

Christ fulfilled the messianic promises of the Old Testament prophets. He inaugurated the New Covenant, which superseded the Old Covenant and provided a means for all mankind -- Jews and

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penitents alike, to be saved by faith in Him. No one in human history understood better than Paul how God's salvation plan was integrated from start to finish, and no one could better communicate it. Nor was anyone better positioned to articulate God's free offer of grace, as no one, by his own admission, was less deserving of grace than he was -- yet he received it in abundance.

Paul was also a passionate and relentless warrior for the truth who, following Christ's example, willfully sacrificed himself and endured great suffering and persecution for the cause of his Savior. He would not be deterred from his singular mission to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth -- in obedience to Christ's Great Commission to the Twelve Apostles.

Finally, I believe God chose Paul because he was so real, so authentic, so personal and so loving. He was not merely a man of great intellect but one of heartfelt emotions, especially for his fellow Jews. He wore his emotions on his sleeve for all to see. In his letters to the churches he planted, you can feel his personal grief over some of the believers having been led astray by false teachers from the true Gospel and his earnest appeal for them to return. When reading his letters, you get a real sense that Paul loved these churches he had birthed as a parent treasures his own children, alternately giving praise, discipline, lessons and love.

I urge you to read or reread the Book of Acts and Paul's Epistles and treat yourself to his unique story and his unsurpassed presentation of the Gospel and essential Christian doctrine. You'll not regret it.