

# GOD'S STORY AND PAUL'S STORY

*I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors.*

Saul—later to be called Paul—grew up in Tarsus, a busy, sophisticated city of the Roman Empire. Like other educated Jews, he read, wrote, and thought in Greek, the common language of the first century. He was also educated in and deeply committed to Jewish Scripture and faith. All these influences bear fruit as Paul later spends thirty years traveling around the northern Mediterranean Sea as a leading apostle or messenger for Jesus, the Messiah of God.



## *Tarsus, no small city*

- How would you describe yourself in a conversation with a stranger? What does this say about what is important to you?

## **A ROMAN CITIZEN** (Acts 22:1-5)

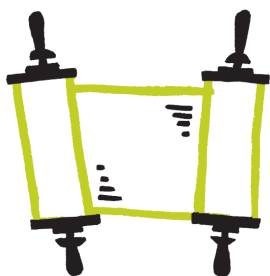
Only in the Acts of the Apostles, written at least one generation after Paul's time, do we hear that Paul was born in the city of Tarsus, in the province of Cilicia. Tarsus was an intellectually lively and diverse city. When Tarsus became the Roman capital of Cilicia, Jews and others were able to become Roman citizens. Paul, or Saul as he is called originally, grows up in a place where he is both a Jew and a citizen of the empire that governs his world.

Tarsus was no backwater. For example, Antony and Cleopatra met (41 B.C.E.) and spent time there constructing a fleet. Although this was well before Paul's time, we can imagine the energizing force these two wealthy and important figures would have created in the city. Traders, political figures, and artisans of all kinds—not to mention military strategists and shipbuilders—were part of the buzz in Tarsus.

Paul grows up knowing his way around this busy port city. His work in canvas (sometimes simply described as “tent-making”) fits right into the scene in Tarsus: canvas work was needed for sails as well as tents. Paul learns

### A busy port

- How has your birthplace or hometown contributed to your becoming the person you are?



### A Greek-speaking Jew

- What conflicts, if any, do you experience between being a person of faith and living in a particular area? What conflicts might others experience?

a good, reliable trade and has opportunities to listen to people from around the Mediterranean as they order the cloth they need.

Later on, when Paul is ready to move west in his drive to spread the good news of Jesus, he is not thinking small. As a citizen of a lively city and an extensive empire, and a Jew devoted to the God who created all that is, he has a big picture in mind and the language skills to engage a diversity of people.

### A FAITHFUL JEW (Philippians 3:4b-6; Acts 24:14-15)

Saul of Tarsus is a Jew. In writing to Christ-followers living in Philippi, he highlights several aspects of his past, tracing his connections with Israel, to establish his trustworthiness as a herald for God's Messiah or promised one, Jesus. He was circumcised on the eighth day, showing that he comes from a Jewish family that upheld the practices of their faith, even as they lived in the Greco-Roman city of Tarsus. Just as most Christians today would feel no conflict between identifying themselves as New Yorkers or Iowans and also saying that they have been baptized and confirmed, and come from a family with United Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, or Baptist ties, so Paul emphasizes the religious life in which he was raised and fully embraces.

Paul never abandons his Jewish convictions (we will explore this more fully in chapter 3). He continues to describe himself as a Jew (Philippians 3:4b-6; Romans 11:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22). More importantly, his understanding of Jesus as God's Messiah makes sense to him, based on what he knows about the God of Scripture, the God worshiped by Jews, the God who always planned to reach God's whole creation with a gift of peace, harmony, and life.

Paul's passion for this God—and not some other divinity readily available in the surrounding culture of his time—shapes his life from beginning to end. He dedicates himself to learning about and serving God, even from a young age. As he says in Acts 24:14-15, "I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets. I have a hope in God . . . that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous."



## EAGER TO LEARN AND SERVE

(Acts 22:3; 26:4-5)

Paul is educated more deeply about his faith than most people of his time. He describes his approach to Scripture as that of a Pharisee, which means he studies deeply and carefully. Raised in a Jewish community within Tarsus, he goes on to study with

Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), at the heart of Jewish faith. Jews understood themselves to be a particular “nation,” a coherent people among the many peoples of the world. Jews from far-flung areas of the Roman Empire came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the temple there at special times of the year (Acts 2:5-11). Jerusalem also had synagogues (places for prayer and Scripture study) for Greek-speaking Jews (Acts 6:1, 9).

Paul is an active learner, a seeker. He is eager, zealous, to serve God. When he becomes convinced that God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, he is still eager to serve God, but in a new way. Because the story of his beloved and revered God takes a new turn (we’ll talk more about this in the chapters ahead), Paul’s story takes a turn and carries him on new paths.



## PROMISES, PROMISES (Acts 26:6)

Paul has hope in the “promise made by God to our ancestors,” to Abraham and Sarah and others along the way. This hope is strong and confident for two reasons. First, from studying Scripture over the years, Paul is deeply acquainted with God’s promises, including a variety of predictions about how

Gentiles (the Jewish term for non-Jews) will come to honor God as the Lord of all creation. Paul’s second reason for hope is the resurrection of Jesus. For Paul, God’s raising of Jesus from death is the sign of a new age under way, a sign that God is faithfully keeping promises long held and trusted by God’s people. In the resurrection of Jesus, Paul has hope—no, confidence—that God’s story is suddenly really moving forward in a new way.

Because God is Lord of all creation, all people are swept up into this story in ways they might not even understand. Gentiles are included in the story and called to be part of God’s people, just as the Jews have been. In all of this, Paul sees God offering a big “come on in” to Gentiles and Jews. It will be the adventure of the rest of his life to get around to as many places as he can with this invitation!

### *An eager student of Scripture*

- As a young person, what did you want to be when you “grew up”? How does that compare with your life now?

### *Study abroad*

- Paul studied Scripture and his faith deeply and carefully. What have you studied in this way, and why did you do this?

### *At Jerusalem, a crossroads*

- Where did you begin to learn about God? What do you remember most about this?

### *A new age is coming*

- What do you think God’s new age might be like? What kinds of images come to mind for you?

### *God’s great in-gathering begins*

## Background Files

**Tarsus.** On the map “The Early Church and Key Locations in Acts” (page 2112 in *Lutheran Study Bible*), find Tarsus on the northeast shore of the Mediterranean Sea. This vibrant, ancient port city served as capital of the Roman province Cilicia and as an intellectual and cultural center. It was known before Paul’s time for its large library of mostly Greek works, a sign the city was home to an unusually educated elite population. The architecture included typical Roman buildings of the time: baths, elegant palaces, aqueducts and fountain houses, and market areas. Romans in Tarsus enjoyed privileges such as tax breaks and citizenship that were not granted to the rest of the diverse population.

**Ancient education.** In the Roman Empire free public education did not exist. Literacy was low (5 to 8 percent of the population, with local variations) and was not considered necessary for most people. For those who could afford education, there was a graduated process that emphasized the skills needed for public speaking and public life. Males and females were taught, usually separately, in private sessions. Students learned to read, to speak clearly and persuasively from memory, and to think philosophically. Although science and mathematics were viewed as less important, they were seen as suitable for military, agricultural, and trade occupations.

**Persecution.** The word *persecution* often evokes Hollywood images of lions or gladiators going up against defenseless believers in a Roman arena as crowds cheer wildly. Dramatic martyrdoms like this did happen, but they were unusual and occurred after New Testament times. In the New Testament period, persecution of Christ-followers was usually more like harassment. Believers stood out when they did not honor the local gods, and this sometimes resulted in trouble finding work or arranging suitable marriages. Within religious communities like synagogues, members could be disciplined for behavior that seemed to threaten the group. Any behavior that caused public turmoil could also be dealt with harshly. On a day-to-day basis, believers dealt with inconveniences, various losses, gossip, exclusion, and group punishments.



## PICTURING THE STORY

As you watch artist Joe Castillo picture early days in Paul’s story, reflect on these questions:

- How is God at work in this part of the story?
- How is Paul influenced by his hometown? How much influence has your hometown had on you?
- What questions are raised for you?



## SINGING THE STORY

*The greatest story is a story of promises God made to the people of Israel and promises God kept through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The story continues through Paul and other early believers as God’s promises are shared with all people. Think about this ongoing story as you sing or pray the words of the hymn.*

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (ELW 257, stanzas 3 and 7)

O come, O come, O Lord of might,  
as to your tribes on Sinai’s height

in ancient times you gave the law  
in cloud and majesty, and awe.

### *Refrain*

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O King of nations, come,  
O Cornerstone that binds in one:  
refresh the hearts that long for you;  
restore the broken, make us new.

### *Refrain*

Text: Psalterium Canticum Catholicarum, Köln, 1710; tr. composite  
Music: French processional, 15th century  
Text sts. 2, 6, 7 © 1997 Augsburg Fortress

## MARK IT

*Choose one or more of the following passages from today's section of the story to read during the coming week. Mark your reading using the marking method shown here.*

Isaiah 60

Isaiah 66:20-23

Zechariah 14:16-21

2 Corinthians 11:21—12:4

## Marking Your Bible

*Make notes about the questions and insights you have as you read your Bible. The following symbols might be helpful.*

- \* A chapter or verse important to me
- ! A new idea
- ✓ A passage to memorize
- ? Something not clear to me
- ∞ God's love
- Ⓢ A promise from God
- ≈ Something that connects with my experience
- † My relationship with God
- ↔ My relationships with others

## Next Time

In the next two chapters, we will look more closely at the world Paul lived in. Chapter 2 looks at a few of the realities of living in the Greco-Roman world. What did people care about, value, and fear? How did they understand the presence and roles of spirits and gods? Chapter 3 will explore Jewish belief, practice, and life in the first century.

To prepare for the next chapter, read the following passages and the study notes that accompany them in *Lutheran Study Bible*:

- Acts 16:16-24, 35-39
- Acts 14:8-18
- Ephesians 5:21—6:9
- Acts 24:22—25:27