

The Birth of the Church and Initial Ingathering.

The birth of the church was astonishing.

¹ And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:1-4 (KJV)

Pentecost occurred 7 full weeks (50 days) after the feast of Passover ([Deut 16:8-10](#)). Passover was, of course, was the day that celebrated the release of the Hebrews from the rule of Pharaoh of Egypt ([Exod 12:1-28](#)). These feasts pointed first to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world and then the ingathering of countless of people into the church.

The amazing ingathering. So the church was born – in fact over 3000 were brought into the church at the preaching of Peter on that day ([Acts 2:37-41](#)). But the Enemy would have none of this – Peter and the Apostles were preaching boldly the resurrection of Christ¹ and were performing miracles through the power of God. Eventually, the Jewish leaders were fearful that this new movement – the Christian movement – would get out of hand so the priests, the leader of the temple guard and the Sadducees seized Peter and John the placed them in detention for a hearing. Even so, another 5000 were brought into the church ([Acts 4:1-4](#)). They were let go because they had felt the pressure of the Apostles popularity with the people:

²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old. Acts 4:21-22 (NIV).

The infant church was on a roll, so to speak.

And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Acts 4:33 (KJV).

Later on, Paul – then an enemy of the church gave witness to this great power in Romans 1:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: *for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.* Romans 1:16 (KJV, my emphasis).

Persecution of the Infant Church Escalates.

The infant church may have been on a roll but at the same time she was on the run.

¹ May I point out that Christianity is unique among all religions in that He, the founder, is not dead – rather Jesus Christ lives and is forever the head of the church.

The Enemy of the Church was not going to give up – in fact he never gives up to this day. It is Satan who makes every effort to suppress the preaching of the Gospel by the church. Let's take a look in Acts for another account of this persecution.

First, we had the Priests, the chief of the temple guard and the Sadducees try to suppress the early church. Again, we have the Synagogue of the Freedmen (freed Jewish slaves) and the synagogues of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia opposed

Stephen ([Acts 6:9](#)). Then Saul of Tarsus became inflamed with hatred – he began to persecute the church ([Acts 9:1-2](#)). Finally for this lesson we conclude that the king Herod murdered the Apostle James because he perceived that it pleased the Jews.

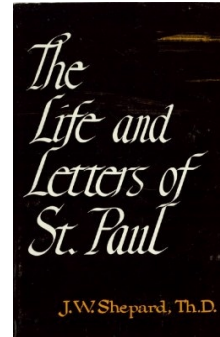
¹ Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. ² And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. Acts 12:1-2 (KJV).

And so begins this amazing account of the birth of the Church, it's infancy and the divine selection of a Persecutor to become the Church's very defender – Saul of Tarsus A.K.A. Paul, the Apostle.

The expanding church finds Saul.² Paul was a man of zeal. He was about to meet a man of kindred spirit – Stephen.

⁸ And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. ⁹ Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. ¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. ¹¹ Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. ¹² And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, ¹³ And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: Acts 6:8-13 (KJV).

Many of my historical notes came from The Life and Letters of St. Paul by J.W. Shepard. Dr. Shepard is a tremendous source of historical notes. He also wrote a book The Christ of the Gospels. Both books are rare finds. They are out of print but may be available from eBay and similar sources. Other suggested sources are MacArthur, [A. T. Robertson](#) etc.



² Outline point taken from The Life and Letters of St. Paul, J. W. Shepard, pg 48. From now on “JW Shepard.”

Please note that Stephen beat the opposition (including Saul³) at their own game. Although *the opposition* debated Stephen with their best rationalization,⁴ the wisdom of Stephen completely refuted these debaters so that they could not resist⁵ his wisdom as empowered by the Spirit. If Saul was there, as is strongly implied, he must have been greatly stirred up in the face of this irresistible wisdom. Saul had been taught in the school of Gamaliel, whose founder was a doctor of the law, greatly respected by the all the people. This may be an important detail not to be overlooked. The religious leaders were held in some disrespect by the people but Gamaliel was not.⁶ This was Saul's first contact with someone in the church who could stand up against the arguments of the religious leaders, *including himself*. Please note that his teacher Gamaliel had expressed some concern that there was a possibility that God was on the side of the church and if that be the case they, *the opposition*, would find themselves fighting against God Himself.⁷ I find Gamaliel's cautionary position interesting. I think he was, at least, a God-fearing man. Although he was *the* doctor of the Law, he could allow the possibility that God was in this growing movement of Christians.

We need to understand that these Jewish leaders *knew* the scriptures.⁸ So what was the problem? These Jews had been so lead astray by the apostate Jewish religious thought of the day that they could not make the connection between Old Testament scriptures and Jesus Christ that was so obvious. A number had. Of course Mary believed her Son was the redeemer to come ([Luke 1:46-55](#)). The family of John the Baptist knew from the special angelic appearance made to his father Zachariah ([Luke 1:8-25](#)). Simeon, the just and devout man upon whom the Holy Spirit, rested knew ([Luke 2:22-32](#)) as did Anna the prophetess ([Luke 2:36-38](#)). Nicodemus was an example of a Jew who escaped this deadly mind-trap of apostate Jewish rational and apparently became a believer (Cf. [John 3:1-16](#) with ch [7:50-52](#); [19:39-42](#)). Joseph of Arimathea offered his private tomb for the body of Jesus Christ after His death on the

³ "...Certain of the Hellenistic students of the law, among whom Saul was probably outstanding..." JW Shepard, pg 55.

⁴ Constantive aorist of *suzeteo* – to examine bit by bit. A debaters technique where arguments are won by overwhelming the other side with details, rationalization.

⁵ Constantive Aorist of *antistenai* – to stand up against. The use of the constantive aorist meant that this was done repeated times – on every occasion.

⁶ Compare [Acts 4:21](#) with [Acts 5:34](#).

⁷ [Acts 5:34-39](#). I like KJV for this.

⁸ Remember the disciples who were grieving about the apparent death of their Messiah after Christ's death on the cross? They too knew the scriptures but there remained a rather thick-headed mentality that had to be remedied by Jesus' teaching. ([Luke 24:13-32](#))

cross and lovingly cared for proper internment (again, [John 19:38-40](#)). So Gamaliel was one of the few (I call) God-fearing men who may not have made the connection but was open to the idea of a possibility that Jesus Christ and this movement *may* be of God. His was a “wait and see” attitude.

But the rest of the apostate Jewish mob was not so disposed. Stephen was railroaded through the bogus court of these religious leaders and was executed via stoning. All the while Saul witnessed this – it made a powerful impression on him. Nonetheless, Saul, a man of zeal began his crusade against the church:

¹ And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. ³ As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. ⁴ Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Acts 8:1-4 (KJV).

So the church was not suppressed – rather like throwing water on an oil inferno, the church spread – like wildfire, if you please. Even so, Saul was determined to exterminate this group of Christians – followers of Christ. But at the same time, the very quenching effort of Saul only served to spread this fire from heaven – the Good News of Salvation through Christ.

Paul’s Ministry Was in Many Ways to Parallel That of Stephen.⁹

	Stephen	Paul
Ministry	Preached Christ in synagogues.	So did Paul (Acts 17:1–2)
Rejected by Jews	Jews rejected Stephens message	Jews also rejected Paul’s message (Acts 18:5–6).
Accused by the Jews	Accused Stephen of speaking against Moses, the law and the Temple (Acts 6:9-15).	Paul likewise accused. (Acts 21:28 ; 24:6 ; 25:8 ; 28:17).
Tried by before the Sanhedrin.	Stephen (Acts 6:12-14).	Paul (Acts 22:30 ff).
Both were stoned by angry Jews.	Stephen died (Act 7:57-60)	Paul survived (Acts 14:19-20).
Both died as martyrs.		

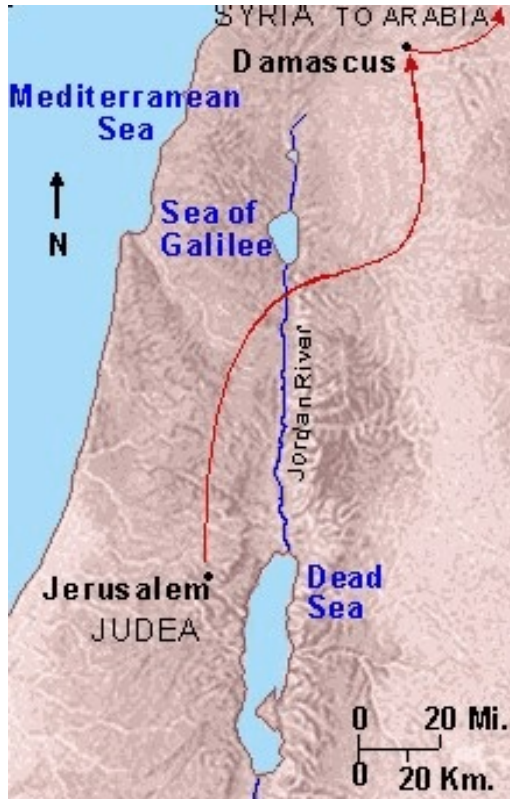
⁹ Basic outline taken from text, [The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#).

Map of Paul's day.



Here are the steps that lead to Paul's conversion:

1. Saul's work accomplished in Jerusalem now seeks to expand his persecution outside Jerusalem to exterminate the Christians ([Acts 9:1-2](#)).
2. Saul meets Christ on the way to Damascus ([Acts 9:3-6](#)).
3. Saul stays in Damascus for 3 days ([Acts 9:7-9](#)).
4. Ananias, a man of God, is instructed to go to Saul and pray for his sight to return ([Acts 9:10-16](#)).
5. Saul receives his sight, is nourished, meets the very people he intended to murder. He is received by the Damascus Christians ([Acts 9:17-19](#)).
6. Preaches that Christ is the Son of God in Damascus ([Acts 9:20-22](#)).
7. Saul escapes Damascus after learning of a plot to kill him ([Acts 9:23-25](#)).
8. Retires to Arabia - see map below. There is a 3 year period to be inserted in [Acts 9:23 - cf. Galatians 1:15-18](#). See also MacArthur comments below after maps.
9. Acceptance at Jerusalem – the very city where Saul had succeeded in the killing of many Christians. He was accepted by Whom ([Read Acts 9:26-29](#))?
10. Once again, Saul escapes a plan to be executed – goes to Caesarea and then to Tarsus - see map below - ([Acts 9:30-35](#)).

Saul, Jerusalem to Damascus, Arabia**Paul, Jerusalem to Tarsus.****MacArthur comments on 3 year retreat into Arabia.**

“Paul went away to Nabatean Arabia, a region that stretched east from Damascus down to the Sinai peninsula. Although he does not identify the exact location, it seems likely that he stayed near Damascus. The place and purpose of his sojourn in Arabia are unknown, but that was surely the place of his preparation for ministry.

“After his stay in Arabia, the apostle returned once more to Damascus and continued preaching there for a period of time. He almost immediately encountered persecution from the Jewish leaders, a group that doubtlessly included some of the men with whom he himself had once planned to conspire against the Christians ([see Acts 9:2](#)).

“The fact that ‘in Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king [of Nabatean Arabia] was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize [Paul]’ ([2 Cor. 11:32](#)) suggests that the apostle also preached in Arabia and had aroused the displeasure of its king. In any case, the Gentile civil authorities of Damascus supported the efforts of the Jewish leaders to arrest and execute Paul (cf. [Acts 9:23-24](#)).

“The two periods of preaching in Damascus and the in-between sojourn in Arabia alone with Lord Jesus—learning, meditating, and studying the Old Testament—totaled three years.”

—MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The