

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Eph 1:1 ESV

Paul

Who was Paul? We know quite a bit about him from Scripture. Before his conversion on the Damascus road ([Act 9:1-22](#)), he was known as Saul. He was born around the same time as Jesus, and was a native of Tarsus, an important city in the North-Eastern Mediterranean in modern-day Turkey, and most likely born there. The only mention of family members is made in [Act 23:16](#), where his sister's son saved his life. He may be referring to extended family in [Rom 16:7](#), [Rom 16:11-12](#). He had Roman citizenship, a valuable commodity in those times, which gave rights and protection not available to non-citizens (cf. [Act 16:37-38](#)). He was also a Jew, with an impeccable heritage ([Php 3:4-6](#)).

A well educated man, Saul trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel ([Act 22:3](#)), where he gained a deep knowledge of the Scriptures (our Old Testament). He was also familiar with other non-religious writings as [Act 17:28](#) shows. Gamaliel was a highly respected and influential teacher, considered to be an authority on the Scriptures, who gave wise advice when the Pharisees tried to stop the disciples preaching Christ ([Act 5:34-40](#)). Despite Gamaliel's counsel, the Pharisees generally were implacably opposed to the Christians. They considered them to be heretics and polytheists, and therefore worthy only of death. We first encounter Saul at the stoning of Stephen ([Act 7:56-60](#)). This event stirred Saul to launch a persecution of the church in Jerusalem and beyond ([Act 8:1](#)). He gladly undertook the task of hunting, arresting and overseeing the murder of many Christians. This intolerance of others seems to have been a mark of Phariseeism (cf. [Luk 18:9-14](#)). There is a solemn warning for us in Saul's story. It is not unusual for people to become so obsessed with their beliefs, and so determined to defend them, that the boundaries between right and wrong begin to blur. When this happens, all sorts of atrocities can be done, all in the name of God.

Saul encountered Jesus Christ in a dramatic way on the way to Damascus on one of his many persecution missions. He was radically and eternally transformed. At this time, his name was changed to Paul, possibly in preparation for his future ministry to the Gentiles. After spending three years in Arabia ([Gal 1:17](#)), where he seems to have had a remarkable, though mysterious vision ([2Co 12:1-5](#)), he returned to Damascus where he began preaching Christ to the Jews. Later, he was to go to the Gentiles, planting churches wherever he went. After many years of teaching, preaching, writing, planting, discipling and persecution, he was executed in Rome around AD66.

There is great encouragement for us also in Saul's story. No one is beyond the grace of God, no matter how heinous his crimes, and how brutal his attacks on God and His people. In addition, it shows us that our lives before Christ are not entirely wasted. In spite of Saul's opposition to Christ, God's plan involved using Saul's training and study as the foundation for the greatest theological teaching and insights we have. His deep knowledge of the Scriptures, coupled with the insights given him by the Holy Spirit, allowed him to interpret the Scriptures to reveal to his hearers, and to us today, the meaning and purpose of the events recorded in what is now our Old Testament. Not only that, but Paul was willing to suffer any abuse and attack, even attempts on his life, if only he might be able to spread the message of the gospel. It gave him great insight into the persecution suffered by believers around the world, and he was able to provide great hope and encouragement to them. The knowledge of God's grace extended to him kept him humble, and kept all things in perspective. No, God doesn't waste our life pre-Christ. On the contrary, it prepares us to live and serve Him effectively.

An apostle of Christ Jesus

Paul begins his introduction to this letter in his usual way; by introducing himself, and his qualifications.

He regularly reminds his readers that he is an apostle ([Rom 1:1](#), [1Co 1:1](#), [2Co 1:1](#), [Gal 1:1](#), [Col 1:1](#), [1Ti 1:1](#), [2Ti 1:1](#), [Tit 1:1](#)). He often refers to his call to serve Christ, or God's will in Paul serving Him ([Rom 1:1](#), [1Co 1:1](#), [2Co 1:1](#), [Gal 1:1](#), [Col 1:1](#), [1Ti 1:1](#)).

Why would he feel the need to do this? Is he boasting? I think not, given that in this first chapter he labours the point that God Himself has called and chosen and saved His people, and then goes on later in this letter to emphasise that it is of God, not man, lest anyone should boast ([Eph 2:8-9](#)).

He is certainly establishing his authority to speak to the Ephesian church. He was a founder of the church, and spent about three years with them in its early life ([Act 19:8](#), [Act 19:10](#), [Act 20:31](#)). No doubt Paul laid a good doctrinal foundation for this church during his stay in Ephesus, and he re-affirms that foundation in this letter.

It would seem that the church maintained its good doctrinal foundation, in the face of much opposition and deception. The church at Ephesus was commended by Jesus Himself ([Rev 2:2-3](#)). They had faced the challenges, and in many ways, triumphed over them, but not without some faults and problems ([Rev 2:4](#)). Paul had warned them about fierce wolves that would come in, and also arise from within, for the purpose of leading them astray ([Act 20:29-30](#)). They would later be able to spot these false apostles, and would not tolerate their false teaching ([Rev 2:2](#)).

Paul's apostleship was the genuine article. He was an "apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."

What does it mean to be an apostle? Fundamentally and literally, it means 'sent one.' All believers are, at least in some sense, 'sent ones' ([Mat 28:19-20](#)). But there is a difference between those called to be an apostle, and the general Christian population in the degree, responsibility and authority of the work they have to perform. Apostleship is a calling extended to few people, not to the Christian population generally ([Eph 4:11-12](#)). Paul's apostleship commenced on the road to Damascus, where he intended to inflict violent persecution on the followers of Christ ([Act 9:1-22](#)). His impact was almost immediate. He began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God and prove to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah that they had been waiting for (see [Act 9:19-22](#)).

He spoke with the boldness, accuracy, anointing and authority that mark apostleship. Paul's stated desire was to preach the gospel where it had never been preached before ([Rom 15:18-21](#), [2Co 10:15-16](#)). Thus he travelled much, preaching and planting churches wherever he went. His ministry was accompanied by great miracles ([Act 14:8-10](#), [Act 20:9-10](#), [Act 20:22-23](#), [Act 28:3-9](#)), deliverance from demons ([Act 16:16-18](#)), and brutal persecution ([Act 16:19-23](#), [Act 21:30-32](#)).

There are a number of distinguishing marks of an apostle:

Boldness

Authority

Great knowledge of the Word

Preach Christ crucified

Accurate doctrine

Signs, wonders and mighty works ([2Co 12:12](#))

Churches established

Father heart for churches

Concern to train saints for ministry ([Eph 4:11-12](#))

Persecution

Self-discipline
Humble
Faithfulness
Fruit ([Rev 2:2](#))

There is a difference between the original apostles appointed by Christ, and all other apostles to follow afterwards. The original had to have been witnesses of Christ from His baptism until His resurrection ([Act 1:21-22](#)). Obviously, this requirement couldn't be met by anyone born too late, or not in Judea at the time of Christ, yet there are quite a number of apostles mentioned in Scripture, (Barnabus and Paul in [Act 14:14](#), possibly Andronicus and Junias in [Rom 16:7](#), James, the Lord's brother, who was an unbeliever while Christ was on earth [1Co 15:7](#), "our brothers" in [2Co 8:23](#), Epaphroditus in [Php 2:25](#)). Eph 4:11 implies that it will be a continuing ministry.

The role of apostle is a foundational gift to the body of Christ ([1Co 12:28](#), [Eph 2:19-21](#), [Eph 4:11](#)). It is a gift given for the purpose of establishing and building up the Church. At this task, Paul was an exceptional example. His deep theological training under Gamaliel set him up to be an outstanding expositor of the Word of God, once his knowledge was enlightened by the Holy Spirit. His dramatic conversion from violent persecutor of the Church was the foundation of His unwavering faith and transformed understanding of the grace of God. He experienced extremes of responses from people, from adulation and worship ([Act 14:8-18](#)) to outright hatred and attempts to murder him ([Act 14:19](#), [Act 23:12-15](#)). None of this prevented him from faithfully proclaiming the Word of God wherever the Holy Spirit led him. He remained, at all times, aware of his unworthiness to be chosen by God, but totally confident and unwavering in his call to serve Christ.

Even if we are not personally called to be apostles, there are a number of lessons for us in Paul's call to salvation and apostleship.

1. Sometimes the most vocal, and even violent, opposition to the gospel comes from those nearest to salvation.
2. No one is beyond the reach and the grace of God. Even the worst sinner is not too far gone for God to save, if God so desires.
3. A calling to great tasks is normally accompanied by great opposition.
4. God does not waste anything. Our pre-Christian experiences are put to good use in our service of Him after salvation.

By the will of God

Paul here points out that his apostleship is not a thing he sought or strived after. Given his acknowledgement of his own sinfulness ([1Ti 1:15](#)), it is doubtful if he would have chosen any great task in service of Jesus apart from the clear will and call of God to fulfil this role. Paul's understanding of the will of God is radically different to the understanding of many in the modern, Western church. Paul understood God to be absolutely sovereign, with a will that cannot be thwarted by the devil or mere human beings. In contrast, many today believe that God's will can be opposed, thwarted and over-ruled by the will of man. This is classic Arminianism, which teaches that man has been given free will, and thus the ability to resist God's will. It is a popular doctrine, not least because it elevates man to a position of some power, and is therefore good for his self-esteem. When analysed carefully, it becomes clear that this doctrine enthrones man as god, and demotes God to a position of servant, useful for helping us fulfil our needs and desires.

A direct descendant of this teaching is the popular "Prosperity Gospel," sometimes known as "name it and claim it." According to this, God wants us all to be healthy and wealthy,

and will give us the desires of our heart ([Psa 37:4](#)), whether that be a new Mercedes-Benz, or gold jewellery, or a high paying job. It also implies that sickness is either an attack of the devil, or evidence of lack of faith.

Like all popular but false doctrines, the Prosperity Gospel is based on portions of truth, taken out of context, and magnified beyond their true place in the Word. The fact that it can be shown to be partly true, or to have come from the Bible, coupled with the natural selfish and sinful tendencies of humanity, make it very appealing.

Having said that, it is not money that is the root of all evil, but the *love* of money ([1Ti 6:10](#)). Money is amoral, that is, neither good nor bad in itself. Our attitude towards money, however, is what causes the problem. The desire for great wealth, or possessions, betrays an underlying selfishness and greed that is foreign to the gospel. On the contrary, the Word expects us to be content with what we have ([1Ti 6:6](#)). There is no question that God chooses to bless some people with great wealth, men such as RG Le Tourneau, who ran a business that contributed 90% of its profits to the Kingdom, and still had enough left over to fly his own personal jet. He was a man who proved over time that he was faithful in little things ([Mat 25:23](#)) and thus received much. For others though, He curses them with great wealth, and it becomes a trap for them. For some, the desire for wealth is pure and simple greed; for others, it is evidence of a lack of faith in God's promise of provision for all our needs ([Mat 6:31-34](#)). Knowing your own sinful tendencies, be very careful why you seek wealth and success.

There is great strength in knowing that your calling is *by the will of God*. In this knowledge, it is possible to operate without excuse and without false humility. Many who excel at a particular thing tend to make excuses or play it down, as if they weren't, in fact, any better than anyone else at it. But this is not actually humility. Rather, it can be a form of pride, with some people secretly hoping that others will continue to praise their abilities all the more with every attempt to minimise it. It is also a lack of acknowledgement of the gift or skill that God Himself has put within us. We are called to think of ourselves, not with pride or arrogance, but with sober judgement ([Rom 12:3](#)). This is difficult to master, but involves being honest with ourselves about our strengths *and* our weaknesses. Only then can we receive praise with grace, but also receive criticism without offence.

True humility arises from recognising our calling as being the will of God. No man can make himself an apostle, although there are some who would claim that for themselves ([2Co 11:12-15](#), [Rev 2:2](#)). God alone can call and equip a person to be an apostle. Anyone else is an imposter. And God's call is not on the basis of superior skills, knowledge or character, but purely on the basis of His sovereign choice, for God is no respecter of persons ([Rom 2:11](#)).

What are the benefits of knowing that the task we undertake, or the job we do, is the will of God for us?

1. It liberates us from trying to be someone or something we are not.
2. It removes striving and driven-ness.
3. It allows us to focus on what God has called us to do, and determine priorities based on that.
4. It gives us the freedom to say "No" to anything that will distract us from our primary calling.
5. It engenders a confidence and authority in what we do and say that is based on God's call and His power, not our thoughts or feelings.
6. It glorifies God as we operate directly under His authority and anointing.
7. It advances the Kingdom according to His plan and purpose, not ours.

To the saints

'Saint' is a much misunderstood term. Many of religious background would understand it to mean a person of outstanding holiness and religious devotion, who by their faith and actions, has accumulated more grace from God than is required for their own salvation. Thus, it is believed, now in death their excess grace is available for other people to call on to help meet their needs, provide a miracle, or to shore up their own salvation. Hence, St Christopher is called on to protect travellers. Other 'saints' are the object of prayer for healing or other miracles.

Those with no understanding or knowledge of religious matters probably tend to consider a saint as a person who is legalistic, joyless, and prudish. Neither of these descriptions comes close to what the Bible describes as a saint. In fact, saints are clearly living human beings expected to be full of joy, grace and love. In fact, Paul addresses most of his letters to "the saints in" and refers to saints in his letters in ways which make it clear they are among the living, not the dead (e.g. [Eph 4:12](#), [Php 4:22](#), [1Ti 5:10](#)).

So, if a saint is not a dead holy person, nor a stick-in-the-mud killjoy, what is he (or she)? The Greek term *hagios* is translated 'saint,' and literally means 'set apart one.' Set apart from what? Set apart from sin, in that they have been cleansed from all sin by the blood of Jesus. Set apart from the world, in that they are no longer of the world, even while they remain in the world. Set apart in action, in that they are called to live a lifestyle that is distinctive in holiness and purity.

But not only set apart *from*, but set apart *to* and set apart *for*. Set apart to God, to serve Him. Set apart to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Set apart as adopted into His household as sons and daughters of the living God. Set apart to be joyous. Set apart to be an example of the wisdom, power and grace of God.

Sainthood is a living and active state, a calling to be salt and light in a perishing world. Sainthood is a high calling, and few are chosen for it, not chosen on the basis of their own worthiness, but on His grace.

Who are in Ephesus

Ephesus was one of the most important and wealthiest cities of the ancient world. It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia (modern day Turkey) and location of an enormous Temple dedicated to Artemis (Diana), an extremely popular deity believed to be the mother of all life. Worship of Artemis involved sacrifices and ceremonial prostitution. Large numbers of Jews lived in Ephesus, including some disciples of John the Baptist, and Apollos, who preached boldly about Jesus, but was lacking in his understanding. Priscilla and Aquila taught him more accurately, and he continued his ministry powerfully in Achaia ([Act 18:24-28](#)).

Shortly after, Paul arrived in Ephesus and met about 12 disciples who knew only John's baptism. Paul corrected this by baptising them into the name of the Lord Jesus, and laying hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit. Paul spent up to 3 years in Ephesus ([Act 20:31](#)), preaching the gospel and reasoning with the people, until "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." It was a period of extraordinary miracles and deliverance ([Act 19:11-12](#)).

A very profitable industry had sprung up Ephesus manufacturing images and portable shrines. Paul encountered the wrath of these businessmen as he succeeded in gaining many converts in the region, thus having a large impact on their trade and profitability. A silversmith named Demetrius stirred up a great commotion, supposedly to defend the honour of Artemis and the reputation of the trade, but at heart, to protect their wealth ([Act 19:24-32](#)).

By 262AD, worship of Artemis had declined so much, in the face of Christian preaching,

that when the Temple was burned down, it was never rebuilt. Artemis was dead, and Ephesus was, to all intents and purposes, a Christian city. In 341AD, a council of the Christian church was held there.

Timothy pastored there ([1Ti 1:3](#)), and the apostle John lived there before his exile to Patmos, and returned there afterwards. John may be buried in Ephesus. With the foundation of Paul's teaching, the ongoing ministry of Timothy, and the presence of John in the city, it may be no wonder that the Lord Jesus would find reason to commend the church at Ephesus for its faithfulness to the Word and their patient endurance ([Rev 2:2-3](#)). Ephesians is a letter designed to establish the saints in sound doctrine. It deals with grace, salvation, predestination, election, redemption, peace with God, conversion. Some of the imagery in Ephesians may have been drawn from the temple ([Eph 4:17-19](#), [Eph 5:8-12](#)). Today, Ephesus is a ruin, and uninhabited. After the council of Ephesus in 341AD, it gradually declined in importance and population, until it was destroyed by the Turks in 1308, and was forgotten until 1863, when it was searched for and excavated. A small village stands nearby, named *Ayasaluk*, which is a corruption of the ancient Greek words *hagios theologos*, which means "the Holy Word of God."

What went wrong? Why should such a large, wealthy and doctrinally sound city shrivel up into insignificance, and ultimately cease to exist? We can only speculate, but we may get some clues from the message of Jesus to the church in Rev 2.

In only the short period of time between Paul's letter and Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus, it seems they had slipped back in their devotion to Christ. It may be that the pressures of maintaining good solid doctrine in the face of a perverse culture caused them to lose focus on what (or really, Who) was important. By now, they are all 2nd-generation Christians, not having heard the message 1st-hand from Paul and others. We know that none of us can get to heaven on the coat-tails of someone else. We need our own revelation and personal relationship with Christ. Unfortunately, our human nature tends to get hung up on side issues, and we come to rely on what we do (good works, social action), or what we believe (good doctrine), to make us righteous before God, rather than on Him who makes us righteous. This "fall from great heights" ([Rev 2:5](#)) is an ever-present danger for all believers, and we need to guard against it in a number of ways:

- Regularly come back to the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- Absorb the "whole counsel of God" ([Act 20:27](#)).
- Be a doer of the Word, not just a hearer ([Jas 1:22-25](#)).
- Stay in fellowship with other committed believers who will encourage you and build you up ([Heb 10:24-25](#)).
- Commune regularly and frequently with the Lord (prayer, worship and thanksgiving).
- Recall the wonder of His gift of grace and salvation frequently ([Joh 3:16](#), [1Jn 4:19](#), [Rom 5:6-11](#)).

Jesus told them that He would "take away their lamp stand if they didn't respond to His warning" ([Rev 2:5](#)). It seems by the subsequent history of Ephesus that they did respond, and Ephesus was a place of importance and significance in Christendom for the next 300 years or so, but eventually they slipped back again, and Rev 2:5 was fulfilled. They lost their lamp stand, and slowly slipped into ruin and abandonment.

How vital, yet how difficult is it to train our children in the ways of the Lord, so that they remain faithful, and pass on that training to following generations? It may be our most important task.

And are faithful in Christ Jesus

This could be a cause for despair, and even condemnation, for many believers. We read about Paul and other Bible characters such as Joseph and Daniel, and can see that they

were commended for their faith (see Heb 11). How can I measure up to that standard when I know my weaknesses, my failure, my sin? Maybe the saints in Ephesus were faithful, but I'm not so sure about myself.

And yet, faithfulness is a characteristic of believers generally, not just the "holy high-flyers." Our faithfulness is displayed in many ways, not least of which is our ongoing commitment to Christ, in spite of our failings and sin. It is remarkable, and often undervalued, that a person would remain a Christian in the face of his own moral failings, and the opposition of the world around him. It is not a calling for the faint-hearted. There is never a time in our lives when we are not under pressure or outright attack from someone (family, friends, the devil) or something (society, work situation, our conscience). To live with this without giving up for 1 year, 100 years is an amazing thing. Believers can rightly claim to be faithful.

But it is not in our own strength. Our faithfulness to God arises out of His faithfulness to us. We are part of His family not because of anything we have done, or deserve, but entirely by His grace. He not only saved us, but sustains us as well. His grace is sufficient for us ([2Co 12:9](#)), whatever situation or circumstance we face. And He will not allow us to be tested beyond what we can bear ([1Co 10:13](#)). Paul never suggests that these saints are anything but faithful. The implication is that faithfulness is a quality believers have, not a quality they need to strive for. Saints are, by definition, faithful. The Word teaches that those who are chosen for salvation will remain in the faith until the very end by the sustaining power of God ([1Co 1:7-9](#), [2Th 3:3](#), [1Pe 1:3-5](#)). If you are genuinely saved, you will remain faithful to final salvation.

This does not give us warrant to be slack or neglectful about our relationship with God. We are frequently warned in Scripture to "watch our life and our doctrine closely" ([1Ti 4:16](#)) and continue in the Word ([2Jn 1:9](#)). We are expected to "abide in the vine" ([Joh 15:4](#)). Nowhere does Scripture give us reason or opportunity to presume upon God's saving grace towards us, but rather expects, demands even, that we continue faithfully in Him ([Heb 2:1-3](#)).

Paul, for the second time in the first verse, refers to Christ Jesus. The saints are faithful "in Christ Jesus," that is, there is a context, and object, an author and perfecter of their faith. Paul also is an apostle in the same context. This links them in a deeper way, with an unbreakable bond, than mere human relationships. It links them (and us today) by a relationship and a power far beyond their own. All of Scripture is truly the testimony of Jesus Christ, and that is particularly obvious here at the beginning of Ephesians. Jesus Christ is referred to at least 20 times in the first 20 verses, setting the context for all that follows. He is referred to in excess of 50 times in this letter of only 155 verses. The Holy Spirit, through Paul, was determined that Jesus Christ should be our focus. The Holy Spirit is the One who will testify about Jesus, and as Author of Scripture, and our ever-present Helper, He *always* draws people to Christ ([Joh 15:26](#)).