



A MESSAGE OF HUMILITY AND
HOPE FROM THE LIFE OF PAUL

THE CHIEF OF SINNERS

BAND OF BROTHERS / SPRING 2026

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SPRING SERIES 2026 – WEEK 1

Better Call Saul

Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen.

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison. – Acts 8:1-3 NLT

- **The apostle Paul: Chief of sinners**

- A Jewish, Greek-speaking, Roman citizen
- Roman citizen
- Pharisee
- Preacher & evangelist
- Author & theologian
- Church Planter
- Persecutor of the Church

*“It is difficult to overstate the apostle Paul’s contribution to the early Christian mission. While he cannot, and would not want to, take ultimate credit for his work (for he was drafted into service by the risen Christ), he devoted his entire life to advancing Christ’s kingdom and propagating the gospel — and with remarkable impact. Few, if any, rival Paul’s influence on Christian theology.” – Dr. Andreas J. Kostenberger, in the forward for *Paul the Apostle*, Robert E. Picirilli*

"In Paul is incarnated the very opposite of the 'bearer of glad tidings'; he represents the genius for hatred, the vision of hatred, the relentless logic of hatred. What, indeed, has not this dysangelist sacrificed to hatred! Above all, the Savior: he nailed him to his own cross. The life, the example, the teaching, the death of Christ, the meaning and the law of the whole gospels—nothing was left of all this after that counterfeiter in hatred had reduced it to his uses. Surely not reality; surely not historical truth!" – Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*

- He authored more than half of the New Testament

Romans	1 Thessalonians
1 Corinthians	2 Thessalonians
2 Corinthians	1 Timothy
Galatians	2 Timothy
Ephesians	Titus
Philippians	Philemon
Colossians	

- Yet, he described himself in less-than-flattering terms:

*This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; **of whom I am chief.*** – 1 Timothy 1:15 KJV

chief – *prōtos*

- first, first in place or rank, the principal
- the worst of the worst

*This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and **I am the worst of them all.*** – 1 Timothy 1:15 NLT

- How could Paul describe himself that way?
 - What had he done?
 - Is this a case of over-exaggeration?

The Jewish leaders were infuriated by Stephen's accusation, and they shook their fists at him in rage. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!"

*Then they put their hands over their ears and began shouting. They rushed at him and dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. His accusers took off their coats and **laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.*** – Acts 7:54-58 NLT

*A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) **But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.** – Acts 8:1-3 NLT*

*I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I **persecuted his people.** 1 Timothy 1:13 NLT*

*I am the least of all the apostles. In fact, I'm not even worthy to be called an apostle after the way I **persecuted God's church.** – 1 Corinthians 15:9 NLT*

*I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I **harshly persecuted the church.** – Philippians 3:5-6 NLT*

Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many believers there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities. – Acts 26:10-11 NLT

- Saul, the Pharisee

*...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...** – Philippians 3:5 ESV*

*I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem....**I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion.** – Acts 26:4-5 NLT*

***I am a Pharisee, as were my ancestors!** – Acts 23:6 NLT*

- Saul was a card-carrying Pharisee
 - His father was likely a Pharisee
 - It was a family tradition
 - And Saul was a proud member
- Who were the Pharisees?
 - A Jewish religious sect
 - The conservative party of their day
 - Defended the Mosaic Law
 - Despised the Romans
 - Promoted separation from Gentiles
 - They had been Jesus' harshest critics
- They accused Jesus of...

- ...blasphemy - Luke 5:20
- ...working with Satan - Matthew 12:24
- ...associating with sinners - Matthew 9:10
- ...being illegitimate - John 8:41
- ...violating the Sabbath - Matthew 12:10-14
- ...subversion and tax evasion - Luke 23:2

- To them, Jesus was a threat to Judaism
 - He was a revolutionary
 - With a counter-cultural message
 - And a rapidly growing following
- His death was an unavoidable necessity

"If we allow him to go on like this, soon everyone will believe in him. Then the Roman army will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation." Caiaphas, who was high priest at that time, said, "You don't know what you're talking about! You don't realize that it's better for you that one man should die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed." – John 11:49-50 NLT

- They had Jesus put to death
 - ~ But He rose from the dead
 - ~ The Spirit came
 - ~ The Church began
 - ~ And Stephen was martyred

As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

Saul was one of the witnesses, and he agreed completely with the killing of Stephen. – Acts 7:59-8:1

- **Getting to know Saul**

- How did he describe himself?

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel." – Acts 22:3 NLT

- Paul was born in Tarsus
 - Located in Cilicia (modern-day Turkey)
 - Part of Asia Minor
 - He described it as "no insignificant city" (Acts 21:39)
 - It was cosmopolitan and wealthy
 - Though Jews, his family were citizens
 - They were likely part of the Diaspora
 - He knew Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic

- Paul spent his early years in Tarsus
 - o Educated in the synagogue
 - o Prepared to be a Pharisee
- But his formal education was in Jerusalem
 - o Under Gamaliel – prominent Jewish Rabbi
 - o A high-ranking Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin

As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did... – Acts 22:3 NLT

- Saul was “a Hebrew of Hebrews”
 - o Literally, “a Hebrew born of Hebrews”
 - o A Jew by birth, not conversion
 - o A Hebrew through and through
 - o He grew up in a Greek culture
 - o But had not “Hellenized”

“‘Hebrews’ is used in contradistinction to ‘Hellenists’, although both Hebrews and Hellenists were Jews. Hebrews...attended synagogues where the services were conducted in Hebrew and used Aramaic as their normal mode of speech.” – F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*

- o To Saul, Hellenists were compromisers
 - They spoke mostly Greek
 - They accepted Greco-Roman culture
 - They had separate synagogues from the Hebraic Jews
- Saul was a Roman citizen
 - o Saul was his Hebrew name
 - o Paulus was his Roman name
 - o His citizenship had not been bought
 - o It was his by birthright

The commander brought Paul inside and ordered him lashed with whips to make him confess his crime. He wanted to find out why the crowd had become so furious. When they tied Paul down to lash him, Paul said to the officer standing there, “Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been tried?”

When the officer heard this, he went to the commander and asked, “What are you doing? This man is a Roman citizen!”

So the commander went over and asked Paul, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?”

“Yes, I certainly am,” Paul replied.

“I am, too,” the commander muttered, “and it cost me plenty!”

Paul answered, “But I am a citizen by birth!” – Acts 22:26-28 NLT

- **A cosmopolitan man**

- Multilingual
- Well-educated
- Born outside of Israel
- Trained by a leading Rabbinical scholar
- Familiar with Greek philosophy
- A strong debater
- Committed to the Torah
- Zealous for God

- **A formidable foe**

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. – Acts 8:1-3 ESV

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus... – Acts 9:1-3 ESV

- **Discussion Questions:**

Does Paul’s diverse background surprise you and change your view of him?

Knowing the rest of his story, how does his past illustrate the power of the gospel?

What does Paul’s reference to himself as the chief of sinners say to you, and why?



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SPRING SERIES 2026 – WEEK 2 HOMEWORK

WEEK 2 – Man On A Mission

In this lesson, we will examine Paul's background and former life as a Pharisee. We aim to establish the dispersion setting into which he was born and to provide a solid working understanding of the context in which he began his ministry.

- You should have received a PDF containing Ken's Devotionary™ on the Book of Acts. If so, please read pages 7-48 sometime this week. They cover the section of Acts that we will be studying in week 2.
- Read Acts 6:8-7:53 to get a context of what was going on in the early days of the Church. How would you describe the environment in which Stephen and the rest of the leaders of the newly formed church in Jerusalem had to operate?

When you read Stephen's sermon, what are the main points he makes that jump out at you?

What do you think he said that hit a nerve with the Jews in his audience?

- Read Acts 7:54-60. What was it that Stephen said that pushed the Jewish leaders over the edge?

What was their response?

What was Stephen's response?

- Read Acts 8:1-3. Saul was in the audience that day. What role did he play, and what does this tell you about his attitude toward Jesus and his followers?

Look at Acts 22:1-5. How does Paul recount his attitude toward Christians when he addressed the Jews who were trying to have him arrested?

Now look at Acts 26:9-11. Paul stands before King Agrippa and has the opportunity to present his defense. What does he say about his feelings toward Christ-followers in his earlier days?

Read Philippians 3:4-6. What does Paul say about himself and his former mission to eradicate the followers of the dead Rabbi, Jesus?

Read Galatians 3:13-14. Once again, how does Paul describe his former life as a persecutor of the disciples of Jesus?

- Why do you think God would consider using someone like Saul to spread the good news about Jesus Christ? What was it about his background that made Saul a wise and logical choice for God?