

The Apostle Paul

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When it comes to the various personalities found in the New Testament, the apostle Paul stands head and shoulders above most, if not all—with the exception, of course, of Jesus Christ.

We admire Paul. We marvel as we read of his experiences as an apostle. We are often challenged when reading his inspired writings. We are amazed at his strong faith.

At times, Paul almost seems superhuman in his dedication and commitment to the cause of Christ. Even in his physical strength, Paul appears almost invincible. He endured many trials. He speaks of being in dangers of the sea, of three times suffering shipwreck. Three times he was beaten with rods and five times he received thirty-nine lashes from the Jews. He was imprisoned, often in danger of death, he suffered perils of robbers, dangers from his own countrymen, once he was stoned and left for dead, he says there were many times when he went without food (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23ff). There were many difficult trials in his life, yet he kept going.

Yes, Paul had the Holy Spirit, but he was still a man. He was human just like you and me. He had his strengths, but he also had his weaknesses. Paul didn't just write about the struggle of the flesh and the spirit, he personally experienced it.

I believe it would be good for us to see the man, Paul, in a more accurate and realistic perspective. Doing so will help us appreciate, all the more, the experiences of his life. Based on some of the descriptions of Paul we have thus far discussed, physically speaking, many may have an image of Paul as being someone who stood about six-foot-four, two-hundred-forty pounds, strong, and good-looking. I suppose that comes from our ideas about how heroes should look. We've been trained through Hollywood to picture our heroes in such a way. But understand, Paul wore no cape. His actual physical appearance was likely quite contrary to what many of us have imagined. For example, one writer from the second century (about 160 A.D.) described Paul as follows:

“A man of little stature, thin haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked...”

That is likely not the picture of Paul which you had in your mind (short, balding and perhaps overweight). There is no way to determine just how accurate this writer was in regards to Paul's physical appearance, but Paul's own critics said of him:

For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.”

2 Corinthians 10:10

Paul's personal presence, or bodily appearance, according to his critics, was unimpressive—but then, that was the opinion of the critics. In the final analysis, what he actually looked like is nowhere near as important as what he did. It is interesting to note that the name Paul, in Latin, means small or humble.

Paul's life prior to becoming a Christian is well-documented in the New Testament. It is Paul himself who provides the information. Here is just a brief summary of what he tells us:

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem], educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.

Acts 22:3 (Addition in brackets mine)

And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

Galatians 1:14

Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation 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 the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

Philippians 3:5-6

For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it;

Galatians 1:13

We are very familiar with Paul's life prior to coming to Christ. He talks often as to how he was a violent persecutor of the church. The images we create in our mind, based on Paul's prior life as a violent persecutor of Christians, perhaps fuels the images we have of Paul as a kind of "Super Apostle." However, are these images correct?

Just as we may have incorrect images of his personal appearance, so here also, Scripture paints a different picture of Paul the "know-no-fear apostle." Take, for example what he writes to the Corinthians about his time in their city:

I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,

1 Corinthians 2:3

Have you ever associated words like weakness, fear, and trembling with the apostle Paul? Probably not! Yet, here they are from the pen of the man himself. What he writes here corresponds to Luke's record:

And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

Acts 18:9-10

It is hard to imagine Paul fearful of anyone or anything. It is hard to imagine him trembling (shaking). Yet, it is essential we do. For far too long, we have admired Paul, envisioning him as a superhero. Yet, while marveling at his accomplishments, we have often failed to appreciate what he overcame. It is what he overcame that can provide valuable encouragement to us.

Think of what we all commonly struggle with in terms of personal evangelism and service in the local congregation: Weakness, fear, and trembling. In addition, we sometimes become so self-conscious about our physical appearance, we lose self-esteem and confidence.

In the apostle Paul, we have a man who was unimpressive in his personal appearance, with contemptible speech, one who at times, was fearful to the point of trembling, and who struggled with weakness, a man who had a thorn in the flesh (whatever it might have been). Yet, despite what many would see as obstacles, he overcame them all to accomplish great things for the cause of Christ!

My dear brethren, despite the obstacles we often impose upon ourselves, we too can accomplish great things for the Lord. Perhaps, we should really listen and apply the words of Paul himself to the Philippians:

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13