

Tarsus: Paul's origins and the years we cannot fill in

What do we know about Paul's connection with Tarsus?

Acts identifies Tarsus in Cilicia as Paul's birthplace and later places him there before Barnabas brings him to Antioch. The surviving texts do not give a continuous account of his childhood, education in Tarsus, or activity during every intervening year.

A birthplace, not a complete childhood

In Acts Paul identifies himself as a Jew from Tarsus and describes being brought up and educated in Jerusalem. Philippians emphasizes his Jewish ancestry and formation. Together these accounts warn against a simple contrast between a Greek Paul and a Jewish Paul. They do not name a school he attended in Tarsus or justify inventing youthful teachers, friendships, or formative conversations.

Biblical references: Acts 21:39 · Acts 22:3 · Philippians 3:4-6

Sources: acts, letters

Return and renewed connection

After threats in Jerusalem, believers send Saul toward Tarsus. Galatians describes activity in Syria and Cilicia and reports that Judean churches heard of his changed witness. Acts later says Barnabas sought him in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch. These points support a broad sequence, while the duration and details of many activities remain uncertain. Silence should not become an invented training program.

Biblical references: Acts 9:28-30 · Galatians 1:21-24 · Acts 11:25-26

Sources: acts, letters, chronology

Formation without a manufactured story

Paul's own emphasis is that the former persecutor now proclaims the faith he attacked. His background matters, but the sources center the change on God's action in Christ rather than a predictable career trajectory. Tarsus invites patient attention to origins and less visible years. Teachers can connect the known places on a map while deliberately leaving unreported experiences unillustrated or labeling artistic scenes as reconstructions.

Biblical references: Galatians 1:13-24 · 1 Corinthians 15:8-10

Sources: letters

Sources

- [acts] Acts 7–28; passage references are supplied in each section. <https://ebible.org/web/ACT.htm>
- [letters] Romans through Philemon; passage references are supplied in each section. <https://ebible.org/web/>
- [chronology] Pauline Letters chronology: Acts, the letters, dated external anchors, and explicitly qualified reconstructions. <https://paulineletters.com/explore/timeline>

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