

Paul's Parents

By Whitney Altopp

Who could have seen how the Apostle Paul would “turn out”?

I was thinking about him from the perspective of his parents.

He came from a religiously devout and highly respected Jewish family. A family like his would have had traditional roles and expectations of both parents and the children.

As Paul writes in his Letter to the Phillipians 3:4-6

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

When did his mother have the most angst?

When he was a zealot and pursuing killing people in the name of religious fidelity? (Acts 8:1-3)

Or when he was laid up for 3 days after going blind on the Road to Damascus? (Acts 9:7-9)

Or did his parents wring their hands and worry when he completely altered his life and set off to tell people about Jesus in foreign lands, even being persecuted and imprisoned? (Acts 9:18-31 and all of his letters)

What did they do when he changed his name? Did they feel sad and dismissed?

Were they always in a comfortable relationship with him? Saying things like, “That’s my boy.”

Or did they admonish his sanctioning of religious killing and thus strain their relationship?

Saying, “Saul, you can’t advocate for people’s death. That’s not the God we worship.”

Or did they freak out when he left to tell communities around the Mediterranean Sea about Jesus being the Son of God? Did they refuse him- sitting shiva as if he were dead? I’ve heard of parents saying to their children (because they married across racial or religious lines, because they came out as gay, etc) “you’re dead to me.”

Or did they hear the Good News- as strange and antithetical as it felt- in their own lives?

Did they reflect in their private conversations on the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures?

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent in punishing. (Exodus 34:6; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalms 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2)

Did they say to each other, “Remember the Prophet Isaiah’s words? This is what Jesus claimed to do and for all accounts demonstrated:

...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Isaiah 61:1-2, Luke 4:18-19)

Maybe they didn't come around right away, but they stayed in a loving relationship with him. And because of what they saw they came around eventually. Maybe they said to one another—you can't fake that much joy and freedom for this long.

In one way or another Paul's parents were clueless. They either messed up in judging him or in not judging him or both (having chosen the wrong thing at the wrong time). Me too. I'm sure God's mercy and forgiveness were available to them as much as their son—in whichever way they messed up. I want to see God bring me into better love of all people. I trust that God's mercy is here for me, as I seek to follow Jesus' commandment to Love One Another. My kids, and their differing choices, give me the opportunity to grow in letting Love claim me, so that I might love better.