



The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Born to a Destiny

The Fingerprints of God on the Early Years

*Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end,
by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for
the insect as well as for the star. Human beings, vegetables,
or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in
the distance by an invisible piper.*

—Albert Einstein

God had set me apart even from my mother's womb.

—the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 1:15)

FROM A HUMAN POINT OF VIEW, there is nothing remarkable about Paul's birth and early life that we are aware of. There is no indication that this was a man who would forever leave his mark on history. His parents did not have angelic visitations. New stars did not appear overhead to guide people to his crib. There were no shepherds hearing angelic choirs or Magi bearing gifts from the east to his humble home.

But the hand of a Sovereign God left fingerprints all over Paul's early life. He was born to a destiny. Later in life, he understood this and commented that God had set him apart even from the time of his conception. He would find that the Lord had been preparing him all his life for his calling, and for the journeys that were planned for him. If you have the right lenses, you may also see that you were born to a destiny (Ephesians 2:6–10). The evidence may be all around you, waiting to be discovered.

Paul's Birth and Early Life

Paul was born to a devout Jewish family in the city of Tarsus, in what is now Turkey, where he spent his formative years during the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. It wasn't that those days were particularly peaceful for the people, but the Empire had sufficiently beaten down all other competitors for power to stand alone as the ruling government of the world. The Roman Empire during this time expanded its influence by building up its cities and increasing its roadways and shipping. As a result, the known world became smaller in many ways.

Paul was born in a time ripe for the work he would be chosen to do. The Roman roads laid out a path for him and his team that connected all the important trade routes. There was a common and prevalent trade language—Koine Greek—in which Paul could communicate with people from other lands even when he didn't know their native tongues or have a translator available. The shipping routes were established, with many ships from around the empire constantly arriving at and leaving from almost every port. Jewish synagogues and communities, established in most cities, presented him with a ready-made beachhead for almost all of his missionary endeavors.

In his Jewish family, which could trace its history to the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:4–6), Paul was steeped in the Torah from his earliest days (Deuteronomy 6:1–10). This lineage was very important to his parents, for they raised their son to be a highly committed man of faith, fluent in Mosaic law and knowledgeable about the prophets of the Old Testament. It is unlikely that they were Jewish in name only or mere cultural Israelites; more probably they were very committed to their heritage. Paul said of his upbringing that he had been “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin.” He referred to himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” and “as to the Law, a Pharisee” (Philippians 3:4–6).¹

His parents gave him the name of the most famous historical leader of the tribe of Benjamin, the first king of Israel, Saul. Paul mentions his namesake only once, in a sermon in Psidian Antioch on his first journey, when he says that God gave the Israelites Saul when they asked for a king. He says that Saul was the son of Kish and from the tribe of Benjamin (which to Paul may have been the only good thing he could say about this character, and the only thing the two seemed to have in common) and that he ruled for forty years, until God removed him and replaced him with a king who followed His own heart—David (Acts 13:21–22). Unlike Saul, Paul would be the epitome of one sold out for

a cause greater than himself, first for the defense of Israel but ultimately for the person of Jesus.

Paul's family was probably committed to the Pharisaical expression of Judaism, which means that they would have placed great emphasis on observing both Mosaic law and probably oral Torah as well, much later to be written down and called the Talmud. He would have been trained from his earliest days to view life through these lenses and to see the world as clean or unclean, pure or impure, good or bad. This sectarian mind-set developed into an all-or-nothing personality, which exhibits itself throughout Paul's life, whether he is hunting down Christians to arrest them or himself standing trial before the emperor for his own faith in Jesus Christ.

Most scholars assume that because Paul held *civis Romanus*, Roman citizenship, he came from a fairly wealthy family. As Acts 22:28 tells us, Roman citizenship was expensive, and it was passed along to him by virtue of his birth. Even if his family had been given Roman citizenship earlier, for heroic service to the emperor (which is also a possibility), it nevertheless provided Paul's family with opportunities that could elevate their status and their standard of living. It was also very valuable to Paul later on, when he began his travels among the first Christians. As a Roman citizen, he could not be punished without a fair trial, and any arrests had to follow a certain protocol, which required that he be treated with greater respect. In actuality, his citizenship seems never to have prevented his arrest, but it did make the arrests more tolerable at times and even gave him, finally, the opportunity to go to Rome to stand before Caesar. He used this privilege a few times over the course of his journeys (Acts 16:37; 22:25; 25:16).

Unlike many Christian leaders today, who are devoted to ministry, all good Pharisaic scholars and teachers had to earn their livelihoods by acquiring and practicing a trade. It is likely that Paul learned his trade as a tent maker from his father, as was customary in those days.² Whenever the need arose, he could make a living plying his trade, a useful one in every part of the empire.

Having grown up in a Roman city and then gone to study in Jerusalem, Paul learned several languages. He spoke Greek fluently and could perhaps read and understand some Latin as well. Tarsus was the leading city of Cilicia, which was under the province of Syria during Paul's lifetime, and so he may have also understood some of the indigenous Cilician dialect, although this is not at all certain. Because of his parents' religious devotion, he may have spoken Aramaic at home, although Greek often became the native language among the diaspora. Given his strict training

in Jerusalem, he would also have learned Hebrew (Acts 22:2; Philippians 3:5). God's sovereign hand is evident, for Paul would later demonstrate an aptitude for learning languages and would write eloquently in the Koine Greek, the *lingua franca* of his day.³

Some make much of the fact that Tarsus, a city that would have been a thousand years old by the time of Paul's birth, was a center for culture, with schools that were devoted to philosophy, rhetoric, and law. I believe that this would have had great influence on Paul, but not so much during his youth, when I believe he would have been somewhat protected from such influence by his devout Jewish home. No doubt the influence of the culture around him helped to prepare him for his call to the Gentiles after his conversion.

In some ways, Paul was what we today would call a "third culture" kid—not only Jewish and not only Roman but also of a third culture made up of both. Granted, his family would have been committed to life in a separate Jewish subculture, but he was still immersed in a leading Roman city and was affected by that experience. If he had been born and raised only in Israel, he could easily have known only Jewish culture, which would have made him less able to adapt to and learn other cultures and languages. But because he was born and lived in Tarsus, he had many advantages for the work he would ultimately set out to accomplish. He could be at home everywhere he went and yet not feel the need to stay, because he never truly fit in anywhere.

As a Jew growing up far from Jerusalem, he probably came to see that his religious beliefs were not bound by geography. Once he came to see Jesus as the Way, all that he had once learned from the Torah and about Jewish law and teaching began to take on far greater significance. In a sense, he was being educated into his destiny even before he could possibly have understood its significance.

It is possible that his family made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem on rare occasions for religious holy days.⁴ Such travels may have begun the pattern that would govern all of Paul's life—taking journeys for his belief in God.

It has been commonly assumed that at some point Saul of Tarsus was married and had at least one child. That was required of members of the Sanhedrin, a high court of Israel made up of seventy-one members who met daily in the temple to govern the Jewish affairs of the day, although there is not really any evidence that Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin.⁵ Regardless, a good Pharisee always married and had a family; that was the expectation for such a role.

But if he did have a family, it is not known what became of his wife and child, since neither Paul nor Luke mentions either. There is much

room for speculation and none for factual assertion. Perhaps both died at some point, causing Paul to seek solace in greater devotion to his work. Could it be that his pain was reflected in the passion with which he persecuted the Christians? We cannot know, but Paul decided to remain single when he became a Christian. He even seems to imply that he had a gift for remaining celibate (1 Corinthians 7:7–8). Paul said, “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife” (1 Corinthians 7:27). He concedes that it would not be wrong to marry, but that one who does loses some of the focus on mission that comes with not being bound in marriage (1 Corinthians 7:32–35). He also mentions that other apostles had the right to take their wives with them on their journeys, but that he and Barnabas chose not to (1 Corinthians 9:5–6). We can conclude from these passages that he was single at the time of his conversion and remained single, and that leaves us to speculate on what happened to his family, if indeed he ever had one. It does appear, however, when he writes to Christians about love, marriage, and parenting, that he has some experience to draw on.

Paul’s Mentors

At some point in his young life (Acts 22:3; 26:4), Paul moved to Jerusalem and was trained to be a Pharisee. His enthusiasm must have been evident because the great Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee and teacher of Jewish law, chose to mentor him. Gamaliel’s exceptional wisdom and respected status among his peers is demonstrated in that passage in the book of Acts where he advises the Sanhedrin, in the church’s early days, not to execute the Apostles (Acts 5:33–42). He warns them that if the apostles’ message is only of human origin, it will die all on its own, but if it is of God, it will not be stopped. Resisting it, he tells them, may even be fighting against God himself. Paul later mentions his teacher’s name to gain some respect in a very tenuous situation (Acts 22:3). Later, as we shall see, Barnabas also became a mentor to Paul.

One of the needs of a leader who finishes well is to have mentors and to mentor others. Paul was blessed to have good mentors, and he would grow to become one himself.

The Mystery and Majesty of Destiny

In the movie *The Matrix*, Neo enters a dilapidated room in an abandoned building on a stormy night and is introduced to Morpheus, a legend he has only heard of. Morpheus is tall and dark, and he is wearing a long leather coat and reflective sunglasses. He is friendly and charming and

walks with a bearing and confidence that imply a deeper knowledge of what life is all about.

Morpheus asks Neo whether he believes in fate. When Neo says he does not, Morpheus asks him why not. Neo tells him that he doesn't believe in fate because he doesn't like the idea that he is not in control of his life. Thus begins a conversation that ends with the revelation that all of Neo's life up to this moment has been a lie. Neo will soon come to realize that he has never had control of his life. But an awakening is about to occur that will not only grant Neo the truth but also eventually give him the freedom to choose the path of his life.

Neo, who comes to be the hero in the *Matrix* trilogy, discovers that he has a fate, a destiny for his own life, that was determined long ago. By stepping into that destiny, and believing in it, he will be able to set many captives free.

It is hard to believe in destiny. Surrendering to the idea that there is a master design for your life, one that you are meant to step into, is a pill that is hard to swallow. It doesn't matter whether you came from a charmed *Leave it to Beaver* childhood or from one full of deep scars and bitter memories; destiny is still a challenge. The idea of a personal fate threatens the hopeful future that some people carry with them every day—a fated life may end up being very different from the life someone desires. For others, the thought that their destiny is foreordained is troubling because it means that a personal God may have actually arranged for them to be born into a painful life. For still others, it may be troubling that their lives, dull or painful as they are, were destined for them. Some, like Neo, just want to maintain a sense of control over their lives. But whether we choose to accept the idea of destiny or not has no real bearing on its veracity. God has a unique calling for your life (Ephesians 2:10).

It is not the scope or theme of this book to address the eternal question of how our own free will works within the sovereignty of God, so I will not even attempt it. I will leave that to smarter men and other books. But when I say that you have a destiny, I mean that I believe God has advance knowledge of your entire life, loves you enough to die for you, and wants you to be fulfilled in the calling He has for you. He will not take away the gift He has given to you, but neither will He force it on you. His love for you is not the whole picture, however. He also wants you to love and trust Him because that, and really that alone, is the foundation of your fulfilling God's life calling for you. Therefore, it is essential that you have a choice in life, for love and trust are always a choice. If the choice is removed, so is the love. If you have no choice, you have no trust.

All of us are born for a reason, and in a time and place of God's choosing. Your parents may not have planned for you to come when you did, but you are no accident. If you have the right lenses, you may also see that you were born to a destiny that is better than you ever dreamed. The evidence may be all around you, waiting to be discovered. This destiny is not simply about a job or career. It is a call to follow Jesus into the significance He has ordained for your life, whatever vocation He uses to get you there. His kingdom call transcends occupations and job descriptions. In fact, the call is not just about you. It is about Him and His purposes—He is not some high-in-the-sky career counselor with a wonderful plan for your own personal life. You will not regret the plans He has forged for your life, but it is not all about your own personal happiness and fulfillment. The purpose of God for your life is much more than that.

Discovering Your Destiny

God's fingerprints are on your early life, but most of us cannot see them until we look back in hindsight. J. Robert Clinton refers to this young phase of our lives as our "sovereign foundations." We really do not have control over the factors that shape us at this stage of development, any more than we can choose our parents. There really is no reason to describe a leader at this phase (as I will do for the other phases to follow), since no one reading this book is likely in this stage, and those in this stage rarely lead anyone.

What I can do is help you look back and perhaps recognize that all the factors of your early life were sovereignly designed for a purpose and contributed toward your fulfilling your calling. You can piece together some of the destiny you were prepared to walk into, and maybe you can even start to make sense of your childhood. God can bring healing, redemption, and even meaning to the hardships you have experienced, as difficult as that is to believe. He is not the author of evil or a stranger to suffering. He is big enough to use even the consequences of evil for his own purpose (Proverbs 16:4), with grace and compassion.

Winston Churchill once said, "It is a mistake to try to look too far ahead. The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time." If you are aware of some of the thoughts presented in this book, I hope that as you grasp your destiny one link at a time, you will be able to make more sense of what has occurred in your life and even of some of what is coming your way. Just as Paul's early background doesn't come close to revealing what God would do with him, analysis of your own early life will not reveal your full destiny. It can help, however, to consider some of

the ways God can redeem the pain of your life and use those blessings for His purposes. As you continue to walk further on the journeys of your own life, it is good on occasion to reflect on your early days and see if some of the fingerprints of God are more obvious.

Many of us have not recognized the hand of God in our birth and early years. Ambrose Bierce, a satirist and author at the turn of last century, once commented that destiny can be a tyrant's authority for crime and a fool's excuse for failure. There is a little too much truth in that. I do not want to use the idea of destiny to cripple you with fear of making a wrong choice, or to give you the excuse to make all sorts of wrong ones. For the purposes of this book, I simply want you to consider that God may have a reason why your early life was the way it was, and I want to give you the hope of discovering a redemptive purpose. The hand of God may not have been clear while you were in the midst of your childhood, but in hindsight you may be able to detect His presence at times you felt alone. You may find His purpose in events that seemed insane at the time. You may find His wisdom behind decisions made seemingly in confusion. Finding God's hand at work in our earlier life can help us put to rest some of the issues of our past and may even bring some healing to old wounds.

You can begin by doing an inventory of your early life and taking stock of the factors that influenced you to become the person you are today. This is a healthy way to balance your past and focus your present. These questions may be helpful:

- Why you were born at the time and in the place where God chose to place you?
- What is special about the cultural soil that you emerged from and that you carry with you in every thought and impulse?
- For what purpose might God use the kinds of things that make you excited or sad?
- What good purpose might there be for the childhood you had?

Paul was not someone bound to his past. He did not carry around excess baggage, nor did unhealed wounds slow him down. When he put his hand to the plow, he did not look back (Luke 9:62). It is not healthy to spend much time looking back. We must live in the present, pressing ahead into our future, hearing the voice of our Lord calling us on.

In Philippians 3, Paul lists much of his background, only to say that "forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13–14). Think of the simple exercises in this chapter as merely looking in the rearview mirror as you face forward, pressing on in your pursuit of Jesus’ calling for your life. Paul used his past to identify with his mission field (Acts 22:1–21), to confirm his unique calling in life (Galatians 1:11–24), to demonstrate the radical transformation of his life (1 Timothy 1:14–16), and to motivate himself for his zealous commitment in the present (1 Corinthians 15:8–11; Ephesians 2:1–13). He never saw his past as an excuse for fruitless living in the present.

Here are some factors to consider as you look back over your early life and try to capture a small piece of the destiny God may have for you. Go over each one and make notes on what may have been an important influence in making you the person you are today:

- Family heritage and relatives
- Friends and associates
- Geopolitical and historical events surrounding this time of your life
- Personality traits
- Birth order and siblings
- Cultural persuasions
- Language and education
- Painful and positive memories
- Passions and preferences
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Abilities and vulnerabilities

Next, learn to respond positively to God’s purposes and His leading you through your background, without letting them dominate your present or future life with Christ. To move forward into the destiny God has for you, reconciling your past will be essential. Forgive those who hurt you, not for their sake but your own. Even if you don’t want to let people off the hook for the evil they have committed, you cannot move forward without setting yourself free from people in your past. By keeping them on the hook, you also keep yourself hooked to your past. Remember, forgiveness is not for those who deserve it but for those who do not. Forgiveness is always substitutionary—it means accepting the evil done to you and releasing any demand for payment. Jesus forgave you, and to walk in His love we must also forgive others and leave justice to God.

It is not just the negative events of your past that you must reconcile. Some people are still living in the memories of their past accomplishments. There are many people who never progress because they are embittered by their past—some because of the glory days and some because of the gory ones. You cannot move forward into significance if you are bound by your past. Paul balanced his past and his present by always pursuing a better future—a future of knowing Christ more fully.

After you have made a list of the influential events, people, and qualities of your childhood, try to place them into the same types of useful categories that Paul himself used. Ask yourself, *How have these events, people, or qualities helped me to . . .*

- Identify with a specific mission field? In what ways have these factors prepared me to reach a certain type of person?
- Confirm my unique call in life? What are the fingerprints of God that shaped me for what He is now calling me to do?
- Perceive God's redemptive love and power? How have these factors told the story of God's love and power in my life?
- Motivate myself for greater service in the present? How have these events, people, and qualities from my past fueled my love and passion for Jesus in the present?

My Destiny

I was born into a family that loved the Pacific Ocean. My father and his brothers loved surfing so much that my uncle became a legendary big-wave rider in Hawaii.⁶ Because of this heritage, I became a lifeguard like my father and his father had been. I had no idea at the time, but while I was serving eight years lifeguarding the beaches of Los Angeles, God was giving me lessons that would help me one day to teach people how to make disciples for Christ's kingdom. My book *Search & Rescue* is based on these years of experience lifeguarding.

Before I was even one year old, my mother gave birth to my brother. For decades I had no idea how this had affected my personality, any more than a fish would be aware that it is wet. But looking back many years later, I realized that because my mother had another baby to care for before I was even out of diapers, I became a very independent person. To this day I am quite self-sufficient and able to make do with whatever life hands me. Of course, this independence also presents a weakness in my relationships that I must struggle to overcome.

My father is an artist. I also consider myself an artist. I received my bachelor's degree in art from California State University–Long Beach. My upbringing and my education taught me to think from a creative point of view, which I have taken into serving my Lord. I may not work anymore on canvas or with clay, but I still approach the way I do ministry as an artist, looking for fresh and creative ways to do the important things in church.

In the years before I entered high school, my father struggled with alcoholism. He sobered up when I was in high school, but I still have painful memories of moments when he was not there for me during a particularly formative period of my life. In particular, I often recall the basketball hoop that hung on our garage. It had a slight tilt and was half an inch too high because a ten-year-old boy put it up, without any help, several weeks after Christmas. Unbeknownst to me, my father's virtual absence was creating a hunger in me for a father figure who could teach me what it means to be a man. Eventually the Lord redeemed this painful consequence by placing a desire in me for mentoring relationships with more experienced men. Over the course of my life, I have been blessed tenfold with godly mentors who have shaped my growth and development in many ways. I have also found personal motivation to become a better father to my own son.

My namesake and great-great grandfather, Cornelius Cole, was a U.S. senator from California during the Lincoln administration. He was an abolitionist and had come to California in 1849 to help the state join the Union. He owned a piece of property in southern California that was called Colegrove. He sold it to the City of Los Angeles, and today it is called Hollywood. I never met this man, but I do feel that I inherited something from him besides his name. I too want to set people free from bondage. I also have a sense of ownership about Los Angeles and have always felt called to bring transformation here. We are now beginning to see many new churches in Hollywood, and I always think of my namesake as I coach some of the church planters. I want to take that place back, but for God's kingdom, not my own possession.

The Cole family is full of overachievers. Not only was my great-great grandfather a senator, my grandfather was a Colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps as well as a founder of the Devil Pups program. My father is an accomplished animator whose work has won an Oscar, an Emmy, several Clios (the advertising awards), and an Annie lifetime achievement award (an award in the field of animation). Many of my siblings and cousins have advanced academic degrees and work today as doctors, researchers, or lawyers. I must admit that I carry some of this sense of ambition and

drive in me as well. I excelled in sports in my younger years and learned that discipline and hard work, applied over the course of a lifetime, will lead to success. I hope that I am no longer striving for my own fame, or for my place in this family, but I remain devoted to hard work and discipline applied in a singular direction.

All these simple examples demonstrate that my upbringing shaped me for a purpose. There is a Designer, and He has been applying the brushstrokes of my life. I could never see this when I was a child, but it makes sense now that I can look back from the vantage point of one who has found peace with God. I can see now how God's hand was on my life before I was even born.

There is a great deal more for you to discover than what you can find in your early years. That period of your life is just the beginning. In the next chapter, we will look at the important developmental phase of inner-life growth. When we do, we will see that a man named Saul had, unknown to himself, a very important and consequential Divine appointment on a certain road to Damascus.

