



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

"Peter, Paul & Barney"

Jeffrey Dahmer was convicted of unspeakable acts of perversion and cannibalism that shocked the nation. He was murdered in prison but not before he had professed faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior.

Ted Bundy was a notorious serial killer executed for his crimes. Before he died he also claimed faith and forgiveness in Christ.

I don't want to explore all the details and argue whether or not these men were saved and are in Heaven today. My point is simply this: Isn't God's grace so amazing that even men like these can be saved at the end of their lives?

When Paul returned from Damascus to Jerusalem he was a man like that. He had left three years earlier on a mission to enlarge the scope of his persecution of Christians. Make no mistake about it - he was a murderer. A serial killer of Christians. A terrorist. He was likened to a wild beast stalking and killing its prey.

He returned a disciple but no one believed his testimony.

Acts 9:26

26 And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple.

Grace is amazing alright but it can seem to us to be indiscriminate and unfair. Is it ever fair that any sinner be saved by grace? No, it is not, and that's what makes it grace.

At least one disciple in Jerusalem was willing to risk everything on God's grace. It was Barnabas.

Acts 9:27-28

27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

28 So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out.

The name Barnabas appears twenty-three times in Acts and five times in Paul's letters. Barnabas was a Levite and native of the island of Cyprus, named Joseph (Joses), before the disciples called him Barnabas. His name is said to mean *son of encouragement* but it can equally mean *son of prophecy* or *one who prophesies or preaches* or even *son of exhortation*.

It seems that Barnabas heard Paul's testimony and believed it. Maybe he heard Paul preach in a local synagogue; maybe he sought him out personally; certainly he received a word from The Lord, a witness in his own spirit, that Paul was truthful. He believed God's grace could even save a man like Paul. It opened the door for Paul to be in fellowship with the Jerusalem Christians.

The only apostle on hand during Paul's stay was Peter. The two spent the next fifteen days together.

Galatians 1:18-19

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.

19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

It would have been great to hang with those two guys and listen to them talk about Jesus. Think of the stories Peter could tell about the three years he'd been with The Lord before the crucifixion. For his part, Paul had been three years in Damascus and Arabia sharing Christ and that certainly fascinated Peter who had not yet had the vision to go and preach to the Gentiles.

Something else significant happened to Paul during those two weeks.

Acts 22:17-21

17 Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance

18 and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.'

19 So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.

20 And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'

21 Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.' "

Jesus had made it abundantly clear, at his calling, that He was sending Paul out to the Gentiles. Paul thought he would base his ministry in Jerusalem.

God speaks so clearly but we hear through our own filters and ideas and desires and preconceptions.

Acts 9:29

29 And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him.

Three years earlier Paul had been watching the clothing of these Hellenists while they stoned to death Stephen. By God's grace Paul now picked-up right where Stephen had left off. And the Hellenist Jews were ready to pick-up (literally) stones against him.

Acts 9:30

30 When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

Paul would be in Tarsus for about the next five to eight years. Commentators often describe his time there as a failure. I've heard it said, and read it in print, that Paul simply went home, to Tarsus, and resumed making tents. It assumes his ministry in Damascus was largely a bust and that he was in solitude in Arabia and that he got nowhere in Jerusalem. So he retired, as it were, and would have been content to pass off the pages of church history.

There are famous people whose conversion to Christianity is a flash in the pan. Bob Dylan comes to mind. I make no judgment about the genuineness of his conversion. He recorded *Slow Train Coming* and followed it with *Saved*. His single off the album *Saved, Gotta Serve Somebody*, won him the Grammy for Best Male Vocalist. That was four decades ago; not much testimony since.

Not Paul, however. We've seen he was out ministering to Gentiles in Arabia. We just read of his bold preaching to Jews in Jerusalem. No way he could retire.

We get some insight from his own pen. Make a mental note that "Syria and Cilicia" was the combined name of the province of which Tarsus and Antioch were co-capitals.

Galatians 1:21-24

21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ.

23 But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy."

24 And they glorified God in me.

"Afterward," meaning when he left Jerusalem, he preached in the regions of Syria and Cilicia, including his home town of Tarsus. He was busy sharing Christ.

In Acts 15:23 "the brethren" in Syria and Cilicia are mentioned in the apostolic letter which was sent to the churches, and in Acts 15:41 it is said Paul "went through Syria and Cilicia confirming the churches." No account is given in Acts of the planting of these churches. Paul fills out the history in Galatians, which leaves no doubt that during the four or five years he was in Syria and Cilicia he planted the churches there.

*Even if all your service is known only to God,
so what? Your service is on a need-to-know
basis and only Jesus needs to know.*

We cannot be certain of things that are not recorded but it's clear Paul was not in retirement, pining away, disobeying Christ's call and command.

Here is a great personal encouragement for you. Much of the service of the apostle Paul is unknown to anyone but God. Even if **all** your service is known only to God, so what? Your service is on a need-to-know basis and only Jesus needs to know.

One reason we are hesitant to press you into serving The Lord is because you may be serving Him in ways that cannot be easily seen. Maybe you don't work in the Children's Ministry but you instead have the gift of giving. You can do both, of course, but I think you get the point.

At the same time don't assume you are serving The Lord in 'secret' when you're really just a slacker.

Paul said of this secret-service, "they glorified God in me." It was only by God's grace, by God being 'in' Paul, that such a person could be converted and be serving.

It's also a reminder to us, is it not, to always serve only so that God gets the glory. It's ok to encourage or give kudos to Christians as long as you're not looking to receive them and disappointed when you don't.

One other significant event in Paul's life most likely occurred during this time in Syria and Cilicia.

Second Corinthians 12:1-6

1 It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord:

2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows - such a one was caught up to the third heaven.

3 And I know such a man - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows -

4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.

6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

A lot of the persecutions Paul describes are not recorded in the Book of Acts. None of his scourgings, for example, and several of his shipwrecks. They must have occurred during his three years in Arabia and/or in the years he spent preaching in Syria and Cilicia.

Perhaps in one of those he swooned and was taken to Heaven. Or perhaps this was a full-on vision God blessed him with. Either way we'd say of it that God knew exactly how and when to encourage His servant.

This was also the time Jesus gave Paul his famous "thorn in the flesh."

Second Corinthians 12:7

7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

This was almost certainly a physical infirmity of some type but we don't know what.

At this point Paul was just ten years old in The Lord. They were an eventful ten years, for sure. A lot more was on his horizon.

Do you see more serving, or less, on the horizon? Make it more; go for it.