



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

"Bringing Out the Beast in You"

Just when you think you've got ministry figured-out, God changes things up on you.

On his second missionary journey the Holy Spirit directed Paul away from Asia because God wanted him to spend most of his time in Europe.

On his third missionary journey most of Paul's time was spent in Asia, in the city of Ephesus.

That wasn't the only change. What scholars call the "third missionary journey" is more like an interim pastorate than a pioneering missions effort.

God wants you to go on depending upon Him day-by-day just as you did when you uttered the very first prayer for salvation. If we only do the same things with and for God, day-in and day-out, we begin to trust in ourselves, in our own strength and talent and ability. Nothing will kill real ministry more than self-dependance.

Most of this third trip is spent in Ephesus. Paul had spent a short time in Ephesus on his way back to Antioch from his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-22). This trip he stayed in Ephesus three years (Acts 20:31). Several remarkable things happened in Ephesus.

- Paul baptized a dozen of John the Baptist's followers and then they received the Baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7).
- Unusual miracles occurred in which handkerchiefs and aprons that Paul had used were brought to the sick and they were healed, or to those possessed and they were exorcized (19:11-12).
- A group of Jewish exorcists, the "seven sons of Sceva," tried to exorcise a demon in Paul's name. The demon-possessed man attacked them and they barely got away with their lives.
- Word of this spread and believers who were still into the occult repented and brought out their books of magic to a massive book burning (Acts 19:13-19).
- The entire city rioted over silversmith Demetrius' loss of business because of people who turned to Christ from worshiping the great Ephesian goddess Artemis (19:23-41).

After leaving Ephesus Paul went to Macedonia, Illyricum, Greece, and Corinth. Then he headed to Jerusalem through Troas, Assos, Mitylene, Samos, Trogyllium, Miletus, Coos, Rhodes, Patara, Tyre, Ptolemais, and Caesarea.

A lot more happened; you can read the full account from Acts 18:23 through Acts 21:16.

What I want to do is see those years from Paul's perspective. He gave us his perspective in two passages of Scripture, one in First Corinthians and the other in Second Corinthians. We'll see a theme emerge.

1Corinthians 15:30 And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour?

1Corinthians 15:31 I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.

1Corinthians 15:32 If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, "LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE!"

First Corinthians fifteen is an extensive account of the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of believers, from the dead. In this passage Paul reminded the Corinthians that he daily risked his life for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Historians make the claim that the phrase, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," is a summary slogan of the Epicurean philosophers of the first century. One of their teachings was that there was no life after death. Thus, while arguing for moderation, the practical outworking of Epicureanism was to live for that which was pleasurable in this life since it is the only life you'll get.

Why would anyone risk his life if there were no reward in a life after death? He wouldn't; he'd just eat and drink and make merry.

The Epicureans could argue all they wanted that there was no life after death but it wasn't "after the manner of men," meaning it wasn't what people in their culture actually experienced. They experienced the occult and knew there was another realm, a spiritual realm, that included angels and demons.

In the classic film, *The Exorcist*, the younger Catholic priest doesn't believe in the devil - only in psychological illness. He finds out the hard way that the devil exists.

That's maybe the thought here. You can argue that there is no afterlife but, at least in Ephesus, there certainly were supernatural powers from another realm at work.

Paul gave a perspective on his time in Ephesus. Paul remembered it as a fight against savage beasts.

Even though gladiators did fight beasts, and certain individuals were thrown to beasts, it is highly unlikely Paul fought against literal beasts.

- He does not recount it along with his other sufferings and hardships in Second Corinthians 11:23-29.
- If he had been thrown to the beasts it would mean he would have lost his Roman citizenship. We know that he still held it when he went before Caesar at a much later date.

He must have been speaking figuratively of things that happened in Ephesus. Scholars are split over which event, exactly, he was referring to. Some say it was the riot that Demetrius started but, in the account, there is no mention of any special danger that Paul was in.

I think it best to see this as a summary of his time in Ephesus. The whole three years had a "fought with the beasts" feeling to it.

I ran across one interesting explanation. The religious and cultural context of Ephesus was magic and mystery cults. Paul's ministry there was filled with exorcisms and demonic encounters.

In Paul's own letter to the Ephesians he said, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (6:12).

It could be that by choosing the word "beasts" Paul meant these spiritually wicked rulers - the devil and His demons.

- The word "beast" appears in Jewish literature as a synonym for an evil spirit or demon. Additionally, evil spirits in magic were often summoned through the images and organs of wild animals.
- In Daniel and Revelation, we see "beasts" used to describe massive spiritual opposition to God's people.
- We see the devil described in First Peter as a "roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (5:8).

Not only was Paul risking his life for the sake of the Gospel by facing the persecutions of men. He was facing-off against demons.

For the better part of three years Paul's ministry was dominated by this kind of spiritual warfare. It was the theme of his daily walk. It was the path Jesus had him on.

What path are you on? It's not always going to be a garden path. It's not always going to be footprints in the sand. It might be a fight with the supernatural "beasts" we know to be demons.

Whatever it is, you'll need to depend solely, completely, upon The Lord.

Paul also discussed this period in his life in Second Corinthians.

2Corinthians 1:8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

2Corinthians 1:9 Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,

2Corinthians 1:10 who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us,

This passage takes us a little deeper into the mind and heart of the great apostle. While involved in this three year struggle with beasts Paul not only believed that he was going to die but he psychologically despaired of his physical life.

Have you ever been spiritually "burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that [you] despaired even of life?"

This kind of honesty makes us uncomfortable as Christians. We think we must rebuke it.

Paul was a veteran Christian, missionary and pastor. Yet he was totally unable to even take another breath.

In the movies when the hero is confronted by some beast he or she is always able to come up with a clever strategy to defeat the brute.

How did Paul deal with it? He admitted he could not defeat the beast by anything he could say or do. In fact, he admitted defeat - despairing of life itself.

Then, and only then, could he be "delivered" from death.

God delivers us from death in three ways:

1. He has delivered us from "so great a death" as eternal death.
2. He does deliver us moment-by-moment.
3. He will continue to deliver us all the days He has granted us to live in these bodies.

Think of it this way. Paul was on the front lines of ministry; he **was** the cutting edge. Even as a mature veteran missionary and pastor he despaired of life. His resolve for it wasn't to pray more or give more or serve more. He didn't say he was weak on account of not keeping up with his devotions.

He realized that he couldn't even take a next breath without relying on the resurrection power of God.

Do we believe - really believe - we cannot take our next breath without God? I don't mean that God is the One Who is sustaining our lives; the One Who knows the number of our days.

I mean do we believe that we have absolutely no strength to minister apart from the breath of the Holy Spirit? I daresay we think we have some things figured-out; that we can 'handle' some things ourselves.

What I mean is that I still think I have some strength, some spiritual strength of my own, to do things for The Lord. I think I can just take a deep breath and stay in the game; whereas Paul understood he'd had the breath knocked out of him and needed fresh air from the Holy Spirit.

I'm not sure I'm making sense even to myself! What I am sure of is that this period of Paul's life was a season of learning total dependence upon The Lord.

God used a season of spiritual warfare for Paul - of beast fighting - to knock the wind out of him so He could take the breath of the Spirit.

If you are God's beloved, He will use a season in your life to do the same.