

4. Paul's union *with* Christ had occurred at Damascus, and so it was fitting that his persecution and suffering *in* Christ should originate in the same place. Paul had travelled to Damascus confident that the Jewish authorities there would stand with him in his efforts to destroy Jesus' followers. His confidence was well-placed; they were indeed committed to his cause, evident in the fact that they directed their hostility toward *him* when he became a promoter of this Way rather than its persecutor.

Paul's new life in Christ was soon met with the deadly opposition that was to characterize the rest of his days on earth. It began with the Jews, but would eventually extend to the Gentiles as well. This wasn't to be the last time Paul would flee for his life as the Lord continued to fulfill His purpose in and through him. As with those he had persecuted, Paul's persecution only furthered the witness and fruitfulness of the gospel. He had testified to Jesus in Damascus, and now he would do so in Jerusalem (9:28).

- a. Three years had passed since Paul departed Jerusalem for Damascus. The fact that he had been laboring in the gospel for some time and was an active part of the Church in Damascus makes it likely that the saints in Jerusalem already knew something of his experiences by the time he arrived back there. Certainly the Jewish establishment was painfully aware of what had transpired on the Damascus road, for Paul's companions would have reported back to them when they returned without him and empty-handed.

Paul was well-known to the Jews of Jerusalem and notorious in the Church, so that there was no way his presence there could go unnoticed. He couldn't keep a low profile if he wanted to, but that wasn't his intention. Luke recorded that immediately upon his return Paul attempted to enter the believing community. His new-found love for Christ's saints in Jerusalem preceded his introduction to them, but they were not so sure of his motivations. The wounds of his past atrocities were still smarting, and the believers were not at all convinced that such a zealous enemy of Christ could really become His devoted servant (9:26).

The persecution that emerged from Stephen's stoning had driven the Jerusalem saints away from the city, but the continuing apostolic presence and ministry – however cautious and low key – would have seen more people coming to faith. There was yet a Christian community in Jerusalem at the time of Paul's return, but one no longer enjoying an open presence. The Jews had not discontinued their mission to destroy the Church, and Saul had been their chief agent. And so it's no surprise that the saints responded to Paul's overtures with deep suspicion. As far as they knew, this was simply a tactic to infiltrate the community and learn who in Jerusalem continued to follow Jesus of Nazareth.

One man, however, was able to get beyond that suspicion. Barnabas, whom Luke had introduced early in the Church's life (4:36-37), saw in Paul a bona fide work of the Spirit. The man whose loving, devoted ministry to the saints had earned him the moniker "son of encouragement" was still living up to his name (9:27). Paul desperately needed an advocate and the Lord provided one in Barnabas.

To this point, Paul had been unable to gain access to the community of believers, let alone the apostles. Everyone was holding him at arms length – everyone except Barnabas. But in God’s purpose and timing, the godly qualities in Barnabas that had led the apostles to rename him afforded him the privilege of introducing Paul to them and explaining God’s work in and through him.

- Luke doesn’t provide any further information about that encounter, but Paul himself observed in his Galatian letter that he met only Peter and James during his first visit to Jerusalem (ref. Galatians 1:18-19). (This “James” was the Lord’s brother and not one of the Twelve, but subsequent to his conversion – probably as a result of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance to him – James went on to play a prominent role in the Jerusalem Church. Thus Paul regarded him as a legitimate apostle.)
- Specifically, Paul mentioned spending fifteen days with Peter, and Peter may well have introduced him to James. There is no doubt that Paul would have used his time with the two apostles to learn more about the Lord he had come to know and love – His life and ministry, His post-resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:5-7), His ascension to His Father, His sending of His Spirit and subsequent work in building His Church.
- Why Paul would have met only Peter and James is unclear, but there is some indication that they were the leaders of two congregations of believers within the larger Jerusalem Church (ref. 12:1-17). Some scholars believe this group led by Peter met in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (12:11-12). He was Barnabas’ cousin (Colossians 4:10) and a close associate of Peter, having likely come to faith in Christ through Peter’s ministry (1 Peter 5:13). These associations may explain why Barnabas took Paul to Peter rather than others of the apostles.

- b. Building upon Barnabas’ introduction, Paul would have elaborated to Peter and James concerning his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road and the amazing circumstances that followed. Doubtless his testimony and demeanor convinced them of the legitimacy of his conversion and calling, and their reception of him would have encouraged the Church to also embrace him. Luke provides no explanation of how Paul won over the saints in Jerusalem, but the boldness of his proclamation certainly would have impacted their thinking.

Jerusalem continued to be the epicenter of Jewish hostility and persecution, and the earlier days of open witness on the temple grounds were a distant memory. But here was Paul – the former persecutor whose betrayal of the cause had put him in the crosshairs of Jewish animosity – “moving about freely” in the streets of Jerusalem and “speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord” (9:28). This Pharisee who had pursued Jesus’ followers with fearless abandon was now bringing the same attitude and zeal to his proclamation of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah.

- c. Paul's betrayal of Judaism was bad enough; returning to Jerusalem and rubbing his former colleagues' noses in it was a direct slap in the face, and such audacity could not long be endured. Luke specifically noted Paul's interaction with the Hellenistic Jews, perhaps indicating that the Hebraic Jews – of which Paul was a member – refused to have anything to do with him now that he had embraced this false messiah (ref. again 6:9-14). Or Luke's purpose may have been to link Paul with Stephen, whose opponents had also been Hellenists (6:9). If the latter was his intent, it creates a sharp irony: The same community that Paul had stood in solidarity with as they took Stephen's life was now seeking to take his (9:29).

Whatever Luke's intention in mentioning only Paul's interaction with the Hellenistic Jewish community, he made it clear that his witness to Christ met with the same response from the Jews in Jerusalem as it had in Damascus. So it was with Jesus' saints, who intervened to rescue Paul from death in Jerusalem just as they had done previously in Syria (9:30; cf. 9:23-25).

5. When they learned of the threat against Paul's life, members of the Jerusalem Church whisked him out of the city, escorting him as far as Caesarea on the coast. From there they sent him to Tarsus, Paul's hometown and the leading city of the small region of Cilicia. Luke's account leaves Paul in Tarsus, where Barnabas would later find him and bring him to the Church in Antioch in Syria (11:19-26; cf. Galatians 1:21). That congregation would become Paul's "home church" and the hub for his missionary labors.
6. Finally, Luke closed out his treatment of Paul's conversion and early ministry with a startling summary statement (9:31). The overall context has emphasized the Church's struggle in persecution, imprisonment and death, and yet here Luke described its general state of being as one of *peace*. Some interpret Luke as implying that the flames of Jewish hostility died down once Paul was converted and stopped fanning them. This view is plausible, but Luke's language seems to suggest a different interpretation – one that shines the spotlight on how the Church is to view itself and order its life in this world.

Looking ahead in Luke's narrative, it's evident that nothing had changed with the Jews' disposition; Paul certainly knew that to be true. The Church enjoyed settled peace *in the midst of a continuing storm*, an irony explained by his qualifying statements.

- a. The first is that the Church was "*being built up*." The unrelenting and lethal opposition directed against the Lord's Church had failed to destroy it; to the contrary, it had served only to strengthen and build it up – in the maturity of personal faith, joy and love as much as in the increase of its numbers.
- b. The second reveals the mechanism for this fruitfulness: The Church was flourishing as it continued in the "*fear of the Lord*" and the "*comfort of the Holy Spirit*." Circumstances were distressing and unpredictable, but the truth of the gospel and the new creation remained constant. The Church's peace wasn't then – or ever – situational, but has always rested on the conviction of the truth and the resource of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 1-4; Philippians 4:1-13; 1 Peter 1:1-9; etc.).