

# Acts

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

*(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)*

## **Paul in Tarsus**

**April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Acts 9:26-31**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 9:26. This morning we are going to be looking at the hidden years of the Apostle Paul. This is the part of his story that we are least familiar with. We’ve probably all heard a few sermons on the Damascus Road Conversion of the Apostle Paul; that’s a wonderful story, and then of course, if you’ve spent any time at all in the church, you are no doubt very familiar with the letters and missionary travels of Paul – but what about the years between?

Paul – or Saul as he is known at this point in this story – got off to a fantastic start. He was preaching the Gospel, he was confounding the authorities – he was causing an uproar, and then, all of the sudden, contrary to everything we would expect, God sent him away into absolute obscurity for the better part of a decade.

Why in the world would he do that?

By looking into these “hidden years” in the life of the Apostle Paul we can learn something about how God shapes and moulds human character. This story provides an illustration of God’s careful, slow and quiet Providence in the lives of those he calls into Christian service. Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 26.

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. <sup>30</sup> And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. <sup>31</sup> So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (Acts 9:26–31 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

In essence this morning, we are looking at the gap between Acts 9:31 and Acts 11:25 – just flip forward 2-3 pages in your Bible and look at that. The church in Antioch had begun to grow and it was a unique church because it was the first church we know of where Jews and Gentiles were worshipping side by side. The church in Jerusalem, sent Barnabas to check it out and to do whatever he could to help them along. When Barnabas saw the church and understood what God was doing there, verse 25 says:

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. (Acts 11:25–26 ESV)

This was a pivotal moment in the history of the church. As I said, this was the first time in the history of the movement where we have Jewish AND Gentile believers worshipping and serving side by side. It was literally unprecedented - that's why they had to come up with a new name for these people! Up until this point Christians had just been "Jews who loved Jesus" – but now we're going to have to call them something else because half of these people aren't even Jewish. This is a new day and it's going to require a whole new type of leader – and that's why Barnabas went looking for Saul.

But why did he have to go looking for Saul in the first place? Why had God sent him into obscurity in Tarsus for almost a decade?

## Why Did God Send Saul To Tarsus?

I think the first part of the answer has got to be this:

### 1. **Because leadership is about more than passion, boldness and charisma**

Paul had those things in spades in Acts 9. He was passionate, he was bold, and he had charisma. Look at Acts 9:28-29; Luke says:

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.<sup>29</sup> And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. (Acts 9:28–29 ESV)

Paul was a rock star in every conceivable way! He was incredibly well educated. He was a graduate of Hebrew Harvard, having studied at the feet of Gamaliel – one of the most famous Jewish Rabbis of all time. Paul was an up and comer – he tells us that in Galatians 1, but we could have figured that out for ourselves from what Luke says about Paul in Acts 7. You don't get to be a Junior Clerk of the Jewish Senate by an average student – those spots go to the stars.

And now he was on our team!

Friends, this would be like if Richard Dawkins converted to Christianity. Right away we would have him on every major stage in Christendom. He would be speaking at T4G, he would be giving the Commencement speech at Liberty University – you know that's exactly how it would go down.

But that's not how it did go down. God sent this superstar into obscurity – because leadership is about more than passion, boldness and charisma.

Paul needed to walk with a limp – and church history tells us that after his time in Tarsus – he did; literally and metaphorically. We don't know exactly what Saul/Paul was doing in Tarsus – we know the basics because while Acts doesn't tell us anything about these years, Paul himself refers to them on multiple occasions in his letters. He says for example in 2 Corinthians 11:24:

“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.” (2 Corinthians 11:24 ESV)

Historian John Pollock says here:

“Writing in A.D. 56, he mentions being punished no less than five times by the Jewish “forty stripes save one,” yet none of this is recorded in Acts. Thus it is probable that he was whipped more than once in the hidden years at Tarsus. Scourging was regarded as the correction of a brother, purging his offense that he might resume a place in the family of the synagogue.”<sup>1</sup>

So at the very least we know that Paul was continuing to preach in the name of Jesus – apparently, in the context of his home synagogue. As a trained Hebrew scholar Paul would have had the right to stand up and offer commentary after the reading of the Scriptures that made up the core of the service. I’m sure the elders of the synagogue gritted their teeth every time Paul stepped forward to speak and when he crossed the line and said something they couldn’t bear they put him under the Old Testament version of church discipline. Pollock describes what that would have looked like. He says:

“Watched by the congregation, he was bent and bound between two pillars. The *hazzan*, possibly the same who had taught him as a boy, solemnly tore at his robe until his torso was bare. The *hazzan* picked up a heavy whip formed by a four-pronged strap of calf hide with two prongs of ass hide, long enough to reach the navel from behind and above. He stood on a stone and with one hand, using “all his might,” brought it down over Paul’s shoulder to curl around and cut his chest. Thirteen lashes were counted, while a reader intoned curses from the Law: “If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this Law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful name, The Lord Thy God, then the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful.” After the thirteenth on the chest, the whipping was transferred to the back, thirteen hard strokes across one shoulder, thirteen across the other, cutting across weals already bleeding. ... The synagogue elder in charge could stop the punishment if the prisoner collapsed or lost control of his bowels, but such mercy can have been exercised seldom, for the scourger was expressly indemnified if the victim died. Paul endured to the end, tasting not only the agony he had inflicted on others but the sharing of his pain with Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

You see it wasn’t enough for Paul to be brilliant. It wasn’t enough for him to know the Bible better than anybody else, it wasn’t enough for him to have the boldness of a lion, he needed to learn empathy, he needed to learn humility, he needed to experience suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> John Polluck, *The Apostle: A Life Of Paul* (USA: Victor Cook Communications Ministries, 1985), 53.

<sup>2</sup> John Polluck, *The Apostle: A Life Of Paul* (USA: Victor Cook Communications Ministries, 1985), 54.

There are certain things you need to know as a leader that you can't learn in a book. King David knew about that – as all good leaders do – he said in Psalm 119:

It is good for me that I was afflicted,  
that I might learn your statutes. (Psalm 119:71 ESV)

Did David not have a copy of the Torah before he became King? Of course he did. According to Deuteronomy 17 he had to write out a copy of the Torah by HAND before he became King, but there are some things you cannot learn by reading the Bible.

That may offend some of you, but it's true.

There are some things you can only learn in the School of Affliction and Paul had to spend some time there for him to become the kind of leader God wanted him to be.

And then secondly, it would seem from our reading of Acts 9 that God sent Paul to Tarsus:

## **2. Because there is a time for war and a time for peace**

The Bible says that in Ecclesiastes 3. The Wise Preacher says that there is a time for everything:

<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:7–8 ESV)

You see, wisdom is about knowing what time it is. Wisdom is about understanding that there is not ONE RIGHT WAY to act; there is not ONE RIGHT WAY to speak and there is not ONE RIGHT WAY to be a leader – and Paul needed to understand that.

Paul came out of the gate like a man on fire. He was a War Machine. He knew the Bible better than anyone else, he had a story like no one else, he had mind like no one else and he was operating more or less independently. Paul was not a “derivative Apostle” – he tells us that himself in Galatians 1. He says that God:

“was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; <sup>17</sup> nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but **I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.**

<sup>18</sup> **Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas** and remained with him fifteen days.” (Galatians 1:13–18 ESV)

All of that content, by the way, fits between Acts 9:22 and 23! Paul was in Damascus, then he went out into the desert, then he came back to Damascus – and then he went down to Jerusalem, which is where Luke picks up the story in Acts 9:26 – which raises the question:

What in the world happened to Paul out in that desert?

Paul says that God revealed the Son to him. What does that mean? It appears to mean MORE than just that God taught Paul about Jesus – it appears to mean that Paul had an encounter with the risen Jesus. We don’t know as much about that as we would like because Paul didn’t SAY as much about that as we would like. In Ephesians 3:2-3 he said:

“you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me **by revelation**, as I have written briefly.” (Ephesians 3:2–3 ESV)

So Paul keeps referring to the fact that he learned the Gospel of Jesus BY REVELATION – not second hand through the other Apostles – but when did that happen? Again, we can’t be 100% sure – but we know it happened in some kind of spectacular way. After his decade in Tarsus, he would look back to a time before that decade and say:

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.” (2 Corinthians 12:2 ESV)

We are almost certain Paul is speaking about himself there because a few verses later he says:

“to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” (2 Corinthians 12:7 ESV)

So Paul had such incredible first hand revelatory experiences that some kind of physical disability was ordained for him to keep him from becoming conceited.

Again – we would like to know a lot more about that than we do. But here is what we do know: BEFORE his decade of exile in Tarsus Paul had experienced FIRST HAND REVELATION FROM JESUS. So he was brilliant, he had a great story, he had a great mind, he had incredible experiences – and he went off in the wider Jewish context like a bomb!

Like Moses coming down the mountain with his face aglow from his encounter with God, there was no way for Paul to hide who he was and what had happened to him and there was no way for his ministry not to attract the wholesale antagonism of the Jews.

And it was not the right time for that.

It was too early in the process for that kind of definitive showdown; so he was sent off to Tarsus and enrolled in a 10 year post graduate program in the School of Affliction.

And in the season of lowered tensions that followed - the church grew. SIDELINING this ELECTRIC CHARACTER for a decade bought the church of Jesus Christ a season to heal and consolidate. Look at the last verse in our story – Acts 9:31:

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (Acts 9:31 ESV)

Here is something we need to understand friends: the church was not designed for constant conflict. The church is a body, not a machine, and bodies need time to rest and recuperate.

When I was in High School I read the book “All Quiet On The Western Front”. Do you remember that book? I read it again later on as an adult, and one of the things that struck me was how LITTLE TIME Paul Baumer and his friends actually spent on the Western Front. Most of the story has to do with their times of rest and recovery behind the lines.

Because of course, that's how war works.

Human beings cannot ENDURE constant conflict. They can fight for a few hours, they can stand watch for a few days, but then they need to come off the line. They need to rest. They need to eat. They need to sleep. They need to write letters to their sweethearts. They need to hope.

So it is with the church.

The church cannot endure constant conflict. There is:

<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:7–8 ESV)

Woe to the Christian leader who doesn't understand that! Woe to the church saddled with a leader who doesn't understand that. There's a time for the warrior's axe and a time for the servant's towel. There is a time for conflict and there is a time to withdraw, retool and rest. Paul only had one posture as a leader, at this point in his life, and it wasn't the posture that was needed – so he went for further training, and other leaders, for about a decade, took centre stage. He was out of sight, but of course, not out of mind. And at the right time – as a much better man – he re-emerged to serve the Lord faithfully in a critical season. Thanks be to God!

So that's the story of Paul's hidden years in Tarsus – but what's the point?

Why did we spend all that time putting together all those puzzle pieces so that we could see and understand this unusual season in the life of the Apostle? What's the intended takeaway for us? That's what I want to spend our last few minutes looking at.

### **What Should We Learn From This Story Of The Hidden Years Of The Apostle Paul?**

I think the greatest impression that this story makes on me every time I revisit it, is the fact that clearly, God is not in our kind of hurry.



## 1. God is not in our kind of hurry

I get the same impression every time I read the story of Moses; in fact, that's where that heading comes from. In Exodus 3, when Moses is spending 40 years tending sheep in the desert of Midian and the people of Israel are languishing in generational oppression and slavery, A.P. Baker is the one who said originally that:

'God is not in our kind of hurry'.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly not.

The Apostle Paul – arguably the greatest weapon the church has ever had at her disposal – spent a decade making tents, studying Greek culture and offending his local synagogue leaders in Cilicia. Just like Moses, as we mentioned, spent 40 years tending sheep in the deserts of Midian. Just like David spent 13 years hiding in the caves of Judea. Just like Joseph spent 13 years languishing in prison and serving as a slave in Egypt.

Clearly God is not in our kind of hurry!

When we see a talented young person we want them to be given a platform NOW! If you ever even try to use the phrase “young people are the church of tomorrow” someone will yell at you that young people are the church of TODAY! Move aside Boomer! Give that young person a microphone! Hand them the keys to the megachurch. Give them a lucrative book deal. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, as we've learned over the last 10 years in evangelicalism – a lot can go wrong. Turns out slow and steady, really is the right way to build high caliber leaders.

That's been a hard one for us, hasn't it? Influenced by our culture, we've become a microwave church. We want everything hot and ready. But as we are seeing in this story, God takes more of a crockpot approach. He throws people into the deep, and then he leaves them to stew over time.

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<sup>3</sup>A.P. Baker as cited by Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, ed. J. A. Motyer, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 50.

If you are in a desert today – if it feels like you’ve been exiled – if you are wondering when you will get your chance to shine – be encouraged, you are right where God wants you to be, so be faithful and fruitful wherever you are. Make the best tents in Tarsus. Be the best shepherd in Midian. Write poetry and prayers in the cave of Adullam and rest assured that God has not lost sight of you, and when it is time - when he thinks it is time - you shall come forth as gold.

God is slow, but that’s because he makes things that last.

The second thing, I think this story is reminding us is that:

## **2. No leader is indispensable to the mission**

The Book of Acts makes that point again, and again and again. This is the first time we are seeing it, but it will not be the last. Flip forward a page or two in your Bible to Acts 12; look at the first two verses:

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.<sup>2</sup> He killed James the brother of John with the sword (Acts 12:1–2 ESV)

James the brother of John – i.e. one of the 3 main disciples. There were 12 disciples, but every Bible reader knows that Peter, James and John were Jesus’ three lieutenants. They were the only ones who went up the Mount of Transfiguration with him. They were the only ones who were brought inside the room when Jesus raised that little girl from the dead. James was a Top Tier Christian leader and yet, for whatever reason he died in the third episode of the second season – do you understand that? How does that make sense?

And it will happen again. In Acts 15 we are told that Paul and Barnabas decide to take two separate routes for their next series of church planting campaigns. Paul and Silas are going to go one way and Barnabas and Mark are going to go another way. And then we never hear from Barnabas again. Barnabas who was one of the MAIN characters in the first half of the book. It was HIS GIFT that was highlighted at the end of Acts 4. It was HIS leadership that got the church in Antioch off to such a good start in Acts 11. It was HIS vision to bring Paul to spearhead the mission to the Gentiles - he was pretty much the best character in the first half of the story – and

then all of the sudden – he was gone. According to church history, he was martyred in Cyprus, stoned by the Jews outside the synagogue in Salamis.

There is a message in all of this, I think, and the message is that NO LEADER IS INDISPENSABLE to the mission of the church.

This is about Jesus. His life. His death. His resurrection. His Spirit. His present intercession.

This is about HIM!

He is the only indispensable one!

The rest of us, play our part, spend our talents, spill our blood, exit the stage, die and are forgotten - and the church of Jesus Christ marches on. This is HIS STORY, not OUR STORY – thanks be to God.

And then one last thing. I think the story of Paul's hidden years in Tarsus is intended to remind all of us of:

### **3. The necessity of quiet, solitude and obscurity**

Paul's preparation for ministry involved TWO seasons of desert and exile. One in the actual desert of Arabia and one in the metaphorical desert of Tarsus. Paul needed that time. The APOSTLE Paul was made in that time – and so it is with all leaders.

Real leadership is forged in quiet.

You can't BECOME in the spotlight. You can't HEAR in the rush of day-to-day duties – all of that has to be sourced SOMEWHERE ELSE – and that somewhere else is the place of quiet, the place of solitude, the place of obscurity. Paul needed those years, he NEEDED that depth of well to supply the years and decades of grueling ministry that lay ahead.

There is a fellow on our Board who took it upon himself a few years ago to make sure that I take all of my holiday time. I think the first year he was entirely successful was 2019. There were a few weeks there where we didn't go anywhere as a family, the kids were still in school, but I took the weeks off anyway, as I had been directed to do, and I just spent in quiet. I lingered over the Word every morning, I went for lots of walks, I spent extended times in prayer and it was a good thing I did because hard on the heels of that season of refreshment came COVID19 – and the 3 most exhausting years of ministry in living memory.

Brothers and sisters, listen to me: Quiet matters. Solitude matters. Time alone with Jesus matters.

We need that. We need that every day! We need to fight for those hours of quiet because that is where strength is found, that is where character is forged and that is where wells are dug that will nourish and sustain our souls through all the challenges and opportunities that we will face as followers of Jesus in the years and decades ahead – thanks be to God.

Let me pray for us.